research in practice

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Practice Tool

PSDP–Resources and Tools:

Interventive interviewing

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Introduction

'Interventive interviewing' is a concept that evolved from a trilogy of papers by the systemic family therapist, Karl Tomm (1987a, 1987b, 1988). Essentially, the concept considers using questions as an intervention in themselves, whereby questions are formed with intent and not just about attaining an answer. In direct work with children and families, this particular approach can be useful in influencing change. It is useful in supervision, as it can promote deeper thinking and reflection from the supervisee in relation to their work and the impact it is having on them.

This learning tool accompanies a presentation, which explains the concept of interventive interviewing, and a short film that demonstrates these ideas in practice. These resources should be accessed separately before drawing on this learning tool.

This tool discusses using interventive interviewing in supervision and provides a visual representation of Tomm's model, followed by example questions from each part of the model, with a more detailed breakdown of 'reflexive questions' in particular.

Using interventive interviewing in supervision

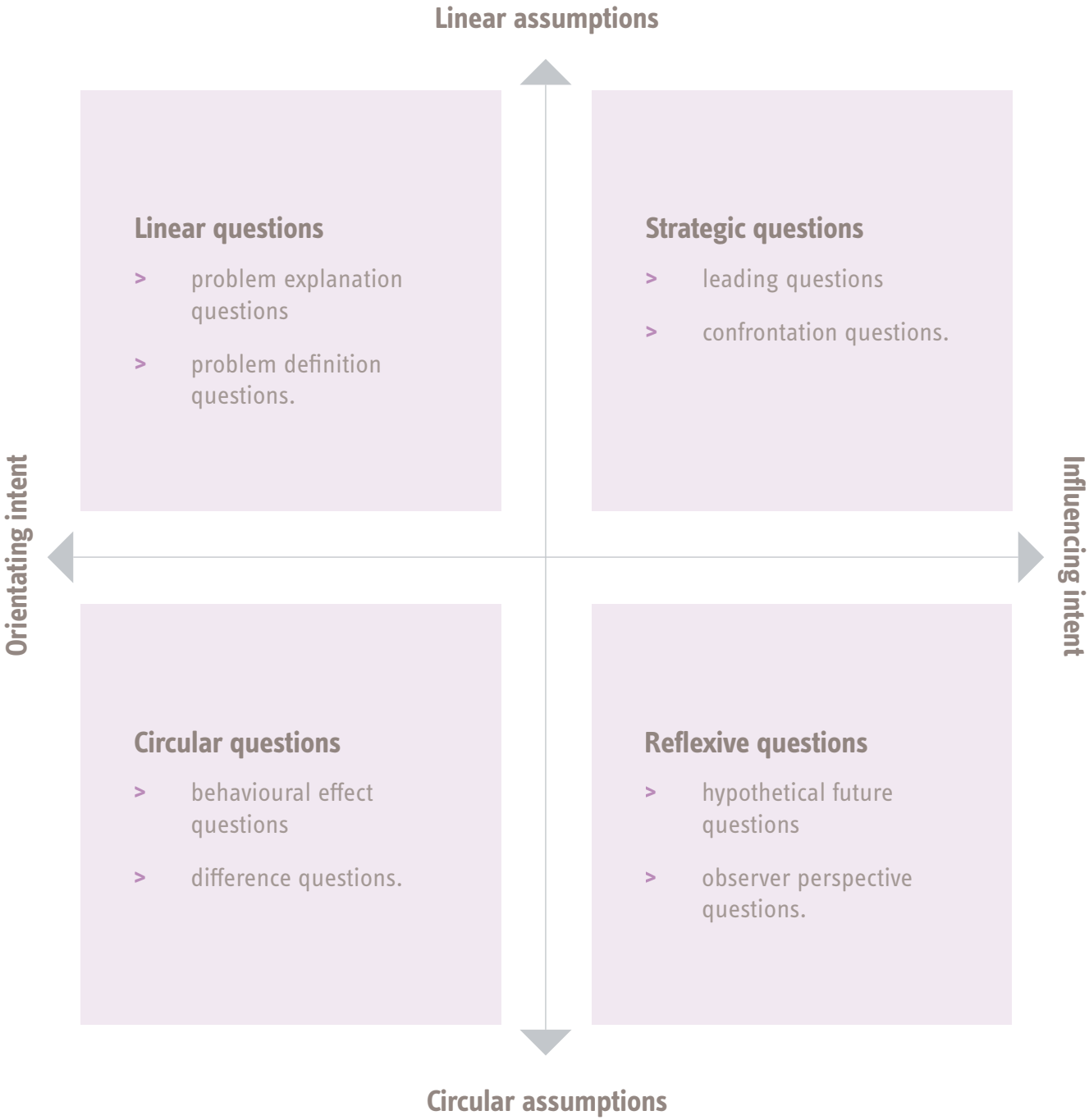
When interventive interviewing is used with families, the goal is to help them become observers to themselves and so begin to understand things differently, to entertain the possibility of having new and different ideas and explanations.

Similarly, using this approach within supervision can enable practitioners to discover new perspectives and possibilities in their analysis of the work they are doing, through drawing out more information about issues of risk and resilience.

Reflexive questions can be particularly valuable in supporting supervisees where they may have become 'stuck' or formed a rigid view of a family. This can invite flexibility, curiosity and new ways of understanding risk and need, and can enable the supervisor and supervisee to think more reflexively about their relationship to the issues.

Hieker and Huffington (2006) have considered how reflexive questions in particular can be used in the role of coaching in psychology. Their ideas have informed some of the example questions in the next section.

Tomm's four different types of questions



Linear questions

Linear questions (with linear assumptions and orientating intent) are very helpful in assessment and first meetings to get an idea of what is happening. They are straightforward, fact finding questions and, in an initial supervision conversation about a family, can help the supervisor to gain understanding. These questions can be 'problem explanation questions' asking where, when, how a problem is happening, or 'problem definition questions', trying to sort out exactly what the issue of concern is.

In supervision, the supervisor might ask:

Can you tell me what you are most worried about?	What are the biggest challenges in working with this child and family?	Who else is concerned about the family?	What is the child's view of their immigration status?

Circular questions

Circular questions (with circular assumptions and orientating intent) are also useful in the assessment phase of social work. They explore circular patterns in relationships by looking at how people relate to each other. These questions may be 'behavioural effect questions', trying to find out how a problem affects people in the family or system, and 'difference questions', exploring differences between people in the system.

In supervision, the supervisor might ask:

What impact are the parents' arguments having on the child?	Who is affected most by the father's drinking?	Who is the teacher most worried about in the sibling group?	Who do you think worries the most in the multi-agency group?

Strategic questions

Strategic questions (linear assumptions, influencing intent) are useful in challenging different perspectives and positions. These questions may be 'leading questions' which suggest a certain line of enquiry or hypothesis, and 'confrontation questions' which stop the process and challenge thinking.

In supervision, the supervisor might ask:

You are worried about the impact that a child protection plan will have on the mothers' mental health?	You find it difficult to like the children's father?	Have you considered how homophobia / transphobia may be implicated in the way their family talk about this young person?	What has stopped you so far from talking to your colleague about your conflict with him?

Reflexive questions

Reflexive questions (circular assumptions, influencing intent) are the kinds of questions that can perhaps be the most useful in supervision. This is because they invite the supervisee to take an observer perspective of themselves and their practice (Tomm, 1988) and give the supervisee the opportunity to activate their own problem-solving resources (Hieker and Huffington, 2006).

There are several different types of reflexive questions which are illustrated in more detail on the next page. These are:

future-orientated questions	distinction clarifying questions
observer perspective questions	questions introducing hypotheses
unexpected context change questions	process interruption questions.
embedded suggestion questions	

Future-orientated questions

These push the conversation into the future, to stimulate new options or possibilities. Examples for using these in supervision might be:

Once you catch up with all your recordings in the next three weeks, what will your next focus be?	What does a possible solution look like for you, and is it positive, challenging, and / or attainable?	Whenever I get stuck, I have to sit down and imagine how things might feel in the morning once I've had some distance from it. How do you get distance?
If I [your manager] was to be more supportive of you in the future, what difference would it make to you in achieving your goals?	Imagine that in six months time the situation was completely resolved, what would have needed to have happened to achieve this?	If you were to get more appropriate technological support for your dyslexia how to do you think that would affect your experience of working here?

Observer perspective questions

These invite the supervisee to take a helicopter view of themselves and can create distance from the dilemma they may be posing, which can help to gain a different perspective. Some examples for using these in supervision are:

If your colleague was here what would they say about that?	Imagine that the child / parent you are working with was here now, what advice might they give you about this dilemma?	Imagine if she were here now, what do you think she would say about how having such an impairment has affected her experience of being a mother?
Who in the team do you admire the most? What do you think they would suggest about how best to catch up with your case notes?	When you and Y are not communicating, how do other team members react? Do they get involved or stay out of it?	

Unexpected context change questions

These flip the context, to invite a different stance. For example, in a conversation about disappointment, asking a question about hope. Examples of how these may be used in supervision are:

What would it be like if you had the opportunity to do X instead of Y?	What would the work environment look like if the conflict went away? What would be different?	If the situation changes, what do you want from the change? Which elements would you want to stay the same?
Who in the team benefits from the conflict the most? Who would experience the most loss if it stopped? What's happening in the team that needs this kind of behaviour?	If the conflict was a solution, what problem is the conflict solving?	

Embedded suggestion questions

These introduce an idea, advice or a suggestion. Examples of ways to use these in supervision are:

What do you think it would be like if you spoke more clearly and made more eye contact when you were speaking to her?	If, instead of complaining to your colleagues, you simply spoke to Y about the impact of her behaviour on your feelings, what would she do?	If you were to tell me you needed three weeks to get your files up to date, what do you think I would say?
What would it be like you if asked him to show you what it is like, as a young black person, to live in this town?	Instead of thinking your ASYE / student is willfully behaving this way, you think she's just confused and doesn't understand what you want - how do you imagine you might explore this with her?	

Distinction clarifying questions

These gather a bit more detail, sort out differences between people and perspectives and separate out the components of the issue. Some examples for supervision are:

When two of your colleagues are both saying the same thing, but their emphasis is slightly different, whose opinion do you value the most?

Who do you think is most excited about the new changes in the team? What do you think about the colleagues who are embracing them?

What do you do when priorities change quickly? In the team, whose style do you think is more adaptive to change and what can be learnt from their approach?

What is most important to you – e.g. being successful in your career or having a family life?

It sounds like the child's class teacher and the head of year have a different understanding of her access needs. Whose perspective are you most in tune with?

Questions introducing hypotheses

These give a glimpse of your thinking and some possible ideas about a situation, without creating pressure for your supervisee to have to agree. Examples of these for supervision are:

If you were to think that the professional system is mirroring the family system and vice versa, what might you do differently?

I'm wondering whether you didn't say anything about feeling overwhelmed with work because you are worried that people will think you can't cope. What are your thoughts about that?

When the parents don't cooperate and are not following the plan and then start blaming you, I'm wondering if you are feeling stuck and frustrated, which then makes you more critical of your own practice / more likely to get frustrated with others.

I'm wondering, if you were to facilitate a conversation with the family about the parents' experiences of coming to this country, and how it affected their feelings about the children, would it help them, and possibly you, to better understand their point of view?

Process interruption questions

These can be used to jump in when things get tricky and might be used to remark on the immediate process of the conversation in order to create a shift. Some examples of how these may be used in supervision are:

How much longer can you go on like this?	I can see that you are frustrated, disappointed and don't see the point. How do you manage to be productive when you normally feel like this?
When you feel as bad as you do now but you're at home, what do you do?	You're thinking discriminatory behaviour is happening here? How have you successfully challenged discrimination in the past?

Learning to use reflexive questions in supervision takes practice. You may find it helpful to think about some questions in advance, which may help you to then use these for a particular issue.

It can also be useful to practice them with a trusted colleague or supervisee you have an established relationship with and who might, therefore, be open to learning together.

Being a practice supervisor involves role modelling, which includes approaches that are sometimes incomplete or imperfect. It is therefore OK to model your own learning and development in supervision conversations by saying, 'I have been learning different ways to use questions in conversations and would like to try some of these today, this might mean I will need to pause and think more slowly or rephrase certain questions.' This can show supervisees that practice does indeed take 'practice'.

Other ways you can use this tool

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

Share this model with your team and create space in a meeting or away day for them to practice the questions by exploring a hypothetical 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.

References

Hieker C and Huffington C (2006) 'Reflexive questions in a coaching psychology context'. *International Coaching Psychology Review* 1 (2) 47-56.

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