NewYork-Presbyterian

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Systemic Family Therapy:

Hypothesis Formation, Neutrality, Circular Questions

Family Therapy Didactics
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AMAZING THINGS ARE HAPPENING HERE

Overview

1. Introduction to Systemic family work
2. Hypothesis Formation
3. Neutrality
4. Circular Questioning
5. Video

From Structural to Systemic Family Work

All Family therapy is interested in change:

- Minuchin/Structural
  - ➢ change through restructuring problematic relationships
    - Boundaries
    - Reframing
    - Enactments
    - Focusing
    - Achieving Intensity

= "building inspector" role

- Milan school/Systemic
  - ➢ change occurs as beliefs are changed
    - Hypothesis formation
    - Neutrality
    - Circular questions

= "detective" role

Circular Questions

- Introduced as a family interview strategy by Milan Associates (from Gregory Bateson's Circularity in Systems at the MRI/Mental Research Institute)
  - An individual's behavior is *connected* to the behavior of another in a *circular* fashion

    vs.
  - The linear view that one person's behavior is the *cause* of another's behavior
- Goal is to investigate various familial relationships and draw attention to the way in which their interactions support dysfunction or perpetuate symptoms.

Hypothesis Formation

Hypothesis = tentatively accepted unproven supposition (Selvini Paalazolli, et al)

- Hypothesis of the therapist places the unexpected and improbable into the family system → keeps the family from imposing its own script
  - ex: designation of who is crazy or guilty

Hypothesis Formation

When is a hypothesis **systemic?**

- When it includes all family members and how they relate to one another

Hypothesis Formation

Example:

Therapist: Your mother said that Marco has always been a difficult child. But according to you, did your mother and brother fight more before or after your father got sick?

Patient: Oh after, after! Mommy gets much angrier, and she's more nervous too…. It's just that at a certain point she has to stop… when Daddy puts his hand over his heart.

Therapist: When Daddy's home at night, is Paolo more naughty with Mommy or less naughty? If he's naughty with Mommy, what does Daddy do?

Testing Hypotheses

If your hypothesis is that a father and a child are enmeshed, you can test the hypothesis through circular questions

e.g. Ask another member how they see the relationship between the two.

Follow up the first circular question with another about how the father sees his relationship with his child.

Neutrality

- How a therapist's total behavior during the session affects the family vs. the therapist's disposition
- Refraining from taking one specific position

How is this achieved?

Neutrality

- Family perceives therapist as *neutral:*
  - not taking sides with any one member or subsystem
  - "allied to everyone and to no one at the same time"
  - nonjudgmental and accepting of everyone
- The therapist works to spends the same amount of time with each individual member of the family
- The therapist often asks the same question of each family member (*circularity)*

(Fleuridas et al, Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 1986 V 12 No.2: 113-127)

Neutrality

Example:

Ask each family member, moving from one to the next in a circular fashion:

“Who are you most worried about?”

Why ask questions?

1. Lends toward patient-oriented conversation (concerns, experiences, perceptions, goals, plans, etc. take center stage)

2. Questions are stronger invitation for the patient to be engaged in the conversation

3. Therapist shows commitment to listen, hear answers

4. Can help families begin to think through problems on their own (fosters autonomy and competence)

Balancing Questions and Statements

Clinician strikes a balance between questions and statements to achieve:

- Balance between the session becoming patient-centered with clinician hiding behind questions (and therefore not becoming fully human)
- Clinician needs to establish some authority as a person with experience to instill confidence and trust

4 Major Types of Questions

1) Lineal: Orient therapist to the patient's situation.

   Are based on linear assumptions about the problem (causal)

   "What problems have brought you in to see me today?"

2) Strategic questions: Asked in order to influence the family in a specific manner.

   Intent is *corrective*.

   = Therapist behaves like a teacher or instructor

   "Your Mom needs your help. She worries she is not a good mother. Can you reassure her?" to an adolescent who distances from a helicopter parent

3) Reflexive: Asked in order to influence the family in an indirect or general manner.

   Are based on circular assumptions. Intent is *facilitative*

   = Therapist behaves more like a guide or coach encouraging the family members to mobilize their own problem-solving resources

   "Who in the family is home when Alison begins to act out after school?" to a family with diffuse roles and unassigned tasks

4) Circular: Orient therapist to patient's situation based on circular assumptions about mental phenomena

   = Therapist as explorer or researcher by encouraging family members to "gossip" about others in front of each other.

Circular Questions

Circular: Orient therapist to patient's situation based upon circular assumptions about mental phenomena

= Therapist as explorer or researcher

Questions bring forth patterns that connect persons, objects, actions perceptions, ideas, feelings, events, beliefs, etc.

- Who worries the most in the family system?
- What do you do when you see your husband worrying so much?

4 Categories of Circular Questions

1) Problem-Definitional
2) Sequence of Events
3) Comparison/Classification
4) Interventive

Problem Definitional

A problem becomes a problem when it is defined as such by the child and/or the people in the child's world.

Circular questioning asks: "What was happening in the child's world when the problem became a problem?" "What are the differences noted? Or the shifts in relationships that occurred?"

- Problem defining questions are those that track differences and changes over time

  (e.g. differences in perspectives about the problem from those in the system, differences in familial relationships, changes in relationships over time, differing notions of helpful traits or behaviors of an individual that may not be noticed in the context of the problem, situational differences (school vs. home), etc.)

- Questions are investigative in nature

Sequence of Interaction

Once the problem is more defined, Sequence of Interaction questions put emphasis on the interactional patterns in the system.

- Who does what? When do they do it?
- Elicit specific examples of behaviors when adjectives are used

Child: “Mommy is a meanie!”

Therapist: “What is Mommy doing when she **acts** like a meanie?”

Child: “She screams at me for leaving my toys on the floor”

Therapist: “And what do you do when Mommy screams about your toys?”

Child: “I start to cry”

Comparison/Classification

- Asks questions of each family member about the other family members (i.e. behaviors, beliefs, relationships, interactions with others, etc.)
- Ask family members to “gossip” about the others while the others are in the room or even when they are not

This is helpful in identifying familial coalitions, relational or interactional patterns in the family, as well as obtaining an understanding of how each individual explains or makes meaning of them

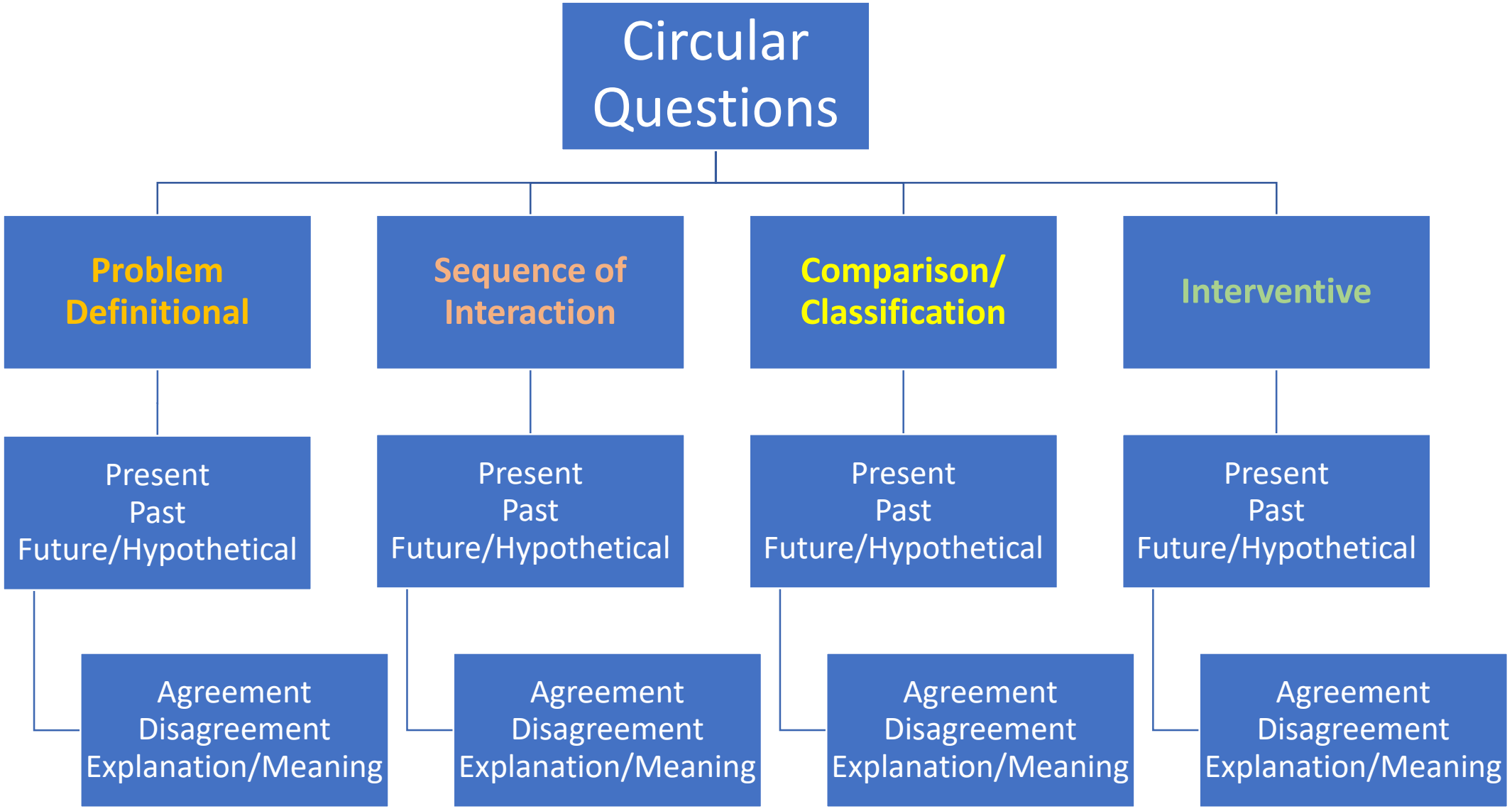
Interventive

- Interventive questions are designed to stimulate change in the family system (either in behavior or ways of thinking about the problem, etc.)
- These questions are designed to challenge, inform, instruct, or re-frame the problem in a more helpful way that may lead to change in the system

Therapist: "If I had a magic wand that could help Johnnie remember to immediately put his toys away after playing with them, how might you enjoy spending that extra time with him after you return home from work?"

Parent: "He could help me cook. He likes to mix things and we play music and dance."

Circular Question Categories



Circular Question examples: Problem Definitional

A. Present:

1. Difference

2. Agreement/Disagreement
3. Explanation/Meaning

B. Past:
1. Difference
2. Agreement/Disagreement
3. Explanation/Meaning

C. Future/Hypothetical:
1. Difference
2. Agreement/Disagreement
3. Explanation/Meaning

- What is the problem in the family now?
- What concerns bring you into therapy now?
- What is the main concern of the family now?
- What problems do the other children have?
- For children: What changes would you like in your family?
- How is this different than before?
- Has this always been true?
- Who agrees with you that this is the problem?
- What is your explanation for this?
- What does this behavior mean to you?
- What was the problem in the family then?
- How is that different from now?
- Who agrees with Dad that this was the major concern?
- What is your explanation for that?
- What do you believe was the significance of her decision to move out at that time?
- What would be the problem in the family if things were to continue as they are?
- How would that be different than it is now?
- Do you agree, [name]?
- If this were to happen, how would you explain it?
- What purpose would that serve?

Adapted from:
Nelson, T. S., Fleuridas, C., Rosenthal, D. M. (1986). The evolution of circular questions: Training family therapists. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 12(2), 113-127.

Circular Questions

What is their impact?

Can have liberating effects

- Family members make their own connections to these relational/circular questions and become liberated from previously held beliefs
- They can then approach their difficulties from a fresh perspective

e.g. husband begins to see that it is not simply his wife's worrisome complaints that activates his depression, but also his depression that activates her complaining

→ He might then be more interested in addressing the depression

Systemic Interviewing in Action

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohTm_YQ1zx4

1) What makes this interview systemic? Which questions did you notice were circular? And why?
2) Can you identify questions from each of the 4 categories?
    - problem-definitional
    - sequence of interaction
    - comparison/classification
    - interventive

References

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