

Useful Questions in Interviewing Families and Children⁸⁷

(English original version)

by

Harry G. Procter

University of Hertfordshire

These questions have been derived, over many years from a large variety of sources, including the work of the Palo Alto Brief Therapy Team, the Milan team, from Personal Construct Psychologists such as George Kelly and Tom Ravenette as well as from our own practice at Southwood House, Bridgwater and other family therapy teams in Somerset, UK (see references).

Think of the questions listed here as tools, rather like Wittgenstein's handles in a locomotive (1953, para 12) – they are all questions but work in different ways and have very different functions. They are designed to provide information and stimulate internal search about the topics and concerns that they refer to. They also elicit the constructs and polarities that the family members use to make sense of, and which govern their interactions. When the interviewer glimpses and begins to utilise and explore the members' constructs and dimensions, the questions will indirectly elicit copious amounts of material in the form of narratives and reflections and stimulate new conversations and explorations both within the session and subsequently. This will begin to modify the understandings of both interviewer and family members which will contribute to and initiate therapeutic change.

The numbered sections can be thought of as stages of the interview, but far better to let the conversation flow where it will naturally, giving the opportunity to explore the gems of the family members' contributions as they arise. Having said that, it is good in an initial session to "touch on" the different topics, so that a sufficient overview of the situation can be gained. This will help one to decide what to negotiate with the family about whether to meet again and what therapeutic plan to propose. Understanding their positions on the problem and treatment will help the therapist to know how to frame formulations and suggestions in a way that makes most sense to the family and is least likely to be resisted or rejected.

Questions for use with families in general are given first. On page 130, a set of questions with simplified language is provided for use with children or people with communications difficulties.

⁸⁷ © H. G. Procter, 2015.

Useful questions in interviewing families

1. Greeting Did you find the place alright? What would you have been doing otherwise?	Orients to time and context just before session
2. Members' lives and interests What do you like doing? How do you spend your time? Which school do you go to? Who is your teacher? How's your relationship with your teacher? What do you like best? What are you best at? What would you like to be doing in a couple of year's time? Who are your best friends? What do you like doing together? What does your Dad do for his work? Have you been to your Mum's place of work? What do they like doing in their spare time? How would you like to use this meeting?	Interests, activities: what spontaneously motivates Knowledge of each other's interests, activities and roles Encouraging interaction
3. Family Where are you from originally? Are your parents still living? Are they together? Of your grandparents, who's your favourite? Whose beliefs in the family do you respect most? Has your Mum any brothers and sisters? Where does she come (oldest, middle, youngest)? What do you call him? What's the nicest thing about your Dad? How often do you see your Dad? What do you enjoy doing together?	Background experience, culture Families of origin: MFO, PFO Parents' childhood experiences To dyadic and triadic construing
4. Solution Focus and Goals What's the happiest time you've had in the last two weeks? When have the difficulties been the least noticeable? Can you tell me about a time when things were okay? How many dry beds have you had since our last meeting? Suppose a miracle happened tonight while you were asleep and all the problems you have told me about were gone, what would you first notice that was different when you woke tomorrow?	Elaborate under "Progress" (section 10) below (Kelly's 7th Question-see Vol 2, Ch. 13 Sec. B8) De Shazer's "Miracle Question"

How would you like Jim to be relating to the twins? If we were to work together for some sessions and it was a successful piece of work, what would things be like then? How would you know that a useful piece of work had been completed? If you were closer and happier, what would you want to do together? What would be the first sign, the smallest step that would indicate that progress is being made? How would you notice the difference if you were happier together? When things are better, what would you want to put your time and energy into instead?	Relational goal Goal question, seeding idea of successful therapy Projection into the future Elaborating goal situation MRI Brief Therapy Question "Step" Goal defined visually, iconically New opportunities on resolution of problems
5. The Problem Who's been worrying most in the family recently? Who next? Who the least? Who have you been worrying about the most? What will your Mum and Dad say they are worrying about? (To other:) Is she right? What is bothering you mainly at the moment? Can you give an example? What happens? What does he do exactly? Can you give an example? Where does this occur most often? At home or at school? When is it most distressing – morning afternoon, evening, weekends? How often has this been happening? Is it sometimes worse, sometimes better? How long does it go on for? Who was there? What other difficulties are there at the moment? How long do you have to go back to find a time when things were okay?	Milan Question: ranking family member on construct of "worry" Difficulties of other family members <i>Worry</i> and <i>bother</i> everyday normalising terms Defining the problem in time, place, context Towards listing the difficulties the family faces Onset of difficulties
6. Attempted Solutions When the problem occurs what do you do to try and make things better? How well did that work? What else have you tried? What do you think she should do when the two boys are fighting? What have other people suggested? Does your mother (husband, son, sister, doctor) know about this? What does she say to you in the way of advice?	MRI: A <i>problem</i> is a <i>difficulty</i> and its failing <i>attempted solution</i> maintaining each other Attempted solution List others Milan Question Survey all in the network via their attempted solutions and suggestions

When your mother tries to get Mark to eat and he refuses, what does your father do? And when he shouts at Mark what does your mother do? What would he do if you did nothing? Have you ever seen anyone like me before? How helpful was this?	Milan: Evoking triadic construing Previous therapy - what did they suggest, was it helpful?
7. Position on the Problem How do you explain this behaviour occurring? What do you make of this situation? What is your best guess as to why it is occurring? Have you got any theories about it?	MRI Questions: "Position on problem"
8. Family Constructs and Relationships How do you see your daughter as a person? How did your family see you as a person? (give me three ways) Who does she take after more, her mother, granddad or step-dad? Who is she closer to? In what way are they different? Similar? As a parent, which of your parents do you think you are most similar to? What do you think she was thinking: how does she see the situation? What was he cross about? Who gets most upset? Tom, James or Sharon? Who gets the next most? (To other) Do you agree with her? What difference would it make if it was your father looking after you most of the time and you saw your mother at weekends? How do you see the relationship between your sister and your mother? Of the six relationships between you, which pair argue the least? What was life like for you when you were nine? How did people see you as a person at that time? What did you do when you were upset or hurt? Have you heard about your Dad's life when he was that age? Before you had this difficulty, how did you get on with your mother? What difference would it make if she was a boy, he was a girl? Who had the most influence in your family?	As a person: monadic construing } Identity: Similarities/differences & closeness Sociality Exploring system emotions, conflict, agreement/disagreement } Milan Questions: relationship and difference Elaborating Relational Construing From Adult Attachment Interview (see Dallos, 2006) Identifying with parent's life as a child Milan questions

If you no longer had the problem, how would their relationship be different? Do you think you would be closer or not so close? Who in the family is still missing Nan the most? Who next? When you feel sad about that, who is the best person to talk to?	Milan Question: Function and impact of the problem Loss and bereavement
9. Position on therapy Who suggested you come and see me? How come you came for help at this time rather than sooner or later? Who was the keenest that you come, you, your friend or your doctor? Have you got any ideas about what we should do to sort things out? If you could sort this problem out without knowing why it occurred would that be okay? If you could get over this problem without knowing how you did it, would that be alright? If we could find a way of James settling in the family, would you be interested? Would you like to do some work with me to try to sort this out? Do want to do some work on this then? What do you feel about how the session is going?	MRI Question: Position on treatment MRI "Customers for change" in the system Position on treatment Position on insight Towards contracting for therapy Reflection on therapy
10. Progress What makes you say that things are better? Have you got any idea how you managed it? How do you think she managed to sort this out? I know it's the last thing you would want to do, but how would you go about making things go back to how they were before this improvement occurred? What would have to happen for things to get more difficult again? Would like me to offer you another appointment?	(Give as much time to exploring improvements and change as you do to the problem) Defining the improvement Agency and perceived agency Addressing relapse: "The Insight Question" Progress sufficient to discontinue therapy?
11. Reflecting Team Was there anything they said you particularly agreed with? Was there anything they shouldn't have said? How did it feel, what did you think, when they were talking?	Questions to elicit responses after Reflecting Team Statement

12. Follow-up Can you give me an idea of how things are now? When you first came, what were you concerned about mainly? Is this now better, worse or the same? Were there any other problems you were concerned about? Is that better, worse or the same? Have you had any other treatment for any of these problems? Have any new problems cropped up since we saw you?	Evaluating change and therapy at follow-up
---	---

Useful questions in interviewing children

1. Greeting Hello, are you Sam? My name's Harry, it's really nice to meet you! That looks really interesting. What's happening there? What would you have been doing at school today?	In waiting room: Taking an interest in children's activity. Settling before moving through
2. Interests What do you like doing best? How do you spend your free time? What did you do last weekend? Who is your teacher? Is she a nice person? What do you like best? What are you best at? Who are your best friends? What do you like doing together? Have you been to your Mum's place of work? What does your Dad do for his work?	Finding topics to talk about and explore Activities at school, with friends Other members of the family's activities
3. Family Who lives in your home? What's your sister's name? Do you two get on well together? What do you call your Mum's Mum? Does she live near you? Who's your favourite grandparent? Has your Mum any brothers and sisters? Where does she come - is she the oldest, middle or youngest? What's it like to be the oldest? How often do you see your Dad? What do you enjoy doing together?	Who is in the situation and relationships with them Position in family hierarchy Contact with separated parent
4. Worries Who's been worrying most in your family recently? Who next? Who the least? Who have you been worrying about most often? What will Mum say she's been worrying about? Is she right?	Worry and bother are nice words to explore difficulty - everyone feels these things

What is it that's bothering you at the moment? Can you give me an example? What happens? Where does this happen most, at home or at school? When is it worst - morning, afternoon, evening or at weekends? Is it sometimes worse, sometimes better? How long does it go on for? Who was there? Why do you think it's happening? Is there anything else you're unhappy about?	} Defining the problem Other problems: towards listing difficulties
5. Attempted solutions What do you do to try and make things better? Did that work? What else have you tried? What do you think Mum should do with two boys who are fighting? What does Dad say? Does your friend know about this? What does she say to you? When he shouts at Mark, what does Mum do? What would happen if he did nothing?	MRI: A <i>problem</i> is a <i>difficulty</i> and its failing <i>attempted solution</i> maintaining each other Exploring various people's suggestions and advice Doing nothing as an option
6. Constructs Who are you? Tell me three things that best describe you. What sort of person are you? What sort of person do other people say you are? Of your friends, who likes you the most? Why? How are you and your brother similar? How are you different? Who are you more like, your Mum or your Dad? In what way? How would I know that somebody was happy, lonely, angry? Who calls you lazy? What would a person be doing to be lazy?	Tom Ravenette: "Who Are You" technique Identity View of self by positive figures Similarities and differences in the family Signs of different emotions Deconstructing negative attribution
7. Relationships Tell me three nice things about your Dad. What was he cross about? Who gets the most upset? Tom, James or Sharon? Do you agree with her? Would it be different if you lived with your Dad and you saw your Mum on a Saturday? How do your sister and your Mum get on? Which two people argue the least? What was life like when you were five? Have you heard about your Dad's life when <i>he</i> was twelve? If this wasn't happening would you be closer?	"Three things" – Tom Ravenette Tracking situations and sequences Two separated parents: Contact Relationships and conflict in the family Earlier developmental pictures

Who in the family is still missing Nan the most? Who else is? When you are sad, who is the best person to talk to about it?	Loss and bereavement, sadness
8. Goals When have you been happiest in the last week? Tell me about a time when things were okay. If you had three wishes what would you wish for? If things changed a teeny-weeny bit what would be different? When things are better, what will you want to do instead?	Constructing and defining goals
9. Therapy Who wanted you to come and see me? Who was the keenest that you come, you or your Mum? Have you seen anyone like me before? How can we make things happier? Would you like to come and talk again with me? How do you feel this meeting's going?	Others' positions on what to do "Contract" for therapy Reflection on meeting
10. Progress How's it been better? Do you know how you managed it? What would make it worse again? What would have to happen to make it worse again?	Defining improvement Agency Relapse Factors in relapse
11. Evaluation When you first came what were you worried about? Is it better now, worse or the same?	Evaluating therapy and change

References

- Dallos, R. (2006). *Attachment Narrative Therapy*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- De Shazer, S. (1988). *Clues: Investigating solutions in brief therapy*. New York: Norton.
- Feixas, G., Procter, H. G., & Neimeyer, G. (1993). Convergent lines of assessment: Systemic and Constructivist contributions. In G. Neimeyer (Ed.), *Casebook of Constructivist Assessment*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*, Vol. 2 (2nd edition 1991). London: Routledge.
- Procter, H. G. (1981). Family Construct Psychology: An Approach to Understanding and Treating Families. In S. Walrond-Skinner (Ed.), *Developments in Family Therapy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.⁸⁸
- Procter, H. G. (1985). A Construct Approach to Family Therapy and Systems Intervention. In E. Button (Ed.), *Personal Construct Theory and Mental Health*. Beckenham, Kent: Croom Helm.⁸⁹
- Procter, H. G. (2005). Techniques of Personal Construct Family Therapy. In D. Winter and L. Viney, *Personal Construct Psychology: Advances in Theory, Practice and Research*. London: Wiley.
- Procter, H. G. (2007). Working with children in the context of the family. In R. Butler and D. Green, *The Child Within: Taking the young person's perspective by applying Personal Construct Theory* (2nd Edition) (pp. 190-206). Chichester: Wiley.⁹⁰
- Procter, H. G., & Walker, G. (1989). Brief Therapy. In E. Street and W. Dryden (Eds.), *Family Therapy in Britain*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.⁹¹
- Ravenette, T. (1999). Personal construct psychology and the assessment of young people. The one-off interview. In T. Ravenette, *Personal Constructs in Educational Psychology: A Practitioner's View*. London: Whurr.
- Safran, J.D. (1984). Assessing the cognitive-interpersonal cycle. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 8(4), 333-348.
- Selvini, M.P., Boscolo, L., Cecchin, G., & Prata, G. (1980). Hypothesizing-circularity-neutrality: three guidelines for the conductor of the session. *Family Process*, 19(1), 3-12.⁹²
- Sullivan, H.S. (1953). *The Psychiatric Interview*. New York: Norton.
- Tomm, K. (1987). Interventive interviewing: Part II. Reflexive questioning as a means to enable self-healing. *Family process*, 26(2), 167-183.
- Tomm, K. (1988). Interventive interviewing: Part III. Intending to ask lineal, circular, strategic, or reflexive questions? *Family process*, 27(1), 1-15.
- Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J., & Fisch, R. (1974). *Change: principles of problem formation and problem*

⁸⁸ Retrieval from https://www.academia.edu/552643/Family_Construct_Psychology_1981

⁸⁹ Retrieval from

https://www.academia.edu/540452/A_construct_approach_to_family_therapy_and_systems_intervention_1985

⁹⁰ Retrieval from

https://www.academia.edu/1810585/Working_with_children_and_young_people_in_the_context_of_the_family_2007

⁹¹ Retrieval from https://www.academia.edu/3770472/Brief_Therapy_By_Harry_Procter_and_George_Walker_1988

⁹² Milan questions.

resolution. New York: Norton.⁹³ [Mental Research Institute, MRI Questions].

Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Websites

<https://herts.academia.edu/HarryProcter>⁹⁴

⁹³ Questions of Mental Research Institute (MRI).

⁹⁴ Harry Procter's website.