

Discussion

In the examples above, respondents could talk about the topic they had been asked, inferring relationships between important people in their lives. The 16-year-old girl's response to the triadic question 'mum and gran going on about it', suggests some tension in the family regarding the CAMHS service, which invites a possible line of further enquiry.

Circular questioning lends itself to respondents considering alternatives, thinking beyond the 'facts' they have experienced, and providing their explanation or meaning behind actions they have witnessed. This is evident in the second temporal example where the respondent imagines what happens after the assessment appointment, surmising that the children seen are 'categor[ised]... child health, communication' by the practitioners.

Engaging with children and young people's natural curiosity lends itself to circular questioning, but therapeutically, it is commonly used with adults with many presenting problems.

There is advice in the literature about how to use questioning techniques when conducting qualitative research. Questions can be organised by intention, such as whether they are seeking opinions (May 2001); non-directive, trying to encourage the respondent to lead the direction (Parahoo 1997); or seeking 'access to concepts, cultural understandings of the... world of respondents' (Kelly 2010). The strengths and weaknesses of using open or closed questions are frequently commented on (May 2001). However, there does seem to be an absence of guidance about how to carefully craft

questions that invite responses about meaning, beliefs or relationships.

The use of circular questions mirrors a philosophical approach to qualitative research that recognises the position of the researcher in the research process. Furthermore, it can be a useful spur to undertaking a reflexive approach to qualitative enquiry and also enables the researcher to employ 'contrastive rhetoric' (Coffey and Atkinson 1996) a method commonly used in analysing qualitative data.

Family therapy research implicitly draws on data in which circular questions are evident. But beyond that speciality, there is no evidence that circular questioning has specifically been used in a study to investigate relationships. Integrating circular questions into a semi- or unstructured interview, when generating data as a participant observer or into a schedule of questions might also add depth to focus groups, revealing interesting relationships with respect to the research aim.

Despite the examples used in this paper having mostly been with children and young people, there are no age limitations to this approach. Circular questions are, by design, useful for conducting interviews with families and groups of people. They can be used with individuals, organisations and members of focus groups. The art of asking circular questions can be rehearsed before going into the field.

Lastly, circular questioning can help to promote curiosity in the researcher and invite responses that illuminate relational issues between participants in a study.

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