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## What Works in Conversations With University Students? An Exploratory Study

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### Abstract

This paper contrasts what happened on a microlevel in conversations between coaches and students when coaches used solution-focused interventions versus confrontational interventions. Four students self-reported regarding their motivations, self-determination, and expectations to succeed at their studies, before and directly after the conversation with the coach and at a 2-month follow-up. Recommendations are provided for the design of research on interventions aimed at increasing students' self-regulated behaviors to achieve academic success. Based on this exploratory study it seems that solution-focused interventions differ from confrontational interventions and that conversations with a coach can affect students' self-determination, motivations, expectations to succeed, and fulfillment of basic needs (e.g., feelings of relatedness, competence, and autonomy). The findings yielded a negative effect for students who had confrontational interactions and a positive effect for students who had solution-focused interactions.

*Keywords:* solution-focused, coaching, student, microanalysis, confrontational interventions, self-determination

It is important for financial and quality reasons that students achieve academic success in a reasonable number of years. However, life at university can be challenging. Many universities have systems in place to guide students through the hiccups and pitfalls they may encounter. Conversations with students conducted by professional study advisors, teachers, and coaches are often part of these systems. Because these conversations play important roles in helping students achieve academic success, it raises the question: What needs to happen in a conversation with a student to contribute to that student's academic success? Do conversations in which the student is pressured work, or does it work better to encourage the student? Do effective conversations focus on what works for the student or confront the student with what he does wrong? How can we help students to come up with explanations for dysfunctional behaviors or poor results that are useful and will help them persevere? Answers to these questions would help professionals conduct conversations that actually benefit the student.

In the summer of 2010, an exploratory study began with the aim of gathering information regarding how to best

research the effectiveness of using solution-focused interventions in conversations with students. This paper summarizes the theoretical background and results of this exploratory study. The study was an independent initiative and conducted by the main researcher (Schlundt Bodien) at the University of Groningen. This university uses a so-called "Study Success Group" system, which is based on solution-focused principles. This study was developed to make recommendations regarding research into what works to increase students' self-regulated behaviors to achieving academic success. The study aimed:

- To observe and analyze what happens on a microlevel in dialogues with students when coaches use solution-focused or confrontational interventions.
- To describe what students self-reported regarding their motivations to achieve their goals, and their senses of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in relation to the types of conversation they have with coaches.

**Theoretical background**

We consider three theoretical perspectives: solution-focused theory of change (de Shazer, 1985; De Jong & Berg, 2013; Schlundt Bodien, 2010; Visser, 2012); self-determination theory, which explains how different forms of motivation are related to basic needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence; Deci, 2002); and the theory of microanalysis of communication, which deals with analyzing what actually happens in dialogues (Bavelas, 2007; Bull, 2003). These theoretical perspectives and their relevance to this study are summarized below. The confrontational interventions are also briefly described because they do not have nearly the same level of theoretical support as the solution-focused model and corresponding interventions. However, in a naturalistic study like this, it is important to capture and describe the effects of confrontational interventions, which are common practice, even though they are not used together within one theoretically defined coaching approach.

**Solution-Focused Theory of Change**

Derived from the therapeutic field, the solution-focused coaching style is used in a wide variety of settings including coaching, management, and organizational change. Using a solution-focused change process, solutions to problems must fit within the unique and specific circumstances of the client. Thus, problems are not analyzed nor diagnosed; rather, the desired future of the client is explored. A solution-focused coach explores the client's desired future in concrete and positive terms and encourages the client to use vivid language. By analyzing previous successes and positive exceptions to the problem in the past, solutions are built that suit the specific context and situation of the client. This analysis of what works is then used to reach the desired

future step by step (Schlundt Bodien & Visser, 2008; De Jong & Berg, 2013). The solution-focused change approach is encouraging, positive, goal- and success-oriented, and focuses on small steps. The assumptions of the solution-focused change approach include the following:

1. Acknowledging and embracing the perspective of clients is the most useful way to build a good relationship and a platform for beneficial change.
2. Problem acknowledgement (understanding the what and how of clients' problems) is sufficient to start beneficial change.
3. Clients change when they have a vivid image of their desired future and their own positive behavior in their successful past.
4. The most important task of the solution-focused coach is to subtly increase the client's belief that beneficial change is about to happen.
5. Clients know best what works for them and the coach should ask questions that help clients to find their own solutions.

When a coach uses solution-focused interventions, he or she will be mainly positive; encouraging; and focused on positive goals, what works for the student, successes, and positive competencies and expectations.

**Self-Determination Theory**

The second theoretical perspective used in this study is self-determination theory (Deci, 2002; Visser, 2010). Deci and Ryan (2002) described the self-determination continuum in which they distinguished between amotivation, four forms of extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation. These different forms of motivation correlate with more or less self-determined behavior regulation (see Figure 1).

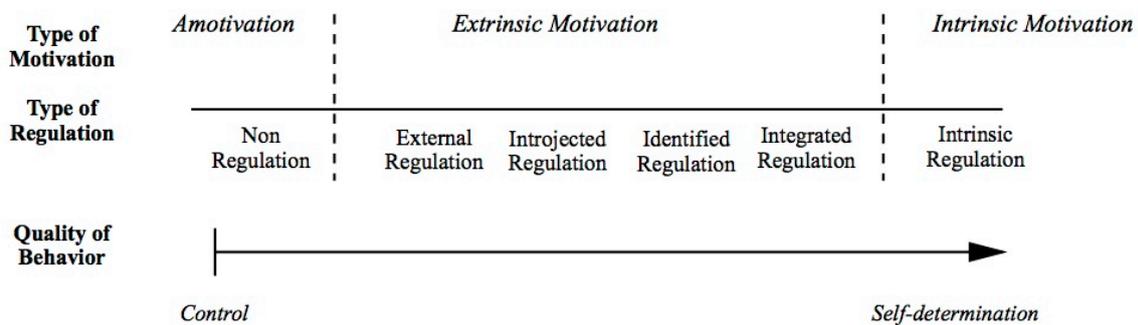


Figure 1. The self-determination continuum showing amotivation, which is wholly lacking in self-determination; 4 types of extrinsic motivation, which vary in their degree of self-determination; and intrinsic motivation, which is invariably self-determined. Also shown are the nature of the regulation for each and its placement along the continuum indexing the degree to which each represents autonomous motivation (Deci, 2002).

Three factors relate to increasing or diminishing motivation: sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Sense of autonomy is the perception of experiencing a sense of choice and psychological freedom in the initiation and continued engagement in one's actions. Sense of competence is the perception of being effective in dealing with the environment. Sense of relatedness is the sense of being cared for and connected to other people. A student who reports a high sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness indicates (intrinsic or integrated extrinsic) motivation to achieve his or her goals and academic success.

Conversation with coaches that help increase the self-perceived sense of competence, relatedness, autonomy, and the levels of intrinsic and integrated extrinsic motivation are likely to result in students' achieving academic success. In this study, the self-reported levels of intrinsic motivation, integrated extrinsic motivation, autonomy, competence, and relatedness were measured using the SDT-questionnaire (Ryan, 2010). This questionnaire consisted of questions regarding intrinsic motivation and value (integrated extrinsic motivation) of students, sense of autonomy, feelings of competence, and perceived relatedness.

#### Microanalysis of Conversations

Microanalysis of communication is a fairly new scientific method (Bavelas, 2007; Bull, 2002) in which the actual interaction between individuals is observed and analyzed. Communication is viewed as an interpersonal interaction in which continuous moment-to-moment feedback and mutual influencing exist. Microanalysis of communication can be characterized by the following (Bull, 2003):

- Communication studied as it actually occurs.
- Communication studied as an activity in its own right.
- All features of interaction are potentially significant.
- Communication has structure.
- Conversation regarded as a form of action.
- Communication studied in naturally occurring contexts.
- Communication regarded as a form of skill.
- Communication taught like any other skill.
- Macro issues studied through microanalysis.

Bull (2002) described the following types of questions, which are part of the so-called organization of speech:

- Yes-no questions: Questions that expect affirmation or negation.
- Disjunctive questions: Questions that expect a reply of one or two or more options presented in the question.
- Listener responses: Vocal verbal and nonverbal utterances that signal continued listening, attention, and interest.
- Declarative questions: A statement with a final rising question intonation.
- Indirect questions: Using reported speech as a means of posing a question.

- Interrogative word questions: Questions that use the words what, when, how, which, why.

Apart from the organization of speech (type of question and listener responses), Bull (2002) addressed the content of speech, which refers to what is actually said and how individuals respond to each other. Bull introduced the concept of face-threatening utterances, which are statements or questions that have the potential risk of the individual's losing face when responding to them. Bull showed that in political interviews, face-threatening questions are often used and result in face-saving responses or equivocation. A face-saving response is aimed to restore and protect one's face (Bull, 2003). The opposite of a face-threatening statement or question is a face-enhancing utterance, which are statements or questions that lead to responses that strengthen one's perspective, confidence, and feelings of competence (Schlundt Bodien, 2010). In this study, the actual interactions between coaches and students were analyzed on a microlevel.

#### Confrontational Interventions Based on the Provocative Approach

In this study, solution-focused interventions were contrasted with confrontational interventions. Although the types of confrontational interventions used in this study were part of the provocative approach, it was not the provocative approach as such that was investigated. The confrontational interventions used in the provocative therapy tradition aim to help clients by challenging them, laughing at them, and confusing them cognitively and emotionally. This approach includes coaches' exaggerating risks and problems that he or she think are present in the client's situation and personality (Conner, 2012; Farelly, 1981; Hollander & Wijnbergen, 2010).

The coaches in this study who used confrontational interventions often mixed these eclectically with other techniques. Additionally, the coaches were convinced of the effectiveness and usefulness of provocative interventions as a key effective ingredient in their coaching. This coaching style may be quite common in everyday coaching situations, even though it is not often described and addressed in research.

#### How to Increase Students' Self-regulated Behaviors

The importance of attributing problems to temporary factors is shown in various research. Reattribution is a technique that attempts to change individuals' explanations about dysfunctional behaviors. Wilson, Damiani, and Shelton (2002) identified profound and long-term effects of small reattribution interventions. Students who earned poor grades in the first year of college were helped in changing their attributions for their poor academic performance from pejorative (e.g., low intelligence) to nonpejorative (e.g., the difficulty of the transition from high school to college) causes. Students who did not perform well were randomly assigned to a treatment or control condition. In the treatment condition, students read actual statistics documenting that many students improve their grades after their first year of

college. These students also watched videotaped interviews of four senior students who discussed their college experiences and reported how their grades improved over time. In comparison to the students in the control condition, those who underwent this small intervention improved their grades in the following year and were more likely to remain in college. Further, this study showed a dramatic effect of the type of explanations students gave to poor academic performance and the long-term effects of a small intervention. If small interventions like this have such a profound effect, it makes what happens in a conversation between a student and a professional coach, teacher, or study advisor a very important means of intervention. Solution-focused interventions may stimulate students to achieve academic success because these help them to reattribute their dysfunctional behaviors or their poor results to temporary factors that are within their control.

Dweck (2002) demonstrated the importance of adopting a growth mindset using relatively small interventions (e.g., complimenting versus criticizing) and their profound effect on the mindset and subsequent performance of students. The type of feedback given by a professional may stimulate either a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. A growth mindset is strongly related to persistence after setbacks (a mastery response) and good academic performance, whereas a fixed mindset is strongly related to a helplessness response and giving up after failure. Dweck (2002) also stressed the importance of approach and learning goals as opposed to avoidance and performance goals. Individuals who have approach and learning goals actually achieve better results and enjoy learning more so than do people who have avoidance and performance goals. These findings seem to correspond well with our observations in practice: Solution-focused interventions stimulate a growth mindset and a focus on learning and approach goals.

Self-determination theory has demonstrated, among other things, that intrinsic motivation and integrated extrinsic motivation (the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation) are associated with academic achievement. Research has shown that when students are intrinsically motivated, they learn better at the conceptual level (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Research has also shown that a controlling interpersonal style as well as controlling tests, deadlines, rewards, and so forth decrease intrinsic motivation and diminish conceptual learning, creativity, and flexible problem solving (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Therefore, it is important that universities create climates in which students' existing intrinsic motivations are not diminished and conditions are created in which students can regulate their own behaviors as much as possible. Solution-focused interventions may help fulfill the aforementioned three basic needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) of students and as a result may stimulate students' self-regulated behaviors to achieve academic success.

To answer our questions, we set up an exploratory study in which solution-focused interventions were contrasted with other types of interventions. The interventions chosen in this study were confrontational, which are utterances that challenge the student's perspectives and are based on the

judgments of the coach with regard to the student's behaviors. This study focused on the effect of confrontational interventions because coaches, teachers, and study advisors are likely to use this approach when a student is not performing well. Confrontational interventions are then used to pressure the student to change his or her behaviors. Confrontational interventions come across as controlling and pressuring. If solution-focused interventions stimulate students' self-regulated behaviors to achieve academic success, confrontational interventions may have the opposite effect and reduce students' self-regulated behaviors to achieve academic success. The meta-analysis by Deci and Ryan (2002) showed that confrontational interventions reduced students' self-regulated behaviors to achieve academic success. They summarized this effect as follows: "The harder you push, the worse it gets" (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 62).

### Hypothesis

Our hypothesis was that solution-focused interventions stimulate students' self-regulated behaviors to achieve academic success because these interventions:

- Help students to attribute any problems to temporary factors within their control.
- Stimulate a growth mindset in students.
- Help fulfill the three basic needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and therefore stimulate intrinsic motivation.
- Help students to formulate implementation-intentions to take small steps forward.

## Method

### Participants

Seven students who were in their first week at the University of Groningen volunteered to participate in this study and went through the procedures. Gathered data of four participants were used for analysis. Gathered data of three participants were later decided not to be included in this study.

### Material

All sessions were audio-taped. The measures used included two self-determination theory questionnaires (SDT; Ryan, 2010). The first questionnaire contained students' self-reported levels of intrinsic motivation (7 items), self-reported effort/importance (4 items), self-reported perceived choice (7 items), feelings of relatedness with the university (3 items), value the participant attaches to his or her studies (8 items), perceived competence (7 items), and level of pressure experienced at the university (5 items). The SDT-questionnaire also contained items regarding positive expectations to succeed at university because research has shown that having positive expectations to succeed helps to actually achieve that success (Dweck, 2002; Visser & Schlundt Bodien, 2009). At the second measuring point, very soon after conversations with the coach, the same

questionnaire was used and included an additional 8 items specifically regarding the feelings of relatedness with the coach. These items were based on the relatedness items in the SDT-questionnaire (Ryan, 2010). The SDT questionnaires and measurement matrix are available from the author on request (Appendix A).

### Procedure

The coaches were professionals who had volunteered to participate and who had been selected by the main researcher based on their experience and the type of interventions they said they used in their conversations (solution-focused or confrontational).

During the first week at university, at their first group meeting with a mentor, the students were invited to participate in this study. They were told that participation would involve filling in a questionnaire at three time points (before, immediately after, and at 2 months following the intervention). The intervention was one session with a coach. Standard expense fees applied for participating students. Seven students responded and participated. Participation was voluntary, and all students were in their first week of their first year. The conversations took place at the University of Groningen. Students were told that the purpose of the study was to gather information regarding how the university could best provide support to students during their first year. The students were randomly assigned to the coaches.

A total of seven conversations were held. Four students had conversations with coaches who aimed to use solution-focused interventions and three students had conversations with coaches who aimed to use confrontational interventions. These conversations were audiotaped for analysis.

Two conversations were microanalysed and two conversations were only briefly analyzed. The reason for this was that only four conversations met the research criteria as explained below. Additionally, this study was designed to make recommendations regarding research into what works to increase students' self-regulated behavior to achieve academic success. Analyzing two conversations in depth and two conversations briefly was sufficient to offer these recommendations.

### Interventions

The main researcher developed two lists of interventions. One list consisted of solution-focused interventions and one list consisted of confrontational interventions. The list of solution-focused interventions was based on key elements of the solution-focused approach. The list of confrontational interventions was based on Deci and Ryan's (2002) meta-analysis of research on the effects of individuals' interpersonal pressuring and controlling communication styles and key elements of the provocative approach (Conner, 2012; Farelly, 1981; Wijnbergen, 2006).

The coaches who used solution-focused interventions in their work agreed that these were the type of interventions they would normally use:

- *Usefulness interventions:* What do we need to talk about to make this conversation useful to you?
- *Building a platform:* Now that your first week at university has passed, what are you content with? What is going well already? What have you learned so far?
- *Future-projection interventions:* Suppose it is July 2011 and you look back on your first year with satisfaction. What will you have achieved then?
- *Clarifying external goals:* For you to start your Bachelor's degree, you will have to have achieved 50 credits this first year. What ideas do you already have to go about that?
- *Acknowledging desires for change:* What is the problem? How does it bother you? What do you want to change?
- *Normalizing:* Yes, most students would feel that way/see it that way/find that hard...
- *Creating a positive expectation:* Soon, when you have settled in at university,... When things are better, what will you be doing differently then?
- *Focusing on what works for the student:* When have you been able to do this successful behavior before? How did you do that then? How did you cope with these sorts of situations before? What worked for you then?
- *Focusing on internal solutions:* Was it useful to talk about this? If so, what was useful? How can you use this? How will you notice next week that you are doing something that works for you?

The coaches who said they would use confrontational interventions agreed these were the type of interventions they would normally use:

- *Mirroring:* Can you see what is happening? / Do you hear what you are saying now? / Can you feel what is going wrong now? / You look as if you disagree...
- *Reflecting emotions:* That scares you / that makes you feel insecure / that makes you angry / that makes you happy / that's clearly your passion.
- *Asking about feelings:* How does that make you feel? / How do you feel about that?
- *Explaining consequences of behavior, thoughts, or feelings:* If you feel that way, you act defensively, which makes it harder for fellow students to relate to you...
- *Giving insight to the student regarding a problem that you feel he has:* I can see that you want things to be perfect, but perfectionism is only going to exhaust you.
- *Challenging the student to change his perspective:* If you think 6 hours of studying a week will be enough to pass this year, then think again.
- *Telling the student what he needs to achieve:* You need to be disciplined... You have to get 50 credits this year...
- *Giving advice:* I advise you to.../what you need to do is.../you have to start with...
- *Problem analysis and labeling:* You have an introverted personality, which makes it hard for you to be spontaneous.

### Analysis of Data

The microanalysis method (Bavelas, 2007; Bull, 2002) was used to analyze two coaching sessions, which were the main focus of this study. The main researcher and an independent second assessor analyzed the conversations. In case of a disagreement about the type of utterance, agreement was reached by discussion. The remaining two sessions, sessions that were valid for further analysis were only briefly analyzed by the main researcher. The data of the four students on the SDT-questionnaires at the three times are described in original scores.

### Results

For the purpose of this study, it was important that the dialogues clearly contained either solution-focused or confrontational interventions. Three conversations with students were not useful for this study because the interventions used did not fall into either of the two categories. In one conversation, the student explained to the coach that she had decided to terminate her studies to which the coach responded by suggesting that she carry on the conversation as if she were continuing her studies. This intervention turned the conversation into role play and

therefore was not used in this study. Two other conversations were not used in this study because the coach used a mix of interventions. Even though the coach beforehand stated believing that solution-focused interventions worked best, in the conversations with the students, she combined interventions by saying things like, "What would be useful for you to talk about" (a solution-focused intervention) and, "You don't have to make up a nice story for me..." (confrontational intervention).

The remaining four conversations clearly used only solution-focused or confrontational interventions and therefore were used in the analysis. The first conversation, analyzed on a micro level, was conducted by a coach who used confrontational interventions. The second conversation was by a coach who used solution-focused interventions. The following describes what happens on a micro level in these two different conversations. Subsequently, students' self-reports regarding their self-determination and expectations to succeed in their studies before and after the conversation with the coach are described. The students completed the SDT-questionnaires just before the conversation with the coach, soon after the conversation took place, and 2 months after the conversation took place.

All the utterances in the two conversations were analyzed (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Content of Speech in the Conducted Conversations With Students*

<u>Categories of Utterances</u>	<u>Definition</u>
<b><u>Content of Speech: Solution-Focused</u></b>	
Loaded positive question	A question that has a hidden or explicit positive connotation to it and evokes a positive answer.
Positive competence question	A question that evokes a positive response regarding one's feelings of competence or that implicitly or explicitly refers to the existence of a certain level of competence.
Positive goal formulation	Formulations that ask for, explore, or define a positive goal.
Positive utterances	Formulations, statements, questions that use positive language
Positive expectation question/statement	Formulations that subtly raise the conviction that beneficial change is about to happen.
Normalizing	Formulations that reframe a specific situation into a normal one, thereby depathologising the situation/problem.
Speech convergence, language matching	Summarizing the student's perspective by repeating his or her key words, thereby encouraging the student to continue his own thought process.
Asking or summarizing what works (solutions)	Formulations or questions that draw attention to what works well for the student.
Visualizing positive behavior	Formulations or questions that stimulate the student to talk in detail about his or her own positive behaviors.
Formulating own solutions	Statements by the student regarding what works for him or her to solve a problem.

Indirect compliments	Questions that evoke an answer regarding what the student has done that worked well, and drawing attention to what he or she has done that worked.
Direct compliments	Statements that directly address what the student has done that worked well.
Complimenting summaries	Summarizing what the student has done that worked well by using his or her key words.
Face-enhancing statements or questions	Statements or questions that lead to responses that strengthen one's perspective, confidence, competence, face.
Implying own choice/autonomy	Statements or questions that imply that the student has made or can make his or her own choices and stresses his or her autonomy.
Problem acknowledgement	Statements or questions that explore the <i>what</i> and the <i>how</i> of a problem.

**Content of Speech: Confrontational**

Problem analysis or labeling	Statements or questions that explore the causes for and type of problem.
Loaded negative question	A question that has a hidden or explicit negative connotation to it and evokes a defensive, negative, or a face-saving answer.
Negative competence question	A question that evokes a negative response regarding one's own feeling of competence or that implicitly or explicitly refers to the lack of a certain level of competence.
Face-threatening questions or statements	Statements or questions that have the potential risk of losing face when responding to the question or statement, often evoking a face-saving response.
Face-saving responses	Responses that aim to restore and protect one's face.
Asking about feelings	Questions that directly invite the student to address and reflect on his feelings.
Reflecting feelings	Statements that directly address the student's feelings as noticed by the coach.
Positive judgments	Statements that show a positive judgment by the coach.
Negative judgments	Statements that show a negative judgment by the coach.
Negative goal formulation	Statements or questions that ask for, explore, or define what one does not want to happen (a negative goal).
Negative statements	Statements that use negative language.
Negative expectation question/statement	Formulations that subtly or directly raise the conviction that a problem or deterioration is about to happen.
Giving advice	Statements by the coach that imply advice regarding what the student should do.

**Content of Speech: Neutral**

Goal formulation	Formulations regarding the student's goals.
Neutral questions	Questions that involve asking for neutral information.
Neutral statements	Formulations that involve neutral information.
Divergence	Summarizing what the student said using different words.
Telling about feelings	Statements by the student explaining how he or she feels.
Equivocation	Saying nothing, being evasive.

The microanalysis of the content of speech (Table 1) showed that when a coach used solution-focused interventions, the dialogue became positive, goal oriented, focused on what works for the student, and was competence-enhancing, problem-acknowledging, and autonomy-supportive. Findings also showed that when a coach used confrontational interventions, the dialogue became negative, focused on feelings, was judgmental, focused on a negative future, was pressuring, and focused on expert advice. This

is exactly what was intended by the coaches and based on what they assumed was necessary to stimulate the student to pursue academic success.

### **Conversation 1: Analysis of a Confrontational Conversation and Its Effect on a Student**

The one confrontational conversation microanalyzed showed that the coach used mainly confrontational interventions (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Summary of Content of Speech in the Microanalyzed Confrontational Conversation*

<u>Category</u>	<u>Coach</u>	<u>Student</u>
Content solution-focused	6%	30%
Content confrontational	77%	47%
Content Neutral	17%	22%
Positive utterances as percentage of total number utterances	8%	30%
Negative utterance as percentage of total	74%	47%
Problem induction, analysis, or diagnosis as percentage of total utterances	9%	4%
Loaded negative question	3%	0%
Negative competence statement as percentage of total number utterances	5%	5%
Face-threatening statements as percentage of total number utterances	22%	0%
Face-saving responses as percentage of total number utterances	0%	25%
Positive judgments as percentage of total number utterances	2%	0%
Negative judgments as percentage of total number utterances	6%	6%
Negative expectation statement as percentage of total number utterances	10%	10%
Giving advice	1%	0%

A closer look at the content of speech showed that the confronting utterances by the coach were, amongst others, problem induction (the coach voices a problem that she believes the student has), negative expectation statements (the coach doubts if the student will show the discipline and competence it takes to succeed at university), and face-threatening statements (Bull, 2003). The following is an example of a face-threatening interaction. The coach asked a neutral question: "How is everything going with regard to your studies?" To which the student responded positively by stating that everything was going well. At this point in the conversation, the coach responded with a face-threatening question: "So you think that things are going well, that means that you have confidence in yourself...what do you base that on, then?" The student started explaining and mentioned that his father told him that "at university, one needs to be a self-starter.". The response of the coach was face-threatening: "Why does your father explicitly say that to you? (Laughs) Does he know his son? Tell me more about that, then." The reason for doing this was that the coach assumed that being provocative would stimulate the

student to perform better. The interaction in this conversation showed the following:

- The student often reacted to face-threatening statements or questions with face-saving responses.
- The student mainly responded with neutral utterances to neutral statements or questions by the coach.
- When the coach had a negative expectation, the student often voiced a negative expectation. However, toward the end of the conversation, the student responded to a negative expectation by the coach with a positive goal statement. This finding could be explained with reference to reactance theory (Brehm 1981), which states that when someone feels that someone else is trying to convince him or her of something, he or she will respond by showing reactance (Visser & Schlundt Bodien 2009), defend himself or herself, and show resistance to being convinced by the coach.
- When the coach gave a negative-competence statement, the student mainly responded by also voicing a negative-competence statement. Here also, it seemed that toward

the end of the conversation, the student started to respond with a positive-competence statement or expectation statement in reactance to the negative statement of the coach.

- The student responded with positive-competence and expectation statements in response to neutral statements by the coach. The coach asked one positively loaded question, to which the student responded with a positive goal formulation.
- When the coach induced a problem, the student often responded with a negative-competence statement.

The utterances of the coach showed that she perceived the student as someone who lacked discipline and needed external pressure to perform well. She pointed to his lack of discipline and confronted the student with his possible bad performance in the future. She shared her negative expectation regarding his future performance and encouraged him to seek external pressure (i.e., someone who would confront him regularly concerning his slack behaviors). The student took over this label and started to voice negative expectations regarding his performance. He also repeated that he wanted to do well this year. The coach doubted if he was genuine about his goals and his desire to perform well and said, “You say that you want to succeed but you are oozing something completely different!”

The student completed a questionnaire just before the conversation with the coach, soon after the conversation, and 2 months after the conversation. The difference between just before the conversation and soon after the conversation was that his intrinsic motivation reduced (from 34 points before to 26 points straight after the conversation). Additionally, the positive expectation decreased (from 45 points before to 42 points straight after the conversation), and feeling of relatedness with the university decreased (from 18 points before to 15 points straight after the

conversation). The perceived choice, value of his studies, his effort, and his perceived competence remained the same soon after the conversation. Feelings of pressure increased soon after the conversation (from 11 points before to 16 points straight after the conversation).

The difference between the moment just before the conversation and 2 months after the conversation was that his intrinsic motivation returned to its original level (34 points before and 2 months after the conversation). His feelings of pressure increased (from 11 points before the conversation to 19 points two months after the conversation) and his positive expectation decreased (from 45 points before the conversation to 39 points two months after the conversation). His perceived competence decreased (25 points before to 22 points 2 months after the conversation). Perceived choice, value of his study, and perceived effort remained at the same level.

The difference between soon after the conversation and 2 months later was that his intrinsic motivation increased (26 points straight after to 34 points 2 months after the conversation). His perceived effort decreased (16 points straight after to 13 points 2 months after the conversation), and his positive expectation decreased (36 points to 32 points) as well as his perceived competence (from 26 points to 22 points). His feelings of pressure (from 16 to 19 points) increased. The other measures remained the same.

Whether these numbers indicate a small or larger change cannot be concluded because  $N = 1$ . A detailed analysis of the confrontational conversation and its effect on a student is available from the author on request (Appendix B).

### Conversation 2: Analysis of a Solution-Focused Conversation and Its Effect on a Student

The one solution-focused microanalyzed conversation showed that the coach used mainly solution-focused interventions as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3  
*Content of speech in the microanalyzed solution-focused conversation*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Coach</b>	<b>Student</b>
Content solution-focused	89%	90%
Content confrontational	0%	1%
Content neutral	11%	9%
Positive utterances as percentage of total	79%	0%
Negative utterances as percentage of total	0%	55%
Positive competence statements as a percentage of total number utterances	1%	1%
Positive goal formulation as a percentage of total number utterances	3%	2%
Positive expectation as a percentage of total number utterances	4%	13%
Normalizing as a percentage total number utterances	7%	2%
Language matching as a percentage total number utterances	2%	0%
Positive behavior description	38%	0%
	23%	21%

<u>Category</u>	<u>Coach</u>	<u>Student</u>
Explaining what works	2%	0%
Formulating own solutions as a percentage of total number utterances	1%	1%
Indirect compliments	3%	0%
Direct compliments	2%	0%
Compliments as a percentage of total number utterances	5%	0%
Face enhancing statements	7%	0%
Problem acknowledgement	1%	0%
Explaining rationale for own positive behavior	0%	8%
Implying own choice	7%	6%
Face saving responses as a percentage of total number utterances	0%	1%

Analyzing the interaction, it became clear that:

- The coach used mainly encouraging, positive utterances, to which the student responded with positive utterances.
- The student responded with a positive expectation when the coach voiced a positive expectation.
- The student responded with positive goal formulation when the coach implied the students' freedom of choice and autonomy.
- The student made positive competence statements when the coach voiced positive competence statements.
- When the coach gave an indirect or direct compliment, the student responded with a face-enhancing statement.
- Positive behavior description questions by the coach were responded to with positive behavior descriptions by the student.

The conversation started with the coach's thanking the student for her participation, and clarifying their respective roles and the goal of the conversation. The coach let the student know that she could choose the topic of conversation so it would be useful to the student. The coach then asked neutral questions, to which the student responded with neutral utterances. The coach also asked the usefulness question ("Have you got anything specific that you would like to talk about?"); the student responded by saying, "I don't really mind, it's just, it was a big step for me studying here, like, it's been hard the first few days."

The student continued with 8.5 sentences of which one was positive: "And I am really motivated." The coach elicited a positive behavior description by asking: "How do you notice that you're motivated?" The coach did not explore what had been hard during the first few days. The student started to describe her own positive behaviors. The coach then asked the student, "So, it was quite a big change, it was hard, but now that you've lived here, what do you think is going well? What are you pleased about?" These questions invited the student to talk about positive things. She responded with face-enhancing utterances such as, "I would say almost everything (goes well)", and "I am quite proud of myself for doing so well." The student then described her own positive behaviors and explained her positive goals. The coach summarized the student's positive behaviors using the student's own words. The coach also asked for the benefits of the student's positive behaviors and the student described positive outcomes. The coach then asked a future projection question to invite the student to describe what she wanted to achieve: "So suppose it is July,

2011, you look back on the year with satisfaction, what have you achieved then?" The student subsequently explained her goals and added that she needed to develop a routine, to which the coach responded by exploring what this routine would look like. This question goes into the process: What does the student do when she is successful? The student became more specific about her own positive behaviors and mentioned difficulty when working with another student in a group. The coach acknowledged this difficulty by asking: "What is complicated with her sometimes?" The student made the problem smaller: "These are some difficulties but it's not that serious," which was a face-saving response. The coach then referred to something positive that the student had said about her and the other student making an effort to work well together. The reason for focusing on what was going well between the student and her colleague was that the coach wanted to acknowledge the student's perspective, which is that she did not have a big problem, just a slight difficulty.

The student then opened up and explained about her finding it difficult to work with someone who "wants to be the leader," just like her. The coach then asked another future projection process question: "So, in half a year's time when you look back on working together for half a year and you're pleased with how you two worked together, what are you pleased with then, what has been good then?" The student described that she would have made compromises and overlooked details, and would have accepted that she cannot always be the leader.

The conversation started neutral and then turns positive very quickly even though the student said something negative: "It's been hard." If the coach had asked: "What's hard, what do you find difficult, why is that difficult, etc.," the conversation could have gone in a very different (negative) direction.

The student completed a questionnaire just before, soon after, and 2 months after the conversation with the coach. The difference between just before and soon after the conversation were increases in perceived choice (from 44 points to 47 points) and positive expectation (from 38 points to 41 points), and a decrease in feelings of pressure (from 22 points to 19 points). Perceived competence increased as well (from 28 points to 30 points). Additionally, intrinsic motivation decreased (from 41 points to 39 points), the feeling of value and importance increased (from 51 points to 53 points), and the feelings of relatedness stayed the same.

The difference between just before the coaching conversation and 2 months after the conversation was that

intrinsic motivation decreased (from 41 points to 38 points), positive expectation increased (from 38 points to 41 points), and perceived competence increased (from 28 points to 31 points). The other measures stayed the same. Finally, the difference between soon after the conversation and 2 months later was that perceived choice decreased (from 48 points to 45 points) and feelings of pressure increased (from 19 points to 21 points). The other measures stayed the same. Whether these numbers indicate a small or larger change cannot be concluded because  $N = 1$ . The detailed microanalysis of the solution-focused conversation and its effect on the student is available from the author on request (Appendix C).

### The Two Briefly Analyzed Conversations

The second conversation in which the coach used confrontational interventions was between a coach and a female student who had a cold. The coach voiced her concern about the cold and mentioned that it was a sign that the student was asking too much of herself, thus making her health suffer. The coach analyzed that the student was a perfectionist and suffered from stress-related symptoms. The coach combined her problem analysis and label with a positive expectation that the student would succeed. The coach also perceived the student as driven and hard working. The coach gave a lot of positive feedback and compliments. The effect on the student was that soon after the conversation, her relatedness with university, perceived competence, and feelings of pressure increased. It is interesting to look into the relation between the time the coach voiced a lot of positive judgments and the student's increased self-perceived competence and increased feelings of pressure soon after the conversation. This finding might be related to the theory of mindset, which states that a direct compliment regarding a fixed trait increases a fear of failure (Dweck, 2002). After 2 months, the measures were back at the baseline level, which means that perceived competence and feelings of pressure decreased. The student's intrinsic motivation decreased 2 months after the conversation with the coach.

The second conversation in which the coach used solution-focused interventions was conducted with a student who had already decided to terminate her studies because she found her studies too theoretical and difficult. She had decided this before she completed the first questionnaire and before the conversation. The coach used solution-focused interventions (normalizing, stressing own choice, positive questions, language matching, positive expectation regarding the future, etc.). Soon after the conversation, the student self-reported an increased perceived competence as well as an increased perceived value of studying. It is remarkable that her perceived competence increased soon after the conversation given that she had previously decided to terminate her studies. This finding might be explained by Dweck's (2002) theory of mindset. The solution-focused interventions might have stimulated a growth mindset in this student (terminating her studies was not seen as a failure). Her intrinsic motivation for her studies had, understandably, decreased. Additionally, her perceived relatedness and

perceived effort increased and the feelings of pressure stayed the same before and after the conversation.

### Discussion

The results support that solution-focused interventions differ from confrontational interventions and are more effective in terms of stimulating students' self-regulated behaviors to succeed. A conversation with a coach can indeed have an effect on a student's feelings of self-determination, motivation, and expectation to succeed, as well as on the fulfillment of basic needs (feeling of relatedness, competence, and autonomy). The current findings revealed a negative effect for students who had had a confrontational interaction and a positive effect for the students who had had a solution-focused interaction. All initial hypotheses of this study are supported by the results.

### Limitations

Seven students participated in this study at the outset; however, data for only four conversations could be used because of the quality of the interventions. The fact that almost half of the conversations did not match the criteria shows that the researchers' initial assumptions about the nature of the coaching interventions used was wrong in a large portion of cases. Even though this is an interesting result in itself, it also limits the possibility for generalizing the results; a coach who claims to do solution-focused coaching may, in fact, not be doing it and may then not be as effective as he or she thinks.

Another limitation was that the number of participants was too small for a statistical comparison between groups on their STD-results. Despite this limitation, the researchers could make a comparison between the effects of solution-focused and confrontational interventions on a qualitative basis using the results from the SDT-questionnaires as well as the microanalysis of the conversations. In doing so, and in light of previous research and relevant theories, the researchers were able to come up with qualitative conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the used interventions

### Practical Implications

This study provides support that solution-focused interventions work better than confrontational interventions, as does other research, as explained in the theoretical section of this paper. Therefore, the practical implications for coaches, study advisors, and teachers may be to use solution-focused interventions to stimulate students' self-regulated behaviors to achieve study success. This implication would suggest that coaches approach students with a positive mindset, asking autonomy-supportive questions, being goal-oriented, focusing on what works for the student, using competence and face-enhancing interventions, and acknowledge problems without labeling the student.

### Recommendations for Research

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations for research are offered. It is recommended future research combine the two research methods (i.e., microanalysis of conversations and self-determination theory questionnaires). The microanalysis of interactions helps determine whether the conversation can actually be defined as solution-focused or confrontational. Further, the questionnaires help determine the effect of specific interventions on students' self-regulated behaviors and motivations. This way both the input (the type of interventions) and the output (self-determination to achieve academic success) will be researched.

The fact that only four conversations could be used highlights the importance of analysing what actually happens in a conversation and focusing on interventions used by a coach instead of relying on what the coach claims his or her style is. The fact that a coach thinks he or she is using solution-focused interventions does not guarantee the interactions that unfold are, in fact, solution-focused.

Because small interventions may have profound effects on students, there is an ethical issue of to what degree is it acceptable to use many of the confrontational interventions in research. This question needs to be addressed when carrying out the following recommendations for research. It seems interesting to conduct a research into what works in conversations with students because

- improving the academic achievement of students is important to universities;
- the (a-)motivation of students to achieve their goals is linked to their actual academic success and;
- the style of interpersonal communication seems to influence students' self-reported motivations and fulfills the three basic needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) as well as mindset. A growth mindset facilitates bouncing back from setbacks (Dweck in Deci & Ryan, 2002).

These recommendations lead to the following hypotheses for future research:

- After having participated in a solution-focused conversation, students will show increased levels of intrinsic motivation or increased levels of integrated extrinsic motivation to achieve their own goals, whereas a confrontational conversation will decrease the level of intrinsic or integrated extrinsic motivation.
- After having participated in a solution-focused conversation, students will show increased feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness.
- After having participated in a solution-focused conversation, students will show increased positive expectations to succeed.
- After having participated in a confrontational conversation, students will show increased feelings of pressure and decreased feelings of autonomy.

- After having participated in a series of solution-focused conversations, students will show improved academic performance compared to students who participated in a series of confrontational conversations.

### The following appendices are available on request:

- A. SDT questionnaires and measurement matrix
- B. Detailed analysis of the confrontational conversation and its effect on a student
- C. Detailed analysis of the solution-focused conversation and its effect on a student

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