

Question-Asking Skills

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Major Objective:

To learn appropriate ways of obtaining accurate information from culturally different clients.

Secondary Objectives:

1. To learn and practice the various uses of question asking with culturally different clients.
2. To review the various functions and levels of complexity in different types of questions.

Questions can be used to encourage or discourage talking. Usually the questions are asked by the interviewer and answered by the interviewee, putting the interviewer in control of the situation. Questions have a great deal to do with power. When counselors lose control in an interview, they sometimes ask a new question as the means of recapturing control. Question-asking skills increase a counselor's ability to collect specific information, redirect the interview, or encourage the interviewee to disclose general information.

Questions help the interviewer understand specific details about the interviewee in order to make appropriate decisions based on accurate information. They can control the quantity and quality of information in the interview. Open questions such as "What do you think about that?" tend to encourage the interviewee to speak more. Closed questions tend to be more specific and require only one or two word answers, such as "Will you come here tomorrow?" A skilled interviewer will know when and how to use both open and closed questions.

1. Open questions help begin an interview.
2. Open questions elaborate and enrich the interview.
3. Closed questions keep the interview from wandering off track.
4. Closed questions fill in specific information gaps.

THE PROCESS OF QUESTION ASKING

The way a question is worded will influence the answer you get. In popularity polls and in some research, questions are slanted to get desired information. There is an implicit answer built into each question. This danger is especially serious in asking questions across cultures. There are several ways you can minimize this source of error in formulating your questions:

1. Keep the question concrete and specific. The less ambiguous the question, the easier it will be to interpret the answer accurately. It is possible to be concrete and specific even when asking for an opinion.
2. Be careful about how the question is worded. Try to make sure that it is understood as it was intended. The words used should be familiar, and the sentence structure should be clear. At the same time, the question should not indicate a preferred answer, or it will become rhetorical. You want the other person's answer to your question. It might be a good idea to pretest some questions with persons from your client's culture ahead of time to discover any possible problems. Questions never work in another culture in totally predictable ways.
3. Ask your questions in the right order. You might, for example, begin with more specific questions and then move toward the more general. In any case, think through the sequence you will use.
4. Be especially careful of the language you use in your questions. It is best if the question can be asked in the client's own first language or language of choice. Working through a translator is especially difficult and raises a whole range of new issues and problems.

The purpose of action responses is for clients to discover the need to change in an action-oriented, objective frame of reference. These action responses—such as questions—are always and necessarily based on careful listening and reflect the counselor's understanding of the client. The open question or probe is a tool that is useful to begin the interview, to encourage client elaboration/information disclosure, to elicit specific examples of client behaviors/feelings/thoughts, and to motivate the client to communicate more. The closed question is useful to narrow the topic of discussion, to get specific information, to define the boundaries of a problem, to restrain over-talkative clients, and to focus the counseling session.

These are five guidelines in the use of probes or questions:

1. The question must focus on the client's concerns and not the counselor's curiosity or need for closure.
2. A pause after the question will give the client time to respond. The client may not have a quick answer to your question.
3. Ask only one question at a time. Asking multiple questions is confusing to both the client and counselor.
4. Avoid accusing or antagonizing the client unnecessarily. The accusation may be either intentional or unintentional and might be conveyed by voice tone, nonverbal language, or the verbal message.
5. Don't rely on questions as the primary response mode in an interview, except in an intake or a pure information-gathering interview.

THE FUNCTION OF QUESTIONS

There are several functions of questions in the counseling interview. They may be used to:

1. Identify specific facts about the client.
2. Identify problems, concerns, or issues for the client.
3. Clarify specific details.
4. Get facts with questions beginning with "what."
5. Reveal feelings or processes with questions beginning with "how."
6. Get at motives with questions beginning with "why."

There are several problems with using questions—and especially with overusing questions—in counseling.

1. The feeling of bombardment or grilling results from asking too many questions. In some cultures questions can be seen as rude and intrusive.
2. When multiple questions are asked at the same time, it is hard to know which to answer.
3. When questions are used rhetorically, they are not really questions at all.
4. When questions are culturally insensitive, they will offend culturally different people.
5. Questions that begin with "why" may be intrusive and offend the interviewee.

Some interviews are nothing more than a question/answer session where the interviewer never gives up control. The interviewee just waits for the interviewer to go on to the next topic and passively follows. Other interviews try not to use any questions, which places much more responsibility for the discussion on the interviewee. The nonuse of questions is also an important question-asking skill.

There are at least seven basic kinds of questions, ranging from the simplest and most elementary to the most complicated. Let us examine each progressively, from the least to the most complicated.

1. Memory questions require the recall or recognition of information and are the least complicated. ("What happened?")
2. Translation questions change information into symbols or language. An idea or thought is restated using different words. ("Is there another way of saying that?")
3. Interpretation questions identify and select appropriate generalizations. ("What did he mean when he said that?")
4. Application questions identify and select appropriate generalizations. ("What have you learned from what he meant?")
5. Analysis questions solve problems through conscious knowledge and thinking. ("What have you learned from that situation that will help you in other situations?")
6. Synthesis questions solve problems with original thinking. ("What are some ways of dealing with this situation you haven't yet tried?")
7. Evaluation questions make judgments of good or bad according to standards and are the most complicated. ("Which way do you think works best?")

Good counseling will use the full range of question types and not limit questions to mere tests of memory. By going beyond memory questions, the client's critical thinking ability can be encouraged. Each different kind of question leads to a different line of thinking. The more complicated questions give the client some credit for bringing resources into the interview. A really good question will have no simple answer but will encourage a great deal of constructive exploration. Each of the seven categories of questions has unique elements but also includes some element of all lower categories, so that evaluation questions build on all six easier types of questions. Memory is part of every kind of question. To test your ability to classify questions, identify one example of each of the seven kinds of questions regarding the same basic problem, and ask your partner to verify that your examples are accurate.

THE PURPOSE OF ASKING QUESTIONS AND QUESTIONING SEQUENCE

In every instance it would be useful to consider three issues about your use of questions in every counseling interview:

1. What was the purpose of the question(s)?
2. How was that purpose useful/helpful in solving problems?
3. To what extent did the question(s) achieve that purpose?

Using questions at five different developmental stages for a client means that on each stage of client development would indicate a different kind of question to accomplish a different purpose. Consider, for example, questions that might be acceptable or unacceptable to clients in each of the four synthetic cultures. Identify the purpose of the question and the extent to which each question accomplished that therapeutic purpose. Refer to the guidelines and rules for each of the cultures to judge appropriateness.

Opening Presentation of Issue

At the opening presentation of an issue, the counselor might ask a very general question like "What would you like to talk about today?" The purpose would be to get the client to provide background in a presenting problem. The counselor would use paraphrasing and encouragers to urge the client along with as little interruption as possible, then summarize the most important elements.

Alpha. Begin with a polite prelude that establishes the relationship, rather than move directly to the task. Be sensitive to the client's bringing up possible questions directly or indirectly, and then follow up with an opening question, like: "Can you tell me what you would like to talk about today?"

Beta. Begin by developing an agenda or a structure that will diminish uncertainty and define (at least temporarily) what will be covered in the interview, like: "Can you identify two or three topics you would like us to focus on today?"

Gamma. Begin by focusing directly on the individual's needs and purpose in coming to the counseling session, like: "Can you tell me what would be most helpful to you in our session today?"

Delta. Begin by focusing on the utility of the session and the way this session will help the client be more successful, like: "Can you tell me what would be most useful to you in our session today?"

Goal. Obtain a story of from fifty to one hundred words. Assess overall functioning of the client on varying cognitive-development levels as appropriate to the client's cultural background. Use questions, encouragers, paraphrasing, and reflection of feeling to bring out data, but try to impact or interrupt the client as little as possible. Get the story as he or she constructs it. Summarize key facts and feelings about what the client has said before moving on.

Sensorimotor/ Elemental

At the "Sensorimotor/Elemental" next level, the counselor would try to understand how a client organizes the world, looking specifically at visual, auditory, and kinesthetic perceptions of the client in ways that make the problem concrete, rather than abstract. The counselor would help the client identify patterns and make sense out of the situation. This stage of the questioning sequence assumes that a very solid basis of trust has been established and you are now ready to get into the client's deeper emotions.

Alpha. Focus on the traditional feelings that the hierarchy will expect or impose on the client and how the client may be embarrassed by not being comfortable with those required emotions, like: "What are the feelings you are supposed to have in your situation?"

Beta. Be formal and unambiguous in separating good from bad feelings by describing specific emotions directly, like: "What are the three most important emotions you experience in that situation?"

Gamma. Personalize your description of emotions and focus on the unique feelings of that particular individual, like: "How your feelings are different from other people's around you?"

Delta. Focus on how emotions help or hinder the individual's success and progress, like: "What are the ways your emotions help you or get in your way?"

Goal. Elicit one example, then explore what was seen, heard, or felt. Aim for here-and-now experiencing of emotions. Recognize that descriptions of emotions might ramble and seem random in their direction. Summarize at the end of the segment. You might want to ask yourself: "What one emotion or feeling stands out for the client from all this?"

Concrete/ Situational

At the concrete-operational/situational third level, the counselor uses questions to collect facts in a linear description of events, with little emphasis on feelings or evaluation. The counselor will help the client describe what happened before and after the problem, but will not interpret the situation. The counselor uses questions to get the client thinking about the problem.

Alpha. Be sensitive to the hierarchy of power and authority, which might constrain the client and require more indirect or subtle communication of problems, like: "What would I notice, as an outsider, if I were to visit you in your own community?"

Beta. Be sensitive to the need for specific detail, structured format, and unambiguous language, like: "Could you give me three specific examples of the situation/issue/problem?"

Gamma. Be sensitive to the role and relative importance of the individual in society, like: "Can you describe your feelings in the situation and how you would like things to be?"

Delta. Be sensitive to the need to succeed and assert a point of view, whatever the risk, like: "What things get in your way and prevent you from being more successful?"

Goal. Obtain a linear description of the event. Look for examples of reasoning from specific causes to specific effects. Ask yourself: "What did he or she do? Say? What happened before? What happened next? What happened after? What are the consequences of each thing he or she did?" Summarize what you learned before moving on. Focus on feelings as well as facts to integrate both the cognitive-thinking and the affective-feeling messages the client is sending.

Formal /Pattern

At the formal operational pattern fourth level, the counselor gets clients talking about themselves and repeated patterns, going beyond description to analysis and interpretation. Abstract thinking about problems is encouraged, and problems are seen within a larger context from multiple perspectives.

Alpha. Be sensitive to traditional patterns that control the client's behavior and how comfortable the client may be with those expectations, like: "Do others expect you always to behave in the same way, or do you sometimes behave differently?"

Beta. Identify the rules and laws that define patterns in the client's life and which provide a certain order, like: "What are three basic principles that guide you in deciding what to do?"

Gamma. Recognize the almost chaotic and spontaneous way of making decisions according to short-term goals, like: "What is the best thing that can happen, from your own point of view?"

Delta. Be goal directed in describing the patterns that would be most likely to succeed, like: "What game plan would you use to win in this situation?"

Goal. Talk about repeating patterns and situations that are important from the client's viewpoint. Ask yourself: "What was the client saying to herself or himself when that happened? Has the client felt like that in other situations?" Reflect on feelings, and paraphrase as appropriate. Summarize carefully the key facts and feelings you learned before moving on.

Dialectic / Systematic / Integrative

At the dialectic/systemic/integrative fifth level the counselor integrates insights from all previous levels to help the client see how he or she constructed the problem, recognize different perspectives about it, and help construct a solution. The client is encouraged to challenge assumptions and take control of the situation.

Begin by summarizing to yourself all that has been said. Ask yourself: "How does the client put together or organize all that he or she told me? What one thing stands out most for the client? How many different ways can the client describe his or her feelings and how they change?"

Alpha. Recognize the importance of the client's social context and the hierarchy of authority to which the client is expected to conform. Encourage the client to describe this context, like: "What do your leaders want you to do in this situation?"

Beta. Recognize the need for answers and solutions in specific, rather than general, terms for solving problems and resolving conflict, like: "What are the rules you will use to guide your decisions in the future?"

Gamma. Focus on the very complex and even apparently disordered need to keep all options open and for self-protection in all situations, like: "Can you describe your strengths and weaknesses to me?"

Delta. Focus on the competitive and achievement orientation of the client to succeed, however difficult that might be, like: "What are the things you will have to do now to succeed later?"

Goal. (1) To obtain an integrated summary of what has been said; (2) to enable the client to see how reality is co-constructed, not developed from a single view; (3) to obtain different perspectives on the same situation and be aware that each is just one perspective; (4) to note flaws in the present construction, co-construction, or perspective, and move to action.

As we move toward more complex reasoning, several options are open. Before using any of them, summarize to yourself and later to the client what the client has been saying over the entire series of questions.

Integration: How do you put together or organize all that the client told you? What one thing stands out most?

Co-construction: What rule was the client operating under? Where did that rule come from? How might someone else (perhaps another family member) describe the situation? Feelings can be examined using the same questions.

Multiple perspectives: How could we describe this from the point of view of some other person or using another theoretical framework or language system? How else might we put it together using another framework?

Deconstruction and action: Can you see some flaws in the reasoning or in the patterns of feelings above? How might the client change the rules? Given these possibilities, what action might the client take?

In working with synthetic culture simulation in the past, I have discovered that the actual content of the question is much less important than the words you use. Each culture has some words that result in a positive reaction and some that result in a negative reaction. As you put together your question, focus not only on the function of the question but also on the actual words you use.

KEY IDEAS

1. The purpose of question-asking skills:
 - To encourage or discourage talking.
 - To put the interviewer back in control of the interview.
 - To encourage the interviewee to disclose information.
2. Open question skills.
 - Help to begin an interview. Elaborate and enrich the interview. Encourage otherwise silent clients to talk.
3. Closed question skills.
 - Keep the interview from wandering off-topic.
 - Fill in specific information gaps.
 - Slow down clients that are otherwise too talkative.
4. Functions of questioning.
 - Identify specific facts.
 - Identify problems, concerns, or issues.
 - Clarify details.
5. Misuse of questioning skills.
 - Bombardment or grilling by asking too many questions. Asking more than one question at the same time. Using questions rhetorically. Using culturally insensitive questions.
6. Types of questions.
 - Memory to test recall or recognition.
 - Translation to change information into symbols.
 - Interpretation to discover relationships among symbols.
 - Application to apply symbols appropriately.
 - Analysis to solve problems using symbols.
 - Synthesis to solve problems with original thinking.
 - Evaluation to judge goodness or badness.
7. The purpose of asking questions.
 - Some theoretical orientations prescribe the use of questions more than others.
 - Questions to begin an interview focus on establishing a relationship.
 - Questions appropriate to the sensorimotor/elemental stages look at the client's organization of reality.
 - Questions appropriate to the concrete/operational/situational level are to collect facts.
 - Questions appropriate to the formal/operational level look for repeated patterns.
 - Questions appropriate to the dialectic/systematic/integrative level develop new and creative insights. Each synthetic culture has a different emphasis in asking appropriate questions at each level.
8. Questions for synthetic cultures.
 - Questioning the Alpha client: Emphasize respect and hierarchical authority.
 - Questioning the Beta client: Emphasize unambiguous structure and organization.
 - Questioning the Gamma client: Emphasize individualism and emotional independence.
 - Questioning the Delta client: Emphasize success and the achievement of goals.
9. The ethnographic question.
 - Questions must be sensitive to their cultural context.
 - Descriptive questions are often used first.
 - Structural questions are used to discover cultural domains.
 - Attribute- or meaning-oriented questions explore the cultural domain.
10. The process of question asking.
 - Keep questions specific.
 - Be careful of wording.
 - Ask questions in the right order.
 - Be careful of the language you use.
 - Focus on the client's concerns.
 - Pause after your questions.
 - Ask only one question at a time.
 - Avoid accusing or antagonizing the client.
 - Don't over-rely on questions for getting information.

EXERCISE 7.1: QUESTION-ASKING SKILLS

In order to practice your use of questions in the interview, role-play a ten-minute interview with your partner and an observer to exchange feedback. Follow these steps:

1. Organize into a three-person group with one person being the interviewee, one the interviewer, and one the observer. The person in the interviewee role will take on the identity of a synthetic culture (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, or Delta) of his or her choice.
2. Select a topic and role-play an interview, with the observer taking notes on specific questions asked by the interviewer.
3. After the interview the observer will lead a discussion from notes identifying specific questions that were asked. Feedback will be provided to the interviewer about how questions might have been used differently.
4. The partners will exchange roles until each has experienced all three. The observer should think of him- or herself as a teacher, remembering the rules for giving feedback, with the goal of increasing the skill of the interviewer in a facilitative way.

QUESTIONING FOR SYNTHETIC CULTURES

Questioning the Alpha Client

In questioning the Alpha client it will be important to keep in mind the importance of respect, the vertical ordering of authority in which the client has found a place, the importance of wisdom and insight, the willingness to obey orders and to please authority figures. It is also useful to remember that when Alphas ask for help they are showing their trust in you. Alphas will be formal and will expect you to be formal also. Alphas will tend to blame themselves as a form of politeness and to avoid conflict.

Imagine you have an Alpha client whom you believe to be lonely and isolated. What are some of the questions you might ask?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Questioning the Beta Client

In questioning the Beta client you should be as structured, organized, and unambiguous as possible. Betas will respond positively to the discovery of truth as a goal of questioning. Your questions will be helpful if they lead to clear and certain solutions or approaches. Betas like to be taught something they already know; it reaffirms their understanding. They will respond positively to a predictable line of questioning. Never surprise a Beta! If you go on a "fishing expedition" questioning a Beta, you will get very negative results. Do your homework and know where you are going. Betas will be intolerant of silly or frivolous questions. They will answer your questions directly and in detail if they feel positively toward you. Don't be surprised if a Beta puts a value judgment on what you are saying, and don't be surprised if a Beta client asks you questions back. You might well feel intimidated by your Beta client. You won't change a Beta's mind, but you might help restructure the situation in a way that will help the client see things differently.

Imagine you have a Beta client whom you believe to be lonely and isolated. What are some of the questions you might ask?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Questioning the Gamma Client

In questioning the Gamma client you are dealing with an individual who likes being emotionally independent. The Gamma will use friendships but is mostly self-reliant and believes that if everybody would only take care of themselves, the world would be a better place. Questions challenging that independence will be threatening. Questions that help the person find ways to self-improvement will be welcome. Gammas are very protective of their dignity and don't like embarrassing questions. They like to explore new ideas and alternatives, and they like a new, exciting challenge. Pitch your question toward the explorer in the Gamma, and even high-risk questions will become acceptable. However, any question that might humiliate the Gamma will get you nowhere. Remember, they make their own rules, so even implicit criticism of them for not following rules will be a sensitive area. Gammas don't mind self-disclosing, on their own terms. They love a debate or argument, and taking you on shows that they trust you. Gammas are likely to ask you some hard questions also and will be sensitive to your own defensiveness or insecurity as a sign of weakness.

Imagine you have a Gamma client whom you believe to be lonely and isolated. What are some of the questions you might ask?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Questioning the Delta Client

Your Delta client is assertive and even aggressive in responding to your questions, so you can expect a lively, rough-and-tumble interview. Deltas like to compete, so don't be surprised if your Delta client challenges you from time to time. The interview might resemble a game where you and the client serve questions back and forth like a Ping-Pong ball. The Delta client will respect a good, penetrating question just like a hard serve, and even a question with some spin on it will be appreciated as a sign of your skill. You need to think quickly to stay ahead of your Delta client, and getting distracted or losing concentration will not be helpful. The Delta client will accept the most awkward or sensitive question as long as you are not self-conscious asking it. On the other hand, you can expect Delta clients to "take no prisoners" if you lose their respect. Deltas like a good discussion with lively interchange, so controversial or provocative questions might be appropriate. The Delta client will take you on to see how good you are before trusting you. Be ready for an argument. Don't get into a fault-finding sequence of questions that tries to fix blame. Emphasize style and repartee. Even joking might be appropriate—although that's always risky.

Imagine you have a Delta client whom you believe to be lonely and isolated. What are some of the questions you might ask?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Instructions to the observer: Listen and watch for specific examples of questioning skills as they are used in the interview.

1. Were open questions used near the beginning of the interview?
Example:
2. Were open questions used to elaborate and enrich the interview?
Example:
3. Were open questions used to encourage otherwise silent clients to talk?
Example:
4. Were closed questions used to keep the interview from wandering off-topic?
Example:
5. Were closed questions used to fill in specific information gaps?
Example:
6. Were closed questions used to slow down the client when he or she became too talkative?
Example:
7. Did the counselor bombard or grill the client by asking too many questions?
Example:
8. Did the counselor ask more than one question at the same time?
Example:
9. Did the counselor use questions rhetorically?
Example:
10. Did the counselor use culturally insensitive questions?
Example:
11. Did the client ask questions at the appropriate developmental level for the client's culture?
Example: