

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ARTICLES

Can a Solution-Focused Coaching Approach Go Beyond the Ocean and Campus? Comparing Solution and Problem-Focused Approaches for Japanese Students and Business People

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Previous studies comparing solution- and problem-focused coaching approaches have revealed that solution-focused approaches are consistently superior to problem-focused approaches. However, these studies were conducted in Australia and Europe, and all the participants have been students. Little is known about whether a solution-focused approach is more effective than a problem-focused approach even in other areas, particularly Asia. Moreover, investigating whether a solution-focused approach is more effective than a problem-focused approach even for other groups, especially businesspersons, is necessary. This study compares the relative impact of solution-focused questions with problem-focused questions on Japanese university students and businesspersons.

In Study 1, 118 Japanese university students participated, and 36 Japanese company employees participated in Study 2. Before and after answering the questions, they completed a set of measures to assess self-efficacy, understanding of the problem, and positive and negative affect.

In Study 1, the solution-focused approach was more effective in increasing self-efficacy and lessening negative affect. The problem-focused approach reduced the positive affect. In Study 2, the solution-focused approach was superior in terms of promoting self-efficacy and decreasing negative affect.

This study provides empirical support for the effectiveness of a solution-focused approach for Japanese students and employees.

Introduction

Asking somebody questions may not only mean exploring his knowledge, but also constructing meaning through the building of relationships. A respondent is not merely a passive but also an active meaning maker who actively interprets the meaning of questions. Notably, a respondent can derive new meaning from their experiences and events (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Tomm, 1988).

Solution-focus is a relatively new approach to therapy that was originally developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg in the 1980s. Solution-focused therapy solve clients' problems, by not exploring and modifying the causes of their problems, but by exploring and encouraging their potential to solve problems. Currently, a solution-focused approach is acknowledged for its effectiveness and have been applied in various fields, such as education, and management.

Coaching is the most prominent field wherein relative effectiveness of the solution-focused approach has been confirmed empirically compared that of the problem-focused approach. As discussed later, empirical studies have been conducted in Australia and Europe, and their participants have been limited

Table 1. Previous studies comparing solution- and problem-focused approaches.

Research	Participants
Grant and O'Connor (2010)	Australian graduate school students (N=39)
Wehr (2010)	Study1: German university students (N=140) Study2: German university students (N=92)
Grant (2012)	Australian university students (N=225)
Neipp <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Spanish university students (N=204)
Braunstein and Grant (2016)	Australian university students (N=140)
Theeboom <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Study1: Dutch university students (N=61) Study2: Dutch university students (N=54)
Grant and O'Connor (2018)	Australian university students (N=512)
Abdulla and Woods (2020)	Students in an all-female secondary school in London (N=115)
Grant and Gerrard (2020)	Australian undergraduate psychology students (N=80)

to students. It is necessary to determine whether the solution-focused coaching approach is still effective in other countries and generations. We attempt to expand the findings of prior studies by testing the effectiveness of a solution-focused coaching approach for Japanese students and businesspersons.

Literature review

A meta-analysis conducted by Theeboom *et al.* (2013) found that coaching has statistically significant impacts on participants. Their analysis includes studies of solution-focused coaching, all of which have shown that solution-focus improves the well-being and performance of students, teachers, and managers (Grant *et al.*, 2009, 2010; Green *et al.*, 2006, 2007; Poepsel, 2011; Spence & Grant, 2007). However, Theeboom *et al.* (2013) did not include studies comparing the effects of solution- and problem-focus.

[Table 1](#) lists studies comparing the effectiveness of solution- and problem-focused coaching. Previous studies comparing solution- and problem-focused coaching approaches have empirically revealed that solution-focused approaches were consistently superior to problem-focused approaches. They used pre- and post-testing designs to examine the differences in effectiveness among various coaching conditions.

Overall, five studies were conducted in Australia. Grant and O'Connor (2010) found that solution-focused questions significantly increased positive affect, decreased negative affect, increased self-efficacy and enhanced goal approach compared to problem-focused questions. Using more than 200 participants, Grant (2012) conducted a follow-up study to replicate these findings. Braunstein and Grant (2016) explored the interaction between solution-focused questions, problem-focused questions, and approach and avoidance goals. They used positive and negative affect, self-efficacy, and perceived goal progress as dependent variables. They found that solution-focused questions led to a greater increase in positive affect, self-efficacy and goal progress and a greater decrease in negative affect. However, there were no interactions between the questions and approach/avoidance goals. In other words, solution-focused questions were more effective than problem-focused questions for both goal types.

Grant and O'Conner (2018) explored the effects of solution- and problem-focused questions and of positive affect induction. Participants were divided into four groups (solution-focused, problem-focused, positive affect, and solution-focused plus positive affect condition). According to Grant and O'Conner (2018), positive affect and solution-focused conditions were equally effective at enhancing positive affect, increasing self-efficacy, enhancing goal approach, and developing action steps. Their study also showed that while positive affect made a valuable contribution to coaching outcomes, combining positive affect with solution-focused questions produced superior outcomes to positive affect or solution-focused conditions alone in terms of self-efficacy, goal approach, and action steps. However, problem-focused questions were the least effective among all the conditions.

Grant and Gerrard (2020) compared the relative impact of solution-focused with problem-focused questions and a combined problem-focused and solution-focused questions condition. In total, 80 participants were randomly assigned to the problem-focused, solution-focused, or problem-focused plus solution-focused conditions. This study found that only solution-focused and combined conditions yielded significant increases in positive affect as well as decreases in negative affect. Additionally, exclusively solution-focused questions were significantly more effective at increasing self-efficacy and decreasing negative affect than a condition that combined both problem and solution-focused questions. Problem-focused questions were the least effective compared to solution-focused and combined questions.

They also found a statistically significant relationship between dysfunctional attitudes and negative affect for the problem-focused and combined conditions. Hence, problem-focused and combined questions are less effective than solution-focused questions when the participants' attitudes are more dysfunctional. However, when participants' attitudes were less dysfunctional, all three conditions were equally effective in decreasing negative affect.

In Germany, Wahr (2010) found that the solution-focused group had increased self-confidence and established a positive mood compared to the problem-focused group. Thinking about the problem strengthened the current discomfort, whereas solution-focused thinking about exceptions invigorated a positive mood. Furthermore, students in the solution-focused group felt more competent in socializing with their fellow students.

Using Spanish participants, in a follow-up study of Grant (2012), Neipp *et al.* (2015) replicated similar findings. Using 204 students at a Spanish university, they found that solution-focused questions produced a significantly greater increase in self-efficacy, goal approach, and action steps than problem-focused questions, and a significantly greater decrease in negative affect.

Based on Dutch university students' data (Experiment 1: N=61, Experiment 2: N=54), Theeboom, *et al.* (2016) focused on the psychological process through which question types affected outcomes. In Experiment 1, they found that solution-focused questions resulted higher positive affect and lower negative affect than problem-focused questions. However, solution-focused

questions do not lead to higher attentional control. In Experiment 2, they replicated the findings on the effect of positive and negative affect and found that solution-focused questions led to higher cognitive flexibility. However, their hypothesis that the differential effects of solution and problem-focused questions on cognitive flexibility are mediated by positive affect was not supported. Thus, solution-focused questions seem to bring about cognitive flexibility without a positive affect.

In England, Abdulla and Woods (2020) compared the effectiveness among question types. They divided 115 female students at a secondary school in London into three conditions (solution-focused, problem-focused, or combined solution plus problem-focused), and analyzed their effect on students' perceived goal attainability and goal commitment. They found that their perceived goal attainability and commitment were higher in the solution-focused condition than in the problem-focused and combined conditions. However, the effect of condition on goal commitment was not statistically significant. Through mediation analysis, it was found that the effect of the problem-focused and combined conditions on commitment was mediated by perceived goal attainability, which means that these two conditions weakened commitment through depressing the goal attainability.

They also found that solution-focused questions were more likely to evoke thoughts of resources and tools, and that problem-focused questions had a greater tendency to elicit thoughts of self-regulation. Abdulla and Woods (2020) suggested that students who are reminded of self-regulation issues may come to doubt whether they can attain their goals.

All previous studies have suggested the superiority of solution-focused conditions. This condition may be more likely to enhance positive affect, self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility, and perceived closeness to goals and decrease negative affect than other conditions. Some studies suggest that solution-focused questions can influence outcomes through unique psychological processes which cannot be fully explained by the positive affect (Abdulla & Woods, 2020; Grant & O'Connor, 2018; Theeboom et al., 2016). This suggests that solution-focus affects not only emotions but also cognitive aspects (e.g., cognitive flexibility, controllability of behavior, etc.). Moreover, solution-focused questions can still be effective even if participants have dysfunctional attitudes (Grant & Gerrard, 2020).

However, all studies in [Table 1](#) conducted in Australia and Europe and their participants have been students or postgraduate students. Although the effects of solution-focus on managers and teachers have been empirically confirmed, previous research has not shown whether it is more effective than problem-focus. Furthermore, no previous studies have compared its effectiveness for business persons and students. To confirm the generality of their findings, it is necessary to expand the study to other cultural areas and groups.

In this study, we conducted research on Japanese students and employees. It is said that modesty has traditionally been considered as virtue in Japan, and many Japanese are not good at praising themselves. According to an

international comparative study of cultures by Hofstede et al. (2010), the characteristics of Japanese culture are very strong uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. Under a strong masculinity culture, there is a need to correct shortcomings. Also, under a strong uncertainty avoidance culture, stress and anxiety of people are high. Therefore, people under these cultures are more likely to seek out and try to fix flaws and shortcomings in order to avoid stress and anxiety. Thus, many Japanese people are presumed not to be accustomed to finding out their strengths, resources or ideals.

For example, Japanese companies are said to be good at continuous learning, which is known *kaizen*. Moreover, six sigma is adopted by many Japanese companies. These practices aim to address problems in production lines or business procedures. Toyota Motor Corporation, one of Japan's leading companies, is famous for its use of five-whys (*naze naze bunseki*). Five-whys is a method of verifying the effectiveness of countermeasures to a certain problem by looking for the factors that caused the problem and then repeating the search for the factors that caused the problem. Many Japanese companies are following such Toyota's problem-solving methods. Thus, many Japanese businesspersons are thought to be better at inspecting and improving deficits than at finding and exploiting their resources or strengths. We are interested in whether solution-focused questions are superior to problem-focused questions in this cultural context. Therefore, to confirm the generality of the findings of previous studies, we should investigate the effects of solution- and problem-focused questions on Japanese employees.

Study 1

1. Method

Design and participants

Given the nascent nature of this study, we thought it appropriate to use the available simplest comparative study. Similar to Grant and O'Connor (2010) and Grant (2012), we chose the simplest research design, wherein participants were divided into two conditions and answered either solution- or problem-focused questions. They were asked to complete the questionnaire before and after answering the questions¹.

The participants were 118 Japanese university students. Study 1 was conducted in class, and we explained that participation in this experiment was not mandatory. We informed them that their data would be dealt with confidentially, and that we would never disclose any personal information about them outside our research. Students who consented to participate were asked to scan one of two quick response (QR) codes that we projected on a screen using their smartphone. They were required to select one QR code according to which the last digit of their ID number would be odd or even. By scanning the code, they could answer pre- and post-questionnaires and

¹ In both Study 1 and Study 2, solution- and problem-focused questions were asked through questionnaires. This non-face-to-face method was employed in all of the previous studies listed in [Table 1](#).

solution- or problem-focused questions on their smartphones. Consequently, the numbers of solution- and problem-focused condition were 54 and 64, respectively. Both groups were equivalent in sex ($\chi^2 [1]=0.132$, $p=0.716$) and grade ($\chi^2 [1]=0.314$, $p=0.575$).

Procedure

Following Wahr (2010) and Theeboom *et al.* (2016), we also tried to enforce a certain degree of standardization of problem contents to increase compatibility among subjects and studies. After scanning the QR code, participants in both conditions were asked to describe a problem with their personal relationships which seemed to be difficult to solve. They were asked to indicate their current degree of self-efficacy, understanding of problems, and negative and positive affect (Time 1).

According to their conditions, they then received either solution- or problem-focused questions. The wording of each of questions was based on previous studies, which were translated into Japanese. In the problem-focused condition, participants were asked to respond to the following questions.

1. How long has this issue been a problem? How did it start?
2. Recall when your problem was the most serious. What do you think is the cause that makes it this serious?
3. Why do you think that your problem can not be solved?
4. What impact is thinking about this issue having on you?

In solution-focused conditions, participants were asked to imagine a situation wherein their problems disappeared because of a miracle. The participants were asked to respond to the following questions.

1. What was the situation wherein your problem was solved? What differences are there in the current situation? Please describe this point as concretely as possible.
2. What do you think would help to solve your problems?
3. What can you start doing from now on to get closer to solving your problems?
4. What impact is thinking about a solution to your problems having on you?

After answering these questions, both participants were asked to complete a second questionnaire about their current degree of self-efficacy, understanding of problems, and negative and positive affect (Time 2).

The experiment took 40 minutes to complete. After completion, we explained the aim and design of this study to the participants.

Measures

Positive and negative affect. Many previous studies have used the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Braunstein & Grant, 2016; Grant, 2012; Grant & Gerrard, 2020; Grant & O'Connor, 2010, 2018; Neipp et al., 2015). According to Watson *et al.* (1988), positive affect is the degree of feelings such as excitement, enthusiasm, and alertness. High positive affect refers to a state of high energy and attentiveness, while low positive affect refers to feelings of sadness and helplessness. Negative affect refers to the inhibition of objectivity, grudgingly going about one's activities, and feelings such as anger, contempt, irritability, upset, guilt, fear, and nervousness. A state of low negative affect means feeling calm and composed. Watson *et al.* (1988) developed the PANAS to measure positive and negative affect using 10 adjectives. In this study, we used items in the Japanese version of the PANAS, which was developed by Kawahito *et al.* (2011). The 20 items were answered on a six-point Likert scale (from 1="does not apply at all" to 6="very much applicable"). The reliability of the scales for positive affect was $\alpha=0.843$ (Time 1) and $\alpha=0.872$ (Time 2), and those for negative affect were $\alpha=0.833$ (Time 1) and $\alpha=0.885$ (Time 2) respectively.

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy has been utilized in several previous studies (Braunstein & Grant, 2016; Grant, 2012; Grant & Gerrard, 2020; Grant & O'Connor, 2010, 2018; Neipp et al., 2015). It is defined as "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" (Bandura, 1977, p. 193). To measure self-efficacy, we used the same single question item as Grant and O'Connor (2010): "I feel very confident that I know how to solve this problem," which was translated into Japanese. A six-point response scale was used (from 1="not at all" to 6="precisely").

Understanding of the problem. Grant and O'Connor (2010) are the only one who have used a measure to understand of the problem. However, we included this measure in our analysis because we were interested in whether solution-focused questions would be more helpful in understanding the problem than problem-focused questions. To measure the understanding of the problem, we employed the same question item as Grant and O'Connor (2010): "I understand the nature of this problem," which was translated into Japanese. A six-point response scale was used for this question (from 1="not at all" to 6="precisely").

2. Results

[Table 2](#) shows the means, standard deviations of the variables, and t-values of the paired t-test in Study 1.

Solution-focused conditions were found to be more effective than problem-focused conditions in decreasing students' negative affect and enhancing self-efficacy. However, neither condition had a significant effect on understanding the problem. Regarding positive affect, the effect of solution-focused questions was not significant, but problem-focused questions significantly reduced it. Overall, students in the solution-focused condition had a more positive impact than those in the problem-focused condition.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and t-values in Study 1

Group	Variable	Mean (SD): Time 1	Mean (SD): Time 2	Difference	t-value
Problem-focused (N=64)	Positive affect	2.798(0.836)	2.577(0.803)	-0.221	2.856**
	Negative affect	2.873(0.989)	2.863(1.033)	-0.010	0.171
	Self-efficacy	2.891(1.323)	3.188(1.468)	0.297	2.264*
	Understanding of the problem	3.766(1.244)	3.875(1.189)	0.109	0.895
Solution-focused (N=54)	Positive affect	2.976(0.898)	2.985(1.033)	0.009	0.096
	Negative affect	2.909(0.845)	2.509(0.919)	-0.400	4.843***
	Self-efficacy	2.593(1.252)	3.593(1.486)	1.000	4.489***
	Understanding of the problem	3.537(1.239)	3.870(1.304)	0.333	1.946

Asterisks represent significance, in this table and all the following tables: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Study 2

1. Method

Design and participants

The participants in Study 2 were full-time employees in a Japanese medium-scale company (number of employees: approximately 500). This company was a relatively young firm established in the 2000s and had run several entertainment businesses. With the cooperation of this firm, we chose employees at random and asked them whether they would like to participate in and attend our experiment. Finally, 40 employees agreed to participate in this study. However, two of them failed to attend due to an accident. Thus, 38 participants were included in the experiment.

We had announced that this experiment was an assessment of the effectiveness of problem-solving techniques, that their data would be dealt with confidentially, and that we would never disclose any personal information about them outside our research.

Participants were randomly assigned to either solution- or problem-focused conditions beforehand, and we distributed one of two types of worksheets according to their assignment. They were not informed of their assignments and were asked to fill in questions on the worksheets, which were the same as in Study 1. However, two were eliminated from the experiments because they did not answer many questions. Consequently, 36 samples were obtained (solution-focused condition: -20, problem-focused condition: -16). Both groups were equivalent in terms of gender ($\chi^2[1]=0.023$, $p=0.878$), and managerial or non-managerial status ($\chi^2[1]=0.009$, $p=0.925$).

Procedure

On the worksheet, participants were asked to describe a problem about their personal relationships, which seemed to be difficult to solve in their occupation. Next, similar to Study 1, the participants were asked to respond to the current degree of self-efficacy, understanding of problems, and negative and positive affect (Time 1).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and Z-values in Study 2

Group	Variable	Mean (SD): Time 1	Mean (SD): Time 2	Difference	Z-value
Problem-focused (N=16)	Positive affect	2.956(0.675)	2.719(0.712)	-0.238	1.934
	Negative affect	2.400(0.932)	2.263(1.079)	-0.138	1.226
	Self-efficacy	2.875(1.204)	3.250(1.000)	0.375	1.897
	Understanding of the problem	3.688(1.078)	3.688(1.138)	0.000	0.000
Solution-focused (N=20)	Positive affect	3.137(0.756)	2.968(0.829)	-0.168	1.500
	Negative affect	2.535(0.869)	2.165(0.782)	-0.370	3.836***
	Self-efficacy	3.350(1.268)	4.050(1.099)	0.700	2.636**
	Understanding of the problem	3.700(0.865)	4.000(0.973)	0.300	1.730

Next, according to their conditions, they were asked to respond to either solution- or problem-focused questions, which were the same as in Study 1. Finally, they were asked to answer questions similar to those in Time 1 (Time 2).

It took approximately 40 minutes to complete this experiment. After completion, we explained the aim and design of this study to the participants.

Measures

We used the same measures as those used in Study 1. Therefore, their explanation omitted. The reliability of the scales for positive affect was $\alpha=0.827$ (Time 1) and $\alpha=0.865$ (Time 2), and those for negative affect was $\alpha=0.860$ (Time 1) and $\alpha=0.898$ (Time 2), respectively.

2. Results

[Table 3](#) shows the means, standard deviations of the variables, and Z-values of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test in Study 2.

Similar to Study1, the solution-focused condition was found to be more effective in decreasing employees' negative affect and enhancing self-efficacy than the problem-focused condition. However, both conditions had no significant effects on the positive affect or understanding of problem. Overall, employees in the solution-focused condition had more positive impacts than those in the problem-focused condition.

Finally, we combined the two datasets and compared the effect between students and employees in each condition. We conducted a Wilcoxon test on the differences between Time 1 and Time 2, and there were no significant differences between the groups for any variable. Therefore, we found no differences in the effectiveness of solution- and problem-focused questions between students and businesspersons.

Discussion

As mentioned in Literature review section, in all the previous studies, solution-focused questions were more effective than problem-focused questions. However, concerning the positive affect and understanding of the problem, we could not find a positive effect of solution-focused conditions in either group. As noted earlier, many Japanese people are presumed not to be

accustomed to finding out their strengths, resources or ideals. The Japanese are said to be more accustomed to finding and correcting flaws and defects. Hence, they may not be familiar with answering solution-focused questions, which is thought to be the reason why solution-focused questions were less effective than in previous studies in Japan. Notably, a participant in Study 2 mentioned that miracle questions could invoke an unrealistic situation that she felt difficulties to imagine realistic and ideal goals. It is thought that invoked unrealistic situation wherein imaging realistic ideal goals could become difficult. It is believed that invoked unrealistic situations may restrain one's efficacy, understanding of the problem, and positive affect.

Nevertheless, we found that solution-focused questions enhanced self-efficacy and decreased negative affect more than problem-focused questions in Japanese university's students (Study 1). These findings suggested that solution-focused approach can be effective to some extent even for Japanese students. These findings corroborate previous studies. In the employee group, solution-focused questions were also more effective than problem-focused questions in increasing self-efficacy and weakening negative affect (Study 2). Additionally, there were no statistical differences of these effects between the students and employee groups. These findings suggest that the solution-focused questioning method can still be effective to some extent not only for students but also for working adults, and its degree of effectiveness may not differ between students and businesspersons.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored the relative effectiveness of solution-focused questions to problem-focused questions in Japanese students and employees. It was found that solution-focused questions had a superior effect on them than problem-focused ones, as similar to previous studies. Therefore, it is suggested that solution-focused questions are effective for people with different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, solution-focused questions can effectively enhance problem solving not only for students but also for businesspersons. However, the effect is not as large as in previous studies.

Our findings have two implications. First, solution-focused questions may be able to apply to broader problem solving, even in Japan. Currently, Japanese companies have lost their former strength and brilliance and are searching for a new direction. In this context, a solution-focused approach, a new and different problem-solving method, is considered promising as a way of thinking that will revitalize human capital and bring out the vitality and creativity of the people. However, as we will discuss later, we will need to devise ways to make it more effective. Second, the worksheet method can be used more easily and in a relatively short time. Thus, this method can be applied to situations such as a large-scale managerial or leadership training of employees and executives, and career or communication education for students and teachers.

However, our study has several limitations. First, the effect sizes in our studies were smaller than those in previous studies. Hence, we need to explore more effective questions in Japan. Ito (2011) discussed how to effectively use

miracle questions, and suggested several points. For example, we can utilize exception questions and appreciate participants' strengths before introducing miracle ones so that participants can accept miracle ones more easily. It may also be useful to use questions to enhance positive emotions in conjunction with solution-focused questions².

Second, in this study, we applied the simplest research design, wherein participants were divided into two conditions and responded before and after questioning without any other conditions. In future studies, we need to explore mediators or moderators through the effects of solution- or problem-focused questions (e.g., Abdulla & Woods, 2020; Grant & Gerrard, 2020; Grant & O'Connor, 2018; Theeboom et al., 2016). Finally, the number of participants was too small and was extracted from one university and company. Due to the small sample size, some factors such as age, marital status, organization, income were not controlled. We need to recruit more diverse participants to confirm the possibility of generalization of our findings in future studies.

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² Grant and O'Conner (2018) evoke positive emotions by asking questions that remind them about positive experiences.

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