
Editorial:

A Caution with Questions

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Having been conditioned for all my adult career in mental health and family work to recognize the power, importance, and possibilities of questioning practices, it is with caution that I begin to acknowledge when and how questions do not always serve us in the best possible way.

In the late 90s, I was finishing my doctoral research on the use of therapeutic letters in nursing work with families (see for e.g., Bell et al., 2009; Moules, 2002, 2003, 2009a, 2009b;). In this hermeneutic study, one of the interpretations that was developed lay in a deconstruction of the effect of asking questions.

Questions as interventions have existed for decades, and date back to the Ancients in terms of a form of discourse. They have been written about regarding therapy quite extensively (Anderson, 1997; Fleuridas et al., 1986; Loos & Bell, 1990; Selvini Palazzoli et al., 1980; Tomm, 1987, 1988; Wright & Bell, 2009; Wright & Leahey, 2013; Wright et al., 1996). They are attributed with the ability to invite reflection, provide therapeutic leverage, and even invoke therapeutic change. Moules (2002), discussing the use of questions in therapeutic letters, discerned that the questions' impact and effect seems conditional on the discretionary use of them. Some thoughtful, strategically placed questions seemed to hold much potential in inviting the reader to a reflexive position, spending time pondering the question and offering up potential responses to it in their own internal work. It also shows interest and can be a welcoming and inclusive way to engage with another. Alternately, the use of too many questions had an opposite effect in that they overloaded the reader. Moules wrote:

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The notion of overload invites us to consider that too much inward breath, in too quick a succession, might become a metaphorical hyperventilation. The biological consequence of hyperventilation is a change in blood gas levels and body acidity, a diminished consciousness, and eventually body shutdown through fainting. We can think of the process of reflection in a similar way. When too many questions are rapidly asked, reflective saturation is achieved and the mind shuts down. Reflection is connected to the mirroring of images. Mirroring or reflection, according to Maturana and Varela (1992, p. 23), is the “moment when we become aware of that part of ourselves which we cannot see in any other way.” The process of reflection always involves an aspect of conservation. Letting in the new too rapidly, with too many changing images in the mirror, obliterates the very act of reflection and the time necessary to assimilate and make new thoughts meaningful. Instead, the mirror becomes a collage of images, thoughts, and ideas that do not have the right chemistry to be absorbed. (2002, p. 107)

This study was focused on the use of questions in therapeutic letters but, of late, I have been aware how I can have similar encounters with questions in my personal interactions with others, professional or casual. Certainly, the absence of questions would be uncomfortable and could almost be read as a lack of interest in my life or a hesitancy to engage in the reciprocal nature of communication. Alternately the overloading of questions – almost presented in staccato, spit fire manner, often without room being left for a response – implies something else. At some level, I find it implies a very enthusiastic interest in learning about my life, perhaps a result of too much time spent apart or long absences and much change, but in the same way as I found in the letters, I can find it exhausting and overloading. Unable to catch my breath enough to reflect and respond, the familiar feeling of hyperventilation can emerge.

Another phenomenon that can happen with questions in conversations is that the person being questioned can feel pushed or pressured to have an answer. A particular question asked may not have an answer or it may be an answer the person is not ready or prepared to engage in and maybe not with the person asking the question. Questions do not always indicate interest; they can be perceived as intrusive, untimely, and insensitive. The fact that the word question also carries the meaning of “putting something into doubt” (Cambridge Online Dictionary) might help us understand how we somehow feel we are being “questioned” when we are asked too many questions.

Questioning indicates the existence of an unsettled issue, a difficult matter, an uncertainty, a matter for discussion. It also invites a reply, a dialogue, a searching out of opportunities and similarities. It opens possibilities and leads, in some sense, to uncertainty, for it throws what may be thought secure into dis-equilibrium or imbalance. (Bergum, 1991, p.57)

When we have more than the usual queries that we wish to make about someone, there are ways to ease into questions and these are often simply about calling out the questions themselves and indicating the purpose for them. “I have so many things I have been wondering about and lots of questions to ask you. Would it be okay if I ask some and you let me know if I’m being too relentless?” By almost outing your purpose of the questions and acknowledging their potential effect, permission is given to the other to not just be a recipient of the questions or a respondent to them but to have the authority to stop them if needed.

In the academy and in our disciplines, we are often immersed in questions: research questions, philosophical questions, practice questions, critical questions, or even existential questions. These questions are not always of a conversational level but are internal questions where, as we seek answers, our scholarship grows and expands. “The very act of posing a question is disclosure, for the question is to sketch in advance the context of meaning in which a particular inquiry will move” (Heidegger, 1969, p. 269). I am not suggesting we abandon questions (if such a thing were even possible) but that we are thoughtful in our engagement with them—be it in research interviews, philosophical debates, or our conversations with friends. “A sudden, bold, and unexpected question doth many times surprise a man and lay him open” (Francis Bacon, 1625). Questions are not benign. And as much as they may be prompted by genuine curiosity and interest, the question of whether the need to know the answer is to satisfy our own curiosity, to show interest and caring, or to show engagement. All drivers might be present, but the caution perhaps lies in the attention to timing, amount, media in which they are asked, and a careful read of the other. Just because we have the power to ask does not absolve us from the responsibility to understand that questions are not innocent. As George (2020) says, we live in an urgency of responsiveness to the demands of individual situations and with the need to “develop our abilities to live and act well” (viii). Doing the right thing cannot be scripted in advance with a template of what is good or not, but rather our responsibility involves “what the good means – right here and now” (George, 2020, p. 2). My experience is that sometimes my silence is more of an opening and invitation than my questions, holding space for the conversation that might really need to happen, as opposed to the one I have decided in advance should happen.

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