research in practice

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

University of Sussex

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Practice Tool

PSDP–Resources and Tools:

Using systemic questions in supervision

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Introduction

Systemic questions are derived from the field of family therapy. A system is any combination of parts that interact to form an identifiable whole.

Systemic questions have application across a number of different human groupings or systems, where the interest lies in thinking about connection and relationships. Systemic thinking aims to make new connections between beliefs, behaviours and relationships to help positive change happen.

Systemic questions are a fundamental tool of systemic practice because they aim to make these connections and facilitate change. They are particularly helpful in supervision, for inviting supervisees to think about their work with families in different ways.

This learning tool accompanies a presentation that explains the concept of systemic questions. It would be helpful to look at the presentation before reading the information in this tool.

Types of systemic questions

This learning tool provides examples of the different types of systemic questions under the following headings:

- **circular questions**
- **questions about relationships**
- **questions about differences**
- **questions about beliefs**
- **action questions**
- **connecting questions.**

Circular questions

These are questions that seek to elicit information about relationships, differences, meanings, explanations and contexts. They are based on feedback or responses, often in relation to a practitioner's questions, in order to shed light on a situation being discussed.

They are usually open questions such as:

How does the problem affect relationships?	Who is affected the most in the family? Who is affected the most after that? Who is affected the least?	Who is most concerned about the problem?
How does each individual affect the problem?	What makes the problem better or worse?	What would each person say about this if they were here?
What ideas does each person have about the problem?	If things get worse or continue as they are, what will the implications be for each person in the future?	If things get better how will things develop in the future?
What would each person say they appreciated about xxx if I were to ask them?		

Questions about relationships

These questions are 'relational' in that they invite the person you're speaking to to consider a different perspective from their own, e.g. the viewpoints of family members regarding a particular relationship.

Some examples include:

Who would notice when...?	How will you know that they have noticed?	Who would you discuss that with?
Who would make that decision?	Have you ever checked that out? Who would you check that out with?	What would you need to do differently for xxx to notice?
How do people in the family usually talk about things?		

Questions about differences

These questions recognise that people have different perspectives and that multiple stories exist within families, teams or a multi-agency group.

They are, therefore, an invitation to explore difference, and can be used to promote anti-discriminatory practice.

Some examples are:

Who likes it most / least?	Who would be most likely to do the opposite of that?	When you do it like that, how does the child or parent react?
Who talks most to whom in the family?	On a scale of 0-10, 0 being impossible and 10 being no problem, how would you rate how OK it is to talk about painful issues?	Do the parents worry more or less about the child since their grandmother died?
What happens in the family when the child seems to show more irritation in relation to her parents?	When the mother and child argue, what does the father do?	If the child and her family were part of our conversation, what would they ask us?

Questions about beliefs

The purpose of these questions is to look beneath the surface of stories about families and consider their belief systems, or the beliefs of the social worker.

This type of systemic question can be used as a means to explore and challenge discriminatory or fixed ways of thinking.

Some examples are:

Where does that idea come from?	What ideas do you have from your family about that?	How do people let each other know how they feel in the family?
If one of the other professionals were here now, what might their beliefs be about, for example, bedtime routines for children, how clean or tidy a house should be, and so on?	How are the parents' beliefs about parenting similar or different? Where do these beliefs come from? How do these compare to your own beliefs about parenting?	

Action questions

These are more direct questions that invite people to think about taking an action or reviewing their action plan. They can be helpful for motivating people.

Some examples are:

If I was there what would I see?	What does that look like?	If things were safer in the household, what would have happened / would we have noticed?
What one small step could you take today to change the situation?	What are the child's or parent's hopes and dreams for their future? What do they want to achieve?	If you don't make the change now, what will happen in the long term?
What have you accomplished today?		

Connecting questions

Questions like these can help you to explore a hypothesis by connecting behavioural patterns with consequences or situations. They also encourage people to consider other perspectives.

Some examples are:

If the child and the father had a better relationship, how might the mother notice this at the dinner table?	What do you think the mother's deepest wish is about her relationship with the child?	Do you think Dean behaves differently to most boys of his age?
What do you think the different sides of the family would recommend to help the difficulties disappear?	If Dean felt his relationship with his brother was going better, what would he notice in his parents' behaviour?	If I asked a question that challenged you, how would I notice this?

Conclusion

Systemic questions can be used in all kinds of situations. They are especially useful in supervision to explore different perspectives, create manoeuvrability and flexibility, open out creative possibilities, as well as gather information. This promotes anti-oppressive practice by encouraging practitioners to take positions of neutrality and curiosity in their work with children and families.

Other ways you can use this tool

You could share these ideas:

with your peers and practice using the questions in relation to a dilemma they'd like to explore

with your team and create space in a meeting or away day for them to explore a practice dilemma.

We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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