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iii

Chapter 4

Circular Interviewing: A Multifaceted Clinical Tool

Karl Tomm

Circularity is one of the three fundamental principles identified by the Milan team as "indispensible to interviewing the family correctly" (Palazzoli et al., 1980, p. 4). In making this comment, the team was referring to the context of conducting a *systemic* interview. The other two principles are hypothesizing and neutrality. All three are inextricably interrelated.

In some respects, circularity represents the "behavioral" or "executive" aspects of the other two. For instance, hypothesizing is described as a conceptual process of "mental effort . . . [to] organize the observations" (Palazzoli et al., 1980, p. 5) so that they are "coherent with the systemic epistemology" (p. 7). The hypotheses thus formulated, guide the therapist's *investigative activity* to ask circular questions. On the other hand, neutrality is defined with reference to the therapist's "specific pragmatic effect . . . [in being] allied with everyone and no one at the same time" (p. 11). The perceived effect of the therapist's questioning guides his *responsive activity* to avoid coalitions, privileged relationships and moral judgements. "By circularity we mean the capacity of the therapist to conduct his investigation on the basis of feedback from the family in response to the information he solicits about relationships" (p. 8). Thus circularity may be regarded as a bridge connecting systemic hypothesizing and neutrality by means of the therapist's activity.

The Milan team drew heavily from Bateson (1972) in elaborating the principle of circularity. In his writings about the mind, Bateson emphasized the notion of cybernetic feedback as a core aspect of mental process. Mind is no "thing", it is a *pattern that connects* an aggregate of components in circular (or more complex) chains of determination (Bateson, 1979, p. 92). Thus the contributions of Bateson were seminal. However, the Milan team also made a major original contribution by operationalizing the concept and applying it to the conduct of family therapy. Circularity became manifest as a peculiar pattern of therapist activity now known as "circular interviewing". A few examples of the types of questions used in this method of inquiry were described in the original paper by the Milan team (Palazzoli et al., 1980). However, it is probably through the many workshops conducted by the team (especially by Boscolo and Cecchin) that circular interviewing came to be regarded as the distinctive feature of the interview part of the five-part-session. Recently various authors have begun writing about this method of inquiry (Hoffman 1981, Penn 1982, Viaro and Leonardi 1983, Tomm 1984). The net result is that an important clinical "tool" has been differentiated.

There are two major aspects of this style of interviewing: circular questioning and circular questions. The second entails the linguistic form and the clinical focus of the questions while the first entails the interactive process in asking them. Although both these facets of circularity are being enacted simultaneously during the course of an interview, they will be described separately.

I.   CIRCULAR QUESTIONING

The Milan style of circular questioning has at times been referred to as "the Socratic method" (Boscolo, personal communication). This is because of the apparent pattern of incessant questions, but no answers, from the therapist. Like Socrates, the therapist "knows that he does not know" and hence keeps asking. He does not even ask to learn "the facts". The systemic therapist knows that he will never "know". Granted, he asks for information to formulate and test hypotheses, but more fundamentally he asks questions in order to become "coupled" with the family in a coevolutionary process of systemic exploration. The questioning, if carefully conducted, allows a unique pattern of generativity to emerge. The therapist's questions trigger family members to "release" new information into their own and each others' awareness which enables them to develop a new understanding of their own systems of interaction. This generative style of therapist–family coupling is an important feature of systemic therapy. It is a *systemic enactment* in the relationship between the therapist and the family. The attitude of wondering, of not knowing and of exploring, spreads from the therapist to the family. When the family subsequently "uncouples", it may find itself endowed with a greater capacity to "discover" or "invent" solutions on its own.

One purpose of the systemic therapist is to try to understand the circular processes in the system with which he is concerned. Thus, the general question, "What is happening in this family?", guides the formulation of his specific questions. By considering this general question, however, the therapist implicitly sets himself apart from what he has distinguished and assumes the position of an observer. He acts "as-if" he is outside of and separate from the entity that is being explored. He regards the family as an "object" of investigation. He then proceeds to identify circular connections in the objectified system in an empirical manner. This aspect of circularity is sometimes referred to as the cybernetics of "observed systems". It is also known as "first order" or "simple cybernetics" (Keeney, 1982).

However, literal objectivity of external entities is an illusion. No object or phenomenon is ever totally separate from whoever is considering it. The observer's own cognitive processes specify or "generate" whatever entities are being considered (Maturana and Varela, 1980). In other words, the systemic entities investigated in therapy are "brought forth" or "constructed" by the therapist through his interaction with the family. When the therapist consciously takes into account his own actions (cognitive and behavioral) in generating and modifying the systems he is exploring, while he is exploring them, *he is observing himself as an investigating observer*. This process is referred to as the cybernetics of "observing systems" (von Foerster, 1981). In family therapy, this means that the therapist investigates the cybernetic feedback loops between himself and the family at the same time as he

investigates the cybernetic feedback loops within the family itself. This level of complexity is referred to as the "cybernetics of cybernetics" or "second order cybernetics".

Circular questioning entails this kind of second order cybernetic process. Needless to say, it is extremely difficult to carry out well. Our day-to-day conceptual habits tend to be predominantly objective and empirical, so we are faced with a constant, covert "drag" towards a first order cybernetic stance. To maintain a systemic perspective of the overall therapeutic process (not just the family process), an expanded awareness and additional cognitive processing is required. The therapist's team can monitor the therapist–family interaction more easily than the therapist. As observers behind the screen they can use their empirical habits to observe him observing and acting on what he appears to be construing. However, a team is not always available. Even when it is, there is the problem of getting the team's feedback to the therapist to be utilized in the ongoing process. Phone-ins and call-outs are relatively slow, time consuming and very disruptive when used frequently. Furthermore, the team does not have as direct access to the therapist's thinking as the therapist himself potentially could have. Thus it behooves the therapist to try to develop the capacity to operate at this level of cognitive complexity *while conducting therapy* if he wishes to maximize his effectiveness as a systemic clinician.

A systemic therapist has two general intentions which lead him to ask different kinds of questions. These are to try (1) to understand the system and (2) to facilitate therapeutic change. The corresponding types of questions are (a) *descriptive circular questions* and (b) *reflexive circular questions*. When the therapist asks a question to elicit information to generate or modify his understanding of the systemic connectedness of the problem, it is a descriptive question. When he asks a question in an attempt to deliberately trigger a change in the system being investigated, it is a reflexive question. I have chosen to call the latter "reflexive" because their effectiveness (when realized) appears to be mediated by the reflexivity in a hypothetical hierarchy of meanings that organises human interaction (Cronen *et al.*, in press). Thus, depending on his intent at any moment, his questions may be descriptive, reflexive or both. The intentions are not mutually exclusive and many questions are, of course, mixed. However, the distinction is useful, as it helps clarify the vicissitudes of neutrality.

At the moment of asking a purely descriptive question, the therapist adopts a position of maximal neutrality. In the wording and tone of the question he tries to convey an attitude of genuine acceptance towards each person and a naive curiosity towards whatever is described. At these moments he even "accepts" the notion of violence and abuse and remains neutral with respect to change. Contrary to some impressions of the systemic attitude, this does not mean that he is condoning violence. What the therapist is accepting is the *description* of the violence, not its enactment. If an angry or violent exchange begins to emerge during a session, he cannot but respond and would do so with a view towards curtailing it, starting possibly with a reflexive question (e.g. in the context of a marital argument, the therapist interrupts by addressing a child, "When your parents argue at home is it less intense or more than it is here?"). When using descriptive circular questions the therapist accepts the family's descriptions of the situation, violent or otherwise, and in a neutral manner proceeds to explore their systemic connectedness with other relevant perceptions, meanings and actions. He does this with the attitude of a fascinated

scientist who is trying to understand "why things have to be the way they are" in this particular system at this particular time. Family members will, of course, be extremely sensitive to the therapist's personal position on every issue. The greater the extent to which they perceive him as taking sides or passing judgement, the greater their responses are distorted by his stance.

However, a skilled therapist can often identify opportunities during the course of an interview where he could offer "immediate" therapeutic input. In other words, he recognises a "good moment" or an "opening" for a particular intervention. To intervene in order to effect a therapeutic change is not being neutral. Rather than become directive (in the sense of telling the family how they should think or behave) and abandon his neutral stance altogether, he may take advantage of these openings and employ a reflexive question. For instance, in the context of a father's tirade against his son the therapist might ask the mother, "How long has your husband had such negative thoughts about the boy?", "When did he first begin to think this way?". These questions are intended to interrupt the scapegoating process and realign the focus. This is not the same as telling the father directly to stop blaming the son. To intervene with a question respects the autonomy of the system in a manner that an explicit opinion, directive or prescription does not. For instance, the hypothetical question, "If instead of your father always leaving, your mother left, what would happen?", is generally provocative but still neutral with respect to a particular outcome. On the other hand, the question, "If you became even more severe in your discipline, do you think it would be more or less likely that he would run away again?", could contain an embedded confrontation and reflect a *tactical* move on the part of the therapist towards a specific outcome. Tactical questions can be risky because the residual neutrality (which usually lies in the tone) is quite limited.

When the therapist introduces an intervention in the form of a question, he has no need to remain committed to it and to justify it if the family strongly rejects its implications. Although he is not fully neutral at the moment he asks a reflexive question, immediately thereafter he can revert back to become more neutral without loss of status. The therapist can then utilize the family's response to re-evaluate the issue (and the process) and approach the system from another angle. Thus time and movement are important elements in enacting the principle of neutrality. The therapist and family engage in a mutual "dance" that is led by his intentions.

The notion of reflexive questioning is a very recent development and needs further analysis and explanation. It is introduced here as an important facet of the second order cybernetic process of circular interviewing. It should be noted, however, that the designation of a question as reflexive does not depend on its semantic content or linguistic structure but on the circumstances in which it is employed. Indeed, the same question may be either descriptive or reflexive (or both) depending on the therapist's intent in asking it. For instance, a triadic question may be descriptive when asked to obtain a third person's neutral report of the interaction between another two. Yet when asked primarily to evoke a particular portrayal to enhance the observer perspective in the other two interactants, it should be considered reflexive. Despite the importance of the immediate process, it is possible to distinguish categories of questions that are likely to be utilised reflexively. Some of these are observer perspective questions, future oriented questions, unexpected context change questions, embedded suggestion questions, normative comparison questions, conservative needs questions and process interruption questions (Tomm, in preparation).

Other categories could, and undoubtedly will, be distinguished as these kinds of questions are more widely utilised and discussed.

The intent of a question does not, of course, guarantee its effect. However, it is impossible to ask a question without having some effect. Most questions, both descriptive and reflexive, probably have a very minor or *conservative effect*. The family responds to the "perturbation" with a minor change in order to remain the same. Yet, every question is a probe and a potential trigger for a *generative effect*, i.e. a more substantive change. What actually happens depends on the family's own organisation and structure. A generative effect can never be predicted with certainty and in some instances will not even be known to have occurred. Some questions "stick" in family members' minds and have an impact for far longer than we suspect. Questions asked with a descriptive intent may, of course, also have a generative effect. The main argument here is only that an admixture of reflexive questions is more likely to have a generative effect than descriptive questions alone, and that one is more likely to achieve the desired effect if one's intentions are clear.

What is particularly appealing about the notion of reflexive questioning is that it provides a focus for the therapist to deliberately introduce generativity into the evolving therapist–family system as the interview unfolds. In addition, change that occurs "spontaneously" through the stimulus of a reflexive question intuitively seems more aesthetic and elegant than change provoked by an explicit end-of-session intervention. Nevertheless, reflexive questioning does not come without risk. When the balance is too much in the direction of reflexive questions (e.g. when the therapist gets "trapped" in trying to have a particular effect), the interview may develop an atmosphere of interrogation or examination. The family begins to close ranks and the session becomes "combative" or "frozen". This may also happen when a series of descriptive questions are not sufficiently neutral. When this kind of "closure" occurs, the therapist has lost his systemic stance and needs to regain his neutrality. This difficulty is less liable to develop if the therapist has a solid grounding in the systemic basis of all his questions (both descriptive and reflexive).

II.   CIRCULAR QUESTIONS

A.   A Theoretical Basis

Why are the questions asked in this style of interviewing, referred to as "circular"? When thinking systemically the therapist is continually oriented towards identifying circular connections. It is assumed that any phenomenon or "entity" distinguished for investigation may be regarded as (1) a system made up of components, (2) a component of a larger system or (3) both. It is also assumed that the organisation of any system is necessarily circular. This "necessity" is a function of the cognitive act of distinguishing an entity as a system (Maturana, 1978). By definition a system is always a *composite* unity. It is composed of component parts or elements. What makes the collection of elements a "whole", a "totality" or a "system" is the *coherent* organisation of the components. This coherence depends on reciprocal or recursive (i.e. circular) relationships between the components. To understand a system is to understand the coherence in its circular organisation. Thus it is the circular connectedness of ideas, feelings, actions, persons, relationships,

groups, events, traditions, etc. that is of interest to the systemic therapist. The questions are circular in that they attempt to elucidate these organisational connections.

The therapist's conception of the nature of mental systems is an important issue and it may be useful to contrast two ways of thinking about systems. Whereas von Bertalanffy (1968) is oriented towards identifying systems of mass and energy in his General Systems Theory, Bateson (1972, 1979) is oriented towards identifying *systems of difference and pattern*. Their units of analysis differ. Von Bertalanffy focusses on intact physical organisms (e.g. a person bounded by his skin) while Bateson focusses on cybernetic circuits of information (e.g. a person-in-his-situation). The mechanism of interaction among components in these systems is different. Bateson's example of a man kicking a dog illustrates this point. The dog's movement due to the physical force of the man's kick is a very different phenomenon than the dog's movement due to the "information" in the act of the man kicking. It is the latter type of interaction (in the man–dog system) that is relevant to understanding behavioral or "mental" systems. The *difference* between what the dog "expects" and what happens that it "doesn't expect" activates the dog to run or growl, not the energy of the kick. Von Bertalanffy's orientation is perhaps more useful for explaining physical and chemical phenomena, but Bateson's is more useful for explaining mental and behavioural phenomena. Bateson acknowledges that mental process requires a base for collateral energy (e.g. the dog uses its own metabolism to run), but what he emphasizes is that mental systems are activated by "differences" which do not consist of energy and have no mass. In a sense, mind is a disembodied system of "bits" of information "flowing" in circuits of differences. Thus mental systems consist of patterns that "exist" quite apart from the physicochemical entities on which they happen to depend (for energy).

It should not be surprising then that circular questions are often focussed on exploring *differences*. For instance, the question, "Who is more jealous, Sandra or Bill?", explores a difference between persons. "Who is father closest to?" explores a difference between relationships. "Are they closer now or were they closer three years ago?" explores a temporal difference. There is a common underlying core in these questions. They seek to uncover differences that may be "causal" in triggering specific interactions among components of mental systems. However, "a difference" is not only a potential link in a causal chain of circular interaction (i.e. in a cybernetic circuit), it is circular in itself. Fundamentally, a difference always defines a *relationship* between whatever categories, phenomena or entities are being distinguished. This relationship, in turn, is always reciprocal and hence is always circular. For instance, if he is brighter than she, then she is duller than he. If she is heavier now than she was last month, she was lighter last month than she is now. While the circularity of the differences in these distinctions may seem trivial and are readily ignored, the consequences of overlooking them may be significant. For instance, badness exists by virtue of the distinction drawn between good and bad. To think of one family member as "bad" is to identify a difference between that individual and the other family members who are implicitly being defined as "good". All too often we forget that *we*, the observers, are drawing these distinctions and then drift towards regarding the badness as an inherent characteristic of the person or act. When we come to believe that these characteristics are, indeed, properties of the designated person or act, we are drawn into lineal thinking and tend to become moralistic and judgemental. On the other hand, questions that deliberately explore the underlying basis for the distinctions being drawn by the family strengthen the therapist's systemic stance.

Multiple differences may be combined or "clustered" to form complex "knots" of connectedness. Thus the next step is to identify "the difference that makes a difference". "If father and Bill were not so close, would Sandra be less jealous?" The latter "difference" is at a *different logical level* than the former. This brings us into the domain of *context* which is extremely important because it enables us to grapple with the notion of "meaning". In day-to-day interaction, the meaning of any particular word, utterance, action, object, event, etc., is usually derived from its context. The challenge, in trying to unravel a particular meaning, is to identify the pertinent context. In order to specify Sandra's behaviour as jealousy, a competitive dyadic relationship is required with respect to mutual relationships with a third party. A multiplicity of differences are entailed. The pivotal "difference" in distinguishing context is a *complementary* one (e.g. part/whole, figure/ground, member/class), while the core differences described in the previous paragraph were either/or ones (e.g. good/bad, bright/dull, close/distant, jealous/not jealous). Drawing a complementary distinction, and thus differentiating a context, makes it possible to connect several either/or distinctions. It is in this way, for instance, that the differences in the father's closeness to the various children may be connected to the jealousies among the children, or that the change in his relationships may be connected to a change in their feelings. Furthermore, in any system of meanings there may be multiple levels of context (Pearce and Cronen, 1980). With each new level the number of connections that are possible increases enormously. What is important to bear in mind, however, is that the relationship between any two levels is always circular, it is reflexive. The membership determines the class just as the class determines the membership. Alliances may promote jealous behaviour, but jealous behaviour also promotes alliances. If we forget that *we* drew the original distinction and begin to believe that the context unilaterally determines the meaning of what is contexted (in a lineal hierarchical fashion), our systemic understanding again risks being eroded. By taking cognizance of this reflexivity in contextual relationships, we enhance our systemic flexibility substantially.

B. Types of Circular Questions

Table I provides an overview of some basic types of circular questions. While the core of a difference question lies in an either/or distinction, the content focus may be either on category differences or on temporal differences. By category difference, I am referring to the dialectical contrast of one percept or concept in relation to another percept or concept. (The term "spatial" was used instead of "categorical" in an earlier paper, Tomm, 1984.)

Category difference questions may enquire about (1) differences between persons, (2) differences between interpersonal relationships, (3) differences between perceptions, ideas or beliefs (quite apart from the persons who "hold" them) and (4) differences between actions and events (regardless of who enacts them). The question, "Who gets more upset when she runs away, mother or father?", is a person-oriented question delineating a difference between persons (the parents) on the dimension of reactivity. An enquiry about category differences in relationships is very useful in

Table I. *Types of circular questions*

Difference Questions	Contextual Questions
I. Category Differences	I. Categorical Contexts
A. between persons	A. meaning/action connections
B. between relationships	(i) meaning to action
C. between perceptions/ideas/beliefs	(ii) action to meaning
D. between actions/events	B. meaning/meaning connections
E. category differences in past	(i) content/speech act
F. category differences in future	(ii) speech act/episode
	(iii) episode/relationships
II. Temporal Differences	(iv) relationship/life script or family myth
A. between past and past	(v) family myth/cultural pattern
B. between past and present	(vi) mixed
C. between past and future	
D. between present and future	II. Temporal Contexts
E. between future and future	A. behavioral effects in a dyadic field
	B. behavioral effects in a triadic field
III. Ordering a Series of Differences	C. behavioral effects in larger fields
A. distinctions made by one person	
B. distinctions made by several	

clarifying alignments and coalitions. For instance, when one asks "Is your wife closer to Sandra or to Bill?", the difference being examined is the mother–daughter dyad in relation to the mother–son dyad. These relationships may be pursued further by asking for behavioral evidence, e.g. "Who does she spend more time with?", "What does she do with him?", "And with her?" When focussing on differences among ideas or beliefs, one might enquire, "When people in this family cry, is it because they are whining to get their own way or because they are weeping out of emotional pain?" "What would be seen as most comforting, to leave the person alone, just be there, try to talk or give a hug?" clarifies categories of action. In asking these questions one is triggering the "release" of perceptions of connectedness between various persons, relationships, beliefs and actions.

A series of difference questions may be asked to generate a classification (or an ordering) of family members on some salient dimension. Responses may be sought from one person or from several. For instance, if a therapist were trying to understand the organisation of a family's beliefs about the origins of "hyperactive" behavior in a child, he could address the following series of questions to a paticular family member: "Who in the family (or even outside the family) believes most strongly that there is something wrong with Bill's brain?", "Who believes this the second most strongly?", "Who believes it the third most?", etc., or "Who believes the least that there is something wrong in his nervous system?", "Who believes it second least?", etc. The answers to these questions describe the different "positions" of various members in the "family game" of beliefs about hyperactivity, as seen by that particular respondent. When other family members are asked the same series of questions (or about their agreement/disagreement) and the therapist monitors the nonverbal "commentaries" throughout, he may observe the *enactment* of various positions in the family game. The overall responses may provide a coherent picture of how the belief system operates in the family. The therapist may be able to identify "points"

of apparent "stuckness" (i.e. tenacity in retaining a particular view) in the system and then proceed to examine the effects of these positions: "When your father thinks it's his nerves, what does he do?", "What does your mother do?" One could also ask some reflexive questions to imply possible change. "If your father suddenly believed that the hyperactivity had to do with confused discipline, what would he do?", "Then what would Bill do?" Information about family member positions on crucial issues is often useful for specifying the finer details of an end-of-session intervention such as in a ritual.

A categorical enquiry may be taken into the past or into the future. For instance, "Who was closest to Bill before he got caught for shoplifting?" explores a difference in relationships in the past. "After Bill grows up and leaves home, who do you think he will keep in touch with the most?" explores a speculative difference in the future. When these questions begin to trigger comparisons between time frames, they merge with the next category.

Temporal difference questions are somewhat more complex. They focus on a difference between category differences at two points in time, in other words, on a *change*. The comparison is between relationships of certain categories in one time frame and comparable arrangements in another. Time markers are, of course, required in asking these questions. Using the marker of a major medical crisis, the question, "Was there more fighting before or after mother's stroke last year?", explores a difference in patterns of arguing between one period in the past and another period in the past. If a major change had occurred (e.g. with less arguing after the illness), one might hypothesize about the effect that the fear of mother's loss might be having on the system. A difference between the past and the present is being explored when the family is asked "Was father closer to Sandra when she was a little girl or is he closer now?" Questions of this type may clarify shifts in family alignments and loyalties. If a change is reported, the therapist might ask about the events which may have initiated it, bearing in mind that memories of the past lie in the present.

Questions about the future are interesting because they are often used reflexively. The most common future-oriented question is to examine a difference between the present and the future: "If this arguing were to continue, what do you expect will become of your relationship in five years from now?" Families with problems often find it very difficult to speculate on the future. They seem so deeply immersed in thinking only about the present or the past. Thus deliberately asking a series of questions about the future may shake them free of their narrow range of vision. Questions about dreaded consequences often enable family members to become more aware of how catastrophic expectations influence present patterns of behavior. Future questions may also be used to introduce possibilities for change. For instance, "If next week, mother suddenly believed that father really felt sorry for Bill, would she protect him more or defend him less?" This is a hypothetical reflexive question connecting two points in the future.

The core aspect of a context question is a complementary distinction, rather than an either/or one. Once again, the focus may be categorical or temporal, but the complexity is greater. By *categorical context questions*, I am referring to the exploration of category differences across levels of logical type. Thus there are at least three major points in the comparison, one of which is at a different logical level. A common type is to ask about the relationship between meaning and action. For instance, the question, "When you think he's trying to control you, what does he do?", isolates one

category of meaning (control) and asks for a connection to a specific behaviour among two or more categories of action. Or one may start with a behaviour and seek distinctions among meanings: "When he walks out of the room, what do you take it to mean?" It is the specific connection between levels of meaning and action that is crucial.

The idealized hierarchy of six levels of meaning in the "Coordinated Management of Meaning" model of communication (Pearce and Cronen, 1980) may be used as a framework for analysing categorical context questions. These levels include (1) the *content* of an utterance, (2) the *speech act* (the utterance as a whole), (3) an *episode* of interaction, (4) the ongoing *relationship* between persons, (5) *life script/family myth* (view of self or family in relation to others in general) and (6) the larger *cultural pattern*. The question, "When he says he loves you at times like that, is it a loving statement or do you take it as some kind of protest or apology?", connects levels of content and speech act. "If he said it when you were being intimate, could you accept it?" connects content, speech act and episode. "Do you have arguments more or less often when you feel distant from each other?" relates episodes to relationship. "How does your marriage compare to that of your parents?" connects relationship to life script or family myth. "Is your family more, or less open about disagreements than most families?" connects family myth and cultural pattern. There can be as many levels and as many connections between them as the therapist and family choose to specify. For instance, the embedded suggestion question, "If you were to bring her a rose after an argument, like some men do in order to heal a relationship, would you be violating your family tradition?", includes aspects of action, episode, cultural pattern, relationship and family myth. Because multiple levels of meaning impinge simultaneously in any situation, categorical context questions may be very diverse and complex.

Temporal context questions explore meaning by examining the location of a particular action or event within a sequence of actions or events. The therapist attends to behavioral effects—the specific linkages in the sequence—e.g. "When he misbehaves, what do your parents usually do?" If we notice repeated conjunction of certain events in sequences, we tend to inpute a "causal" connection between them. However, this leaves us at risk for lineal thinking. To remain circular and systemic, the therapist must identify *recursiveness* in the sequence and thus ask an extended series of temporal context questions. For instance, "When you are at dinner and your sister is not eating, what do your parents do?", (My mother tries to persuade her); "Does she eat then?", (No, she refuses); "Then what does your mother do?", (She yells at her); "Then does she eat?", (No, she just gets more stubborn); "When she yells at her, what does your father do?", (He walks out); "Then what does your mother do? Does she go after him?" (No, she just stops yelling); "And what does your sister do?" (She starts eating); "Does your father come back?", (Sometimes); "When he comes back, what does your mother say?", (She just glares at him); "Does your sister notice?", (Sometimes); "When she notices, what does she do?" (She stops eating); etc. There are at least two circular patterns evident in the responses to these questions: a simple dyadic one between the mother and sister, and a more complex triadic one between the mother, daughter and father. They are obviously interrelated. In attempting to understand the meaning of any particular behavior or pattern it is always useful to keep enlarging the context of observation. For instance, the triadic pattern noted above may be a component of a larger circular

pattern including a sibling, the grandparents or a professional deeply involved with the family.

C. Circularity in Ordinary Interviewing

How are these concepts applicable in day-to-day practise? Family therapists do not usually think in terms of difference questions, contextual questions, category questions, etc. They think in terms of problems, family members and their relationships. A brief outline of "ordinary" questions, noting possible links to these circular concepts, may be helpful. The following categories are used for ordinary questions: (1) Problem Oriented Questions—(a) definition, (b) explanation—and (2) Family Assessment Questions—(a) person oriented, (b) interaction centered and (c) interpersonal perception.

Problem definition questions seek to determine the precise nature of any problem? The basic questions are "Who . . . , what . . . , when . . . , where . . . , how . . . and how much . . . ?" Implicitly, each of these questions utilizes the notion of differences: "Who?" (Paul, not Fred or Mary); "What?" (Marijuana, not alcohol, speed or heroin); "When?" (Yesterday after the argument, not last month); etc. These questions may be described as "centripetal", i.e. center seeking. They seek to funnel down to the "heart" of the issue. The process is one of drawing finer and finer distinctions on those already drawn to get a clearer and clearer picture. When the therapist does not realize that he is utilizing the "tool" of circular differences to paint his picture he is more liable to come to believe that the problems he has identified are objective and "real". The more he focusses on collecting "the facts", the more he gathers "data" but loses "information" and along with it the systemic perspective.

Explanation questions operate at a higher level of complexity. The task is to "map" descriptions onto fundamentals (i.e. basic assumptions about human relations and mental process). The essential questions are "Why . . . , how come . . . and in what way . . . ?" These are contextual questions. The major tool for exploration is the complementary distinction. The focus is on the meaning or function of the problem in the context of the system. The therapist may ask family members directly about their own understanding of the phenomena. Most of the time, however, he asks for an explanation indirectly by exploring his own systemic hypotheses as he assesses the family. In both instances, the questions may be described as "centrifugal", i.e. center fleeing. The approach is to enlarge the field of observation and identify the connectedness of the central issue, the problem, to its larger context.

Person oriented assessment questions may be *self*-oriented (i.e. focus on the respondent) or may be *other*-oriented (i.e. focus on a person other than the respondent). Self-oriented questions elicit self-disclosure. Other-oriented questions, in the presence of the person being described, elicit gossiping and mind reading. When the latter are used to enhance the "observer perspective" of the other they are reflexive. Regardless of focus, person oriented questions that are systemic, search for circular connections between thoughts, feelings and actions. For instance, "When you think of failing, how do you feel?" and "When you feel depressed, what do you do?" are self-oriented context questions. "Do you think he prefers to make his own mistakes or have someone point them out for him?" is an other-oriented category difference question.

Interaction centered questions are far more interesting from a systemic point of view. This is because the ultimate locus for the generation of new meanings and for the initiation of change is social rather than intrapersonal. Interaction centered questions may be divided into those that *include* the respondent and those that *exclude* him. For instance, "When you punish her for coming home late, what does she do?" is a behavioural effect question that includes the behavior of the person being addressed. Interaction questions that exclude the self are referred to as triadic: a third person is asked about the relationship between another two. "When your sister comes home late, what does your mother do?", "If your mother tries to get your father involved, what does he usually do?" Triadic questions may be more complicated as when a fourth person is asked about the relationship between another three, e.g. "When your mother and your brother are having an argument, what does your father do?", "Does he go more on your brother's side or your mother's side?" While these happen to be temporal behavioural effect questions, many triadic questions explore category differences, e.g. "Is your husband more distant from your son or your daughter?", "Who between the two of them, wants the most to have a closer relationship?"

Interpersonal perception questions constitute a bridge between person centered and interaction centered questions. They are mind reading questions that are asked in the presence of the other and allow for clarification of misinterpretation and misunderstanding. These questions become increasingly recursive as interpersonal perception is explored in greater depth. For instance, an adolescent may be asked, "What do you think your mother thinks when you get home late?" (first recursion), "What does she think that you are thinking when you stay out?" (second recursion) and "What does she think you want or expect from her when you don't tell her where you were?" (third recursion). The mother may, of course, be invited to validate or "correct" the adolescent's perceptions at any point. On the other hand, the mother may be asked a similar series of questions about her perception of the perceptions of the adolescent. The salient issue here is the difference between the views of the mother and the adolescent and whether clarifying this difference could make a difference in their interaction. The therapist's use of other-oriented questions rather than self-oriented questions is not trivial. His choice depends on his momentary intent. My bias is that as a therapist becomes more aware of his specific intentions in the process of circular interviewing, he will be able to make better choices.

III. CONCLUDING COMMENT

Why has the delineation of circularity captured the imagination of so many clinicians? Two possible reasons come to mind. First, it has reoriented the therapist's "purpose" in meeting with families. What is becoming clearer is that the purpose of a systemic interview is not so much the lineal "removal" of a problem, but the "discovery" of its systemic connectedness and hence its temporal "necessity". Recognition of this necessity makes the need for alternative action self-evident. The systemic nature of the exploration triggers the "effective freedom" of the therapist and/or the family to evolve new patterns of behaviour that do not "require" the problem. As a result, the problem may dissolve "spontaneously". Many clinicians

experience this as a more respectful approach to families than directive, problem solving procedures. Second, circularity emphasizes the inclusion of the therapist himself as an active participant in the elaboration of the mental process ostensibly within the family system. In other words, what the therapist "discovers" in his investigation is, in large part, his own creation. He "chooses" what issues he will attend to and what patterns and relationships will be explored. The "realities" that emerge are "relative" to the process of therapeutic interaction, not "objective". Contrary to some impressions of the systemic approach, this relativity *increases* rather than decreases the therapist's personal responsibility. The net effect is that the therapist takes more responsibility for his own conduct and allows family members more autonomy for theirs.

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