

INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY THERAPY & SYSTEMIC PRACTICE

Dr *Kate Owen*
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Systemic Assessment & Questions for Inviting Change

Systemic Clinical Interview

- The aim is to shift the focus from the individual as “the problem” to relational factors and broader view of the interactional context.
- Every question asked (and how it is asked) has the potential to introduce “news of difference”.
- Information from who is present and who is not (but significant).
- Accepting the family’s definition of the problem while implicitly exploring additional ways to describe it using relational terms.

Example Questions

Q: Who first noticed that this was a problem? - Identifies pattern of perception.

Q: Who agrees or disagrees that this is a problem? - Explores the ‘politics’ or the issues of power surrounding the problem definition.

Q: Whose ideas was it to seek therapy? - Identifies pattern of initiation.

Q: How was it brought to your attention? - Identifies interpersonal process involved in seeking help.

Q: When you think about seeking help, who or what gave you the thought that coming here might help? - Information about how familiar the family is with the ‘culture’ of therapy and what therapy involves.

Tracking Questions

- Interactional information – sequences of thoughts, emotions, intentions and behaviours within relationships become targets for change in therapy.

Example Questions

Q: Who did what when?

Q: What did they actually say or do?

Q: What were you thinking when they said that /you said that?

Q: What was happening right before this?

Q: What happened next?

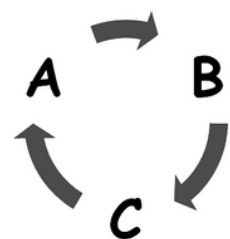
Q: And then what happened?

Q: Then what did they do?

Q: While this was going on, where were.....(other family or household members)?

Q: When they do that, what happens next?

Q: What meaning do you make of that (how did you get that idea?)



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Timelines: Context Across Time

- Listing events of family history in chronological order to track the evolution of the family history over time.
- Focus on strengths as well as struggles
- Puts clients in context – as belonging to a history, to the present context, and to the future.
- Helps family members remember events and make connections that clarify and change their perspective about the present situation in a positive way.

Helpful Questions

Q: What was the first (or next) significant event in your life (as a person, couple, family)?

Q: When this happened, how did each of you react?

Q: What was the sequence of these reactions?

Q: After it ended, what conclusions did you draw about yourself and others?

Genograms

- Genograms visually conceptualise the family and wider system in terms of membership and relationships.
- Captures the following: All members of the family system (typically three generations); birth and death dates; marriage, divorce, and significant relationships; pregnancies, miscarriages, and terminations; occupations, schooling; mental health issues, medical issues; ethnic/cultural variables; migration; relationship patterns and functioning (enmeshed, conflict, distance, etc); family life cycle stage; family strengths and resilience; family beliefs, stories, narratives, rituals; and broader socio-political context and influence in various eras.

Helpful Questions

Q: How is your family different from other families that you know?

Q: How are mum and dad different from each other?

- Explores perceptions of parental interactional styles.

Q: How is each child different from everyone else in the family?

- Explores family roles, fairness, alliances, etc.

Q: Who is most like dad? Who is most like mum? What makes you say that?

- Narratives of difference, strengths, coalitions, beliefs, etc.

Q: How does your family express affection?

- Affectional and communication style.

Q: Who runs the family? Who gets the last word?

- Overt and covert power; leadership.

Q: Who else in the family has coped under difficult circumstances?

- Explores family strengths.

Reference: Hanna, S.M. (2007).
The Practice of Family Therapy: Key
Elements Across Models (4th ed.).
Brooks/Cole: USA