Are Parent-Reported Outcomes for Self-Directed or Telephone-Assisted Behavioral Family Intervention Enhanced if Parents Are Observed?

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1.1 Aim
The aim of this study was to examine the effects of conducting observations as part of a broader assessment of families participating in a BFI. It was designed to investigate whether conducting observations can affect intervention outcomes.

This study was part of a larger research project that examined the efficacy and effectiveness of BFI for mothers of toddlers. Only the measures and outcomes related to this study are reported. For further details of the research, see Morawska and Sanders (2006). The focus of this study is on the effects that observation has on self-report measures and not on reactivity effects within the observational context.

2.1 Hypotheses
Families were randomly assigned to two different levels of BFI varying in intensity and a waitlist control condition and were subsequently randomly assigned to either observation or no-observation conditions. It was expected:-

(1) That mothers assigned to the intervention conditions would report more improvement in their own and their child’s behavior as a result of the intervention compared to mothers who were in the waitlist control group.

(2) It was also predicted that mothers who were observed would report more improvement compared to mothers who were not observed.

(3) It was expected that the effect would be additive for the two intervention conditions, that is, mothers at each intervention level who were also observed would report greater improvements compared to those who were not observed.

(4) No effect of observation was predicted for the waitlist control group. Thus, a synergistic effect was predicted, with observation providing an additive effective in the intervention conditions and no effect expected in the waitlist condition.

3.1 Results
There was support for the predictions:-

(1) That mothers who were observed would report more improvements compared to mothers who were not observed. This effect was evident for maternal reports of their child’s behavior, particularly in terms of the intensity of problem behavior, a key outcome measure for this research.

(2) Regardless of intervention condition, mothers reported that their child’s behavior improved more when they were observed compared to mothers who were not observed.

(3) There was no observation effect found for the waitlist control group.

4.1 Findings
This study has demonstrated that being observed can have an impact on the outcomes of an intervention, with implications for research outcomes. Given the impact of observations, it may be difficult to compare intervention outcomes across studies that have used different protocols in relation to observations or ones where observations have not been included. Further, the strength of this study lies in the randomization protocol, where participants were randomly assigned to an intervention condition and to observation level.

5.1 Summary and Implications
The results of this study, although preliminary in nature, open new possibilities for enhancing intervention outcomes in BFI but also potentially other forms of intervention. The finding that the observations can significantly affect intervention outcomes is one that, to the authors’ knowledge, has not previously been demonstrated. The findings have implications for intervention delivery at a clinical level but also at a research level. Given the unique findings of this study, it is important that future research focuses on the elements of the observation that contribute to the effect and clearly delineate the mechanisms involved.

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