Constructing children’s half-membership through question–answer sequences in family therapy
Competence

- Competence is related to the child’s ability to manage their social setting and engage in a meaningful social action within an interactional context.

- (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998)
Membership

• Children only acquire full membership in society when they have passed through the developmental stages and achieved ‘adulthood’.

• Children should be considered as children, not as trainee adults (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis)
Half-membership

- There are different types of membership in an interaction, namely:
  - members,
  - less-than-full members

- Adults are assumed to be ordinary full members of an interaction

  (Shakespeare, 1998)
Family

- The form and composition of the ‘the family’ has rapidly changed.

- The family still represents an important social unit for the child to negotiate competence.

  (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998)
Family therapy

• The family therapy movement grew out of psychiatry.

• Family therapists normatively consider individual problems as the symptoms of family problems and therefore ‘treat’ the whole family.
Methods

• Children are active in the construction of their social lives and the social lives of those they engage with

• Qualitative methods therefore are the most appropriate for the study of children.
  • (Prout and James, 1990)
The study in context

- Systemic family therapy data
- Children with diagnosable problems
- CAMHS context – GP referral
- 4 families, 2 therapists
- Approx 22 hours – videotape
- Ethics
- CA and DP
Findings

- Parents answer for the children with and without a delay.
- When parent’s display disagreement with the child’s answer, positioning them as answering the question incorrectly in some way.
- When the child fails to respond adequately to the therapist’s question it can orient to non-competence.
Parents answer- no delay

- From session 4 (Niles)
- FT: So what are you gonna do Steve, are you gonna change your name (.) sounds like your sister’s thinking about it but isn’t quite sure if it sounds right
- Dad: It’s it’s only name in it it (.) it don’t make no difference
- FT: What does it mean what does it mean to everybody to have the same name
- Dad; I suppose it hhh
Key points

• The question is clearly directed to Steve
• The father has an agenda because at stake is the child taking his name
• Steve doesn’t get an opportunity to reply because the father steps in after both questions
With a delay

- **From session 3 Niles**
- **FT:** Were you worried about what happened with Nicky Steve? Did it worry you that she could have been badly hurt?
- **Nic:** °No°
- **FT:** Steve?
- (1.6)
- **Dad:** he doesn’t I don’t think he doesn’t care (1.2) <he knows the true meaning of> you know danger things like that >‘cause I mean< he’s got no sense of danger
Key points

• Therapeutically relevant question
• The blame has been attributed to Steve so Steve is held to account
• Nicola responds with her interpretation but the therapist pushes Steve for a response
• Father provides a response for Steve
Disagreeing with the child

- From session 1 Clamp

- FT: okay how old are you Jordan?
- Jordan: Six
- Mum: You're [not six
- Dad: [You're [not six
- Joe: [ not six
- FT: Oh (.) people don't think you're six
- Dad: °Nine°
- Jordan: Nine
- FT: You're nine
- Mum: He hasn't got the mind of a
  ni(h)ne ye(h)ar o(h)ld
Key points

• Jordan provides an answer
• Three adults (in overlap) disagree
• The FT affiliates with the adults
• Father provides the answer which is accepted by Jordan
• The mother provides an account for why Jordan got the answer wrong
‘I don’t know’

• **From session 1 – Bremner**
  • **FT:** And if Bob’s upset how do you feel?
  • (2.0)
  • **Jeff:** hhhhhh
  • (1.6)
  • **Jeff:** Don’t know on that one
  • **FT:** Don’t know on that one?
  • (0.6)
  • **FT:** So (. ) if it makes you ↑ sad when mummy’s upset (. ) what d’ yer do t’ help mummy?
  • **Bob:** Not[hin’
  • **Jeff:** > cuddle ‘er<
  • **FT:** Pardon?
  • **Jeff:** >Cuddle ‘er<
Key points

• Therapeutically relevant question – feelings
• Ft questions the child’s response of ‘I don’t know’
• FT returns to the feelings question relating to the mother
Discussion and Conclusion

• Half membership is arguably counterproductive to the inclusive, equitable ethos of systemic family therapy

• Not answering or using strategies of “I don’t know” do not necessarily indicate non-competence, but are sometimes used by the child strategically demonstrating competence
• References and handouts available on request – to reduce the carbon footprint 😊
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