

# **Question Utilization in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy: A Recursive Frame Analysis of Insoo Kim Berg's Solution Talk**

**Jeffrey Cotton**

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida USA

---

*Recursive frame analysis (RFA) was used to conduct a single case investigation of Insoo Kim Berg's question utilization talk in a solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) session. Due to the lack of process research that explores how SFBT questions facilitate change, the author investigated how Berg's solution language influenced a client to respond in session. The purpose of this case study was to explore how SFBT questions served as interventions to facilitate change. The research question for this study was twofold: (a) how does Berg's language influence conversation and (b) how is the client influenced by Berg's questions in a therapeutic context? The findings suggest that Berg's questions serve as interventions for change as noted by patterns in the therapeutic conversation. Key Words: Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, Recursive Frame Analysis, Couple Therapy, Question Utilization, Qualitative Research*

---

## **Introduction**

Suppose for a moment what it would be like if something strange happened, that a miracle occurred overnight and the problem that brought you here is solved. When you wake up tomorrow morning, what will be the first sign you will notice that will let you know a miracle must have happened? Who in your life will notice this change? What is the first step you can take that will move you in the direction of reaching this miracle? I wonder if pieces of this miracle are already occurring? These are some quintessential questions that Insoo Kim Berg may have asked you in a therapeutic interview. According to De Jong and Berg (2002), the aforementioned questions involve the art of interviewing for solutions, and the interview itself serves as a therapeutic intervention.

Because there is a process of interviewing for solutions, the author of this investigation seeks to understand how solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) questions influence a client to respond in a therapy session. In other words, how are solution-focused questions utilized in the therapeutic context? In addition, philosophical assumptions concerning SFBT are well documented throughout the publication literature and give insight as to how SFBT questions work. For example, Bavelas, McGee, Philips, and Routledge (2000) demonstrate that the miracle question, "...embeds several presuppositions: that the problem might conceivably disappear and that, if it did, the client would notice specific, observable events in the world" (p. 58). Additionally, Gale and Newfield (1992) provide discoveries from their process research to demonstrate how Bill O'Hanlon utilizes his style of solution-focused language, questions, and turn taking moves. More recently, Tomori and Bavelas (2007) found that Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer (SFBT experts) used both formulations and questions to interact and respond with clients

in a positive context thus demonstrating how experts use SFBT discourse in therapy sessions.

Furthermore, SFBT involves "...utilizing what clients bring with them to help them meet their needs in such a way that they can make satisfactory lives for themselves" (de Shazer, Berg, Lipchik, Nunnally, Molnar, Gingerich, et al., 1986, p. 208). Lipchik (2002) believes that the philosophy of SFBT encompasses the idea that "change occurs through language when recognition of exceptions and existing and potential strengths create new actions" (p. 14).

SFBT therapists utilize techniques such as scaling questions, relationship questions, exception questions, and tasks that allow for the construction of goals and solutions for clients (Corcoran & Stephenson, 2000). SFBT can also be applied to a variety of settings and populations (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000). Investigating how SFBT techniques are effective with therapy participants would seem to confirm credibility of the model. Even though evidence-based practices are becoming mandatory in the counseling field, SFBT has not been put through enough rigorous experimental-based research paradigms to establish itself as an efficacious practice (Trepper, Dolan, McCollum, & Nelson, 2006). According to Corcoran (2003), research efforts are focusing on the SFBT model to study its effectiveness. Overall, a gap exists in the literature that includes process-oriented studies that involve how SFBT works (Stalker, Levene, & Coady, 1999). However, a few process studies specific to SFBT have been published (see Gale & Newfield, 1992; Tomori & Bavelas, 2007) and more investigations of the model would appear to enhance credibility and provide readers with a substantive understanding concerning how SFBT questions and language are effective.

The aim of this study is to investigate the practice of how SFBT functions so that the findings can be useful for therapists who want an understanding of how solution talk serves as a process of change for clients in a therapeutic context. In addition, Trepper et al. (2006) discuss that, "although many studies state that SFBT was delivered as a treatment, it is often difficult to know exactly what was done in session..." (p. 135). This qualitative research project provides a description of what unfolds in a SFBT session, and hopefully this can add to the design of future studies or evidence-informed investigations. An analysis of how SFBT conversations unfold is studied by means of a qualitative research tool known as recursive frame analysis (RFA).

The author of this qualitative inquiry investigates a single case study of a session with Insoo Kim Berg utilizing SFBT with a client. Also, the author's main assumption is that the use of solution-focused language and questions influences the client to respond to the therapist with solution-oriented language in co-constructing goals for change. Therefore, RFA will be utilized to explore the relationship with Berg and her client in evaluating the content and process of their relational interaction within a therapy session. The research question for this case study is twofold: (a) how does Berg's SFBT language influence the conversation in therapy and (b) how is the client influenced by Berg's questions in a relational, therapeutic context?

## **Research Paradigm**

The qualitative research paradigm, RFA, was utilized to investigate how SFBT works as a system of solution talk. According to Chenail (1990/1991), the foundation of

RFA is a method that allows the researcher to make a note of patterns or differences in interaction throughout a period of time so as to infer what was said. In other words, this process allows the researcher or practitioner to create an illustration of data derived from the context of the therapeutic interview and note relationships among a system of categories. Keeney (1990) discusses that when therapeutic conversation is studied through a process of the exploration of talk, and talk of the talk, what then evolves is the complete method of conversation.

For purposes of this study, RFA allowed the principle investigator to chart data and form frames, galleries, and wings to categorize the information in allowing data representation (Chenail, 1995). Keeney (1990) says that, "A frame indicates the contexts a client and therapist offer each other" (p. 42). In other words, the discussion may unfold in the context of a frame of "problem talk" or "solution talk." In addition, a gallery includes a category of discourse contextualized as frames (Keeney). A gallery, for example, may include frames of conversation such as "past successes." Moreover, the larger order of a wing includes a category of galleries (Keeney). This may include a wing that represents, for example, "the client's exceptions to the problem."

Furthermore, RFA allowed the investigator to note patterns in the data and construct a system of notation that includes: conversation, words or clusters of words (phrases), dialogue, speech, discussion, language, etc. (Chenail, 1990/1991). Essentially, the recursive nature of SFBT communication was studied so as to make sense of how solution talk functions.

According to Chenail (1990/1991), the philosophical nature of RFA facilitates the investigator's understanding of what the researcher learns about communication as well as how language is utilized in context. Furthermore, RFA permitted the researcher to study the client's ability to discuss her lived experience through communication (Chenail, 1990/1991). In applying RFA methodology in this study, the focus involved how the researcher understands the client's verbal responses in relationship to SFBT model-based questions.

RFA involves a process of categorizing words, phrases, and statements into frames so that meaning and context materialize, especially when the researcher absorbs him or herself within the words (Chenail, 1990/1991). This process of organizing data allowed the investigator to study and present a description regarding the function of SFBT practice. According to Chenail (1995), "RFA is a method for understanding and presenting conversations" (p. 1). This methodology facilitated the opportunity to observe, interpret, and discuss conversations in a qualitative manner.

RFA is accomplished by studying a variety of options: previously taped sessions (audio/video), transcribed therapy sessions, or utilizing a blend of any of the above (Chenail, 1995). The investigator of this research project reviewed both the transcript and the videotape of a previously recorded session with Berg and the client (Robin). The conversation was investigated in regard to how Berg's SFBT language influenced the conversation in therapy, and subsequently, how the client was influenced by Berg's questions in a relational, therapeutic context.

## Research Method

### *Subject and procedures*

This project includes a qualitative research inquiry about the process of SFBT and how it works therapeutically to facilitate in-session transformation or shifts in language. Once a SFBT video was selected, the author began collecting and reviewing transcribed data from the video of a previously taped, full-length, initial session with Insoo Kim Berg and a client. The session notes were transcribed from a published video (see Allyn & Bacon, 2000), "Solution-Focused Therapy with Insoo Kim Berg (Reprint): Psychotherapy with the Experts."

The total video running time is one hundred and fifteen minutes and includes the initial therapy session (forty-two minutes) in part two of the video. Berg meets with a married woman Robin who presents with relationship issues involving her husband Ed. The author of this case study reviewed the transcript and the videotape conjointly in order to check the accuracy of the transcription.

In reviewing the transcript, the researcher tracked Berg's comments into openings and frames, converted the frames into galleries, and categorized the galleries into wings (Chenail, 1995). The transcription of the session was reviewed and tracked through a variety of transformations. According to Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002), the function of analysis is to bring significance, organization, and presentation of data, or in other words, "...making sense of what has been learned" (p. 31). For the purpose of this project, RFA allowed the researcher to note differences in conversational patterns regarding how Berg influences the conversation and how the client responds to her solution-focused questions in the context of therapy.

The RFA process further allowed the researcher to categorize data, derived from the transcript, into openings and galleries so that changes in both Berg's and the client's dialogue is systemically studied (Chenail, 1995). This recursive process further permitted the researcher to make sense of the conversational relationship, as well as present galleries and openings of communication in order to study the therapist's influence on the client's language pattern (Chenail, 1995).

Essentially, noting when Berg asked a question helped identify openings, or shifts, in the conversation. Next, recognizing when and how SFBT questions are utilized in relationship to the client's responses or statements allowed for further analysis of the transcribed conversation. Finally, RFA served as the research tool in describing patterns and changes in the talk between the client and the therapist.

### *Credibility*

In preserving credibility in regard to this project, the principal investigator utilized several techniques. First, peer debriefing was utilized with a colleague, Lisa C. Palmer, to ensure that the investigator's focus on the project was maintained. Palmer acted only as a consultant on this case study and provided appropriate feedback concerning the transformation of data. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), peer debriefing helps to ensure ethical research decisions and provides for criticism regarding the research project.

Second, member checking was conducted with Insoo Kim Berg, prior to her untimely passing, via email and phone consultation. Berg electronically received and reviewed the RFA transcript coding as well as the process of categorizing openings, frames, galleries, and wings in Microsoft® PowerPoint® (version 2004). Berg's feedback confirmed the accuracy of the data collection process. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), member checking allows the researcher to "...take emerging findings back to the participants for them to elaborate, correct, extend, or argue about" (p. 69). This helps to ensure the correctness of the analysis. Berg's feedback via phone consultation further provided confirmation of the correctness of the data thus helping to ensure the integrity of this research project.

Lastly, the research process was organized and maintained in an electronic audit trail throughout the project in order to preserve the integrity of the study. The audit trail consists of the documentation of the entire research process from beginning to end. This audit trail includes: (1) an electronically noted transcript, using the "new comment" icon in Microsoft® Word® (version 2004) that allowed the researcher to memo words, phrases, questions, and statements, (2) an electronic record of the transformation of communication patterns into frames, galleries, and wings using Microsoft® PowerPoint®, and (3) the process of revising many categories of wings into three final categories and displaying them in Microsoft® PowerPoint® (Chenail & Duffy, 2009). As the author utilized PowerPoint®'s facets, it became clear that the user-friendly aspect of the program is congruent with the suggestions recommended by Chenail and Duffy in that "...PowerPoint® would not only make the process easier, but the software application would also enhance the recursive frame analysis itself" (p. 126). In other words, the PowerPoint® software allows for the organization of data into individual slides so that displaying and categorizing the talk is tracked frame by frame (or slide by slide) in a recursive method.

### *Limitations*

Since studying SFBT throughout graduate school, the principal investigator holds many assumptions about the model, its systemic philosophy, and the model's utilization in therapy. For example, knowing that SFBT focuses on the client's strengths and resources (De Jong & Berg, 2002), the investigator's bias is reflected in relation to how the data in this study is interpreted as well as how the data are presented. Furthermore, the researcher is well versed in SFBT practice, and this bias does serve as a limitation for this project. In addition, since this is only a single case study, the preliminary findings cannot be generalized to the larger counseling community.

## **Analysis and Interpretations**

### *Relationship between openings and frames*

Berg has a pattern, as noted in the analysis of the transcript, of offering openings in relation to: questions of difference, questions that contain presuppositions, relationship questions, exception questions, and questions that explore exceptions to the client's problem statements. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the aforementioned

list of questions is not exhaustive or exclusive, and these questions can be integrated throughout the dialogue, especially in regard to the client's problem talk. For example, a relationship question, based on an exception to a problem, can contain presuppositions about differences that may in turn be amplified as a solution. In other words, the above questions can be utilized recursively, or used repeatedly throughout the session at different times, to facilitate the solution-building process.

### *Question of difference*

A question of difference is defined as a question that presupposes that something needs to be different. This idea originated from the work of Bateson (1972) that involves a process of communication that helps to identify a "difference which makes a difference" (p. 381). An example of Berg asking a question of difference, preceding an opportunity for the client to engage in problem talk, is found in the very beginning of the session as noted on the first line of the transcript (001).

Berg initiates the session by opening with a question of what needs to be different for her client, Robin. Berg (001) states: "Um, let me ask you, what do you suppose that needs to be different in your life that will let you know that it was a good thing that you came and talked to me today?" This question of difference then influences Robin to respond by providing two important answers about what she needs: (a) "Probably, um, helping me realize that, you know, a lot of things that, that go on are just normal everyday life. Um, you know, that, that I'm no different than anybody else. My experiences are all the same" (002), and (b) "Because sometimes I, I sometimes blow things out of proportion and think only those things happen to me, but when in fact, you know, they're just normal everyday occurrences" (004).

In effect, the process of Berg's questions of difference helps to establish two significant frames that initiate goal development for Robin early in the session. In addition, Robin's feedback influences Berg to construct a new opening and continue with goal development as well as the expansion of solution talk.

### *Presuppositions*

According to McGee, Del Vento, and Bavelas (2005), a question containing a presupposition involves the notion that a question embeds an assumption. For example, Berg (005) asks a question presupposing that if Robin learns that her reactions are normal, that this will be helpful for her. In other words, Berg (005) presents this type of question in a new opening to Robin by asking, "Okay, okay. So suppose you find that out. That what's happening to you and how you react to things are pretty normal. How is that going to be helpful, how would that be helpful for you?" This question presupposes that the client will find out that she is normal and that the process of discovering this will somehow be helpful for her. In reply to Berg's position of curiosity, Robin (006) answers, "It gives me piece of mind." Further into the session, Berg shifts her questioning to include relationship questions.

### *Relationship question*

According to De Jong and Berg (2002), relationship questions help elicit feedback from the client that includes relational experiences and how they are meaningful to the client. Berg offers examples of a relationship question that presupposes that others around Robin will notice something different about her when she is able to let things go and get on with her life. For example, Berg (039) asks Robin, “So suppose you are able to do that...what would people around you notice different about Robin that would let them know, ah, she is able to let things blow into the wind and then go on with her life?” Also, throughout their therapy conversation, Berg weaves into the conversation specific relationship questions regarding the client’s ability to use self-control in relationship with her husband (049), sister (144), and anyone else that gets on her nerves (154). An example of this is given below.

Berg creates an opening for talk involving self-control by framing a relationship question to Robin early in the session that addresses, “What would he say he (husband) would notice different about you?” Robin’s (050) response is: “He’d say that noting gets to me. He’d be surprised that noting gets to me.” In addition, Berg (143) later utilizes a relationship question with Robin that invites thoughts about others with which she can use self-control: “So who do you, I mean, who do you do that with?” Robin (144) replies, “I’m learning to do it with my sister.” Also, Berg (153) consistently utilizes the relationship question with Robin by asking, “Okay, and who else do you do this with?” Robin (154) answers, “Basically anybody that gets on my nerves.” In addition to Berg’s use of relationship questions, she also utilizes and weaves exception questions throughout the session as noted in the transcript.

### *Exception questions*

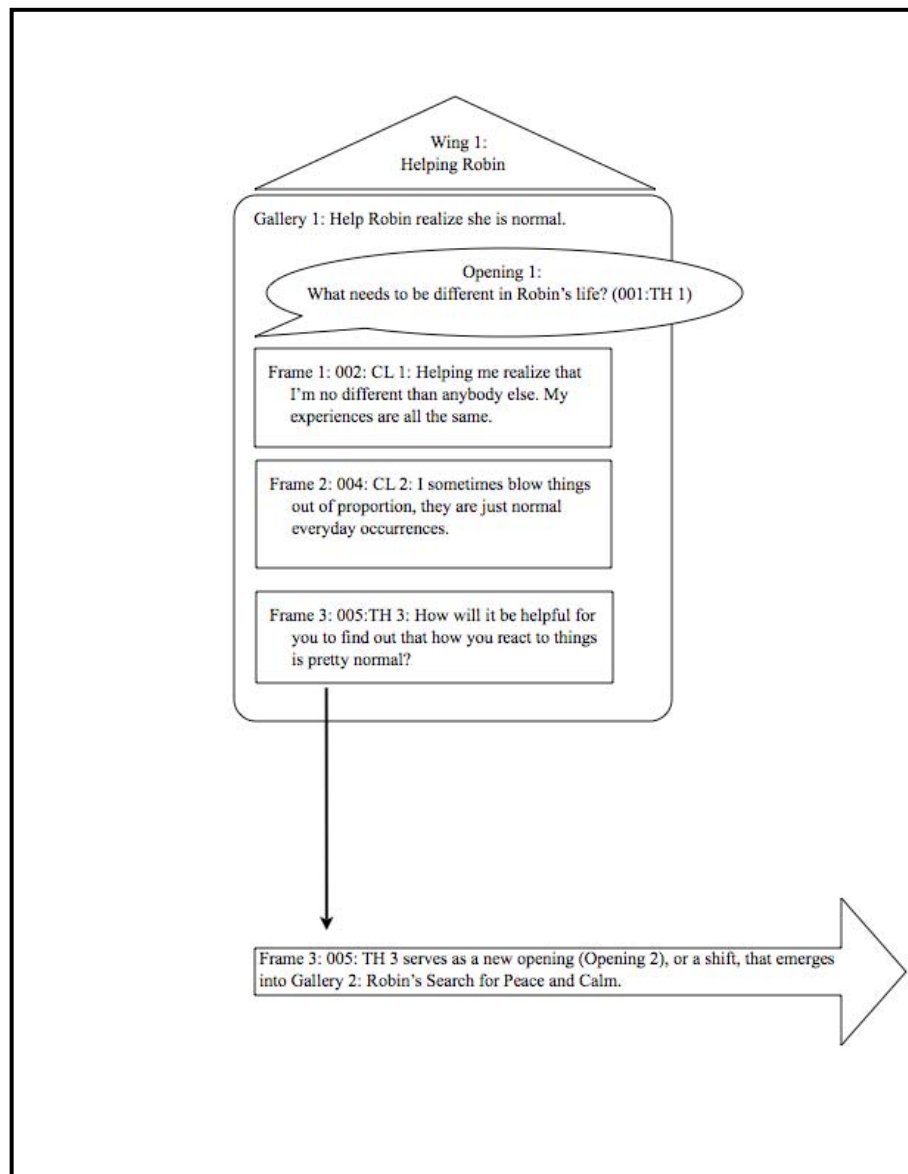
Eliciting feedback from the client about the differences when the problem did not occur, or occurred with less severity, helps the therapist identify strengths, embedded in exceptions, that the client can utilize in the future (De Jong & Berg, 2002). At different moments in the session, Berg introduces exception questions emphasizing the non-problematic times when Robin is calm and in control thus punctuating the client’s strengths.

Berg creates an opening by asking Robin about a recent time when she was able to be in control. For example, Berg (069) asks: “When was the most recent time you had been able to do that?” Robin replies that she picked her battle on a recent day (Sunday). In addition, Robin states: “I sort of pick my battles so to speak, you know, what I’m going to stand up and say no I’m not going to do or what I am going to do, and not back down on it” (076). This in turn influences Berg (077) to adopt the client’s language “picking battles” in relation to the frame of control: “So, when you pick your battle, that’s when you are in control of things?” Also, Berg utilizes the exception talk throughout the session primarily when Robin mentions problem statements.

*Problem talk and exception talk*

Another observation includes the relationship between the openings and frames of problem talk and exception talk. For example, when Robin attempts to engage Berg in frames of problem talk, Berg responds by returning to openings engaging Robin in exception talk about her recent success with self-control on Sunday. For example, Robin attempts to invite Berg in a discussion about her emotions as being the problem by emphasizing that it is hard for her to follow through with control when her emotions are involved. Furthermore, Robin (162) responds to Berg’s question with a problem frame: “Because that’s where my emotions come in.” However, Berg (163) replies to the invitation for problem talk by punctuating Robin’s exception, “...like Sunday, how is it that you do not allow your emotions to come through?” This is a significant SFBT therapeutic technique as evidenced by Berg’s consistent use of exception talk that invites Robin to discuss her recent exception with control and “picking her battles.”

Figure 1

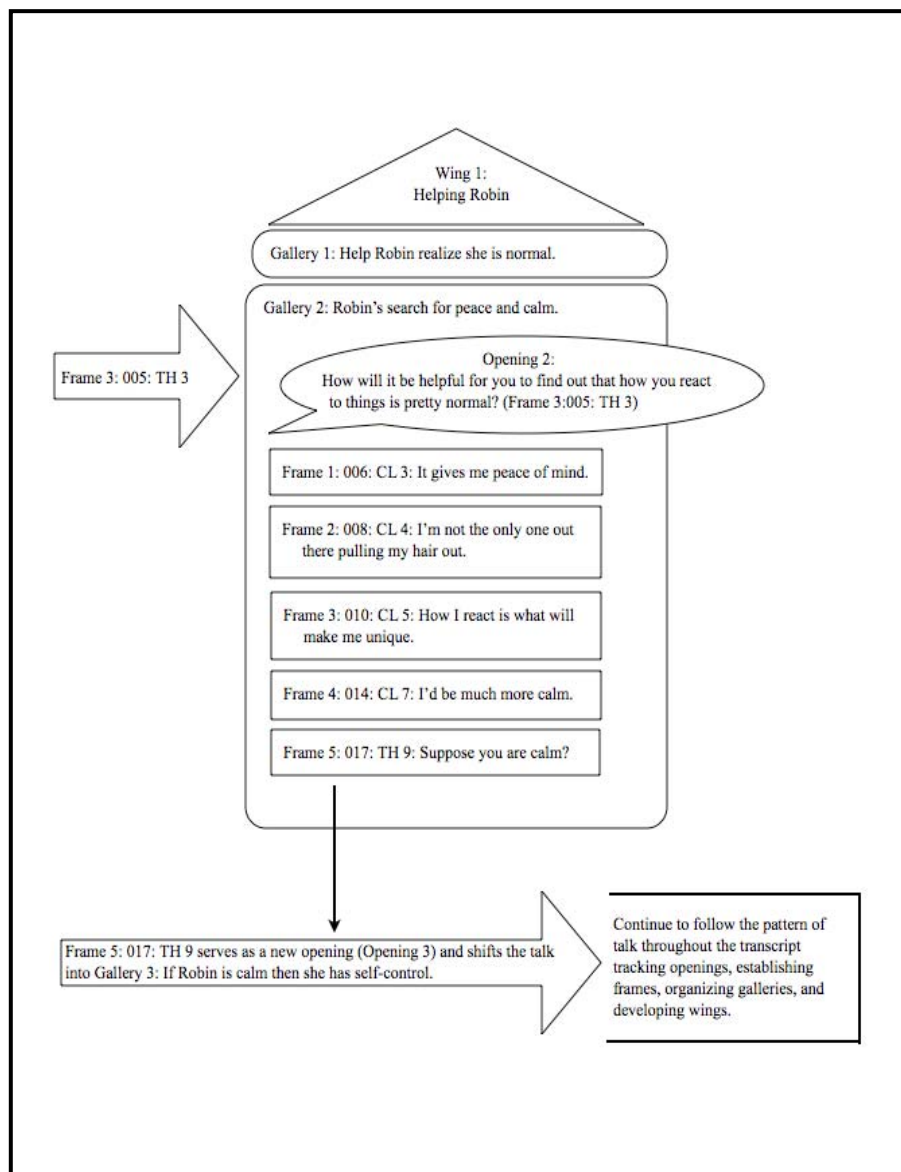




Berg further weaves exception talk, based on the client's language, into the opening of Robin's twofold therapy task: (a) "pay attention to what signals that you pick up, like the Sunday incident. What signal tells you that this is the battle that you can win or you are going to win?" (261), and (b) "The other idea is perhaps since your husband and your sister know which button to push with you, I wonder, have you ever thought about maybe you could pretend like you just disconnected the wire, when they push the button?" (267). Robin agrees with the task (274).

The process of noting openings and frames, as represented above, allows for the categorization of galleries and wings, as displayed below. Relationships between the galleries allow for a visual representation of talk as well as the themes that emerge (wings). See Figure 1 and Figure 2 for a diagram of this process.

Figure 2

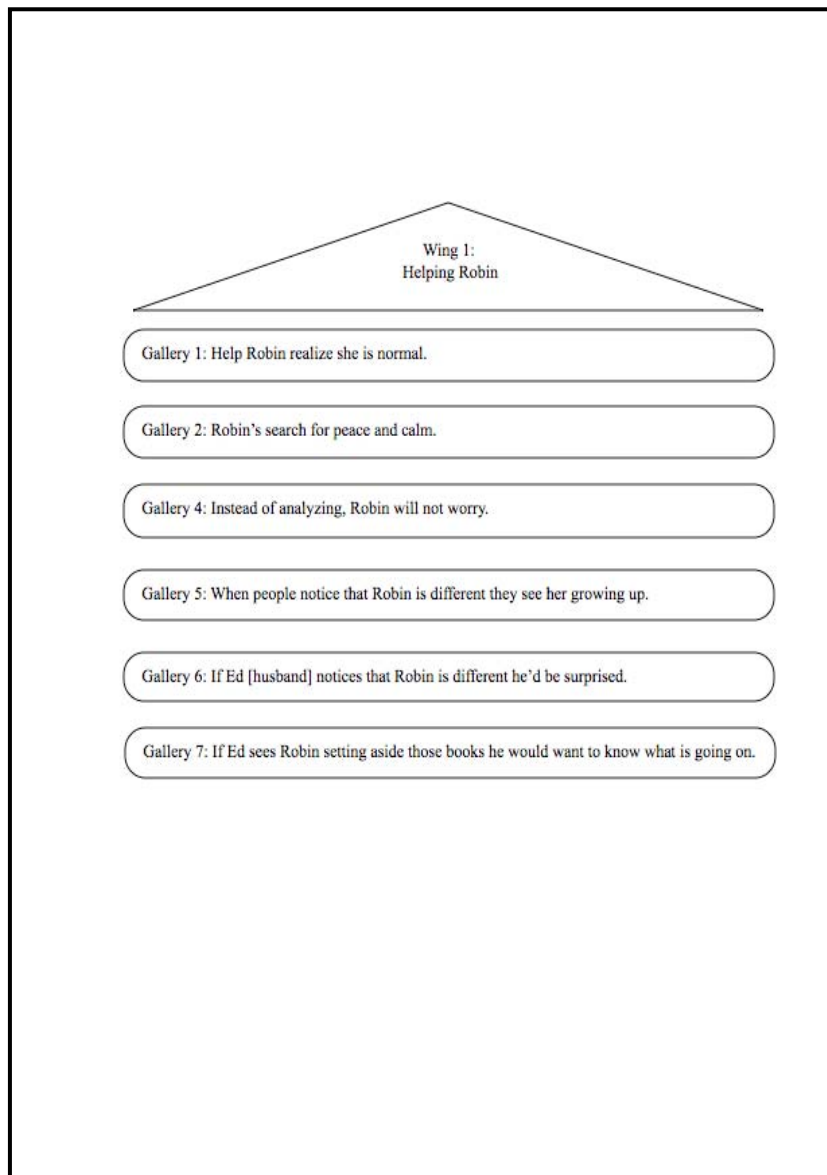


## Relationship among Galleries and Galleries

### *Helping the client*

Wing one involves the notion of “helping Robin.” In order to construct a representation (Chenail, 1995) of the therapy talk between Berg and Robin, seven galleries establish the first wing, constructed from the openings and frames as observed in the transcript. The RFA of Wing 1 and its galleries are listed below in Figure 3.

Figure 3



The relationship among the galleries in Wing 1 involves the notion that they are all based upon the frames of what needs to be different for Robin as influenced by Berg's systemic questions. For example, Berg (001), as presented in the previous section, initiates the session by asking Robin, "...what do you suppose that needs to be different in your life that will let you know that it was a good thing that you came and talked to me today?" This initial question of difference establishes a context for change and influences other openings based upon Berg's subsequent questioning:

- (005) How is that going to be helpful, how would that be helpful for you?
- (017) So suppose you are, so suppose you are calm?
- (029) So, what would you do instead of analyzing then, when you've got to that point?
- (039) What would people around you notice different about Robin that would let them know, "Ah, she is able to let things blow into the wind and then go on with her life?"
- (049) What would he say he (husband) would notice different about you?

In order to demonstrate the relationship between Berg's questions and the flow of the talk as categorized in the various galleries and wings, an example of this process is offered. In Gallery 4 "Instead of analyzing, Robin will not worry," Berg (039) creates a new opening by asking Robin, "What would people around you notice different if you are able to let things blow into the wind and then go on with your life?" This opening provides feedback from the client that creates a fifth gallery, "When people notice that Robin is different they see her growing up." The above exemplar emphasizes a shift in talk from problem talk: (a) "analyzing and worrying," to a shift in solution talk: (b) "letting things blow in the wind," to talk about what others would notice about Robin's change: (c) "growing up." This flow of talk results in the construction of Wing 1, "Helping Robin." In other words, the flow of talk can be observed as, if Robin is to be helped, she will need to do something different as opposed to worrying about and analyzing situations too much. An alternative solution is amplified (De Jong & Berg, 2002): if she can let things go, she can then grow up and others around her would notice.

Robin's feedback, in response to Berg's systemic questions, entails what needs to be different for her thus establishing reciprocity of solution talk. A few of the many exemplars of Robin's feedback based upon the notion of what needs to be different are listed below:

- (002) Probably, um, helping me realize that, you know, a lot of things that, that go on are just normal everyday life. Um, you know, that, that I'm no different than anybody else. My experiences are all the same.
- (006) It gives me piece of mind.
- (014) I'd be much more calm.
- (050) He'd say that nothing gets to me. He'd be surprised that nothing gets to me.

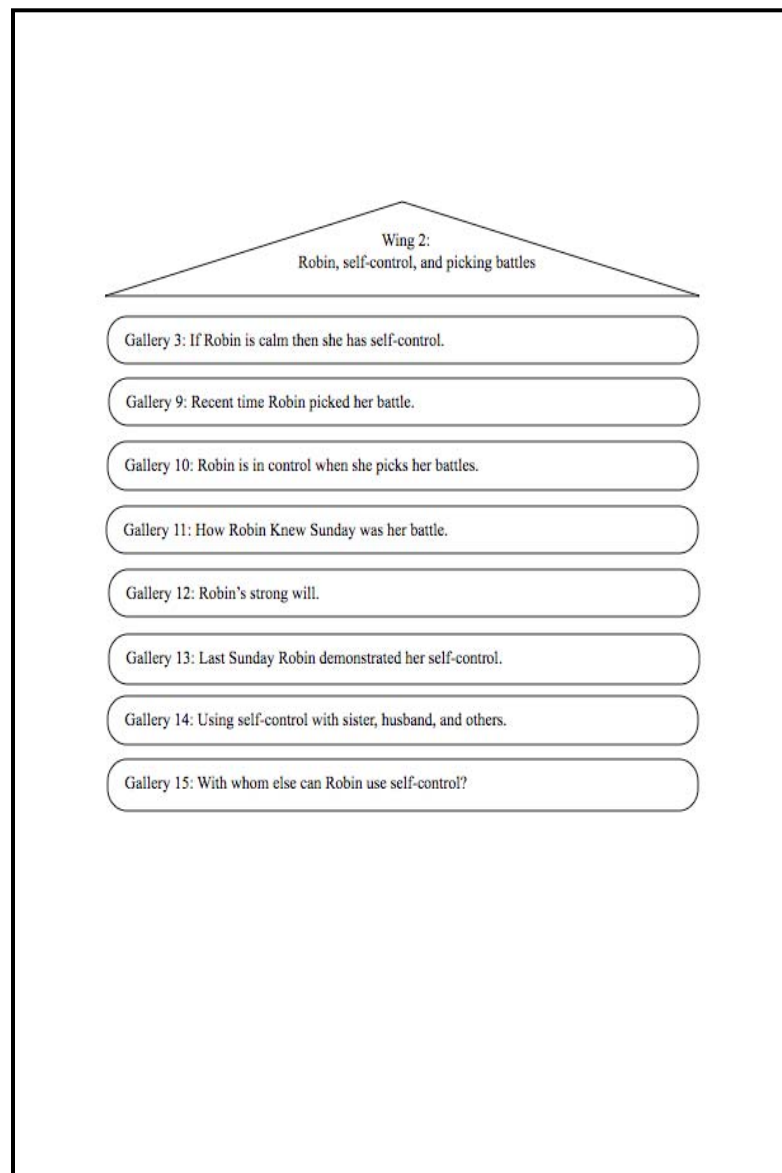
Berg's SFBT questions of difference allow for the understanding of the contextual nature of how the questions themselves serve as interventions for the client within the

specific moment of therapy talk and create a context for change (McGee et al., 2005). The outcome of Berg's questions of difference entails what would be helpful for Robin as noted by the galleries. In addition, Wing 1 depicts how Berg engages the client and builds momentum that continues the solution talk as noted in the second wing.

*The client, self-control, and picking battles*

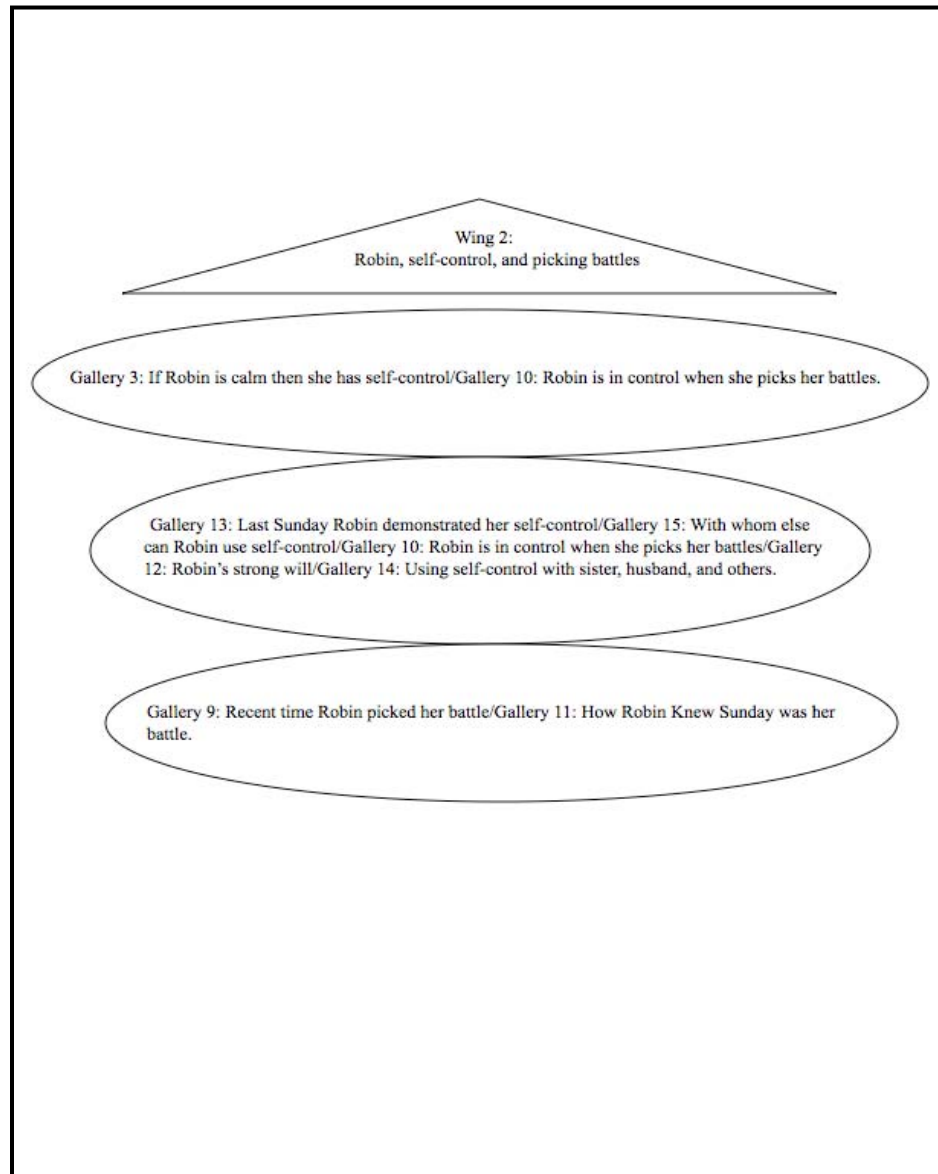
The second wing, "Robin, self-control & picking battles," portrays Robin's exceptions as punctuated by Berg throughout the transcript as displayed in linear form. See Figure 4 below.

Figure 4



In viewing these Galleries in a non-linear form, these second wing galleries are “re-presented” (Chenail, 1995) under Wing 2 in relationship to the gallery beside it so as to juxtapose the relationship of one gallery to another (as emphasized by the symbol: /). In other words, Berg weaves frames of solution talk into galleries that are interconnected. In addition, the juxtaposition of these galleries in relationship to one another allows the opportunity to explore the data in the larger context of solution talk. Furthermore, these galleries are based upon Berg’s systemic questions that note Robin’s self-control and the times she knows when to pick her battles. This non-linear view of Wing 2 includes the following representation. See Figure 5.

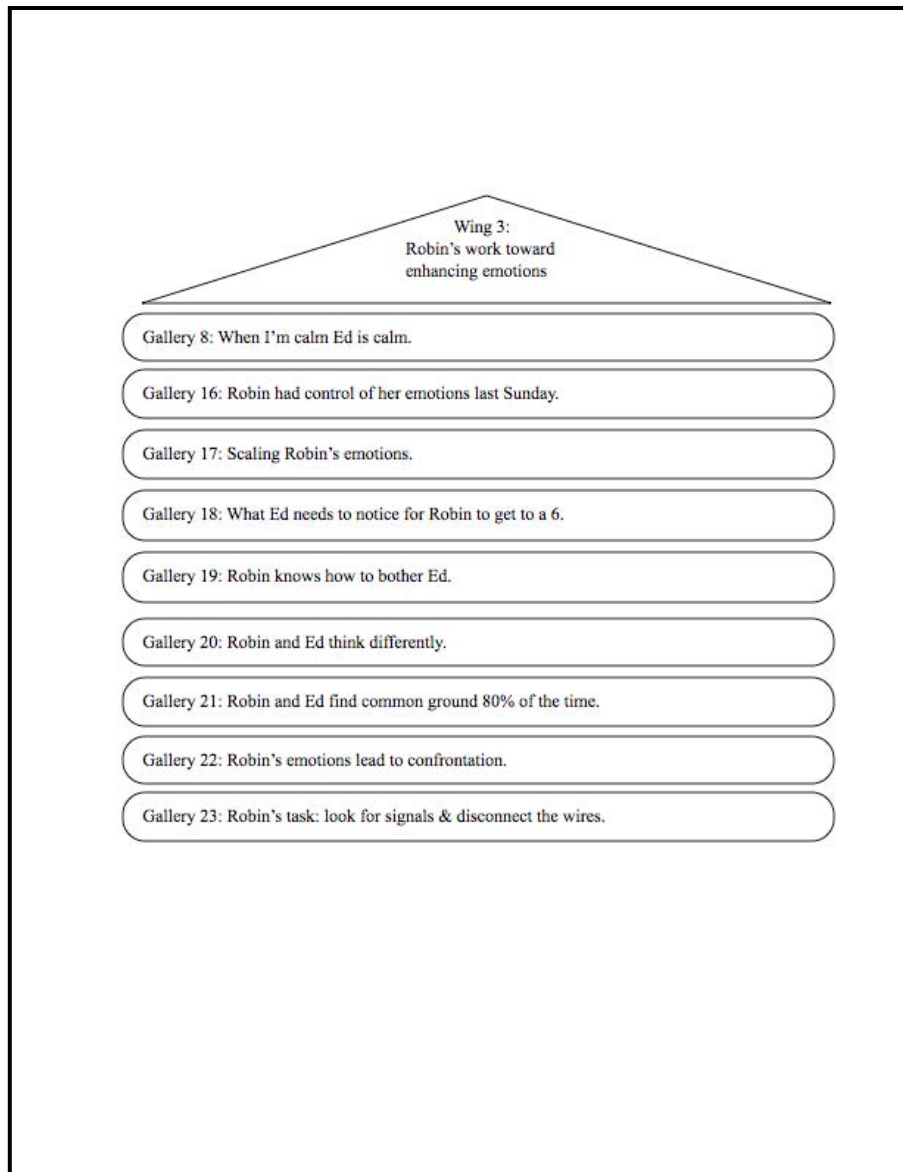
Figure 5



An exemplar is offered so as to discuss how the talk in one gallery can be compared to the talk in another gallery, or in other words, looking at the relationship between one gallery and another. Gallery three and ten will constitute this example of Berg’s solution-focused approach.

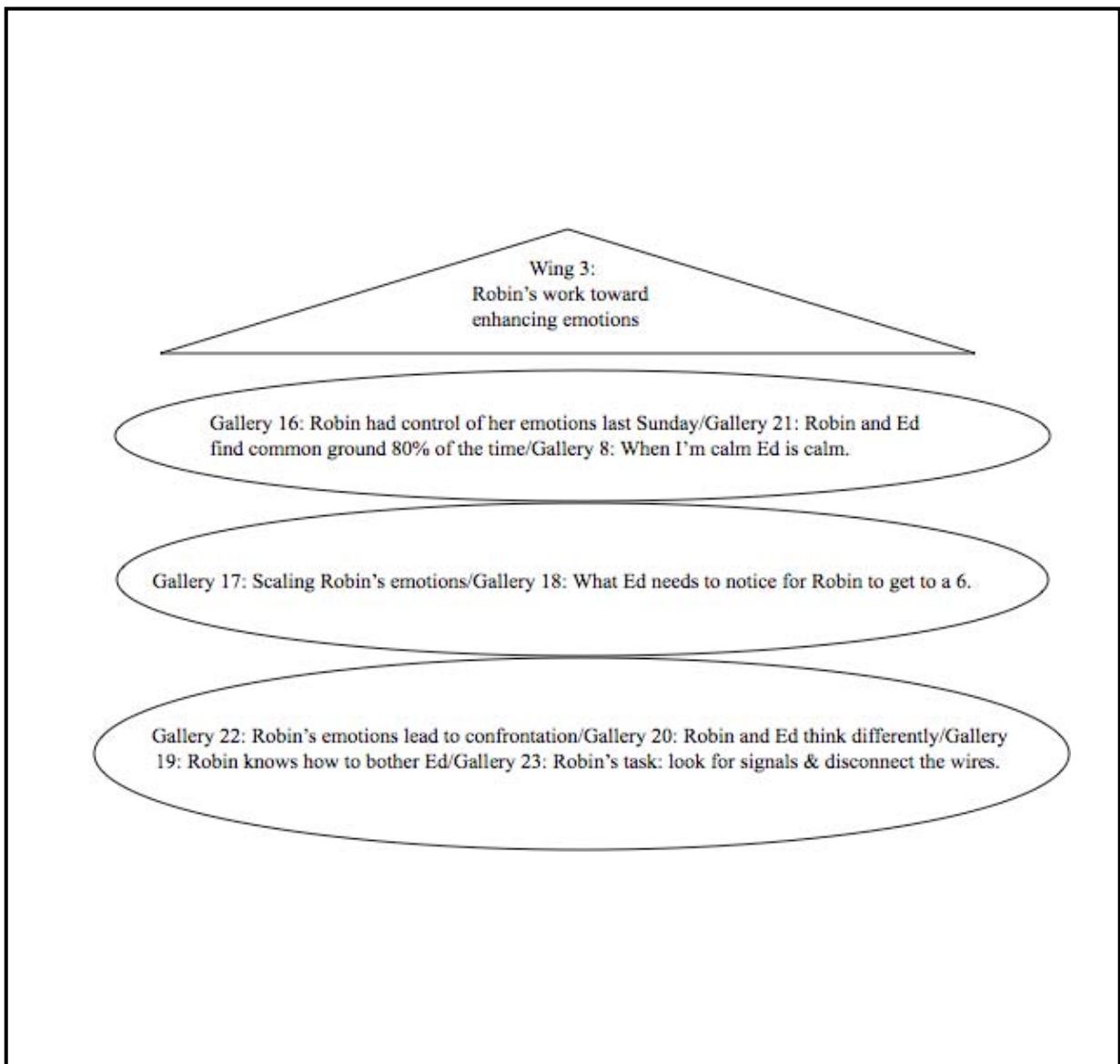
As displayed in Gallery three and Gallery ten, the relationship between Robin, self-control, and picking her battles is visually represented (3/10). In viewing the communication in the third gallery, one can observe the solution talk between the therapist and the client: Berg (017) asks, “Suppose you are calm?” Robin (022) responds, “I’d have a lot of self-control.” Furthermore, in Gallery ten, Berg (077) asks, “So, when you pick your battle, that’s when you are in control of things? You are in self-control?” Robin (080) replies, “It’s like if I know I want to do something, I’m not going to let anything stand in my way.” Berg (087) then asks Robin, “So, how did you know that on Sunday that’s your battle?”

Figure 6



The above example represents the talk that embeds the theme “Robin, self-control, and picking battles.” The other galleries are based upon this same notion. In addition, it appears that in maintaining the relationship between Galleries three and ten, Berg was actively observing the conversation and weaving Robin’s language of “self-control” and “picking battles” into the context of solution talk that punctuates the client’s strengths throughout the session (de Shazer, Dolan, Korman, Trepper, McCollum, & Berg, 2007). Also, the talk of strengths and exceptions allows Berg and Robin to move in the direction of building a therapeutic task.

Figure 7



### *Enhancing emotions*

The third wing, “Robin’s work toward enhancing emotions,” entails galleries that depict the process of the SFBT therapeutic initiative utilizing Robin’s language in relation to how Berg frames the SFBT task. First the third wing is presented in linear form and then subsequently re-presented to allow for a non-linear view of the data. See Figure 6.

Again, the above galleries are juxtaposed (Chenail, 1995) below to display a relationship between one gallery to another. Also, these galleries are based on emotion talk, scaling questions, relationship questions, and a SFBT task. The RFA of Wing three are represented in Figure 7.

Under Wing three, Berg engages Robin in exception talk about her emotions (16/21/8). In addition, this pattern (16/21/8) represents a relationship between Robin and her husband’s expressed solutions regarding talk of controlling emotions, finding common ground, and calmness. Berg further guides the conversation into more solution talk by introducing scaling questions for Robin and what her husband would notice if she were to go from a five to a six on a scale of one to ten (17/18).

Robin also explains her emotions as problem talk contextualized in the gender differences between her and her husband as shown in Galleries 22, 20, and 19. However, Berg’s task (Gallery 23), as contrasted with Robin’s problem talk (Galleries 22, 20, & 19) suggest that if Robin can look for signals that she can win the battle (use self-control) and disconnect the wires when others push her buttons, then she will be utilizing her strengths as an intervention for problematic interactions (Galleries 22/20/19/23).

To portray the talk of the task in regard to Robin’s problem, an exemplar is offered. For example, Berg’s (261) talk in the task gallery includes the following frame: “...I have some suggestions for you to experiment with...pay attention to what signals that you pick up, like the Sunday incident. What signal tells you that this is the battle that you can win or you are going to win?” Berg (267) then introduces a second part to the task: “The other idea is perhaps since your husband and your sister know which button to push with you, I wonder, have you ever thought about maybe you could pretend like you just disconnected the wire, when they push the button?” If this task is utilized during the times the client experiences the problem, then Robin’s relationship to the problem is likely to change. An example of a problem with which this task can be utilized is offered by Robin (230): “...we have an argument and I’m not calm, and I don’t try to get him calm, and we end up having a fight or a disagreement.” In effect, Berg and Robin’s co-construction (Berg & De Jong, 1996) of the task is likely to help Robin utilize her self-control and experience change with her relationship to the problems that brought her to therapy.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this case study exemplifies how SFBT functions in the therapeutic context. As noted in the conversational patterns, Berg’s SFBT questions do not appear to be neutral but seem to consist of presuppositions regarding how things would be different without the problem and how this will make a difference for Robin. For example, Berg (229) states, “When you believe you are normal, are calmer, have peace of mind, what will you do different between you and him?” Additionally, Berg’s question presupposes that Robin will do something different when she believes that she is normal, calmer, and has



peace of mind. According to McGee et al. (2005), questions are co-constructed, not neutral, and contain assumptions. Also, the wings illustrate how exceptions, solutions, and the task were created conjointly in this session.

Additionally, RFA was utilized as a research tool to display the relationship between the content of the client's problem talk (overanalyzing, emotions, and confrontations) and the process of Berg's solution talk (exceptions, goals, and task). According to Berg and De Jong (1996), the therapist's responsibility in utilizing SFBT techniques involves the request for clients to address two notions: (a) what do they need to be different? (b) what personal strengths do they bring with them to therapy that will allow them to achieve change? This study further supports the idea that clients do want to change and they have the resources to accomplish this. The first wing, "Helping Robin," represents the solution talk of what Robin would like to have different in her life, resulting in galleries that depict a relationship of talk about differences.

Furthermore, the RFA utilized in this project allows for data re-presentation (Chenail, 1995) of how Berg's SFBT questions influence the therapeutic conversation. In addition, Berg's questions appear to serve as interventions for the client as noted in the shift of conversation from problem talk to solution talk as evidenced by the patterns distinguished in the transcript. Keeney (1990) discusses a similar idea that appears congruent with Berg's therapeutic style: "In essence, this method of creating interventions involves two skills: First, the skill of extracting the most meaningful resource frames from a therapeutic conversation; and secondly, the skill of combining these resource frames into interventions" (p. 26). Again, Berg's SFBT style of communication punctuates the strengths and resources of the client as emphasized in their exception talk as illustrated in Wing two: "Robin, self-control, and picking battles."

Berg's solution-focused language style also appears to influence the conversation about what is currently working for Robin as punctuated in Wing two that includes the galleries of Robin's exceptions and strengths. Therefore, it seems that Berg's SFBT language does influence the conversation in Robin's therapy. Furthermore this language is consistent with the major assumptions of the SFBT model (De Jong & Berg, 2002). In return, the client appears influenced by Berg's questions of difference in the therapeutic context, noted by the shifts from problem talk to solution talk and evidenced throughout the openings, frames, and galleries of solution talk. Moreover, Berg's ability to utilize the client's language creatively in co-constructing the therapy task further exemplifies the aesthetics of SFBT approaches (de Shazer et al., 2007). Additionally, utilizing the skill of creative discourse in regard to integrating words into an inventive task presents a client with unique opportunities to experience meaningful therapeutic results (Keeney, 1990). Berg demonstrates her assumption of hope and possibilities for further change as presented in Wing three, "Robin's work toward enhancing emotions," that includes Robin's task for therapy.

This analysis confirms the accuracy of Berg's application of solution-focused techniques as noted in the patterns of her question utilization. These are important findings because they can help other researchers to make judgments on whether or not a session is an example of SFBT. This study shows how one can evaluate a session to see how SFBT is conducted in the talk between people. It is this type of process research or process change research that SFBT needs in order to build a better set of evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness.

## References

- Allyn & Bacon (Producer). (2000). *Psychotherapy with the experts: Solution focused therapy with Insoo Kim Berg* [Video]. (Available from Allyn & Bacon Professional, 160 Gould Street, Needham Heights, MA 02494-2310)
- Anfara, V. A., Jr., Brown, K. M., & Mangione, T. L. (2002). Qualitative analysis on stage: Making the research process more public. *Educational Researcher*, 31(7), 28-38.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bavelas, J. B., McGee, D., Philips, B., & Routledge, R. (2000). Microanalysis of communication on psychotherapy. *Human Systems: The Journal of Systemic Consultation & Management*, 11(1), 47-66.
- Berg, I. K., & De Jong, P. (1996). Solution-building conversations: Co-constructing a sense of competence with clients. *Families in Society*, 77(6), 376-392.
- Chenail, R. J. (1990/1991). Bradford Keeney's cybernetic project and the creation of recursive frame analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 1(2&3). Retrieved May 12, 2006, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR1-23/Keeney.html>
- Chenail, R. J. (1995). Recursive frame analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 2(2). Retrieved May 12, 2006, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR1-2/rfa.html>
- Chenail, R. J., & Duffy, M. (2009). Utilizing Microsoft® Office to produce and present recursive frame analysis findings. *The Weekly Qualitative Report*, 2(20), 117-132. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/WQR/rfa.pdf>
- Corcoran, J. (2003). *Clinical applications of evidence-based family interventions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Corcoran, J., & Stephenson, M. (2000). The effectiveness of solution-focused therapy with child behavior problems: A preliminary report. *Families in Society*, 81(5), 468-475.
- De Jong, P., & Berg, I. K. (2002). *Interviewing for solutions*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- de Shazer, S., Berg, I. K., Lipchik, E., Nunnally, E., Molnar, A., Gingerich, W., et al. (1986). Brief therapy: Focused solution development. *Family Process*, 25, 207-222.
- de Shazer, S., Dolan, Y., Korman, H., Trepper, T., McCollum, E., & Berg, I. K. (2007). *More than miracles: The state of the art of solution-focused brief therapy*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Gale, J., & Newfield, N. (1992). A conversation analysis of a solution-focused marital therapy session. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 18(2), 153-165.
- Gingerich, W. J., & Eisengart, S. (2000). Solution-focused brief therapy: A review of the outcome research. *Family Process*, 39(4), 477-498.
- Keeney, B. P. (1990). *Improvisational therapy: A practical guide for creative clinical strategies*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Lipchik, E. (2002). *Beyond technique in solution-focused therapy*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- McGee, D., Del Vento, A., & Bavelas, J. B. (2005). An interactional model of questions as therapeutic interventions. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 31(4), 371-384.
- Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stalker, C. A., Levene, J. E., & Coady, N. F. (1999). Solution-focused brief therapy: One

model fits all? *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 80(5), 468-477.

Tomori, C., & Bavelas, J. B. (2007). Using microanalysis of communication to compare solution-focused and client-centered therapies. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 18(3), 25-43.

Trepper, S. T., Dolan, Y., McCollum E. E., & Nelson, T. (2006). Steve de Shazer and the future of solution-focused therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 32(2), 133-139.

---

### Author Note

Jeffrey Cotton, MS, LMFT, LMHC, is a PhD Candidate in the Family Therapy program at Nova Southeastern University, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Mr. Cotton works at Hollywood Pavilion's Intensive Outpatient Program.

The author would like to thank Dr. Ron Chenail, Dr. Lisa C. Palmer, and the late Insoo Kim Berg for their inspiration and collaboration on this research project.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Jeffrey Cotton (www.cotton5150.com), E-mail: cotton5150@aol.com

Copyright 2010: Jeffery Cotton and Nova Southeastern University

### Article Citation

Cotton, J. (2010). Question utilization in solution-focused brief therapy: A recursive frame analysis of Insoo Kim Berg's solution talk. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(1), 18-36. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-1/cotton.pdf>

---