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THE EVOLUTION OF CIRCULAR QUESTIONS: TRAINING FAMILY THERAPISTS

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This article describes a procedure for training family therapists in the clinical application of circular questioning as developed and implemented at the Marriage and Family Therapy Clinic at the University of Iowa. A pragmatic taxonomy of circular questions is presented; instructional handouts designed to facilitate the use of these questions within the trainee's initial interviews are included.

The concept of circularity has been widely discussed in family therapy literature since Bateson's (1972, 1979) elaboration of the cybernetic epistemology of family systems (cf. Hoffman, 1981; Keeney, 1983, 1985; Papp, 1983; Penn, 1982; Palazzoli Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1978a, 1980; Tomm, 1984a, 1984b). The Milan Associates introduced the circular interview as a means for conducting a systemic investigation of the changes and differences in family relationships which recursively support dysfunctional interactions or symptoms in the family (Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980). In addition to being a useful tool for gathering information suited to the generation of hypotheses and interventions, circular questions provide the family with an opportunity to view itself systemically. Developing an awareness of the reciprocal interrelatedness of behaviors may, in and of itself, promote significant spontaneous change (Penn, 1982; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980; Tomm, 1984b).

The authors adopted the theoretical principle of circularity and the method of circular questioning into their practice, research and training of family therapists at the Marriage and Family Therapy Clinic located at The University of Iowa. It was noted that even after a year of graduate family therapy education, and an additional year of clinical training with live supervision, some trainees had not yet grasped the practical differences between linear and circular hypotheses and questions. This was credited in part to the novelty of systemic thinking, and also to the complexity of previous presentations of circular questioning. In an effort to enhance the learning process, a pragmatic taxonomy of circular questions was devised and instructional handouts were designed to facilitate teaching the procedures of the circular interview.

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INTRODUCING THE CIRCULAR INTERVIEW

Circularity is a term which bewilders many neophytes to the field of family therapy. To describe punctuated interactional sequences as an overlay of infinite, evolving circles, loops, or circuits, may only increase the confusion. Metaphors and images are useful; however, the essence of circularity is not its shape but its implication—behaviors and beliefs do not occur in isolation. Individuals are best understood within their interrelational contexts. A comprehensive systemic view of the family focuses on the evolving relationships of the family members within their environmental, historical, developmental, and ideological contexts. A circular perspective emphasizes cyclical sequences of interactions which interconnect with family beliefs; these patterns of relating and believing may recursively serve to perpetuate dysfunctional behaviors and cognitions (cf. Papp, 1983; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1978a, 1980).

The circular interview investigates the recurring contextual patterns of relating which constitute a family system. A thorough exploration of behavioral and ideological links between the evolution of the presenting problem, changes in intrafamilial relationships, and interactions around these dynamics will reveal the family circle of interrelating (Penn, 1982; Tomm, 1984b). Using the phrase "relationship questions" interchangeably with "circular questions" may enable therapists to better understand the systemic, investigative nature of this form of questioning. "Information questioning" and "reflexive questioning" are terms which have been used to emphasize the primary objective of circular questioning—to provide new contextual information to the family (McNamee, Lannamann, & Tomm, 1983; Penn, 1982; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980; Tomm, 1984b). This form of questioning serves as an efficient process for soliciting information from each member of the family regarding their opinion and experience of: (a) the family's presenting concern; (b) sequences of interactions, usually related to the problem; and (c) differences in their relationships over time. This provides the family and the therapist with a systemic frame of the problem, thereby enabling the therapist to generate hypotheses and design interventions (or additional questions) which interrupt dysfunctional cycles of interrelating and which challenge symptom-supporting myths or beliefs (cf. Minuchin & Fishman, 1981; Papp, 1983; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1978a, 1980).

The therapeutic orientation of the Marriage and Family Therapy Clinic at the University of Iowa is an integrated marital and family therapy model (Riche' & Rosenthal, in press), incorporating principles and techniques from structural, strategic, systemic, and multigenerational approaches. Graduate students are introduced to each of the major schools of family therapy, to systems theory, and to the pragmatics of family therapy through coursework, videotapes, and roleplaying (cf. Piercy & Sprenkle, 1984). Therapists in the Brief Family Therapy Research Program (Fleuridas, 1984) at the Marriage and Family Therapy Clinic are trained in the interviewing model of the Milan Associates: the five-part session, neutrality, hypothesizing, and circularity. These principles are fully described elsewhere (cf. Papp, 1983; Penn, 1982; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1978a, 1980; Tomm, 1984b). Hypothesizing and circularity are fundamental concepts of family systems orientations to therapy and should not be viewed as model specific (e.g., Goldner, 1985; Riche' & Rosenthal, in press). Neutrality of the therapist, on the other hand, is primarily represented by the Milan and Ackerman schools of therapy (Papp, 1983; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980). The process of teaching neutrality, hypothesizing, and circularity is facilitated through the use of an instructional handout which outlines some guidelines for the clinical application of these principles (see Table 1).

TEACHING CIRCULAR QUESTIONS

Once the theory and pragmatics of the circular interview are understood, trainees are introduced to circular questions. The variety of circular questions are endless (Tomm,

Table 1
Guidelines for the Circular Interview

I. NEUTRALITY

A. The family perceives the therapist as neutral:
   1. As not taking sides with any one member or subgroup.
   2. As allied to everyone and to no one at the same time.
   3. As nonjudgmental and accepting of everyone.

B. The therapist asks questions of each member:
   1. Attempting to spend an equal amount of time with each.
   2. Going around the circle, often with the same question or the same type of question, to investigate each person's perceptions.

C. The team assists in neutralizing any attempt of a family member to form a special relationship or coalition with the therapist.

II. HYPOTHESIZING

A. Definition of hypothesizing: suppositions, hunches, maps, explanations, or alternative explanations about the family and the "problem" in its relational context.

B. Purpose of hypotheses:
   1. To connect family behaviors with meaning.
   2. To guide therapist's use of questions and order.
   3. To introduce a systemic view to the family and to enable the members to develop new, but related, views of their relationships, beliefs, and behaviors.

C. Formulation of hypotheses:
   1. Based on information about the family (gathered during the phone intake, interviews, and from the referring person):
      a. Descriptive opinions (from family members, referral sources, others).
      b. Behavioral observations (interactive patterns).
      c. Analogic data (metaphors, cue words, repeated stories and beliefs, myths, statements, expressions, secrets).
   2. Based on previous experience and knowledge (of the team):
      a. About similar families (ethnicity, culture, religion).
      b. About similar problems, symptoms, and situations.
      c. About similar interactive patterns.
      d. About developmental and life cycle stages.
      e. Of theory in general (systems, psychological, socio-political, anthropological, etc.).
   3. Based on whatever is salient (to therapist or team at that time).

D. Keys and guidelines:
   1. Design hypotheses which are:
      a. Useful; there are no "right" hypotheses—the goal is not to identify "truth" as much as to generate the most useful explanations of the family at that time.
      b. Ultimately systemic; must "include all components of the family" and formulate "a supposition concerning the total relational function" (Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980, p. 6).
      c. Related to the family's concerns (such that most of the questions seem relevant to them).
      d. Different from the family's hypotheses (to provide new information to the system).
   2. Ask questions of each member; note responses to questions and interventions (to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses).
   3. Discard unconfirmed hypotheses; modify useful hypotheses as new information is provided—hypotheses evolve.
   4. Do not tell the family your hypotheses.
   5. Attempt to design interventions based on confirmed hypotheses or hypotheses which seem most useful.

III. CIRCULARITY

A. Definition of the circular interview: the "capacity of the therapist to conduct his (or her) investigation on the basis of feedback from the family in response to the information he (or she) solicits about relationships, and therefore, about difference and change" (Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980, p. 8).

Table 1, continued

B. Purpose of circularity:
   1. To introduce the family to a systemic view of itself by providing new information about their concerns, beliefs, behaviors, and relationships.
   2. To develop, confirm, or deny the team's hypotheses about the family and the function of the problem.
   3. To intervene indirectly by raising issues neglected in the family (such as expressing appreciation, allowing independence, helping a child learn a desired trait through modeling) or by questioning the effectiveness of attempted solutions to their situation (see Table 3 for examples).

C. Keys and guidelines:
   1. "Think only in terms of relationships . . . ," in terms of differences or changes in behaviors between family members across time.
   2. Ask questions of each member, not spending too much time with any one person.
   3. Ask about issues that are relevant to the problem or to your hypotheses.
   4. Note the "cue" words or repeated phrases which the family members use to describe the situation and each other's behavior, such as "absent-minded," "worried," "scared," "lazy," "perfect," "no time alone," or "he has always been that way, even as a baby." Transpose these into questions about differences between relationships and behaviors; investigate their explanations for these presumed characteristics.
   5. If there is a sensitive issue and members are hesitant to respond, reverse the question and ask about the opposite: "Who was the first to believe that there was something wrong with Samuel?" becomes, "Who believes that nothing is wrong with him?"
   6. A full circular view is obtained when a complete cycle of behaviors or a pattern of interactions becomes clear; gaps in the cycle may be due to perceptual or conceptual blindspots. Search for the missing links.
   7. Hypotheses give order and cohesion to your questioning; take care not to ask a random assortment of questions without direction and purpose.
   8. Ask linear questions when helpful and appropriate—direct inquiries to an individual about his or her behaviors or feelings may lead to important information. Linear answers can be used as a base for more circular questions.

IV. INTERVENTIONS

A. Base all interventions on systemic hypotheses about the family and the symptom: is the symptom a temporary response to a perceived crisis, or does the symptom serve a cybernetic or evolutionary function in the system?

B. Everything which a therapist does is an intervention; do not randomly select interventions, but consider what is most apt to enhance the family's own ability to learn, to grow, and to find suitable solutions to their own problems.

C. Prior to formulating the intervention, consider the possible ramifications of an intervention and the consequences of change for each member and the system as a whole.

D. Valuable information can be learned about a family by observing their responses to prescriptions, positive connotations or reframes, paradoxes, and homework tasks. The way in which the family completes, changes, or ignores an assignment also yields important information.

E. For guidelines and descriptions of various types of interventions, refer to the many books and journals in the field.

1984b), and there are numerous ways in which they may be classified. At the clinic, it became evident that the previous classification schemes of circular questions, although informative, were not practical tools for training therapists in the clinical application of the circular interview. Therefore, a clear and succinct taxonomy of questions and a procedural guideline for their use were developed. Table 2 describes this taxonomy, while Table 3 provides specific examples of questions. The outline presents four major categories into which circular questions are classified: (a) Problem Definition; (b) Sequence of Interaction; (c) Comparison/Classification; and (d) Interventive Circular Questioning.

Table 2
Circular Questions: Classified and Described*

I. PROBLEM DEFINITION

Ask questions of each member about perceptions of the problem(s) in the family now. Ask each one for her/his own explanation for the situation (learn their hypotheses, if any, about why this is considered a problem or about why the problem exists [Penn, 1982]). Children may prefer not to identify "problems" in the family; they may respond to a question about what types of changes they would like to see. (For examples of these, and other, circular questions, see Table 3.)

II. SEQUENCE OF INTERACTION

Ask questions of each member about who does what, when (related to the problem, symptom, or to your hypotheses).

A. Ask for *specific interactive behaviors:*
   1. Not in terms of predicates supposedly intrinsic to a person (Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980) (e.g., "When *is* he a pest?", but rather, "When does he *act* pesty?" or, "When does he *show* you this behavior?").
   2. When members describe each other with adjectives, have them elaborate with specific examples of behaviors (e.g., "What do the children *do* when they are 'misbehaving'?" or, "Then what does Daddy *do* that *shows* you he's angry?").

B. Ask about differences or changes:
   1. In the past: "How does what happens now differ from what used to occur?".
   2. In the future: "How does this differ from what will happen when she or he leaves home?".
   3. In some hypothetical event: "What would happen if she or he did this instead of that?" This investigates the perceived consequences of change (Palazzoli Selvini, et al., 1980). Also use hypothetical event questions to take power away from an individual who uses threats of unwanted behaviors to manipulate the family: "What would happen if she or he ran away?"; "What would Dad do?"; "What would Mom do?" (cf. Hoffman, 1981, p. 302).

C. Ask who agrees with whom about the sequence presented.

D. Ask for each member's explanation for certain member's behavior (around the problem). Ask for their explanations of differences and changes in behaviors. Ask what certain behaviors, responses, symptoms, expressions, or suggestions mean to them and what they think these behaviors mean to others. These questions serve to investigate cognitions, values, rules, and myths about what is and what should be.

E. Attempt to discover the full cycle or sequence of intermember behaviors which may interact recursively with the symptom, thereby perpetuating it. (An intervention may be designed to interrupt dysfunctional patterns [Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1978a, 1980]). Consider eco-systemic interactions with the family as well. The symptom may be a temporary response to an external event, and/or may be perpetuated by a dysfunctional relational pattern which extends beyond the context of the nuclear family and includes extended family members, the school, friends, place of employment, the church, the community, ethnic group, and so forth.

III. COMPARISON/CLASSIFICATION

Ask questions of each member about the other family members: their behaviors, beliefs, values, thoughts, traditions, habits, feelings, and relationships.

A. Have members compare, contrast, and rank order similarities and differences: investigate intra-, inter-, and trans-generational coalitions and alignments; watch for patterns (Penn, 1982; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980). Such an exploration of coalitions around the problem encourages members to "gossip in the presence" of the others (Penn, 1982; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980). This is also called "triadic questioning" when a third person is asked to comment on the behaviors and the relationship of two or more of the others (Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980; Tomm, 1984b).

B. Investigate differences or changes in coalitions over time. Explore how these changes may be related to the present dysfunction:
   1. In the present and in the past: "Has this always been true?".
   2. In the future: "Who will be closest to Mom when you have all grown up?".

Table 2, continued

3. In a hypothetical event: "Who would be closest to Mom if Son were to leave home?". Test possible effects of change. Also, block unwanted behaviors such as: "How would Mom's death affect the family?" (cf. Hoffman, 1981, p. 302).

C. Ask who agrees or disagrees with whom, as this also provides information about relationships (Penn, 1982; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980).

D. Ask for their explanations of, or the meanings of, the coalitions, splits, and patterns of relating in the family.

IV. INTERVENTION

Ask questions of each member which serve primarily to challenge, inform, or instruct indirectly; observe the family's response to these challenges or alternative frames.

A. Use these types of circular questions only after sufficient information has been obtained from the family such that the degree of rigidity has been assessed and some working hypotheses have received adequate validation.

B. Begin with questions which are least offensive or threatening, to test the family's responses. For example, with a family which appears comfortable with intimacy and closeness, and yet neglects to demonstrate affection to each other, ask each one how the others show family members (specific ones) that they care for them. You may want to begin by comparing the members who seem closest to each other and, along the way, address the more distant relationships.

C. Ask questions which may prompt members to try out new behaviors:

1. Ask how the identified child is going to learn the desired behaviors; ask each one what they think would and would not be effective. When appropriate, one may request members to classify (rank order) which approach they think would work the best. Use some of their suggestions, and make up a few others, including a desired response and possibly a paradox; observe how they assess possibilities. For example: "What do you think would help Jamie (identified as withdrawn) learn to share her feelings the most: for you to ask her questions about her day, for you to share things about your lives with her, or for her to hear the two of you share your feelings with each other?".
2. Ask how the older child is going to learn to live on her or his own, and what responsibilities she or he needs to acquire prior to moving out. This tactic may be used to test an hypothesis about enmeshment or transgenerational coalitions, to expose a child's desire to move out or to remain in the home, and to learn what preparations have been made, if any, and who had discussed these plans. These types of questions often encourage families to discuss these issues and to prepare for this transition.
3. Ask the children what "fun" things they did as a family over the weekend; if the family has an uninvolved parent, ask the children what they did with that parent last week.
4. Ask the children what "fun" things Mom and Dad did together during the past month if it is hypothesized that the marital relationship is weak.
5. There may be an interest in challenging a belief or family rule which seems to be rigid; care must be taken not to convey judgment but simply other possibilities such as: "What would happen if you were to offer to help your wife take care of the children once a week?".
6. There are many situations where these types of questions may serve to challenge the family to explore new behaviors and beliefs. Remaining neutral to their responses may be a key at times, especially if the individual or family wishes to return the challenge. If your hypotheses are on target, their responses may indicate a lack of readiness for change, or that the information was heard and once they have had time to think and talk about it, they will figure out a way to work it out on their own.
7. Experiment with embedding reframes or paradoxes within circular questions (if one is skilled in this manner of intervention): "How did your son learn to be this creative? Who else in the family is creative?" (a positive connotation of "disobedient" and "mischievous"); "What do you think your folks would do if I told them that they aren't ready for you to change and that you should remain dependent upon them?" (paradox) (cf. Papp, 1983; Palazzoli Selvini et al, 1978b; Tomm, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c; Weeks & L'Abate, 1982).

Table 2, continued

D. Note: It may be that the more rigid or dysfunctional an interaction or symptom, the more indirect the intervention must be to promote positive change. To the degree that this is true, these questions must be used sparingly and carefully. Also, to the degree that a family will experiment with alternative behaviors without being told directly to do so, this approach will be useful. This provides a model for generating options, testing possible consequences of change (by thinking through the known implications, e.g., "What do you think would happen if . . .?"), and for considering the importance of the contribution of each member to the success or failure of their attempted solutions. Thus, interventive questions may be used as an indirect method for teaching cooperative problem solving and decision making.

*See Table 3 for examples of these questions.

The rationale and scope of each category are discussed with trainees, as presented in the handout (Table 2).

Trainees are instructed to begin the first interview with circular questions from the first category, Problem Definition, in order to obtain information from each member regarding their perspectives of the situation. The inquiry begins in the present ("What is the concern of the family *now?*"), explores the past ("When did you first notice this problem?"), and investigates everyone's expectations regarding how it may be in the future or in some hypothetical event ("If this situation were to remain as it is now for the next five years, what would you do?"). The therapist may then move to the second category, Sequence of Interaction, to examine interactions related to the presenting problem, as described by the family and as hypothesized by the team. A circular view of the problem is obtained when the full cycle of repeated interactions is clear. A chronological "arc" (Penn, 1982) appears by tracing the development of the symptom over time: the events and relational contexts which occurred prior to, and during, the recalled onset of the symptom, the current contextual view of the symptom, and future expectations for what may happen. Attempted solutions to the problem may also be explored in this way, with an inquiry as to what seemed least, and most, effective at which times to accomplish the desired effects (cf. Papp, 1983; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

Relationships, beliefs, values, myths, thoughts and feelings are explored through questions from the third category, Comparison and Classification. Members are requested to describe the behaviors and beliefs of the others in the family and to define intermember relationships over time. Interventive Circular Questioning, the fourth category, differs from the others in intent: once the family's interactions and belief systems become clear (Papp, 1983), and hypotheses have been tentatively confirmed, interventive questions may be used to challenge the family's patterns of interacting. Embedded reframes or positive connotations, paradoxes, (Palazzoli Selvini et al, 1978a; Weeks & L'Abate, 1982), metaphors, and alternative possibilities (Jacobson, 1983) in circular question form serve as indirect ways of providing new information and opportunities for change (see Tables 2 and 3 for examples). The members' responses to interventive questions may also provide information confirming or refuting hypotheses about relationships and beliefs which may maintain the symptom.

Table 3 illustrates the temporal dimensions within each of the four major categories: (a) past, (b) present, and (c) future/hypothetical. Within each temporal dimension, the therapist may investigate: (a) *differences* or changes within the family between relationships, between beliefs or behaviors of family members, or between their family and other families; (b) *agreements* or *disagreements* between members; and (c) *explanations* for why their relationships and interactions proceed as they do and the intended and perceived *meanings* of certain behaviors. These questions enable therapists to explore

Table 3
Examples of Circular Questions

I. PROBLEM DEFINITION QUESTIONS:
Whenever possible, ask for a description of the specific behaviors which are perceived to be problematic.

A. *Present:*	• What is the problem in the family now? • What concerns bring you into therapy now? or: What concerns bring you here 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?
1. Difference:	• How is this different than before? • Has this always been true?
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	• Who agrees with you that this is the problem?
3. Explanation/Meaning:	• What is your explanation for this? • What does his behavior mean to you?
B. *Past:*	• What was the problem in the family then?
1. Difference:	• How is that different from now?
2. Agreement/ Disagreement:	• Who agrees with Dad that this was the major concern of the family then?
3. Explanation/ Meaning:	• What is your explanation for that? • What do you believe was the significance of her decision to move out at that time?
C. *Future/Hypothetical:*	• What would be the problem in the family if things were to continue as they are?
1. Difference:	• How would that be different than it is now?
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	• Do you agree, Mom?*
3. Explanation/Meaning:	• If this were to happen, how would you explain it? • What purpose would that serve?

II. SEQUENCE OF INTERACTION QUESTIONS:
Focus on interactional *behaviors*.

General Examples:	*Specific Examples:*
A. *Present:*	
• Who does what when?	• Ask Daughter: When Mom tries to get Sister to eat (to solve or prevent the presenting problem) and she refuses, what does Dad do? Then what does Mom do? What does Brother do? And what does Sister do? Then what happens?
• Then what happens?	
• What next?	
• Where is she or he when this happens?	
• What does she or he do?	• When your mom and brother are fighting, what does your dad do?
• Then what do they do?	
• Who notices first?	• Does Dad get involved in that fight or stay out of it? Describe what happens.
• How does he respond?	
• When she or he does not do that (problem definition), what happens?	• When Dad doesn't get involved in their fights, what happens? How does your mom react when your dad doesn't get involved and fight with your brother?
1. Difference:	
• Has it always been this way?	• Has Brother always behaved in this manner?
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	
• Who agrees with you that this is how it happens?	• Who agrees with you that Mother yells at Dad every time he stomps out of the house?

Table 3, continued

General Examples:	*Specific Examples:*
3. Explanation/Meaning:	
• What is your explanation for this?	• How do you explain Dad's tendency to leave home often?
• What does this mean to you?	• What does Dad's behavior mean to you?
B. *Past:*	
• Who did what then?	• What did Dad do on those days when Brother used to push Mother around?
• What solutions were tried?	• How did your folks try to get you to stop? How did that work?
1. Difference:	
• How was it different?	• How was his behavior different? Describe what he used to do.
• When was it different?	• When did he do this? How often? • When did he change?
• What else was different then?	• How did Dad respond to the earlier situation? (Then what happened?).
• How does that differ from how it is now?	• How does that differ from how he responds now? (Then what?).
• Was it more or less then, than it is now?	• Was he gone more or less often than he is now?
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	
• Who agrees with you?	• Who agrees with Mom that Dad is more involved in the fights now?
3. Explanation/Meaning:	
• How do you explain this change?	• How do you explain this recent involvement?
• What does this change (or lack of change) mean to you?	• What does it mean to you that day after day, year after year, things between the two of you have not changed?
C. *Future/Hypothetical:*	
• What would you/he/she do differently if she or he did (not) do this?	• What do you think Mom would do if Dad were to ignore Brother? • What will Dad do with Brother when Mother begins to work nights?
1. Difference:	
• How would it be different if she or he were to do this?	• How would your parents' relationship be different if your mom were to return to school?
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	
• Who would agree with you that this is probably what would happen?	• Do you think your mom would agree that they would probably get a divorce if she were to return to school?
3. Explanation/Meaning:	
• Tell me why you believe this would happen.	• Dad, explain to me why you think your daughter and wife both agree that a divorce is likely should your wife return to school.
• How do you think your wife would explain it?	• What would a divorce between your parents mean to you?
• What would this mean to you/him/her/them?	

Table 3, continued

III. COMPARISON/CLASSIFICATION QUESTIONS:

General Examples:	*Specific Examples:*
A. *Present:*	
• Who is closest to whom?	• To whom does Dad show most affection—Mom or Daughter?
• Who is most like whom?	• Who is most like Mom of your seven children? Then who?
• Who gets angry most?	• Who acts most upset when she seems uncooperative?
• Who acts most upset when (the problem) occurs?	• Who is most convinced that something is wrong with his behavior? Who next?
• Who feels most helpless when (the problem) occurs?	• And who is least convinced that something is wrong? (Rank order.)
• Who is most involved in this situation?	• Who is the first to help you when you are having trouble with your homework?
• Then who? (Rank order.)	• Who spends the most time helping you with your homework? Who spends the least amount of time with you?
• Who helps the (so-called) problem child the most?	• Classify the various members of the family in reference to their tendency to keep their rooms neat. Begin with whoever is the neatest (or the messiest).
• Who is most apt to do what another member of the family does?	• If Mother begins to cry during the session, you may state: Mother seems unhappy. Who is most able to comfort her when she is sad—your dad, your grandmother, your sister, or you? (Then who?)
• Who generally sides with whom?	• Who is more attached to Mom—your brother or your sister?
• Who generally argues with whom the most?	• Do you, or does your husband, communicate best with the children?
• Who has the most fun with whom?	• Is your parents' intimate life better or worse lately?
• Who most understands a certain member of the family?	• Have you felt more like a wife or a daughter in the past month?
• Who spends the most time with whom else?	
• Who else feels this way?	
• Who else in the family prefers this?	
1. Difference:	
• How do they differ?	• How does his behavior bother you differently than it bothers Mom?
• How is this different than that?	• How is Mom's discipline different than Dad's?
• How does your family differ from other families?	• Is your family as close as other families that you know?
	• Would you consider your parents' marriage to be happier than most?
	• Do the children fight more than most siblings do; less; or are they about average?
• How does this family differ from your/his/her family of origin?	• How close is he to the children compared to how close your dad was to you when you were growing up?
	• How do you think you and your spouse's relationship differs from that of your parents?
	• How are you raising the children differently than how your parents raised you?
• Has this always been true?	
• Was it ever different?	

Table 3, continued

General Examples:	*Specific Examples:*
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	
• Who agrees with whom about this?	• Who disagrees with Dad the most?
• Who else believes this is true?	• Who do you think would agree with you that Dad is closest to Sister?
• Which set of grandparents would be most apt to agree?	• Who in the family agrees with you that Mom is closest to Brother?
	• To Dad: Do you agree with your daughter that your son is closer to your wife when you and she quarrel?
3. Explanation/Meaning:	
• What is your explanation for this?	• What leads you to believe that Dad and Daughter are closest in the family?
• Explain to me the meaning of this.	• What do you think is the significance of their (or your) closeness?
• Have you thought about why this occurs? What hunches have you come up with?	• What is your explanation for this difference (or agreement)?
	• What is your reason for his extreme dislike of school?
• How does (the outsider) explain this?	• How does the teacher explain this behavior?
	• What does marriage mean to your spouse?
• What does this mean to him or her?	• How has she or he showed you that this is so?
B. *Past:*	
• Who was closest to whom before this happened?	• Before Brother left home, who was closest to Dad? (Rank order.)
	• Was your Mom more on your side in the past than she is now?
	• Who was most pleased with your former therapy? Who next? (Rank order.)
	• Who argued the most with Brother before he went to jail?
1. Difference:	
• Has this always been true?	• Has she always demonstrated her sadness this way in the family?
• How was it different then?	• How were Mom and Dad closer before you moved out?
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	
• Do you agree with her that it was different?	• Do you agree with Mom that they got along better before you moved?
3. Explanation/Meaning:	
• What was your explanation for that?	• How did you explain the distance you both experienced at that time?
• What do you think she or he meant when she or he did/said that?	• What did he mean when he told you that he would never leave you again?
C. *Future/Hypothetical:*	
• Who will be closest then?	• Who will be closest to Mom when all of you children have grown up and left home?
• Who would show the most anger if ___ ?	• If the girls were no longer at home, would things be better or worse for you and your husband?
• What would happen between the two of you if this were to happen?	• After your wife's (imminent) death, who will take care of your (handicapped) daughter?
• Who would be the best companion for whom?	• If one of you children had to stay home after high school graduation to take care of your parents, who would be the first to volunteer? Who would be the best for your mom? for your dad?
• Who would seem the most helpful?	

Table 3, continued

General Examples:	*Specific Examples:*
• Who would act the most upset if this were to happen?	• Who would act the most upset if Dad were to come home drunk—Mom or Daughter?
• Who would show the most relief if this no longer happened?	• Who would show the most relief if Dad were to quit drinking?
1. Difference:	
• How would that be different than it is now?	• What would you do differently if Mom and Dad got along?
• How would their relationship be different if ___ ?	• How would Mom and Dad's relationship be different if you were to leave home?
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	
• Who agrees with her that if this were to happen, they'd be closer?	• Who agrees with Dad that Son would improve if Mom and Dad got along better?
• If (teacher, Grandmother, school counselor, etc.) were here, with whom would she agree?	• Do you agree with your daughter that you and your husband would get a divorce if she were to leave home?
	• If your teacher were here, what would she say?
3. Explanation/Meaning:	
• What is your explanation for this?	• How do you explain your Dad's guess that if they were to go on a trip, you three children would get along fine?
• What is your reason for the likelihood that this would (not) happen should that occur?	• Explain why you think they would not get a divorce if you left.
• What purpose would that serve.	• He just stated that he should run away. What purpose do you think that would serve?

IV. INTERVENTIVE QUESTIONS

Note: Many of the examples above may be an interventive, depending upon the intent of the therapist and the family's frame of reference. Some additional examples appear below.

General Examples:	*Specific Examples:*
A. *Present:*	
• What "fun" things do you usually do together as a family?	• Ask each of the children: What's something fun that you did with your family this week?
	• Have you had some special time alone with your dad lately? What did you do?
• How much time alone do you typically spend together doing something enjoyable?	• Did your mom and dad get to go out together, just the two of them?
	• What do you like to do when your folks go out on a date?
• How often do you go out together; alone; as a couple?	• How do you think James will learn to do his homework on his own? (Do you agree, James?)
• How much time do you two spend alone?	• How do you think Karen will best learn to share her feelings? (That's one possibility, any other ideas? Which do you think would be most helpful?)
• How is she or he going to learn to ___ ?	
• From whom did son/daughter learn to (reframe behavior or intent)?	• From whom did Daughter learn to act so courageous and persistent?
	• In what other ways does he show you that he's concerned about the two of you?

Table 3, continued

General Examples:	*Specific Examples:*
• What would be different in your family if I told you that change would be risky now? (Paradox)	• How do you think your mom would respond if I told her that the family is not ready for you to change, and that they need you to stay home from work and school in order to protect them as they grow older? (The same type of questions suggested above apply to the interventive questions.)
1. Difference:	
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	
3. Explanation/Meaning:	
B. *Past:*	
• How did your parents do that in the past?	• How did your parents discipline you in the past? What do you think was most helpful? What have they done with James when he misbehaves? Did that work? The last time that he ran away, what did your mom do? What did your dad do? What do you think helped James the most then?
• What do you think was most effective?	
• Did that work?	
• What did your family do the last time this happened? How did that help?	• When did Carol take on the responsibility of keeping your brothers out of trouble by monopolizing all of your parents' time and attention?
• When did she or he first take on the job of caring for her or his mom/dad/siblings in this way? (Reframe.)	
• What other creative ways have you found to discipline the children?	
1. Difference:	(The same type of questions suggested above apply to the interventive questions.)
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	
3. Explanation:	
C. *Future/Hypothetical:*	
• What does she or he need to do to prepare for this?	• What do you think Mother needs to do to prepare for the time James leaves home?
• Who will be the most prepared when this happens?	• What does James need to do?
	• When Mother goes to the hospital, how are each of you going to help in the home? How could Dad help the best? How could James help?
• How will each member help the family when this happens?	• What would happen if they grounded him from the T.V. every time he stayed out past his curfew?
• What would happen if _____ ?	• Do you think she would be more willing to share her feelings if you were to: (a) ask her questions about her day, (b) share your feelings with her, or (c) if she were to see you and your wife share your feelings with each other?
• What do you think would be the most effective way to resolve this problem?	
• If she or he were to do help, how would she do it? Would she succeed?	• If Mom were to try to teach Daughter not to whine and complain, how would she do it? Do you think that would work? How would Dad try to teach her? (The same type of questions suggested above apply to the interventive questions.)
1. Difference:	
2. Agreement/Disagreement:	
3. Explanation/Meaning:	

**Note:* The terms "Mom," "Dad," etc. are used in the text. In therapy, the person's name would be used in cases of direct address.

the issues in greater depth, as well as to test their hypotheses (Hoffman, 1981; Penn, 1982; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980; Tomm, 1984b, 1984c).

It is important for trainees to be grounded in the principles of family systems theory in order to facilitate the generation of useful circular hypotheses which in turn direct the selection of questions. The handout on circularity and hypothesizing (Table 1) provides keys and guidelines for the clinical application of these principles. It cannot be overly stressed that therapy is more than techniques: therapists are encouraged to be sensitive to the uniqueness of each family, as well as flexible and creative with their use of circular and linear questioning.

CONCLUSION

Since the introduction of the circular interview to the field of family therapy (Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980), much interest in the principles of the interview and in circular questioning has been demonstrated in the literature (e.g., Papp, 1983; Penn, 1982; Tomm, 1984a, 1984b). A pragmatic method for training therapists in the application of circularity has been presented in this paper. The instructional handouts designed to facilitate the teaching of this approach have been included, in addition to a brief description of the training procedures employed at the Marriage and Family Therapy Clinic at the University of Iowa.

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