'Good question': Exploring the experiences of generating questions in coaching

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Abstract

This research uses heuristic inquiry to provide insight into experiences of generating questions in coaching. Eight experienced coaches, recruited as co-researchers, shared their experiences of generating coaching questions via post-coaching reflections and conversational interviews. Thematic analysis of the data identified that coaches noticed a wide range of elements when forming questions. Questions frequently 'pop' into the heads of coaches, accompanied by somatic sensations. When asking questions, coaches used prefacing statements for their own or their client's benefit. Inner dialogue was experienced, often in the form of meta-questioning. This research highlighted three paradoxes that coaches tried to balance while enquiring of their clients. Suggestions for future research are also proposed.

Key words: coaching, questions, heuristic inquiry, paradox, experience, dyad.

Introduction

As a coaching practitioner, I have long been interested in the process of coaching. The interaction between coach and client, the philosophical underpinnings of coaching, and its efficacy as an intervention, have all held a fascination for me. Much of this interest originated as a result of a gradual dawning awareness as I began to see that a coaching approach really did seem to make positive and significant, contributions, to the lives and businesses of the people I worked with. Understanding the dynamic that helped produce such positive results was both interesting and puzzling. Coaching seemed to be underpinned by relatively simple processes – listening, asking questions, reflecting back etc. – and yet seemed able to develop both situations and people, often quite considerably. It was through the lens of this background, coupled with my own work in coaching and coach-development that I became interested in the micro-techniques of coaching, including the questions that coaches pose.

Coincidentally, research in coaching is moving away from examining the efficacy of coaching to exploring what makes coaching effective. De Haan et al urge that research in the field focuses on the factors that result in coaching being effective for clients, including coaching techniques (de Haan, Culpin, & Curd, 2011; de Haan & Duckworth, 2012). Following their synthesis of the work of Bennett (2006) and Stern (2008), Kaufman and Bachkirova (2009) suggest several broad areas of study that coaching researchers should be pursuing, including an exploration of the 'processes' of coaching. More recently, Fillery-Travis and Cox (2014) have provided a contemporary view on the gaps in coaching research, and among several observations of areas that would benefit from further exploration, stress the need to explore the actual interaction within the coaching process. They conclude that "the coaching activity itself, the interaction of the dyad including the elements of listening, questioning, clarifying, reflecting, challenging and thinking have simply not yet been researched" (Fillery-Travis & Cox, 2014, p.453).

The paper begins by introducing some of the relevant coaching literature around questions and highlights the gaps in the literature that led to the creation of the research questions. It then outlines

the theoretical position of the research, followed by an overview of the use of heuristic inquiry as the methodology employed in this research. Key findings across three broad themes are presented, followed by a conceptual conclusion. Finally, reflections on the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are presented.

Literature

The purpose of coaching questions

It may be argued that the purpose of coaching questions, is to support the purpose of coaching itself (Clarke & Dembowski, 2006; Neenan, 2009) through prompting helpful client responses such as introspection (Zandvoort, Irwin, & Morrow, 2008). De Haan's research into 'critical moments' in coaching sessions as reported by experienced coaches, identifies that working effectively with 'critical moments' in coaching can be aided by focusing on certain elements of the coaching process, one of which is 'deepening by continuing to ask questions' (De Haan, 2008, p.8). 'Deepening' is not a term De Haan explicitly defines, but it could be taken to mean "increasing trust and opening up new paths of exploration" between coach and client (Parker, Wasserman, Kram, & Hall, 2015).

Cox (2013), suggests coaching questions should be less about garnering information for the coach, and more about helping the coachee explore, clarify and learn, indeed she asserts that "the only reason why a coach asks a question is to move the client closer to some resolution of the task" (Cox, 2013, p.108). This echoes the observation by Grant and O'Connor (2010) that "coaching questions that are truly effective should have the effect of enhancing motivation, developing understanding, increasing positive affect and self-efficacy for change, as well as helping the coachee to move closer towards their goals or objectives" (Grant & O'Connor, 2010, p.103).

Thus, it would appear that there is some literature albeit limited, to suggest that questions serve their purpose of supporting the achievement of the wider aims and objectives of coaching, while also serving some more specific in-the-moment objectives of individual clients in relation to helping them achieve their goals.

The coach-client dyad

The relationship between client and coach has not just been described as a critical success factor in coaching, but "*the* critical success factor" (Bluckert, 2005, p336)**.** Indeed, executive coaches themselves reported overwhelmingly that the ability to build rapport and a firm relationship was a key skill (Wasylyshyn, 2003). A recent dyad survey study exploring coaching by managers of employees in their line, reported that in addition to improving some areas of work-based performance, trust and the manager-employee relationship were positively impacted by the manager using a coaching approach (Kim & Kuo, 2015).

The relationship appears from the literature to be indirectly linked to questions a coach might ask (Stout-Rostron, 2006). Awareness from the coach about the relationship does seem important: The better able the coach is to judge accurately the coaching relationship, or alliance, the better the outcomes of a coaching engagement for the client in relation to their self-efficacy (Baron & Morin, 2009). Although recent research suggests that coaches' perceptions of the working alliance and the objective amount of observed working-alliance behaviours did not correspond; interestingly neither client or coach agreed in the rating of the working alliance (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015). There is suggestion however that the coaching 'alliance' is a learning entity in its own right, and that the questions that are asked and the answers that are given promote learning in the alliance itself, as a form of extended cognition (Cox, 2013).There also appears to be a link with questions that result from

the relationship, which is the ability to help the client achieve particular results through an increased willingness to challenge the client, in the form of having 'deeper conversations' (Dagley, 2010). As questions are a key part of the coaching process, there appears to be a link between the relationship and the questions.

The experience of generating and asking questions

Many coaching practitioner texts include discussions of the importance of questions coupled with advice about how to ask them effectively, including such advice as recognising that there are useful questions for particular coaching settings and certain question types to avoid (Parsloe & Leedham, 2009). *The Handbook of Coaching Psychology* (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007) is divided into eleven chapters of the different approaches that coaching psychologists may follow. Each chapter includes helpful examples of, or inferences to, questions and how they may be deployed in each approach. When one looks beyond these practical references, the scholarly and empirical body of research is slim.

Close scrutiny of real coaching conversations by Diget (2010) provided an insight into how coaches actually operate, and show that the questions coaches use fall into three categories:

i. Information elicitation questions
ii. Future orientation questions
iii. Hypothetical questions

Of these, coaches typically use types (ii) and (iii) more frequently because they are dealing with issues that are yet to be realised. Information elicitation questions tend to be simple interrogatives including yes/no forms, used to establish factual information and assume the coachee has the answers available to them, while answers to future-oriented and hypothetical questions depend on the coachee's ability to find an answer (Diget, 2010).

Rostron (2006) investigated several elements of coaching interactions and concluded that rather than using a template of questions, coaches are better served by holding their own coaching model together with the themes of the conversation, and then using the questions more flexibly around these two foundational elements. She goes on to stress the importance of listening to questions and identifies three phases of a coaching conversation: Input/throughput/output. The input phase sets the scene for coaching conversations, using data gathering questions; the second throughput phase defines priorities and explores the issue at hand; the final output phase uses questions to identify the learning and actions that will follow the coaching session.

There was just a single example of coaching research indirectly exploring the experiences of enquiry, showing that where the cognitive-emotional development of the coach is well formed, and certainly compatible with that of the client, the impacts of their coaching was likely to be more effective (Laske, 2006).

Research questions

From the review of the literature it was apparent that there was a dearth of research related specifically to coaches' experience of generating questions in coaching sessions. The result of the review was that an opportunity to contribute to knowledge presented itself in the shape of researching this area through the following research focus: "An exploration into the experience of generating questions in coaching"

This over-arching aim is supported by further questions that were examined through the research:

    i.   What influences the generation of questions in coaching?
    ii.   What are the experiences of coaches in relation to *asking* questions in coaching?
    iii.   What are coaches aware (and unaware) of when generating questions in coaching?

Theoretical perspectives

During coaching sessions, I am able to accept that the versions of the world my clients present are 'true', perhaps better to say 'accurate', to them in their context, as they perceive it. In such a situation, I will do my best to work with them and try hard to 'meet them where they are' (Wolever et al., 2011) while accepting that I cannot actually 'be' wholly where they are. Thus, I would describe my ontological position as closely to that of context relativism (Gifford, 1986), where there is an emphasis on the uniqueness of representation and the subjectivity of interpretation. I would adopt a position even more closely aligned to that of perspectivism, firstly outlined by Nietzsche (1968), which suggests that there is no 'fact' or 'truth' which has not been through the filter of interpretation. Schrift (1998) declares that Nietzsche positioned perspectivism not as an ontological position, but as a new epistemological position, relating to what it was possible to know, rather than what is known. Ultimately, my view and the position I embrace is that we each have our own 'realities' which are unique to us and that can only be accurately interpreted by us. Indeed, even though we may not possess all the faculties to wholly interpret our own realities; at least we are closer than others are, to our own experiences. With this underpinning philosophy it seemed important to find a research methodology that aligned.

Methodology

Eight co-researchers were invited to join the research. Five of these coaches were drawn directly from my own professional network and the remaining three were recruited using a snowballing approach. Table 1 shows the demographic and coaching-related information for the co-researcher group:

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Professional Membership	Main coaching contexts	Coaching supervision
Skye	54	White British	ICF	Executive	Yes
Sam	49	White British	EMCC	Executive	Yes
Kimberley	45	White British	ICF	Executive & small business	Yes
Bryan	54	White Welsh	No	Executive, team & career	Yes
Mary	49	White British	No	Early career & executive	Informal
Melissa	48	White English	EMCC	Executive	Yes
Dale	55	White British	EMCC	Leadership	Yes
Grace	55	White Scottish	No	Executive & leadership	Yes
Glenn Wallis	48	White English	Institute of Coaching	Executive	Yes

Table 1: Co-researcher demographic and coaching-related information.

Co-researchers were asked to represent their experience of generating questions from their coaching sessions in whatever way made the most sense for them over a period of four months. These 'reflections' were then used as the background to the second phase of the research, namely a two-hour audio recorded interview. The interview was structured in the style of an 'informal conversational interview', consisting of spontaneous questions and a natural tenor to the conversation (Patton, 1980). Not only did this process have echoes of a coaching session, but more importantly, as a style of interviewing, this seemed to be a better 'fit' with the research methodology, as it helped get to the heart of experience and 'the search for meaning' (Moustakas, 1990). Each interview was transcribed and, in line with heuristic research, data was analysed in order that key insights could emerge from the experiences of the co-researchers. The analysis was accompanied by a deep immersion in the accounts of co-researchers.

Following the analysis, individual depictions of each co-researcher's experience were created in the form of word clouds. These were presented back to the co-researchers to check the faithfulness of their representation. All depictions were considered to capture 'accurately' the key elements for each co-researcher. In line with one central tenet of heuristic inquiry I did share my own experiences of generating questions. The rationale for including my own experiences is that one declared aim of heuristic inquiry is to understand experience to the point where it can prove to be deeply transformational for the primary researcher. Such transformation results from 'knowing' the essential elements of the experience – both my own and those of the co-researchers - in a way that only comes from extended periods of immersion with the question under study. Finally, I produced a creative synthesis of the whole experience of generating questions using my own experiences, informed by the insights from co-researchers.

Findings

For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to present the inter-related elements of the experiences from the co-researchers, in three broad 'phases':

i.   Factors that influence the questions
ii. The moment of asking
iii. The dynamic of questions and answers.

Whilst restricted here to a linear representation of a lived, highly complex experience, it should be noted that co-researchers typically represented their experiences in a much more integrated way.

i. Factors that influence the questions

There were two broad themes that emerged from the data in relation to factors that influenced the generation of coaching questions. The first group of factors were those from the background of the coach, such as their personal history, coach education and philosophy. The second group of factors were 'precursors' to the moment of asking and included the state of the coach and client, in addition to the impacts on the experience of the coaching contract.

Co-researchers recounted how their experience of questioning in coaching was impacted by several of these factors and may be illustrated by two direct quotations. The first, illustrates the impact of personal history and comes from the interview with Kimberley, a divorcee and successful business-owning mother. She predominantly coaches women entrepreneurs to develop their business, while they are also juggling their private lives that may often include family commitments. She felt this part of her history directly impacts her experience of asking questions:

... most of the women I coach in that kind of context, know that I haven't had a perfect route and there's something in that that allows [me] to ask some questions. I can ask some stuff that I couldn't ask if I had had a smooth trip

The second example is from Bryan and related to the level of experience of the coach. Bryan felt that his questions were different now he had greater experience of successful coaching:

I think this has changed probably from when I first started working regularly as a coach. Earlier on I think I was very deliberate and conscious in my choice of questions, and there was probably a little bit of trying to be clever or whatever. But also a little bit of just lack of practice.

The coaching contract, a clear agreement between the coach and client that acknowledges the coaching 'process and shared understandings' (Cox & Jackson, 2014) also impacted the experience of generating questions. Skye felt that once good contracting was done she could ask very direct questions,

... I give myself permission to ask them at any time, so it could be later in Session 1 or it could be in Session 6.

The coaching contract, deemed important by coaches (McNamara et al., 2014) and the bodies that support coaches through publishing Codes of Ethics for their members (e.g. EMCC, ICF) includes elements that help clearly set expectations and boundaries. It can, through the Psychological Contracting element (Stevens, 2006) also include agreement specifically around the level of challenge, provided in part through the coach's questions. The coaching contract provided co-researchers with an apparent contradiction, in that the tighter the boundaries had been set through an effective contract, the freer coaches were to ask almost any question they wanted to, in service of their client's progress. Despite the apparent freedom provided for some by the contract, some co-researchers still sought permission to ask some questions.

ii. The moment of asking

A key finding from the research was that these coaches often preface questions with statements or non-verbal cues. The prefacing was there to help the client prepare for a question that may have an increased level of challenge or to be clear about their authority to refrain from providing a response. However, prefacing questions also served to help the coach and was something that I considered a potential blind-spot for coaches (Bachkirova, 2015). While the intent of prefacing was sometimes positioned as being there to help the client, it appeared to me as little more than a way to influence or even manipulate the client.

Prefacing was used to seek permission to ask questions, despite contracting and even where an established relationship existed. Coaches and supervisors may want to be mindful of the phenomenon of prefacing questions, explore the purposes of it, and monitor its use. Table 2 shows a summary of the perceived benefits of prefacing questions, and highlights that for this group of co-researchers these were often beneficial to themselves rather than their clients.

It appears that some questions are formulated with higher degrees of conscious awareness. These questions seem to appear to be more prevalent at the beginning and end of coaching sessions. They serve the purpose of establishing progress from the last session, scene setting, and rapport building at the start; they serve a purpose of building robust plans at the end, in part to ensure the coaching adds real value for the client. There are also questions that coaches ask which feel to them to be generated

less consciously. These questions just emerge and *'pop'* into the heads or mouths of coaches. Non-conscious questions are often accompanied by a somatic response within the coach. Indeed, Melissa felt that generating questions included a significant physical or sensory element: *"I think it would be more somatic than rational."* Co-researchers variously described these senses, but often said that they had a 'light' feeling to them. They also prompted physical reactions that co-researchers could locate quite specifically, bodily, and uniquely to themselves.

Client Benefit	Coach Benefit
To prepare themselves for a challenging question	To display positive intent
To have clear permission to respond as they see fit	To appear to shift the power to the client
To hold the question 'lightly'	To protect the relationship
	To ask questions outside the boundaries of the contract
	To challenge
	To 'get away with something'
	For the coach to give themselves permission e.g. to ask or for the question not to 'land' well with the client
	For the coach to get another layer of permission
	To prepare themselves for what might be raised in the answer

Table 2: Co-researcher perceptions of how 'prefacing' benefits clients and coaches

Being able to tap into the somatic cues mentioned by co-researchers hints at their levels of experience, as research suggests such embodied awareness is not easily taught but is generally the result of experience (Matthews, 2013). Embodied awareness in coaching seems to have relied on coaches viewing their body as part of the resources available to them. In order for coaches to be fully present and access the high levels of awareness they spoke of, they use their body as an integrated *part of* themselves rather than as something *separate to* themselves (Flaherty, 2010; Gunnlaugson & Walker, 2014; Strean & Strozzi-Heckler, 2009).

iii. The dynamic of questions and answers

Co-researchers reported that using inner dialogue was a regular feature of the experience of generating questions. Coaches use these internal conversations as a kind of compass.. Keeping focus of their intention and enquiries centred on the client's objectives is helped by this internal checking system. There was also evidence that inner dialogue was focused on the performance or capability of the coach as illustrated by remarks from Dale:

> *It's something that's running as I'm in coaching space. It's probably a little voice in my head running, 'Shall I? Shan't I? What about now?' there's that question ... you know, 'ask him this''*

An interesting element of this inner dialogue was that it frequently took the shape of self-directed questions with the purpose of raising awareness of a particular moment in the coaching session; co-researchers often posed themselves questions about their questions. This phenomenon of meta-questioning is another unique finding to come from this research.

As part of the flow of question-and-response, co-researchers felt there were a number of key areas that were present within the relationship dynamic including the immediate and longer-term impacts of their questions on their client. The importance of the coach-client alliance is central to effective coaching, and the co-researchers in this study seemed clear that the strength of the relationship to some extent determined the different questions that they would, could, or did ask (Bordin, 1979). Co-researchers also recognised that the state of the 'bubble' within which the relationship existed, impacted their questions, and that their questions impacted the relationship (Cratty, 1984).

Conceptual conclusions

Findings from the co-researchers enabled me to attempt a synthesis that depicts the core significance and essential meaning of their experiences that are more conceptual in nature. To me, it felt that the experience of generating questions uncovered a set of balances that coaches try to manage while in coaching sessions with clients. I interpreted these as the three experience paradoxes of coaching. The three paradoxes that are explored through the creative synthesis are:

1. Increasing levels of awareness that results in no awareness
2. Being objective while being deeply subjective
3. Adding value for the client while remaining non-attached to the outcome

Questions are a result of managing the balance of paradoxical elements critical to the success of effective coaching. In an echo of Garvey's suggestion, perhaps it is helpful that coaches and their supervisors both engage with such complexity rather than collude with simplicity (Garvey, 2011).

The coaching paradoxes

Following several iterations, I settled on the final symbol (Figure 1) to represent the paradoxes present in the experience of asking questions. The yin-yang symbol was referenced by co-researchers, as was the idea of balance, described in terms of black and white. It represents balancing the seemingly opposing forces described by co-researchers.

Paradox 1: Increasing levels of awareness that results in no awareness

The more heightened the level of awareness coaches have, the less aware they become of the questions that they ask. Thus, a paradox becomes apparent which is that greater awareness in coaching results in no awareness. Greater experience and a relaxed state appear to be important in achieving this balance that allows for the almost automatic generation of questions and the ability to select the appropriate moment for, and level of, challenge in questions. Indeed, it appears possible that being able to access a more relaxed state is a function of greater experience.

Paradox 2: Being objective while being deeply subjective

Coaches want their work to be all about the client. Questions should be focused on the client, their objectives, and be free from the agenda of the coach. Coaches acknowledge that being objective and ensuring that questions are not infused with influences of the coach is an ideal place to be. For me, much to the chagrin of many coaching colleagues, I have never felt that objectivity of this nature is achievable in coaching. Indeed, I have questioned whether it is even wholly desirable. Even Clean Coaching seems actually to produce a version of less subjective coaching, rather than a process that is ultimately objective. Coaches also acknowledge that it is impossible not to be present in their work and in the questions that they ask. The paradox of a process that, according to co-researchers, is

ideally objective, is wrapped inside an interaction between two human beings that brings with it inevitable levels of subjectivity.

Figure 1: The creative synthesis representing the coaching experience paradoxes and the nature of questions.

Paradox 3: Adding value to the client while remaining non-attached to the outcome

Coaches want to help. They want to add value in the eyes of their clients and in their own judgment of their performance. They want to use questions to help clients think better, produce robust plans, and reflect on goals and objectives. This over-riding desire to help is coupled with a rather esoteric position of remaining non-attached to the outcome of the questions they ask. Set in the wider context that coaching generally is effective for clients, this research suggests that co-researchers trust the process and their own skills and can afford, as a result, to have confidence that all will be well.

Implications of the findings

The many implications for coaching practice of these findings seem to be in the arena of raising the awareness of coaches and coach educators, including supervisors, around the area of questions that are asked in coaching sessions. Coaches may want to consider how they construct their coaching contracts to reflect the purpose of questions and educators may want to help coaches explore the structure of the contract and the way it is embodied in the coaching work, in relation specifically to how questions are used.

Where coach education explores the importance of the coach-client dyad, consideration may be given to these findings that suggest that there is a dynamic connection between the questions that are asked and the positive development of the coach-client relationship. Supervisors may also benefit from awareness that an element as specific as the questions that coaches ask impacts the relationship and may be an important factor of relational issues that are brought to supervision sessions.

Limitations of the study

The essentially individual nature of the data that was produced during the research, and the qualitative methodology adopted, meant it is not possible to generalise from these findings to

anything beyond the realms of this research. However, it may be worth noting that Moustakas aligns with the thinking of Husserl when he asserted that found in the pure essence of individual experiences may be findings of social and even universal significance (Husserl, 1999; Moustakas, 1990).

The size of the co-researcher group was limited to eight plus the primary researcher. Within heuristic inquiry, there is a suggestion that at the *upper end* the number of co-researchers may be 10-15 (Moustakas, 1990). The group recruited for the purposes of this research was fewer in number than this upper limit but in such a study, a case can be made for a 'less is more' approach that allows for a deeper, richer exploration of the experience of the co-researcher group (Smith, 2004).

Experienced coaches that used a range of coaching approaches were selected for the purposes of this research, as I believed that they would be able to provide reflections on their experiences that were different from coaches new to coaching. As an experienced coach myself, I was keen to explore the experiences of other coaches who had several years of practise and reflection time in relation to generating coaching questions.

Suggestions for further research

It would appear that that this research has provided a good foundation for future researchers build upon. Three areas in particular could contribute to generating new knowledge in this area of work, and may also produce insights to further inform coaching practice.

The first interesting area of exploration would be the experience of questions in coaching from the perspective of the client. This would provide an interesting additional angle from which to view questions; it would also allow for some comparison with the findings from this study.

The co-researchers and I were unclear about the relative efficacy of the questions that we asked. Therefore, there may be some real benefits to investigating whether a model of questions that are more 'effective' can be generated. There is a suggestion from this research that coaches recognise when questions are less effective for their clients. From this beginning it may be possible to uncover elements that contribute to questions being more effectively generated and asked.

Questions that appear to be generated less than consciously, that are themselves a heuristic for coaches, might provide some very interesting further avenues for research for those who have an interest in neuroscience. Exploring what is actually happening at a cellular level during the generation of questions may be both illuminating and of practical interest to the coaching community. Bearing in mind that these questions come more frequently for more experienced coaches, there may be interesting work to be done with the experience of novice coaches and their experiences of generating questions.

The generosity of the co-researchers has helped produce rich insight into the experience of generating questions. The experience of generating questions has been presented as a complex process, impacted by the wide range of elements, presented here. Questions are pivotal tools that are integral to coaching, and this research has provided a unique and useful insight into the dynamics of generating questions in coaching.

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