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EDUCATION UPDATE:
Fundamentals of Theory and Practice Revisited

Circular Questioning: An Introductory Guide*

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This paper presents a simplified model that has been found to be useful for those learning questioning skills within the Milan systemic approach to family therapy as well as for those who simply wish to develop some skills in circular interviewing. The model begins with the premise that clients frequently describe a problem in terms that are either too broad or too narrow. The model has two categories of questions: those that draw connections and thus broaden a client's understanding of their context and those that draw distinctions and thus narrow a client's focus where generalisations predominate. The model is presented within the context of other models of Milan systemic questioning and the contributions they have made.

INTRODUCTION

The interviewing style of the Milan Associates has provided a unique contribution to the field of psychotherapy: the process of circular questioning. Circular questioning has since been adapted to many models of therapy. The development of circular questioning emerged from the Milan Associates' application of Bateson's ideas about circularity to their behaviour as therapists. They state that their research was directed at '. . . the most correct and fruitful procedure for interviewing the family' (Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin and Prata, 1980: 3). Circular questioning draws connections and distinctions between family members or people within the larger client system. For example, the behaviour of one person is shown by implication to be connected to the behaviour of another in a circular manner rather than in the usual lineal or causal way that has been the basis of much of our thinking about human problems. Thus, instead of asking why someone is depressed, a circular form of questioning would inquire about when someone shows depression and what other people do when this is happening.

This interviewing style stimulates the release of information into the system in a manner that encourages new ways of viewing the problem. The premise behind circular questioning is that information comes from difference and that difference implies a relationship, through connections or distinctions in the surrounding environment. For example, if I state that she is happy, I am stating this in relation to other people I have seen who were less happy. Thus, the noted difference in happiness has information value. The questioning is aimed at creating or maximising difference and then drawing connections in order to provide information that frames problems in new ways. A number of writers have subsequently devoted considerable effort to the task of delineating uses for circular questioning, in the process of facilitating the release into the system of new information about the problem and its context (Penn, 1982; Fleuridas, Nelson and Rosenthal, 1986; Tomm, 1987; MacKinnon, 1988). This paper examines a two factor model of questioning which aims to help therapists to broaden the family's focus when it is too narrow, and narrow the focus when it is too general. It is particularly useful as a framework for family therapy students attempting to construct their own circular questions.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND ELABORATION OF CIRCULAR QUESTIONING

The Milan Associates do not say a great deal about actual interviewing in their seminal 1980 paper (Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin and Prata, 1980). However, what they do say is extremely significant and has stimulated extensive thinking and subsequent delineation. Citing Bateson, they work within the framework that information is a difference and that difference is a relationship or a change in the relationship. They highlight the benefits of investigating a dyadic relationship by asking a third person for his or her perceptions on that other

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relationship, calling it a 'triadic modality'. They argue that this manner of questioning breaks a rule that they believe operates in dysfunctional families: that family members do not comment on the relationship of other family members in their presence.

Another contribution of the Milan Associates, drawing on the work of Watzlawick, is an elaboration of the idea that all behaviour is communication. One family member is validly able to comment on the relationship between two other family members by observing their interaction, rather than by inferring their internal states. They draw the distinction between the verb 'to be' and the verb 'to show'; instead of speaking about *being* depressed, for example, the therapist speaks about *showing* depression.

The Milan Associates further suggest that it is useful to focus on behavioural sequences and each person's interpretation of behaviour, as a way of establishing circularity and new meaning. A further recommendation to help create difference is that family members be asked to rank each other on specific behaviours, making discrepancies in the views of various family members more noticeable. They highlight the usefulness of ascertaining the differences in behaviour before and after significant family events, and of asking hypothetically what differences might become apparent if other circumstances existed in the family. These ideas about questioning were revolutionary, as were the Milan Associates' unorthodox ways of interviewing, resulting in many unpredicted changes in families. Their paper sparked a number of other significant contributions which elaborated and extended these ideas.

In her attempts to define a model for interviewing, Penn (1982) concentrated on designing questions that create difference. She stated:

> The aim of circular questioning is to fix the point in the history of the system when important coalitions underwent a shift and the subsequent adaptation of that shift became problematic for the family. The information sought by circular questions is the differences in relationships the family has experienced before and after the problem began. (Penn, 1982: 272)

Thus, she presents a number of categories of circular questions that highlight differences, including: 1. Differences between verbal and analogic information provided by the clients, 2. Differences between the problem definition and explanations of the problem over time, 3. Differences between closeness of various family members over time, and 4. Differences created through the classification and comparison of family relational patterns. These questions highlight the importance of creating questions that mark difference and change over time as well as difference between the views of family members, particularly around the presenting problem. Her emphasis on 'difference' as an underlying concept for all questions asked in the interview was an important contribution to circular interviewing.

Fleuridas et al. (1986) also focussed on differences and change over time as a way of gaining information for the therapist. However, they noted when teaching the questioning technique that students had difficulty grasping circular interviewing. So they developed a taxonomy specifically to facilitate their teaching, presenting four types of questions: 1. Problem definition, which is the beginning point for student inquiry in the interview. 2. Sequence of interaction, the next step in the interview once the problem definition is obtained. This category, which together with the next (comparison/classification) includes questions that focus on differences and changes over time, agreement and disagreement between family members and explanations for the views expressed, is very similar to questions delineated by Penn (1982). 3. Comparison/Classification questions are the next suggested focus in the interview for students. They include comparisons and classifications of behaviour, beliefs, values, thoughts, feelings and relationships. 4. Intervention is the final category, where students ask questions that, among other things, encourage clients to try new behaviour that challenges family beliefs and rules. These questions have embedded reframes to enable family members to see their situation differently. The above categories each develop questions related to time, from past to future. Fleuridas et al. provided a guide for the interview with many examples of the types of questions that could be used. Their classification was thus an extremely useful learning tool. The first two categories of problem definition and sequence of interaction are very prescriptive, providing an excellent framework for students to follow when learning circular questioning and conducting interviews early in the therapy. However, with so many possible questions that can be asked under the comparison/classification category, the level of guidance changes significantly from that provided with their first two categories.

Tomm (1984), in his elaboration of the Milan systemic approach, focused on questions that highlight the spatial (differences between people, relationships, ideas, values and perceptions) and temporal (differences over time). His ideas continued to develop through various other papers, culminating in his 1988 paper, where he presented a model of four major types, based on the theoretical assumptions underlying the questions (lineal versus circular) and the intention of the therapist in asking them (influencing the client versus orienting the therapist). The question types are: 1. Lineal (e.g. problem explanation and problem definition): useful in providing basic information regarding the problem, but can convey a judgmental attitude, stimulating defensiveness and guilt in clients. They may also validate pre-existing beliefs around the problem. 2. Circular questions (eg. behavioural effect and difference questions) are less judgmental and have liberating effects of families. 3. Strategic questions (e.g. leading and confrontational), while being corrective in nature, have the effect of imposing therapist views on families, with the possible effect of creating shame and guilt. 4. Reflexive questions (e.g. hypothetical future and observer perspective) are seen as facilitative, providing indirect influence on clients in that they encourage reflection on the impli-

cations of current behaviour and ideas, and a consideration of new options.

Tomm's notions about therapist intent and assumptions in questioning are very useful for experienced clinicians, who are thus encouraged to monitor the effect of their questions during the interview, and to ask different questions if their intentions are not realised. Tomm also emphasises the idea of creating a balance between questions and statements. If there are too many questions, clients may feel interrogated, while if there are too few, therapists may experience restrictions in the information available. Tomm's emphasis on the statement/question balance is particularly useful when training therapists who come from client centred therapies that emphasise reflecting client statements, as opposed to asking questions. However, as student therapists grapple with learning circular questioning, the new model presented by Tomm is often overwhelming.

MacKinnon (1988) focuses on the Milan questioning process as a way of exploring the 'openings' presented during a session. Openings are indicated by key words and utterances that signify emotionally laden areas. The therapist uses questioning to explore these areas and facilitate increased intensity and emotional openness. Questioning is also used to explore and shift premises that constrain family members' relationships and ability to resolve conflictual or painful issues.

THE TWO FACTOR MODEL: CREATING DIFFERENCES AND CONNECTIONS

Most of the other models of questioning focus on *types* of questions as a way of teaching student therapists. Such an approach requires students to learn a classification system and the specific questions in each category, in order to apply them when conducting therapy. By contrast the two factor model emphasises a *process* for asking questions, rather than relying on students to memorise specific categories of questions. While both approaches are valid, I would argue that learning how to *construct* questions may be more appropriate for the beginning therapist than memorising categories of questions. Following a period of constructing their own questions, it may then be useful for new therapists to reflect on the categories of questions that exist in various models. This approach encourages students to draw questions from a range of models.

Creating Differences

When clients generalise a particular problem situation to their entire life, it is often helpful to deconstruct the generalisation by asking questions that create difference. The concept of difference is crucial in all of the models of circular questioning discussed and in this model, is best introduced as the first factor for emphasis when teaching circular questioning. Penn's (1982) model is an example of one that has difference as a fundamental principle underlying *all* question types. Other models conceptualise difference as a *type* of question (eg. Tomm, 1988; Fleuridas et al., 1986). When the purpose of an interview is to provide information, and information is difference, then having a category of *difference questions* is somewhat ambiguous, as all questions should have the goal of providing information through the creation of difference. As Selvini Palazzoli et al. point out, '1. Information is a difference. 2. Difference is a relationship (or a change in the relationship)' (1980: 8). Having a goal of creating difference in the information provided by clients through the subsequent questions asked in a therapy session is thus fundamental to the interviewing style. For example, clients often provide non-specific information such as 'The problem has always been present' or 'We all think the problem is caused by bad genes'. When a therapist operates from the underlying principle of creating difference in the session, he or she can watch for such comments and then turn them into more productive information, by asking questions such as 'Who most accepts the view that the problem has always been there?' or 'When has the problem been better/worse?'; 'Who most thinks that the problem is caused by bad genes?' or 'When did the family begin to think that the problem was caused by bad genes?' Thus, if the therapist has an underlying goal of creating difference and hence information, unhelpful statements from clients can easily be turned into useful information that uncovers subtle differences ignored by the family, providing an alternative view to a dominant one presented by clients in the interview.

As Tomm (1985) notes, difference can be created categorically (between people, relationships, perceptions and events) and temporally (between past, present and future). Differences across time, people and events are very useful categories to use for training therapists because there is little overlap between them, which creates less confusion than a more extensive list of specific difference question types might provide. When training students, I have used some of Tomm's categories, adding one of my own, and focusing on the following categories as the basic underlying principle for interviewing in a way that maximises difference:

1. Across time

Difference over time highlights the changes that occur, which clients often fail to notice, possibly due to their subjective involvement, anxiety or beliefs about a problem. Contrasting past time with the present is a way of creating difference. For example, when asked about these differences over time, a client may note that a problem began at a particular point, or that a behaviour is more extreme during one week than another. Future time, which is always hypothetical, can also be used as a way of pointing to new possibilities and the creation of hope, as is well documented elsewhere (Penn, 1985). For example, when asked about differences in the future, a client may think that a problem will be resolved at some future date or that other changes will occur that will alter the nature of the problem.

Examples:

- When did the problem begin?
- When is the problem most difficult?
- When is the problem least evident?
- When might the problem be solved?
- Will the problem be solved more quickly by itself or more quickly if you have some assistance?
- How long will it take for this problem to go away?
- How might the problem change in the future?

2. Between people

Differences between people highlight unique behaviours, attitudes or beliefs that clients may fail to notice when wanting to create a greater sense of unity or cohesion. For example, clients may state that all family members are sad about the death of a grandparent, but fail to acknowledge, until questioned on this difference, that one family member is having a much stronger reaction to the death. On the other hand, using questions that rate family members on particular behaviours, attitudes or beliefs and thus creating difference, may draw out similarities that have been ignored by clients. For example, family members may see one person as being argumentative until asked to rank all members on their argumentativeness; then they realise that it is a common behaviour in the family.

Examples:

- Who is the most argumentative in the family? Who next?
- Who most believes that parents should make all the rules in the family? Who next?
- Who misses John the most when he is away at boarding school?
- Who between the two of you most thinks that women should have the major responsibility for the housework?
- Who is most committed to the relationship? How do they show it?
- Who most shows their concern about the problem?
- If the problem stays around for a long time, who will be most concerned about it?

3. Between parts of a person

Differences within a person highlight the multidimensional nature of behaviour, attitudes and beliefs and the absurdity of categorising a person with a particular label. When a person is seen to have a particularly strong behaviour, attitude or belief, it is useful to distinguish between the part of him or her that thinks or behaves one way and the part that thinks or behaves another way. This recognises the complexity of human nature, and the potential for tapping into the ambivalence that may be there.

Examples:

- Is your dad's tender side or his gruff side easier for you to see? Where do you think the tender side is hidden?
- Thinking of your head and your heart, which part wants to stay in the relationship and which part wants to leave?
- How much of you is angry and how much of you is sad about your grandmother's death?
- Do you think he is ruled more by his feelings or by his thoughts when he stays out late? What do you think those thoughts are?
- When you feel angry with her, what part of you taps into your current feelings about the situation and what part taps into feelings from the past?
- When you argue with each other, which side is more likely to take over, your rational side or your emotional side?

4. Between situations

Differences between situations highlight differences in client behaviour, attitudes and beliefs, depending on the context. Client flexibility and control over behaviour, attitudes or beliefs are emphasised when questioning reveals these differences between the same person's behaviour in different contexts.

Examples:

- Is he more likely to be violent in public or private? Why do you think that is the case?
- Do you think her behaviour is better at home or at school?
- Do you think her attitude about you being the breadwinner is more evident when you are with friends or when you are with your family?
- In what situation is the problem most noticeable?
- Where are your religious beliefs most obvious to others?
- Where do you think you are most yourself, at work or at home?

These four categories provide a helpful framework for understanding how news of difference can be created in an interview, as a way of increasing the information value of the interview for therapist as well as client. Student therapists are able to practise asking questions that highlight difference on the above dimensions in response to client statements that normally mask any notion of difference. The skill in creating difference is an important task for students in the process of learning circular questioning.

Drawing Connections

When clients are overwhelmed by a problem, they often see it as isolated from the context in which it exists. Their focus may be narrowed by the gravity of the situation. Explanations of the problem are frequently linear, with the problem being seen in a simplistic black and white way. Ruesch and Bateson note that '. . . all knowledge of external events is derived from the relationships between them . . .' (1968: 173). Seeing the 'pattern that connects' that Bateson writes about puts the problem in a much broader context, changing its linear

focus to one that is systemic. This more complete picture of client problems is helpful for the therapist and client in creating understanding and facilitating change.

In teaching students to draw connections, I find it useful to use content categories in the first instance. The content categories selected have been delineated elsewhere (Brown, 1997), but will be discussed here briefly. The categories of content selected provide a trigger for students to stimulate questions within the broad category to use for drawing connections or links.

1. Behaviour

Questions focusing on behaviour are useful in getting a good understanding of exactly what is happening with clients. Often a vagueness in client report of problems can be clarified through emphasising specific behaviours. Behaviours can be linked to other behaviours, to feelings, to beliefs, to meaning and to relationships. Questions focusing on behaviour are also useful as a way of maintaining neutrality, as value laden categories are frequently avoided when the focus is on behaviour. For example 'Why do you spend the day in bed?' is more neutral than 'Why are you so lazy?'.

Examples:

- What happened after you asked him to go to his room? What happened then? . . . How did it all end?
- When she stays out late without telling you where she is, what feelings come up for you?
- How does hitting your son relate to your beliefs about child rearing?
- How do the ways you fight relate to the ideas about how couples resolve arguments that you brought from your family?
- How do you make sense of the difference between his behaviour at home and at school?
- When the family argue, does it bring you all closer together or further apart?

2. Feelings

Questions about feelings are asked as a way of highlighting the emotional experience of family members, where there is often a tendency to focus on behaviour and meaning. While these questions are useful in increasing therapeutic understanding of the meaning and motivations of behaviour, they are also a way of increasing client self understanding, as well as stimulating increased empathy and understanding by other family members. The way that feeling questions are asked may unintentionally imply that clients have too little or too much control over their feelings. For example the well-known question 'How does that make you feel?' implies that a client has no control over how he or she feels. The question 'When did you decide to become depressed?' may imply so much control that the client feels misunderstood. Thus, feeling questions need to carefully weave a path between these two extremes, by maintaining therapeutic connection with the client while not inferring that she or he has no control over personal feelings. This is particularly important early on in the therapeutic process, while later on, questions suggesting a greater control of feelings by the client may be more therapeutic. Feeling questions can be linked to behaviour, beliefs, meaning and relationships. Note the difference between these questions, which imply less control over feelings, and the more confronting 'how do you feel?' questions often asked by beginning therapists.

Examples:

- What feelings come up for you when she calls you incompetent?
- When he tells you that he doesn't love you any more, what emotions emerge?
- When she feels sad, what feelings do you have?
- How do you feel, knowing that he believes women should stay at home and raise the children?
- What sense do you make of his anger that you will not have sex with him?
- When you spend long periods of feeling angry with each other, how do you think that affects your relationship?

3. Beliefs

Questions about beliefs are asked to help understand some of the underlying ideas that clients have which influence the way they act, think and feel. Beliefs tend to emerge from past experience in situations with significant people such as family, friends and former lovers. They frequently result in clients accepting a certain way of acting, thinking and feeling as the unquestioned norm. Beliefs also may arise out of painful past experience and thus operate as a way of protecting the self. Beliefs are often attributed to participation in groups such as family of origin, culture, social class, gender, sexual orientation and religion. Beliefs can be linked with behaviour, feelings, meaning and relationships.

Examples:

- When he is reluctant to help out with the housework, what do you think he believes about the role of women?
- When she is sad about not having had a child, do you think it is more because she wants a child or because her family wants a grandchild?
- When you believe that conflict should be out in the open in any relationship, does he agree more or less with you?
- How do you make sense of her saying on the one hand that she believes men should be responsible for their own feelings and yet on the other hand continuing to seek out your deeper emotions?
- When you believe that there is a danger in expressing your anger at home, do you think that unites or separates the family?

4. Meaning

Meaning questions tap into the way that clients interpret their world through their interaction with others. These

interpretations are useful in helping to understand their behaviour in its interpersonal context. They are useful for understanding self as well as other family members. When they are linked to behaviour, feelings, beliefs and relationships, questions about meaning are powerful in creating change in family systems.

Examples:

- How do you understand it when he says that he loves you and he neglects to help you when you ask for assistance?
- When he is feeling sad, what do you think his sadness is about?
- When she thinks that your anger relates to unresolved issues with your mother rather than her, how do you think that she gets that idea?
- When you say that his behaviour shows he doesn't want to live at home any more, how do you think he sees that statement?
- When she says that she feels you do not love her any more, how do you think that affects your relationship?

5. Relationship

Relationship questions are used to allow family members to comment on the nature of their relationships with each other, as they experience them through their every day interaction. These comments are rarely made outside the therapy room. However, assumptions about the nature of relationships are frequently made and acted upon in the context of the family. Making these assumptions explicit through relationship questions that draw connections between relationships and behaviour, feelings, beliefs and meaning can create significant new understanding, and thus provide the impetus for change in the family.

Examples:

- When she says that she is coming home right after school is finished and does not do so, how do you think that affects the nature of your relationship?
- When he is angry and expresses that to you, does that make you feel closer together or further apart?
- When you believe that relationships should not have any conflict and conflict continues, what does that say about your relationship?
- When she is pessimistic about your willingness to be more involved in the family, how do you think that affects your relationship?
- When he feels that the family is working together well, are you more likely to feel closer to the family or more distant?

CONCLUSION

While a number of models exist for teaching circular questioning, they are frquently difficult to understand for new therapists. Understanding that the major guiding principle of circular questioning is a process of creating distinctions and connections can be a useful simplification of the process, allowing students to experiment. In this way, the usefulness of various questions will become apparent very quickly to students and they will thus become self motivating. Furthermore, linking questioning style to aspects of neutrality and hypothesising then creates a more complete context for conducting an interview in a circular style. As experience builds up at this level, it is possible for students to focus on some of the more complex models of questioning and integrate these into their repertoire.

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