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## What is Different about SFBT?

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Calvin College      University of Victoria

Opening Plenary  
Solution Focused Brief Therapy Association  
Banff, Alberta  
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## How is SFBT different?

Many, many ways including this very important one:

- The attention it pays to language
  - To the client's language
  - To the way language works in therapy

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Steve de Shazer & Insoo Kim Berg



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On Language in Therapy

“One of the first things that is obvious to an observer of any therapy session is that clients and therapist are having a conversation; they are using language. And yet the fact that *doing* therapy involves using language has been, in effect, hidden away like Poe’s *Purloined Letter*. The fact that *doing* therapy involves using language was always already right on the surface of things but somehow overlooked.”

de Shazer & Berg, 1992, p. 71

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### On Co-construction

He is a poor observer indeed who does not notice that a stimulating conversation between two persons soon creates a condition in which each utters thoughts he would not have been able to produce by himself or in different company.

Ludwig Fleck, 1979

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### Meanings, Client Words, & Negotiation

“... we have come to see that the meanings arrived at in a therapeutic conversation are developed through a process more like negotiation than ... an uncovering of what it is that is ‘really’ going on.”

Berg & de Shazer, 1993, p. 7

“When the client uses a word—nymphomania—she brings to this particular use all the previous meanings that word has had for her...  
In face-to-face conversation there is at least the opportunity to negotiate with one another about which meaning of ‘nymphomania’ we are going to use.”

de Shazer, 1991, p. 68

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**Connecting SFBT  
to Research on Language**

- Steve and Insoo's interest
- Common roots
  - Interest in language and communication
  - Therapy as active, creative use of language
  - "Influence is inherent in all human interaction. We are bound to influence our clients, and they are bound to influence us. The only choice is between doing so without reflection, or even with attempted denial, and doing so deliberately and responsibly."

Weakland (1993)

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**Congruence between observations of therapy  
and research developments**

| <b>Traditional approach</b>  | <b>Alternative approach</b>  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Alternating monologues by individuals</li></ul>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Collaborative, reciprocal dialogue</li></ul>                                 |
|                                   |                                  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Neutral transmission of information, feelings, etc. (essentialist)</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Actively shaping the information, feelings, etc. (co-constructive)</li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Global process and influence</li></ul>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Moment-by-moment, "micro" influence</li></ul>                                |

Bavelas, McGee, Phillips, & Routledge, 2000

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### Congruence of Research Method

- DeShazer & Berg: focus on the details of therapists' *actual* and *specific* language use
- In research: focus on the details of actual dialogues, moment by moment, utterance by utterance
  
- Combine these to ask new questions:
  - Do SFBT experts follow their model?
  - Are their practices different from experts in other models?
  
- Testing three specific hypotheses so far  
Compared to other approaches, SFBT experts are more likely
  1. to use more positive language
  2. to summarize using their client's language rather than their own.
  3. to follow up on the client's positive (versus negative) contributions.

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### Using Microanalysis to Make Co-construction Observable: SFBT compared to CBT & MI

3 studies completed

- 1. Positive & Negative Content in SFBT & CBT  
(Smock, Froerer, & Bavelas)
  
- 2. Role of formulations in SFBT, CBT, MI  
(De Jong, Bavelas, & Korman; Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong)
  
- 3. Positive & Negative Content in SFBT  
Formulations  
(Froerer & Smock)

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**STUDY 1:  
POSITIVE VERSUS NEGATIVE CONTENT**

Smock, Bavelas, & Froerer (under review)

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**Prediction:  
SFBT content is more positive;  
CBT content is more negative**

- Three SFBT expert sessions
  - Berg
  - De Shazer
  - Dolan
- Three CBT expert sessions
  - Meichenbaum
  - Lichtenberg
  - Persons
- Analyzed full session, both therapist and client.

Smock, Froerer, & Bavelas (under review)

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### Positive Content

- *Positive therapist content* includes questions, statements, formulations, suggestions, etc., by the therapist that **focus the client on some positive aspect of the client's life** (e.g., a relationship, trait, or experience in the past, present, or future).
- *Positive client content* includes questions, statements, formulations, suggestions, etc., by the client that **focus on some positive aspect of his or her life** (e.g., a relationship, trait, or experience in the past, present, or future).
- Note: *positive content* does not = good. *Positive* is not a value judgment

Smock, Froerer, & Bavelas (under review)

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### De Jong (SFBT)

- 1) T: Thank you. (shuffles papers) So is it ok if I call you [first name]?
- 2) C: Mm-hmm.
- 3) T: Okay. Please call me Peter. I'm real comfortable with that.
- 4) C: Okay.
- 5) T: And, let's see you are...what year?
- 6) C: I'm a junior.
- 7) T: You're a junior here, so...have you gone all your college years at [name of college]?
- 8) C: Mm-hmm.
- 9) T: So you've been here for a while?
- 10) C: Yes.
- 11) T: What are you...what are you studying?
- 12) C: Um, I'm studying Spanish education and bilingual education.
- 13) T: Okay.
- 14) C: So I'll be, um, doing my student teaching in one year in the spring of next year.

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## De Jong (SFBT)

- 15) T: Okay, so you've got a lot of background in Spanish.  
16) C: Yeah.  
17) T: Yeah?  
18) C: Yeah  
19) T: Are you pretty good in Spanish?  
20) C: Eh, I can hold my own.  
21) T: Oh...(nods head slightly)...so you can carry on a conversation in Spanish?  
22) C: Yeah, yeah I've studied abroad and I'm going to Guatemala this summer, so, for...most of the summer.  
23) T: Oh...where, where did you study abroad?  
24) C: In Honduras.  
25) T: Ok, and then did you...(motions with hands) live with a Spanish-speaking family at that time too?  
26) C: Mm-hmm. Yeah, it was a really good experience, and uh, it really improved my Spanish a lot when I was there.

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## Negative Content

- *Negative therapist content* includes questions, statements, formulations, suggestions, etc., by the therapist that **focus the client on some negative** relationship, trait, or experience in the past, present, or future.
- *Negative client content* includes questions, statements, formulations, suggestions, etc. by the client that focus on some negative aspect of his or her life (e.g. a relationship, trait, or experience in the past, present, or future).
- Note: *negative content* does not = good. *Negative* is not a value judgment



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### Lichtenberg (CBT)

- 1) T: Eileen, tell me what things I can help you with today.
- 2) C: Kind of like helping me control my temper.
- 3) T: Your temper?
- 4) C: What, my temper, so that I don't get this big temper from him. Like last year when things were really, the year that I had a hernia disk, it, he was really uptight and I was uptight, but I don't know what I was doing. And then I fussed back at him, and he said "you really are crazy." And I had a butcher knife in my hand, (T: um hmm) and I thought, "Which one of us is crazy?" [laughing]
- 5) T: Okay, so things got pretty heated?

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### Findings

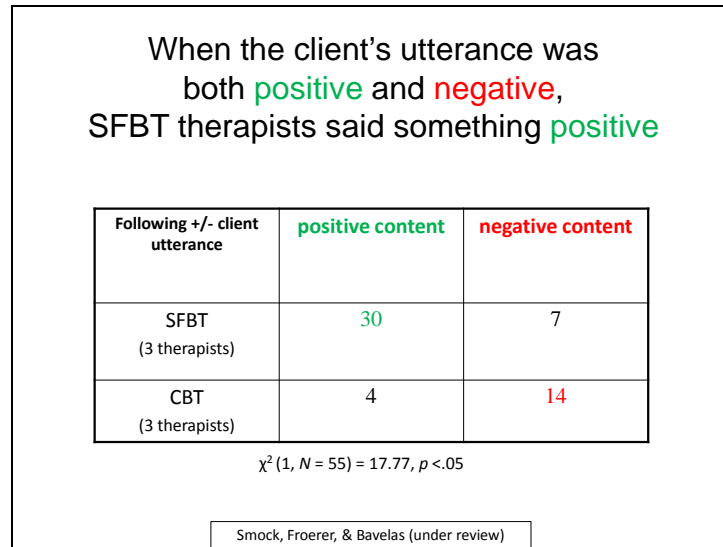
- SFBT therapists were **more positive** than CBT therapists.
- CBT therapists were **more negative** than SFBT therapists.

| Overall frequencies    | positive content | negative content |
|------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| SFBT<br>(3 therapists) | 197              | 37               |
| CBT<br>(3 therapists)  | 93               | 140              |

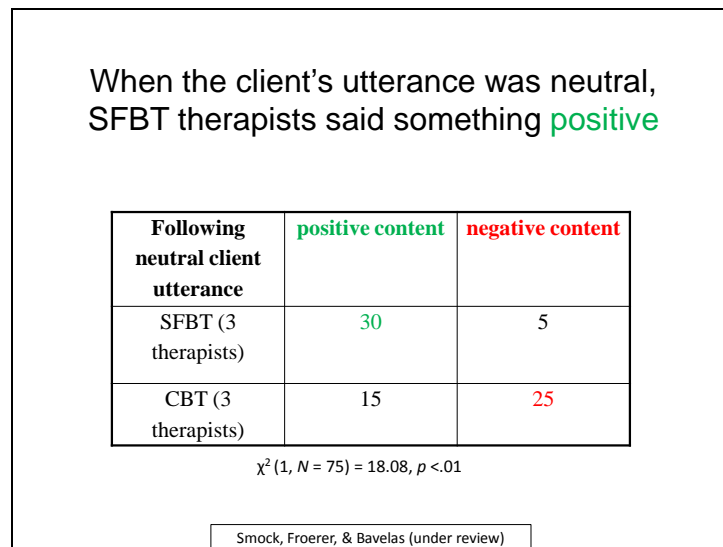
$\chi^2 (1, N = 467) = 97.23, p < .01$

Smock, Froerer, & Bavelas (under review)

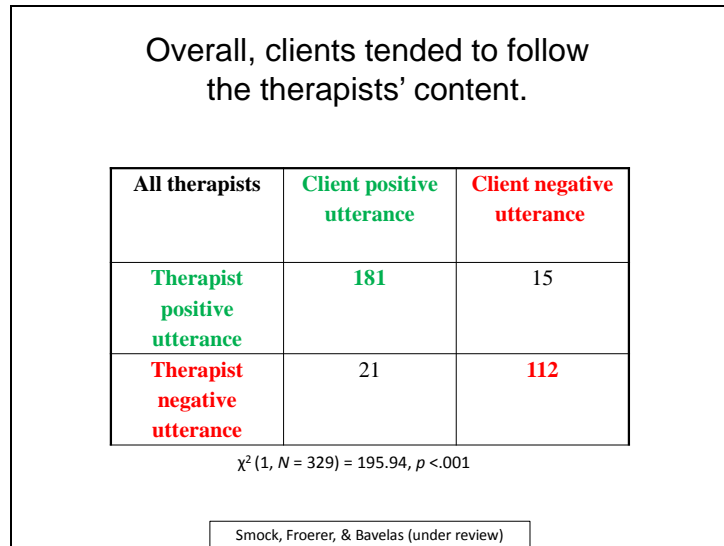
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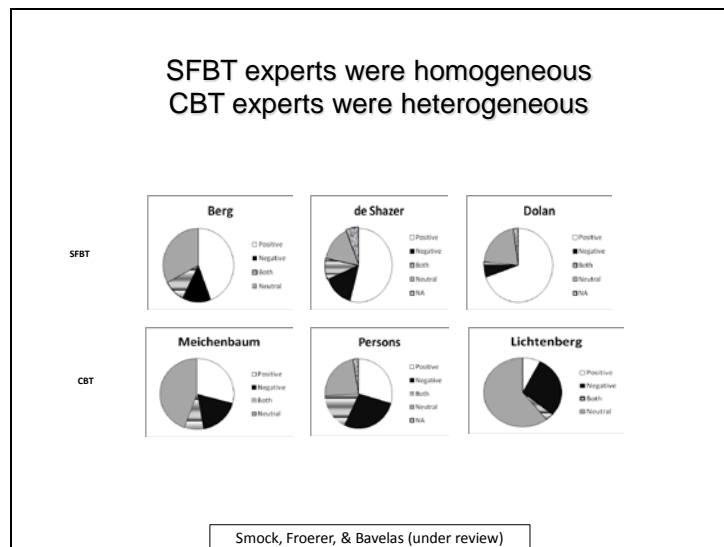
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**Think of alternative positive talk**

- 1) T: Eileen, tell me what things I can help you with today.
- 2) C: Kind of like helping me control my temper.
- 3) T: Your temper?
- 4) C: What, my temper, so that I don't get this big temper from him. Like last year when things were really, the year that I had a hernia disk, it, he was really uptight and I was uptight, but I don't know what I was doing. And then I fussed back at him, and he said "you really are crazy." And I had a butcher knife in my hand, (T: um hmm) and I thought, "Which one of us is crazy?" [laughing]
- 5) T: Okay, so things got pretty heated?

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**STUDY 2: PRESERVING AND  
ADDING IN FORMULATIONS**

De Jong, Bavelas, & Korman;  
Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong  
(under review)

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### Study 2: The Role of Formulations in SFBT, CBT, MI

- What is a *formulation*?
  - In everyday ordinary dialogue, one person often *talks about or comments on* what the other person just said or said earlier.
- Specifically, the person might “describe, explain, characterize, summarize, paraphrase,” etc., what the other person says.  
(adapted from Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970)

Example

Person A: How long y’gonna be here?  
 Person B: Uh, not too long. Uh, just till, uh, Monday.  
 Person A: Till—oh y’mean like a week from tomorrow.

(reformatted from Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977, p. 369)

De Jong, Bavelas, & Korman; Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong (under review)

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### Formulations in therapeutic dialogues ...

- Formulations are called *echoing, summarizing, paraphrasing, reflecting, mirroring*.
  - Generally (and mistakenly) seen as passive, neutral, non-directive or simply as part of the “joining” process.
  - Except when used as therapeutic tools -- then called *reframing, relabeling, normalizing*....
- We propose that formulations are *always* active and co-constructive.
  - They transform what the client has said.
  - Reflect the therapist’s theoretical model.
  - By making them explicit, we hope that therapist’s will use them more deliberately and precisely.

De Jong, Bavelas, & Korman; Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong (under review)

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How does a formulation inevitably transform what the client said?

1. It often **preserves** some of the client's words.
  - **exactly** or **deictically** (e.g., as "it")
2. It usually ~~omits~~ some of the client's words.
3. It may preserve what the client said **in altered form**
  - rephrasing; synonym
4. It may **add** to what the client said
  - usually interpretation

De Jong, Bavelas, & Korman; Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong (under review)

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The formulations are underlined

- 1) C: ... So I thought maybe this might help me sort out whatever I need [T: Right] to get my life back together.
- 2) T: Help you sort something out to get your life together. So what would be a feeling, eh, a thought, an action, something you would do or think or feel that would tell you that you were sort of getting your life together [C: Uhhh] this afternoon or tomorrow?
- 3) C: I guess like just relaxing maybe.
- 4) T: Relaxing
- 5) C: I've been very [T: Right] tense and stressed. [gets teary]
- 6) T: Okay, okay. Yeah, it's tough, huh?
- 7) C: Yeah
- 8) T: Yeah, yeah. How long were you married?
- 9) C: Four and a half years.
- 10) T: Wow, that's, any kids?
- 11) C: I have a 19 month old son.
- 12) T: Okay, hmm, that doesn't make it simpler.

## Slide 29

Which words are **preserved exactly**?

- 1) C: ... So I thought maybe this might **help me sort out** whatever I need [T: Right] **to get my life back together**.
- 2) T: **Help you sort something out to get your life together**. So what would be a feeling, eh, a thought, an action, something you would do or think or feel that would tell you that you were **sort of getting your life together** [C: Uhmm] this afternoon or tomorrow?
- 3) C: I guess like just **relaxing** maybe.
- 4) T: **Relaxing**
- 5) C: I've been very [T: Right] tense and stressed.
- 6) T: Okay, okay. Yeah, **it's tough**, huh?
- 7) C: Yeah
- 8) T: Yeah, yeah. How long were you married?
- 9) C: Four and a half years.
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- 12) T: Okay, hmm, **that doesn't make it simpler**.

De Jong, Bavelas, & Korman; Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong (under review)

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Which exact words are **omitted**?

- 1) C: ... ~~So I thought maybe this might~~ help me sort out ~~whatever I need~~ [T: Right] to get my life ~~back~~ together.
- 2) T: **Help you sort something out to get your life together**. So what would be a feeling, eh, a thought, an action, something you would do or think or feel that would tell you that you were **sort of getting your life together** [C: Uhmm] this afternoon or tomorrow?
- 3) C: ~~I guess like just~~ relaxing ~~maybe~~.
- 4) T: **Relaxing**
- 5) C: ~~I've been very~~ [T: Right] ~~tense and stressed~~.
- 6) T: Okay, okay. Yeah, **it's tough**, huh?
- 7) C: ~~Yeah~~
- 8) T: Yeah, yeah. How long were you married?
- 9) C: ~~Four and a half years~~.
- 10) T: Wow, that's, any kids?
- 11) C: ~~I have a 19 month old son~~.
- 12) T: Okay, hmm, **that doesn't make it simpler**.

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What is **preserved in altered form**?

- 1) C: ... So I thought maybe this might help me sort out whatever I need [T: Right] to get my life back together.
- 2) T: Help you sort something out to get your life together. So what would be a feeling, eh, a thought, an action, something you would do or think or feel that would tell you that you were sort of getting your life together. [C: Uhmm] this afternoon or tomorrow?
- 3) C: I guess like just relaxing maybe.
- 4) T: Relaxing
- 5) C: I've been very [T: Right] tense and stressed.
- 6) T: Okay, okay. Yeah, it's tough, huh?
- 7) C: Yeah
- 8) T: Yeah, yeah. How long were you married?
- 9) C: Four and a half years.
- 10) T: Wow, that's, any kids?
- 11) C: I have a 19 month old son.
- 12) T: Okay, hmm, that doesn't make it simpler.

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What is **deictically preserved**?

- 1) C: ... So I thought maybe this might help me sort out whatever I need [T: Right] to get my life back together.
- 2) T: Help you sort something out to get your life together. So what would be a feeling, eh, a thought, an action, something you would do or think or feel that would tell you that you were sort of getting your life together. [C: Uhmm] this afternoon or tomorrow?
- 3) C: I guess like just relaxing maybe.
- 4) T: Relaxing
- 5) C: I've been very [T: Right] tense and stressed.
- 6) T: Okay, okay. Yeah, it's tough, huh?
- 7) C: Yeah
- 8) T: Yeah, yeah. How long were you married?
- 9) C: Four and a half years.
- 10) T: Wow, that's, any kids?
- 11) C: I have a 19 month old son.
- 12) T: Okay, hmm, that doesn't make it simpler.



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## What is added?

- 1) C: ... So I thought maybe this might help me sort out whatever I need [T: Right] to get my life back together.
- 2) T: Help you sort something out to get your life together. So what would be a feeling, eh, a thought, an action, something you would do or think or feel that would tell you that you were sort of getting your life together [C: Uhmm] this afternoon or tomorrow?
- 3) C: I guess like just relaxing maybe.
- 4) T: Relaxing
- 5) C: I've been very [T: Right] tense and stressed.
- 6) T: Okay, okay. Yeah, it's tough, huh?
- 7) C: Yeah
- 8) T: Yeah, yeah. How long were you married?
- 9) C: Four and a half years.
- 10) T: Wow, that's, any kids?
- 11) C: I have a 19 month old son.
- 12) T: Okay, hmm, that doesn't make it simpler.

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## All transformations

- 1) C: ... ~~So I thought maybe this might help me sort out whatever I need~~ [T: Right] to get my life back together.
- 2) T: Help you sort something out to get your life together. So what would be a feeling, eh, a thought, an action, something you would do or think or feel that would tell you that you were sort of getting your life together [C: Uhmm] this afternoon or tomorrow?
- 3) C: ~~I guess like just relaxing maybe.~~
- 4) T: Relaxing
- 5) C: ~~I've been very~~ [T: Right] tense and stressed.
- 6) T: Okay, okay. Yeah, it's tough, huh?
- 7) C: Yeah
- 8) T: Yeah, yeah. How long were you married?
- 9) C: ~~Four and a half years.~~
- 10) T: Wow, that's, any kids?
- 11) C: ~~I have a 19 month old son.~~
- 12) T: Okay, hmm, that doesn't make it simpler.

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Analysed beginnings of five expert sessions\*

**Solution Focused Brief Therapy**  
Berg, "Glad to be alive"  
Korman, "Bonding"

**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**  
Meichenbaum, "Cognitive Behavioral Therapy"  
Lichtenberg, "Depression with older adults"

**Motivational Interviewing**  
Miller, "Motivational interviewing"

\* The first 6 ½ to 10 minutes

De Jong, Bavelas, & Korman; Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong (under review)

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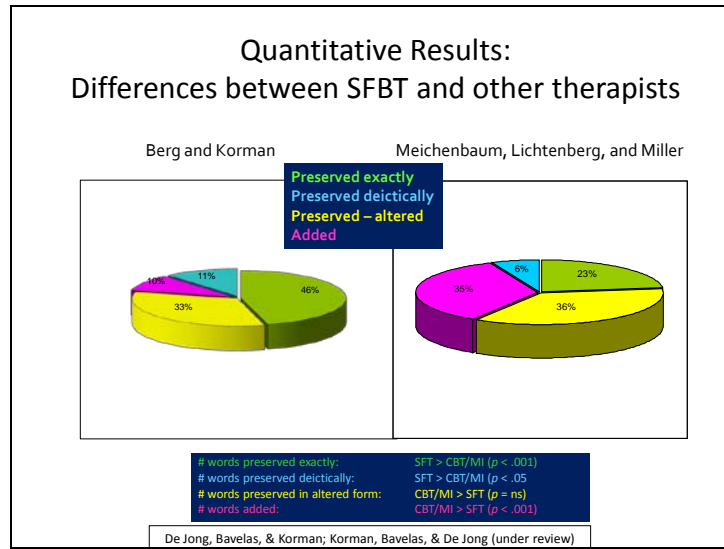
**Main Predictions**

The formulations in SFBT, compared to CBT and MI:

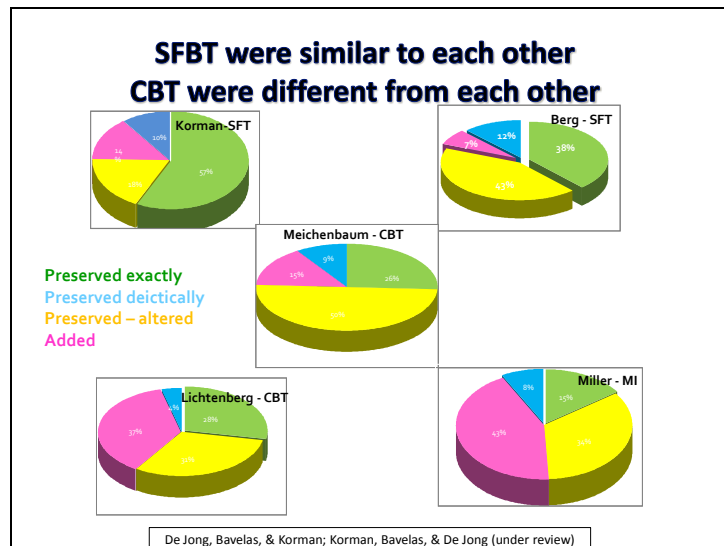
- Will keep more of client's **exact** language.
- Will **add** less of therapist's language.
- The formulations in all approaches will contribute in an important way to the therapeutic reality created in the session

De Jong, Bavelas, & Korman; Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong (under review)

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## Miller's Formulations

- 1) T: Okay. Alright. So what are the drugs or what is it you're struggling with?
- 2) C: Well, honestly cigarettes.
- 3) T: Okay
- 4) C: That's the biggest.
- 5) T: Okay
- 6) C: Alcohol to a degree, but I think I've had more of a problem with that two or three years ago, you know, it seems to have gone down to a degree and probably simply because of the environment.
- 7) T: So that's kind of settled down.
- 8) C: Well, not all that much. [T: Um Mhm] Okay, but enough, it's gone down simply because I'm getting too old to do this stuff [T: Uh Huh] anymore if that makes any sense to you.
- 9) T: It does. You can't keep up with it anymore.
- 10) C: I don't think I can. [T: Um Hmm] I really don't think I can.
- 11) T: And then the cigarettes are still the real addiction for you.

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## Miller's Formulations with Transformations

- 1) T: Okay. Alright. So what are the drugs or what is it you're struggling with?
- 2) C: ~~Well, honestly cigarettes.~~
- 3) T: Okay
- 4) C: ~~That's the biggest.~~
- 5) T: Okay
- 6) C: ~~Alcohol to a degree, but I think I've had more of a problem with that two or three years ago, you know, it seems to have gone down to a degree and probably simply because of the environment.~~
- 7) T: So that's kind of settled down.
- 8) C: ~~Well, not all that much. [T: Um Mhm] Okay, but enough, it's gone down simply because I'm getting too old to do this stuff [T: Uh Huh] anymore if that makes any sense to you.~~
- 9) T: It does. You can't keep up with it anymore.
- 10) C: ~~I don't think I can. [T: Um Hmm] I really don't think I can.~~
- 11) T: And then the cigarettes are still the real addiction for you.

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**Study 3:  
Positive vs. Negative Content  
of Formulations**

Froerer & Smock (under review)

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**A Closer Look at  
What SFBT Experts Do**

How they used formulations to

- Preserve the client’s language
- Contribute to **positive** co-construction

Combined the first two analyses:

- The three SFBT experts
- Focused on their formulations
- Examined
  - preserved/deleted words
  - positive/negative content

Froerer & Smock (under review)

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### Specific Focus

1. Use of positive, neutral, or negative formulations
2. Preserving positive versus negative client language

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1. The SFBT experts' formulations were more likely to be positive than negative

**Berg**

■ Positive  
■ Negative

**de Shazer**

■ Positive  
■ Negative

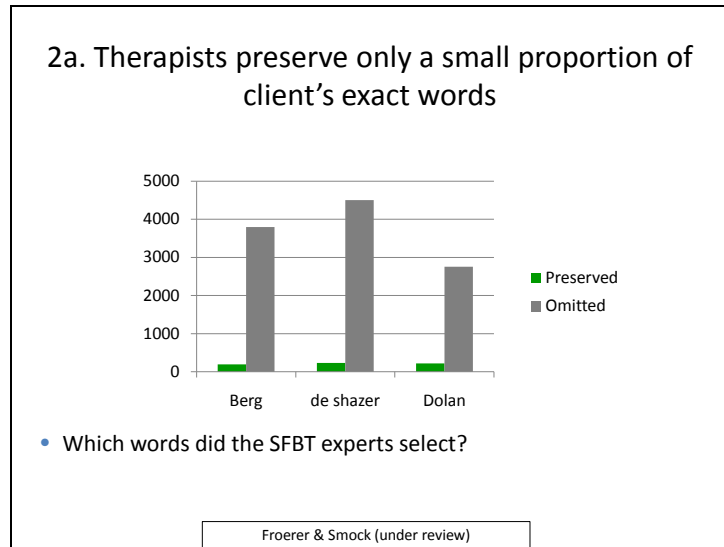
**Dolan**

■ Positive  
■ Negative

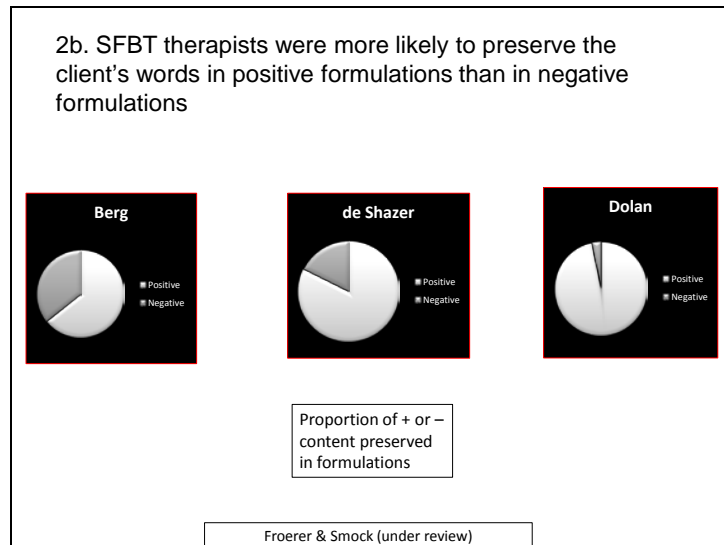
proportions of +/- formulations

Froerer & Smock (under review)

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### Our Conclusions: What's different?

- SFBT is unique in its focus and sophistication about language and co-construction:
  - In theory
  - In practice
- Research so far shows SFBT language-in-practice is different:
  - SFBT expert sessions are more positive in content; CBT are more negative.
  - SFBT experts preserve more of clients' language; CBT and MI add more of their own language.
  - SFBT experts are consistent with their model; other models are not clear about language in practice.
  - SFBT experts are more consistent with each other than CBT experts, who differ a lot.

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Note: Working copies of articles under review may be available from the authors.



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