

Good question: exploring the experiences of generating questions in coaching

Glenn P Wallis (2015)

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Wallis, Glenn P (2015)

Good question: exploring the experiences of generating questions in coaching

PhD (DCM), Oxford Brookes University

“Good question: Exploring the experiences of generating questions in coaching”

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the award of
Doctor of Coaching and Mentoring

September 2015

Abstract

Coaches use questions, with other techniques, to facilitate progress for clients. The coaching practitioner literature provides advice on how to employ questions in coaching sessions, but there is little empirical evidence examining how coaches generate or ask questions. Investigating my own experiences and that of other coaches, in relation to questions, has been a long-standing professional interest. Thus, this research provides insight into exploring the experiences of generating questions in coaching.

The approach to the research was relativist and employed heuristic inquiry as the research methodology. Eight experienced coaches were recruited as co-researchers, to share their experiences of generating coaching questions. Capturing experiences was achieved through post-coaching reflections and conversational interviews. Thematic analysis of the data identified categories and patterns that led to the creation of individual depictions of the experience for each co-researcher. In line with the research methodology, individual experiences were brought together to produce a final creative synthesis. A departure from heuristic inquiry was the omission of a group depiction. The selection of exemplary portraits was replaced with presenting the portraits of all co-researchers. Both of these amendments were felt appropriate in order to align the methodology more faithfully with a relativist approach.

Coaches noticed a wide range of information when forming questions, originating from sources both inside and outside the coaching session itself. The background of the coach played a part in shaping the experience of generating questions, as did the transitory 'state' of both coach and client. Coaches asked questions when in an altered state that some described as a 'flow' or 'zone'. Questions 'pop' into the heads of coaches in a non-conscious way at times, often accompanied for the coach by a somatic sensation, while some were generated more consciously. At the point of asking questions, coaches often used a prefacing statement for their own or their client's benefit. Coaches frequently engaged in inner dialogue when asking questions that were usually focused on the coach or the question. The inner dialogue varied in nature, but often presented in the form of a question.

The conclusions indicate that the experience of generating questions in coaching was deeply impacted by the coach themselves. This research highlighted three paradoxes that coaches tried to balance while enquiring of their clients. Suggestions for future research are also proposed.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the generosity and patience of a large number of people. I have felt accompanied in partnership throughout the entire journey by some key people who have helped me both directly and in spirit to produce this thesis. I would like to take this opportunity humbly to thank them and acknowledge that this work is in many ways as much theirs as mine.

Firstly, I would like to extend my thanks to the academic staff at Oxford Brookes University, most especially my supervisor Dr Elaine Cox, who has shown a level of sensitivity and patience that is the hallmark of great teachers.

My deepest gratitude goes to those friends and colleagues who gave of their time and knowledge so freely in their role as co-researchers. While they must remain anonymous here, they are known deeply to me and I shall be forever grateful for enabling this work to emerge.

My colleagues at Oxford Brookes, Alison, Shaun, Ian and Jill, have helped make the undertaking of this research a pivotal experience of my life. Their shared humour and love made completing this research journey a truly enriching one.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my wife Vicky and our children, Georgia and Jack, who regularly asked me good questions, such as “What is it you are doing?” and “Why are you doing it?” Thank you all for your unstinting support.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

In this chapter, I show how my interest was initially piqued by how questions are used in coaching through experiences in my own coaching practice. I also explore how that interest transferred over time to a genuine, and at times, all-consuming fascination, leading ultimately to the decision to research this phenomenon. I have aimed to provide a clear outline in relation to why this specific research question is important to explore, and the gaps in current research that the study attempts to contribute towards filling. These gaps are of two kinds – a lack of empirical research into the area under study and an accompanying lack of literature both within coaching and across other related disciplines. There is also an explanation of the theoretical position that has been adopted for the research and the resulting informed decision about the choice of methodology. Finally, this chapter includes an outline of each of the remaining chapters in the thesis with a comment about what can be found within each.

An idea emerges

I sat across from Mary (not her real name) as she sat in an easy silence. Mary was a coaching client of mine; clearly bright, aspirational, and well-regarded by the organisation within which she was a senior leader. She was, at that moment, in a state of mental reverie, reflecting on the situation that she was facing in her work and that she hoped to find a way to resolve. A further pause was then concluded with: “Mmmm, that’s a good question, I need to think about that some more.” While this had not happened to me in every coaching session I was involved in, it was a pattern I recognised sufficiently to let the moment remain unbroken. The question had prompted Mary to think deeply, or differently, about a particular area. The part that I found particularly interesting was I had no conscious idea of what question I was going to ask Mary before I asked it. Furthermore, I would have struggled to repeat the question in exactly the way I asked it, had that been required of me. The question seemed to emerge from my non-conscious and that was interesting, particularly as it seemed at that time these questions were qualitatively different, and more effective, than those questions that I was more aware of constructing and asking.

As I spoke to other coaches and raised the issue as part of my on-going professional supervision sessions, it was clear that the phenomenon was something that held interest

for others involved in our field. Many also recognised the pattern and had been in sessions where similar experiences had occurred for them and their clients. I wondered if our experiences were actually similar, or if there were interesting points of difference. It appeared that a possible area with research potential had emerged, and that was sufficient to encourage me to pursue investigating it further. The results of that research are presented here.

An early challenge was to define exactly what it was that was to be researched and how to go about that. The actual experience of coaches at that moment of asking their questions was the key area of interest. Thus, the research was limited to the experiences of coaches in generating and asking questions with a view to understanding these experiences and to helping them and the wider coaching community appreciate what may be happening at this moment, in relation to a critical coaching skill.

What is a question?

It is appropriate before commencing this overview to ensure that a definition of the term ‘question’ is clearly established at the outset, to arrive at a common understanding. In essence, it is necessary to begin by answering another question: “What is a question?” The response to such an enquiry depends, to some extent, on who answers it. There is literature of a philosophical nature that explores the area of analysis of questions referred to as erotetic logic (Prior & Prior, 1955). Those who study such a discipline might describe a question as a ‘language event’ that adheres to some basic structures of language (in English) and seeks to reveal information about the topic of concern (Tichy, 1978).

A question contains both an underlying structure and a surface structure: The former includes both the use of a symbol (?) and starting stems, such as ‘what...’, ‘where...’, or ‘when...’ which are referred to as *wh*-interrogatives. The surface structure is formed from the underlying structure and adds contextual information, including verbs and the tense that aid the interpreter in providing an appropriate response (Bromberger, 1966).

Prosody, referring to the tonality, rhythm, and stress in language, also helps define a sentence as a question. Despite research suggesting that some questions, especially polar, yes-no questions, do not require as much rising and falling intonation in order to

be interpreted as a form of interrogation, there is some consensus that rising and/or falling intonation usually implies a question (Cruttenden, 1997). In summary, the linguistic literature provides some helpful insight into the structures and rules of the construction of a question. Using this information as a foundation to work from, for the purposes of this research I will define a question as:

“A conversation-based enquiry, that may be expressed though language or behaviour, that helps the asker or respondent become more aware of relevant information”

1.1 Gaps and purpose

Coaching is either a relatively new approach to helping adults learn, made popular in its current form since the mid-1980s (Showers & Joyce, 1996), or an intervention that has been around since the early twentieth century (Gorby, 1937). The difference in views about timescales for the emergence of coaching depends on several factors, including the perspectives of the authors who write about coaching and, significantly, the parameters used to define what coaching actually is.

Empirical research in coaching is still in its infancy, and while retrospective studies suggest a high level of positive impacts of coaching, empirical studies show smaller, yet still positive outcomes (De Meuse, Dai, & Lee, 2009). Whether it is the ability to improve ‘bottom line’ factors, including a return on the investment or productivity (Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997), psychological variables (Moen & Skaalvik, 2009) including self-esteem (Leonard-Cross, 2010), or performance/skills, well-being, work attributes or goal directed self-regulation (Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2013), coaching seems to be able to contribute to positive change. Add to this growing empirical base the anecdotal experience of coaches and clients and one could come to the conclusion that coaching is an effective intervention. Such a conclusion offers an opportunity to research what it is about coaching that makes it so effective, when one considers the wide range of coaches, clients, and challenges that are part of coaching interactions.

Researching into the coaching field has also changed to reflect the development of the industry itself and some have challenged coaches to take the role of researcher into their own discipline (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004). Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) tracked

the development of coaching research and overlaid it with the development of research in other disciplines, such as counselling. Their conclusion was that coaching research has improved in quality; changed its focus from exploration and definition towards theory building and large randomized control studies; and finally, will burgeon in scale in the next decade. It should be noted that Passmore and Fillery-Travis are from the coaching psychology field, where a more post-positivist paradigm may hold sway and could have impacted their conclusions.

De Haan urges 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 seven 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).

It is into the gap identified by these works that this research is placed: Empirical, practitioner-led, and focused on an element of *what helps make* coaching effective, rather than trying solely to attest that *it is* effective. These elements are all important to me as a professional coach. In order to give something of value back to this growing industry, I wanted to produce a piece of original, empirical research that is of help to coaches. Much of my work is spent helping develop the skills of coaches and leaders in business that want to assimilate a coaching approach into the way they interact with members of their team. Improving my ability to do that effectively through new insights from the research will be valuable both to me and the delegates I work with. Furthermore, by contributing to the literature into what makes coaching effective, specifically closing an area within the gap identified as currently existing in the research i.e. the interaction between coach and client, it is my sincere hope to help coaches and clients improve their experience of the process. Those involved in coach-development

such as trainers, lecturers, and supervisors, may also find this work of interest in informing their coaching development programmes. While the study is focused on a micro-technique of coaching, it may also provide a deeper understanding of the coaching process more broadly. Furthermore, it may prove of interest to those within communities outside of coaching, such as counselling or therapy, where asking questions is a key skill.

If there is a dearth of advice to coaches in relation to questions in coaching, resulting from a lack of empirical research, that does not mean, thankfully for me and other coaching practitioners, that there is no advice available. Such advice comes from two categories of literature: The first is scholarly work that references empirical study, but is not a direct product of such research itself; the second is practitioner literature, based largely on accepted wisdom or the experience of the coach. Advice and insights on the theme of questions in scholarly text is scant at best, with notable exceptions such as Cox who dedicates an entire chapter to synthesising empirical work on the theme of questions (Cox, 2013). There is, however, plenty of such advice to be found in the practitioner literature. These range from whole texts that focus on questions (Stoltzfus, 2008) to, more commonly, sections of chapters that are dedicated to questions in coaching (Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, Sandahl, & Whitworth, 2011; Megginson & Clutterbuck, 2010; Rogers, 2005). These cited texts generally:

- outline the author's view on the role of questions in coaching
- draw distinction between closed and open questions
- discuss a class of questions generally referred to as 'powerful'
- suggest that leading questions are not as effective as asking questions that are bias-free
- provide a list of questions that coaches – new and experienced – might find useful in their practice

While there is much useful advice to be found in these texts, and clearly the help is well intentioned, it cannot be based on evidence from empirical research because as the review of literature chapter presented here will attest, no such research exists.

Two approaches that originate from outside of coaching, but have been adapted by practitioner authors and coaches alike, offer unique views of questions. Both approaches use a very specific set of questions that are prescribed and have little flexibility in how they are asked of clients. The first approach draws on the successful work in psychotherapy of Grove (Grove, 1998) who developed the use of ‘Clean Language’ that helped trauma patients improve their condition. One coaching work that emerged from Groves’ work was that of Sullivan and Rees (2008) who outlined how coaches could use such an approach effectively by employing twelve basic questions. A mini-industry has grown up around this approach, and now coaches present themselves to clients as ‘clean coaches’.

The second approach has also emerged from a different place and has been absorbed into the coaching industry. Kline has advised many organisations since the early 1970s to develop ‘Thinking Environments’ where attention is paid in a way that fosters deep and clear thinking to enhance results, performance, and lives (Kline, 1999). More recently, this approach has been crafted into a coaching style that, like clean language, promotes the bracketing out of the coach to enhance the experience, thinking, and learning of the client, by using a strictly predetermined set of questions.

Taking all of this body of practitioner literature together, it can be seen that questions appear to have an important role to play in the toolkit of coaches. Advice is plentiful, albeit that it is based on accepted wisdom, personal experience, or apparent efficacy from other fields and transmuted to work in the field of coaching. The factor that all of these sources have in common is that none of the advice that is proffered is the result of empirical research. None of these texts is the direct result of a controlled, designed, exploration into the experience of asking questions in a coaching session and, as such, this research hopes to go some way to filling that gap.

As a result of the gaps that have been identified, the primary aim of this research is to investigate the phenomenon of “exploring the experience of generating questions in coaching”. Three supporting questions that this research also sought to provide insight into are:

- 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 of when generating questions in coaching?

Providing evidence in answer to the primary research aim and supporting questions should to help fill some of the gaps that exist, in addition to assisting the broader coaching community reflect on their own practice and how they might develop their asking skills further.

1.2 Theoretical position and methodology

Developing and maturing my theoretical position has been a process completed over some considerable time. Much of that process was going on outside of my awareness and some through critical moments of insight. One such moment was the result of a conversation I had with a doctoral student who had no background in coaching. He asked me to describe how I coached my clients. I outlined that I held a belief that the people I work with are able to find or draw on their own resources that will help them resolve situations, achieve goals, or develop their behaviours and thinking. The answers to such situations would emerge, prompted by questions and reflections I would play into the conversation with my clients. Importantly, I believed that the client's views of their circumstances, goals, and plans were right for them. The student wanted to know what preparation I did for such 'open' conversations. I replied "little or none", explaining that this helped me stay open to what would transpire in the conversation. "Really? So you just turn up and wing it?" was his follow-up question, asked only partly in jest. It was the jolt that resulted from this question that made me reflect on how I do what I do as a coach, and what it might tell me about how I viewed the reality held by my clients and the effect of this on my own coaching and research. My conclusions were that I am very comfortable in my coaching practise to accept that the version of reality that is most important to the client is the one they hold relative to themselves. My pre-judging of what they should do, and which goals they should choose, would all be coming from my own biases and would be informed by my own reality which cannot be an exact replica of the reality of my client: We are different people, with different histories and, as a result, hold different values as important. We may interpret the same things quite differently. For me, there would be a wholly unacceptable level of arrogance of thinking that would accompany such phrases as "I know exactly how you

feel” or “I’ve been in exactly that situation myself”. I concluded that for me as a researcher and coach, reality is relative and subjective (Garvey, 2014).

There are philosophical differences as to the meaning of the term ‘coaching’ (Price, 2009), but for the purposes of this research, ‘coaching’ will be defined broadly as a flexible, individualized approach to human development and goal achievement (Bachkirova, Cox, & Clutterbuck, 2010; Bachkirova, 2011). It should be noted here that my own coaching has an integrated pedigree. My coaching does not spring from any single discipline or school of psychology, but rather integrates approaches and techniques from several ‘homes’ and while it has a clear outcome-focus – almost all of my work takes place in corporate organisations – it also focuses centrally on the human being with whom I work. The combinations of all of these variables of philosophy, definition, and coaching approach allow a small glimpse into some of the issues faced by coaches who want to research into their own discipline.

In summary, taking such views from my coaching and extending them into the approach for this research seemed both a natural and the ‘right’ thing for me to do. I wanted to explore how other coaches experienced their reality of coaching practice that I found deeply fascinating. My outputs would not, and could not, be generalised to the whole coaching community, but I hoped they would give an interesting insight into how this group of coaches experienced generating questions. If other coaches recognised some conclusions as similar to their own experiences, then hopefully it may prompt a new way of thinking about this critical skill. The task became finding a research approach that matched my research aims and was aligned to my subjective, anti-essentialist theoretical position.

As I will outline later in this thesis, I started my research committed to constructivist grounded theory, after Charmaz (2006), but quickly realised that this did not suit either my aims nor align to my theoretical views. Following wider reading, I settled on embracing heuristic inquiry as the methodology for this study. This approach allowed me to engage in the research without the need to ‘bracket’ myself out and gave me the space to join in the research and ‘get inside’ this topic that has held fascination for me for so long.

Heuristic inquiry 'is a way of engaging in scientific search through methods and processes aimed at discovery; a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences' (Moustakas, 1990, p 15). It is an overt part of this methodology that the primary researcher be involved intrinsically in the process. To try to remove the researcher from the process would distance them from the phenomenon and remove their ability to tap into both tacit knowledge and the accompanying insight, which are such critical components of heuristic inquiry.

Wrestling with both my own coaching approach and questions of how I view reality allowed me to gain clarity on my ontological position and drew me to a research methodology that is aligned with these views. After a false start, I pursued heuristic inquiry and aligned my approach and methods of data gathering and analysis accordingly. Once this process was clear, I was able to undertake the research commencing with analysing the data of five coaches from a focus group and the recruiting of eight co-researchers for the heuristic research. Both groups comprised experienced coaches who came from a range of coaching approaches, although the majority described themselves as using an integrated approach.

In terms of the methods that were applied within this research I used a two-part approach.

In part 1, I arranged a focus group discussion with the five coaches mentioned above, that was audio-recorded and transcribed. The analysis of the transcription helped provide some very broad direction for coaches to consider when capturing the essence of their experiences in part 2 of the research.

In part 2, there were four steps that reflected the proposed approach for heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990).

1. Reflections received from co-researchers in any form that helped represent the experience for them faithfully
2. Audio recorded and transcribed conversational interviews with each co-researcher

3. Presenting back individual ‘portraits’ of experience of each co-researcher
4. Synthesising data to expose essential elements

Following steps 1 and 2 above, I undertook a process of analysing the output to capture insights into the individual experiences reported by each co-researcher. After a period of immersion in the data, I left it for a period of time to allow it to percolate. Following this active-fallow period, I returned to the data of each co-researcher and, following a process of thematic analysis, drew up an individual representation for each, referred to as a ‘portrait’. These were offered to the respective co-researcher for feedback. From there I once again returned to the data and drew out what I came to term the ‘essential elements’ from the experiences of all co-researchers and produced a representation of these elements in the form of a creative synthesis. It is this process, and its results, that are presented in this thesis. In the next section I shall outline the structure of the thesis and provide a brief overview of each chapter.

1.3 Thesis plan

Chapter 2: Literature review

Initially the terms of the literature search are outlined, including explanations of sources searched, particularly where material originated from disciplines outside of coaching. As a result of the dearth of empirical coaching literature in the area of questions, it was necessary to extend the literature search to these other disciplines. A justification for narrowing the additional disciplines for inclusion to the fields of education and therapy, with a specific reference to philosophy of linguistics, is offered. A structure of the resulting literature review is provided.

The review is framed under four key areas: The purpose/role of questions; the relationship; the skill of asking questions; and the experience of generating questions. Each area is presented with coaching specific literature in focus, where it exists, with the relevant literature from other fields providing supporting material. A conceptual framework is provided that seeks to summarise the current state of the research into questions and identify where the gaps exist in the literature. The research questions that have been formulated to help close this gap are outlined in the summary of this chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed review of the heuristic process I undertook in identifying my own theoretical positions in relation to ontology and epistemology. The chapter outlines how these philosophical positions are aligned with the selection of the methodological approach of heuristic inquiry. The co-researcher recruitment process that was undertaken is provided, as are their profiles, albeit in a way that protects their anonymity. Heuristic inquiry has a predetermined set of steps that enable the uncovering and understanding of individual experience – these steps are clearly outlined in this chapter. The chapter also includes my reflexive observations as they impacted the research at each stage. An explanation of the process of thematic analysis that was employed in line with the methodology is outlined.

There follows an overview of chapter 4 that presents my own experiences of generating questions. Three analytical chapters, each focused on key themes to emerge from the research follow this. The final section of each of these chapters explores how the findings relate to the literature. The last chapter summarised here is the conclusion.

Chapter 4: ‘The coaching dance’

This chapter provides an insight into my own, real, experiences of generating questions in coaching. The rationale for including this chapter is made in the text, but in summary this research aims 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 in a way that only comes from extended periods of immersion with the question under study.

Chapter 5: ‘All the things that help you’

The themes identified in chapter 5 suggest coaches use a range of influences that pre-exist any particular coaching session, to generate questions. These influences are presented in two groups: The first group comprises six elements that reside with the coaches and their own ‘history’ or, as I have termed it, ‘background’. The second group of influences consists of elements that rely more clearly on the interaction between the coach and the client within their context. I have termed this latter group of influences ‘Precursors’. These precursors contribute to shaping the experience, but precede the

actual generation of questions. This chapter examines both of these two themes in depth, to explore their place in the experience of generating coaching questions.

Chapter 6: ‘In the moment’

This chapter examines how co-researchers experienced creating questions for their clients. From co-researcher accounts, there appeared to be three broad elements that represented what happened at that point in time of questioning in coaching: Noticing, forming, and asking. These three elements provided the structure for this chapter. Noticing explores how co-researchers experienced collating and analysing the information they then used, or discarded, in relation to generating questions. The second section explores how co-researchers form their questions, some of which are generated consciously while others emerge non-consciously. The final section provides insights into experiences of the very moment of asking coaching questions.

Chapter 7: ‘Knock on the door with curiosity’

The moment of asking a question that a coach has generated, is often followed quickly by being engulfed in a new round of data from the client as they respond, verbally, and non-verbally, to the enquiry. This chapter explores the experiences of co-researchers at this point in the exchange between client and coach. The themes to emerge that constitute this chapter are the co-researchers’ experience of feedback on questions they have asked; the inner dialogue experienced by co-researchers; and finally, an exploration of the interesting dynamic between the coach-client relationship and questions.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The final chapter includes an overview of the research, including the key findings. In line with the methodology of heuristic inquiry, the presentation of the creative synthesis can be found here, with accompanying conclusions. These conclusions are related to the research question and offer the resulting contribution to knowledge. The chapter also provides key insights for coaching literature and practice. It is here too that the limitations of the research are outlined, and suggestions for future research are made.

Summary

Conducting this research is a deeply personal pursuit that has emerged from years of fascination with the role of questions in coaching, and why and how coaches ask the questions that they do, or do not. However, in addition to satisfying a personal interest, I am also keen to contribute to the growing field of coach-practitioner led research. I want to help shape the industry, which is graduating towards becoming a profession. In order to achieve that wider aim, this original research is positioned centrally in an area that the giants who have gone before me have identified as an area that is rich for exploration. Thus, my focus on a micro-technique of coaching is my contribution to that broader development of coaching.

Questions are largely an under-researched area of the gamut of coaching skills. On the assumption that all coaches use questions at some point in their practice, they may find the outputs from this research illuminating for their own practice and, by extension, of help to their clients.

It is to a review of the current state of the research and literature that the next chapter turns. By examining current research in the area of coaching, in addition to other related disciplines where questions are employed, the existing knowledge is made known and the current gaps in research made clear.

Chapter 2 Literature review

This chapter begins by providing details of the process undertaken to search and review literature related to the research focus: “Exploring the experiences of generating questions in coaching”. This review includes search terms and methods, and explains the rationale for including certain literature (Booth, 2006). The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to presenting an analysis of the extant literature that focuses on using questions from coaching and other related fields, concluding with making the case for undertaking research in a new direction.

The literature search

The sampling strategy used for the review was selective, in that it drew on literature on the theme of ‘questions’, especially where these form an important part of a process of interaction or learning. The fields eventually included in the review resulting from using the above strategies were coaching and mentoring, a range of psychotherapeutic approaches, teaching and learning, linguistics, and philosophy of language.

The search started with a broad coaching-specific subject review, around the theme of ‘questions in coaching’ and similar phrases, carried out using internet search engines e.g. Google Scholar. The results from these were then pursued via electronic journal databases including PsychINFO, Web of Science, Business Source Complete and EBSCOhost. Following a search for coaching specific literature, a wider range of areas was explored to uncover relevant literature from the fields outlined above. Citation searching was employed to a limited extent, because it appeared to generate a high proportion of results that focused on areas less relevant to this study. However, some weight was given to sources that had higher citation figures, although only after their relevance to this study had been established.

Studies included in the review were primarily empirical. These were either published articles or unpublished research studies. There is some reference to conference material and published books where these are scholarly in nature and provide references to empirical work. Importantly, the reviewed literature included studies that were both quantitative and qualitative, although because of the nature of coaching, coupled with

its relative immaturity as a field of study, the majority of the sources that were accessed were reporting on qualitative research.

Most of the literature included in this review falls within the date range of 2000-present day. This span was not pre-set as part of the search parameters, but reflects the increase in the frequency of published research in the field. It also reflects the change in focus for research in the field. As coaching matures, it has an impact on the research that is undertaken. As a discipline evolves, so research tends to move from a focus on exploring questions of efficacy towards more granular research, finally arriving at exploring individual experiences (Fillery-Travis & Cox, 2014; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011).

The searching was limited to papers that were written in English. This resulted in literature almost exclusively being drawn from research that had been undertaken in the UK, USA, and Australia, or which had been undertaken elsewhere but published in journals produced with English text.

Structure of the literature review

There were very few coaching studies that fitted all the criteria for inclusion as a result of the specific parameters set. Therefore, in order to gain a useful insight into the topic, it was necessary within this literature search to include work on questions from other fields. Research on improving patient and student-doctor interaction through learning how to use open-questions (Tsai, Lu, & Frankel, 2013), and increasing the number of questions cancer patients ask (Brown, Butow, Boyer, & Tattersall, 1999) are two examples of the use of questions from the field of medicine. Similarly, improved 'lie detection' by untrained interrogators (Levine, Shaw, & Shulman, 2010) and evaluation of police interviewing techniques including the use of questions, both come from the field of law enforcement (McGurk, Carr, & McGurk, 1993). In addition to these examples, there is also literature located in the field of academic research which looked at interviewing, particularly exploring the wording of survey questions (Presser et al., 2004; Schuman & Presser, 1996) and questions used in structured interviews (Campion, Campion, & Hudson, 1994). However, these areas are less directly related to coaching and, as a result, the search was redirected mainly to areas that were deemed more closely aligned to the process and outcomes of coaching. As a result, two key settings

have been selected for fuller review: Education and therapy. A particular offering from philosophy of linguistics has been utilised in section 3 on the skills of asking questions as this helps understand some of the mechanics of generating a question.

In attempting to structure this chapter in a way that synthesises the literature in a meaningful way, I have used the following approach as outlined in figure 2.1 below:

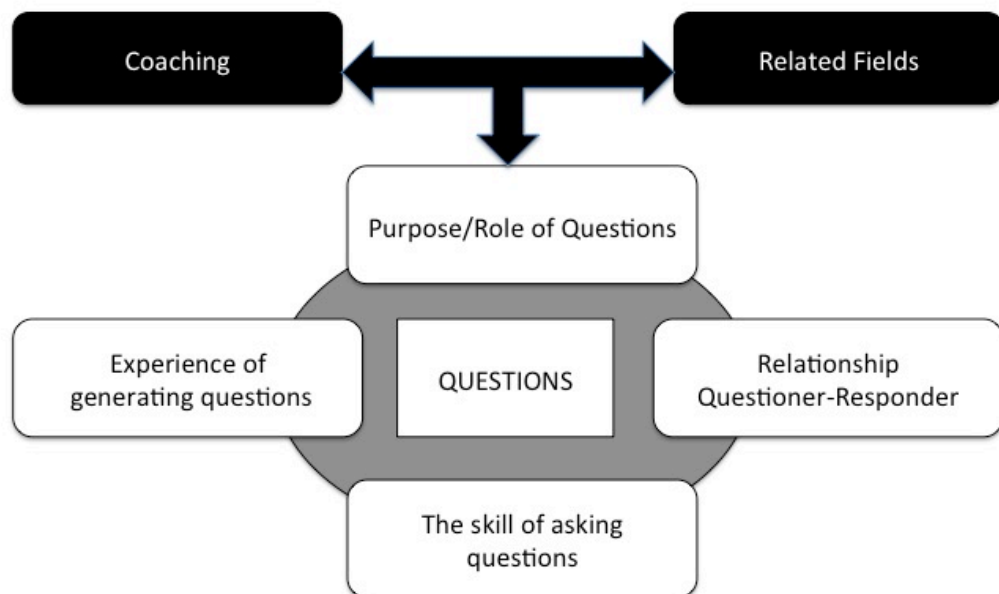


Fig 2.1 Showing the structure of chapter 2 as a result of a synthesis of the existing literature.

Each section of this review first presents literature from the coaching corpus. This is followed by a presentation of relevant research from the other related fields. Where relevant, comparison, contrast, and comment follow, including a statement about any apparent gaps in the literature. Section 1 explores what the literature says in relation to the role and purpose of questions. Section 2 draws together the literature on the significance of the questioner-responder relationship and its possible impacts on the questions asked in an exchange. Section 3 recounts what the literature has to say about the skill of asking questions. Section 4 presents the literature on experience of

generating questions. The final section presents a conceptual framework resulting from this review and argues that there are significant gaps in the literature concerning coaching questions and describes how this research will contribute to knowledge and coaching practice.

1: The purpose and role of questions

This section will review the literature related to the role and purpose of questions. The review will commence by presenting the relevant literature from coaching. There is little direct empirical literature that uncovers the purpose and role of questions, although there is coaching research that indirectly exposes this link. Scholarly and practitioner work is reviewed.

It would be a reasonable assumption to suggest that the only role of questions is to gain information or a response from the person to whom the question is directed. However, Cohen (1929) identified that this is *not* universally the case. Even where it is the objective of the enquiry, the use to which the information can be applied, is varied. In a similar vein, rhetorical questions are often used to persuade and thus, do not seek for the respondent to provide a reply or any information (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004). This section will explore how questions are perceived in terms of their purpose or role in coaching and related fields (education and therapy) respectively.

1.1 Purpose of coaching questions

Defining the purpose of coaching as a concept, rather than defining the specific purpose of any single coaching engagement, appears rooted broadly in the aim of helping people achieve their personal and professional goals and bringing about positive change (Bachkirova, 2011; Brockbank, 2008; Kilburg, 1996). The purpose of questions it may be argued, as an integral tool of the coach, 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).

In a comprehensive review of the process of coaching, Cox (2013) devotes a whole chapter to questions and their role in coaching which, she establishes, 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). In a randomized study, where undergraduates had to respond to coaching questions online, it was found that both solution-focused questions and problem-focused questions were effective in enhancing goal approach. Furthermore, the solution-focused questions produced significantly greater increases in goal approach, positive affect, decreased negative affect and increased self-efficacy (Grant, 2012).

Thus, it would appear that there is, albeit limited, some evidence 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.

1.2 Purpose of questions from related fields

A reference text on questions in therapy is the work by McGee et al. (2005). This was based on the doctoral work of McGee (1999) which took a functional analysis approach to understanding the role of questions in therapy. The resulting analysis produced a view that all questions are co-constructed: The mere fact that they are asked by one person [Q] and responded to by another [R] suggests interplay between both parties. Several purposes of asking were identified, namely to:

- Assist the process of change
- Release information

- Invite taking responsibility in the client
- (De)construct dominant and impoverishing stories
- Reframe experience

This list aligns well to the findings of a meta-analysis of the therapy literature completed by James, Morse, & Howarth, (2010) into the purpose of questions in therapy. The addition that James et al. include, that McGee omits, is ‘building new adaptive thinking styles’ (James et al., 2010, p.83), an important element in helping the client achieve sustainable change, rather than the ‘fixed for today’ problem-solving approach to some therapy (Padesky, 1993).

A review of the literature suggests that questions in education are asked from two different perspectives, but with a common overall goal. The first perspective is of questions asked by the teacher or instructor. The second perspective is that of questions asked by the student. The common goal of both is improving the learning of the student by the promotion of thinking (Hokanson, 2011) and through the reflection (Zee & Minstrell, 2001) that occurs when one is required to respond to a question.

Teachers use questions to monitor comprehension and assessment (Sutcliffe, 2011) to foster active processing (Rosehine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996), engage with reading texts (Pearson, 1985), and give students greater responsibility for thinking (Zee & Minstrell, 2001). In order to achieve these ends, research has provided insights into the fact that teachers use questions that can be grouped into categories based on the depth, breadth, or complexity of the process required to provide an appropriate reply (Moyer & Milewicz, 2002). Interestingly, teachers have been found to use a high proportion of questions that were of a basic recall or encyclopaedic nature, although they moved dynamically between these questions and those that are more reflective or abstract in nature (Abrandt-Dahlgren & Oberg, 2001; Rosehine et al., 1996). There is some suggestion that more skilled students benefit from the higher order questions, while lower performing students respond better to fact-based questions, which may account for the flexible nature of the question asking (Carlsen, 1991).

Students are encouraged to ask questions in order to engage in the work they are studying, the process of which can lead to higher order questions being asked (Farmer,

2007), more effective comprehension of text (Pearson, 1985), and improved critical thinking (King, 1992; Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005). Graesser and Person (1994) suggest that attainment improved following tutorials where students were taught to ask higher quality questions, although question frequency alone did not impact attainment positively. This may suggest that questions themselves are no guarantee of learning, but that the questions have to be of the right type for the learner to improve.

1.4 Summary of purpose of questions

Questions serve a range of purposes, including supporting the broader system in which they are deployed, as well as in specific client-related circumstances. In coaching, the purpose of questions is to help the coach aid clients to get into work of a ‘deeper’ nature that should help those clients to make positive change and progress towards their goals. There is no evidence of how coaches know if the questions they are asking are achieving their aim. There is also a lack of literature on whether there are other purposes that coaches use questions to achieve.

2: Relationship

Coaching, education, and therapy all, to a greater or lesser extent, pivot around the relationship between two parties. This section will look at if, and how, the relationship impacts questions.

2.1 The coaching relationship

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, and coaches who saw the executive as the client, rather than who viewed the sponsoring organisation as the client, were more likely to build faster and more effective relationships (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.

2.2 Relationship in related fields

The therapeutic alliance between therapist and patient has some relevant echoes for coaches and clients with respect to the relationship. In therapy, an effective relationship can be a pre-condition for positive outcomes for the patient (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993). In research, looking at the impacts of the experience of the therapist on the alliance, better trained, more experienced therapists were better able to engage the clients as collaborators (Mallinckrodt & Nelson, 1991). James et al. suggest that asking questions that a client cannot answer, or that are delivered poorly, can make a client more confused and possibly undermine self-esteem as they struggle to answer questions they feel they should be able to. An impact of this can be that clients opt not attend future sessions (James et al., 2010, p.89).

In his research into conversations in First Grade classrooms, Mishler (1975) examined the effects of differences in power and the impact of successive questions. He established that if the respondent [R] chooses to withhold a reply following a question posed by the questioner [Q], it is likely to prove very challenging to gain access to any of the information required. Therefore, eliciting a response is a vital part of the

question-answer interaction. The type of response may depend on a number of relationship variables that the literature suggests will include but is not restricted to:

- i. Age difference between [Q] and [R]
- ii. Role difference between [Q] and [R]
- iii. The type of question asked

(Mishler, 1975).

Mishler (1975), suggests that differences in age and status may affect the length of responses children give to adults in contrast to those they give to peers.

2.3 Summary of relationship

‘Better’ questions may have a positive impact on the coaching relationship, as it appears poor questions in the field of therapy can negatively impact the therapeutic alliance. Merely by dint of being in the position of questioner, there is an implied power held by the coach/questioner. The questioner tends to lead the pace and direction of such interactions, and this perceived power difference may impact on responses (Mishler, 1975). While the variable of age may be less significant in the work of coaches, one might posit that status – real or perceived – can have an impact on the kind of response that a client is likely to provide. Evidence from research on the theme of deference would support the suggestion that differences such as age and status do impact the replies of the client (Krosnick, 1991; Lenski & Leggett, 1960).

There is little literature that refers directly to this dynamic between questions and the relationship, which is surprising when one considers the central importance of both building an effective coaching alliance and the use of questions. While there is a suggestion that coaches are more willing to challenge from the basis of a strong relationship, there is no research on the experience of coaches of asking those ‘tough questions’.

3: The skill of asking questions

To some extent, the richest area of literature in relation to questions was found in the area of the philosophy of linguistics. Making a case for establishing the nature of a question, and the different types and purposes of questions, was to be found here, albeit

in academic papers with no empirical research element. There was also much material to be found within the pantheon of practitioner literature. Sources from within the practitioner literature provided technical insight into questions, but ranged in the degree of empirical evidence-based foundation from which they were written. In this section, I shall present literature from coaching, education, and therapy, and conclude with insights gained from the philosophical literature, particularly in relation to presuppositions in questions and structuring questions in relation to the concept of deference.

3.1 The skill of asking questions in coaching

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. While these are not empirical sources of literature, they are well-referenced material and provide plenty of space for an exploration of questions. However, 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. In some respects, this reflects the Goal, Reality and Wrap Up elements of the GROW model, only overtly missing the Options element, where possible ways forward are explored (Alexander, 2006).

3.2 The skill of asking questions in other disciplines

It has been noted that despite the observation that therapists – especially those using cognitive therapeutic approaches – use a high proportion of questions in their work with clients (James & Morse, 2007), there has been little empirical research into questions used in the therapy process (McGee et al., 2005). Indeed, it seems that much of the literature centres on a small number of notable articles that, while no doubt academic in nature, were not always the product of primary research (Overholser, 1993; Tomm, 1988).

McGee (1999) summarised the process of question-asking in therapy as consisting of four elements. Each element could be defined as having underlying properties, which in turn produced certain impacts in a therapeutic conversation (See table 2.1 below).

Elements of Process	Property	Impact	Comparable Coaching Element
Adjacency Pairs	A relevant and 'expectable' turn in a pattern of two successive utterances	Tends to return the initiative to the therapist [Q]	Turn-taking where coach asks questions and client answers (e.g. Cox, 2013)
Presupposition	Underlying implicit assumptions	Communicates the perspective of the questioner. [R] can correct presuppositions	Future-oriented questions (e.g. Diget, 2010)
Bridging Inference	The interpretation of words and meanings undertaken by both [Q] and [R]	Making sense of utterances from other party	Coaching conversations (e.g. Rostron, 2006)
Creating Common Ground	Knowledge, beliefs, terms and assumptions that both [Q] and [R] share before they enter into the conversation	Answering accepts the presuppositions in the question which helps create common ground between [Q] and [R]	Through the coaching contract (e.g. Schein, 1980)

Table 2.1: Properties and impacts of four elements of question-asking in therapy (McGee, 1999) with examples of comparable coaching elements.

It can be seen from table 2.1 that the process of asking questions in therapy might share some characteristics with questions in coaching, such as turn-taking which inevitably returns the initiative to the coach. Coaching questions also contain implicit presuppositions in them; for example the future-oriented or hypothetical questions, identified by Diget (2010) contain the presuppositions that the client can project into their future, and has the cognitive capacity to answer hypothetical or more abstract questions among others. The coaching contract would establish a known common ground between coach and client within which coaching questions can be asked (Schein, 1980).

Not all therapeutic approaches use questions. Indeed, some eschew their use completely (McGee, 1999), although perhaps not unsurprisingly a variety of cognitive therapies seem to employ them widely. Solution focused therapy (SFT) (Berg & De Jong, 1996) uses two particular types of questions. The first is a 'special' question referred to as the 'Miracle Question'. This particular question asks clients to imagine a miracle happening that resolved their particular issues and forms an integral part of the SFT approach. Another particular question used in SFT is the scaling question, where clients are typically asked to rate an element of the discussion, e.g. their feelings of anxiety or

confidence in a proposed solution on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high). Outcome research has shown that SFT can be successful with clients in a number of contexts (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000; Kim, 2007) and by extension that questions are helpful in bringing about positive change in clients.

A range of ‘types’ of questions should be asked in order to bring about meaningful learning. Limiting questioning to ‘encyclopaedic’ questions suggests only a surface level of engagement with the concept under study, whereas using a range of question types indicate a deeper learning (Abrandt-Dahlgren & Oberg, 2001) although in classroom teaching this type of question appears to be asked relatively infrequently, as low as 4% of the time (Sigel & Saunders, 1977). Questions that need new answers as well as known answers, challenge learners to think (Hokanson, 2011). Socratic questions have been specifically found to promote Critical Thinking in distance learning environments when used by instructors and taught to learners (Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005) although their place in coaching has been questioned because of the ‘leading’ nature of these questions when employed in a coaching situation (Cox, 2012, p.116).

When teachers ask questions that they already know the answers to (‘display questions’) the impacts include closing down areas of real discourse to students, and results in them providing answering from recall rather than engaging in the question. Higher quality and quantity of output can be achieved in students when teachers ask questions that they do not already know the answer to (‘referential questions’) (Nicholson, 2014).

Vogler (2005) asserts that asking questions in the classroom is a skill that teachers can master, but in order to reach this stage they need to practise. To help teachers develop their questioning skills, he provides an overview of several elements of how to go about executing effective questions, including reference to how to sequence (Wragg & Brown, 2001), where a questions builds upon those previously asked. In advice of how to phase questions effectively, Vogler summarises several key research findings, including:

Lifting	Gradually increasing the cognitive level of questions
Same path	Asking questions at a similar cognitive level
Narrow to broad	Posing questions from a specific low cognitive level to a higher cognitive level that are broader in nature
Funnelling	Moving from broad questions at a low cognitive level to a specific higher cognitive level of questions

Table 2.2: Approaches to phrasing questions in primary school education (Vogler, 2005)

There are questions that are open-ended that start with question stems such as: ‘Where ...’, ‘What...’ or ‘When ...’, referred to as ‘*wh-*’ interrogatives (Bromberger, 1966). These open questions invite fuller responses while polar questions tend to require simply a yes/no reply (Cerovic, 2010). Both types of question require that the presuppositions made by the questioner in the construction of the question are correct, otherwise the respondent will find answering difficult, or may be unable to answer truly. This is highlighted in the familiar polar (yes/no) question that shows potentially faulty underlying assumptions: “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?” The respondent cannot respond truthfully if they have never beaten their wife, as the presupposition in the question is that they have (McGee, 1999). The only appropriate response, assuming that the respondent has never beaten their wife, is for the respondent to challenge the underlying assumption.

Deciding on the information required and then generating a ‘type’ of question, which will fulfil this purpose, is dependent on a number of underlying factors in the relationship between the questioner [Q] and respondent [R]:

- a) [Q] and [R] presume [Q] does not know the answer to the question being posed
- b) [Q] desires/needs to know the answer and that [R] will supply it
- c) [Q] believes the presupposition to the question and expects [R] to give a true response

(Dillon, 1982)

Conditions a) and b) above, are important for setting up the context in which to ask a question. [Q] needs data, which may come in many forms, including verbal and non-verbal. At the heart of the matter is that there are gaps in knowledge, anomalous

information, obstacles to goals, or uncertainty for which new information is a way to resolve these various circumstances (Otero & Graesser, 2001). With the information comes the ability of achieving the knowledge goals of [Q] and the opportunities to make judgments (Cohen, 1929), and resolve decision problems (van Rooy, 2003).

If replies represent a wide gamut of *potential responses* to a question, ‘the answer’ is the reply that [Q] needs to complete their investigation. The answer therefore can be seen as a subset of all possible replies (Harrah, 2002) and the depth of understanding one gains from such an answer is somewhat dependent on the question that is asked (Ram, 1994). Dillon’s multi-disciplinary meta-review of literature on questioning suggests that from the understanding gained by [Q] they can learn what [R] knows. As a result, questions are important to learning and education and have been researched extensively in this field for well over a century (Dillon, 1982, p.152). If such research was available in coaching too, it could be a potentially helpful way for coaches to use questions and the output from them, to understand more about their clients and generate following questions accordingly.

In terms of the experience of constructing a question, a practical suggestion is that each ‘turn’ within a conversation is less than twenty words (Clark & Schaefer, 1989, p.280). There is also some literature providing guidance on the construction of questions – beyond the standard practitioner advice of using open-questions (Maltbia, Marsick, & Ghosh, 2014) that centres on the role of deference and its impacts on conversations. Fraser and Nolen (1981) describing deference, identified a theme that was often implicit and that occurs between two parties according to an initial set of rights and obligations that will limit, at least initially, the boundaries for the interaction and the construction of questions. Their work suggested that three criteria make utterances more deferent:

- i. A conditional sentence was judged more deferent than the corresponding indicative one, e.g. “Could you do that?” vs. “Can you do that?”
- ii. Interrogative sentences were considered more deferent than the corresponding imperative form, e.g. “Could you do that?” vs. “Do that, could you?”
- iii. Positive modal sentences were judged more deferent than the corresponding negative version, e.g. “Could you do that?” vs. “Couldn’t you do that?”

(Fraser & Nolen, 1981 p. 103,)

3.4 Summary of the skill of asking questions

Beyond the practitioner resources, there is little research on how to ask coaching questions. It appears that questions coaches ask tend to be future oriented and hypothetical, and that closed questions are used for clarifying facts. There are suggestions from Rostron that a clarity over a coaching model as a frame for questions maybe a useful approach for coaches, aligned to three distinct phases of a coaching conversation and that listening is also a key part of how to ask effective coaching questions (Stout-Rostron, 2006).

As suggested earlier, literature highlights the central importance of the coach-client relationship. Failing to play by the unspoken rules of a ‘conversational contract’ may result in questions that are considered impolite, and one might conclude that this would have a negative impact on this delicate coach-client relationship (Fraser & Nolen, 1981). Such negative impacts may occur without intent on the part of the coach, but as Tomm notes, there can be a schism between what the therapist (coach) intends and the effect that it brings about. How clients respond to a question depends on the uniqueness of their own organisation and structure at each moment, regardless of what or how the therapist asks the question. Thus, questions can only be asked based on the anticipated effects it causes in the client (Tomm, 1988).

There is a gap in the literature in relation to insights from coaches as to how, why and which questions they ask in any moment. Understanding the experience and the process of generating, deciding to ask or not to ask, and what coaches use to formulate questions, are all areas currently with little empirical research literature. This research aims to provide some new evidence-based knowledge to add to the advice that can be provided.

4: The experience of generating questions

This section will summarise the limited literature that purports to explore the experience of asking questions. As a result of the paucity of literature, particularly from coaching, the following section is presented in an integrated way, presenting insights from all three disciplines explored within this review. The literature outlines the impact of the level of the coach’s ‘knowing’ and coach-client compatibility on the experience of coaching.

Coaching research at the Interdevelopmental Institute discovered that where social-emotional development and cognitive development of the coach are well formed, and certainly compatible with those of the client, the impacts of their coaching was likely to be more effective (Laske, 2006). This developmental theme is echoed in education research where results show that the more knowledge that 12th grade students had, compared to 8th grade students, the more questions they asked about texts they were reading (Otero & Graesser, 2001). This suggests that the more knowledge children have, the more questions they can ask. While clearly not directly from the coaching literature, this does resonate with Laske's findings (2006) that the developmental stage of the coach, relative to their client, impacts the experience and success of the coaching process and may directly impact the questions they are able to ask.

4.1 Summary of the experience of asking questions

As has been shown, there is no extant literature on the actual experience of generating and asking questions in coaching. There is some degree of interpretation that might be made from other fields, and some advice that can be played into coaching and conclusions that could be drawn about the possibilities, but no literature exists about how coaches experience generating and asking questions.

5: Gaps in the literature and the contribution of this research

It is apparent that the empirical research in relation to question asking from all fields is sparse. In order to explore the experience of asking coaching questions, it has been necessary to make the most of what limited research has been undertaken across all fields and extrapolate from that. Despite the breadth of the search, it is only possible to offer quite a short review into the process by which questions are asked in a coaching conversation.

A surprising finding from the literature search was the lack of relevant research from the field of neuroscience, particularly when the insights it might have provided could have been of interest to coaches (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011b) and provide useful insights into any theories of asking questions. However, despite searching various branches of neuroscience, including those related to linguistics, neurolinguistics and cognitive linguistics, no relevant literature was discovered. I have made a

recommendation for future research at the end of the thesis to suggest this is an area rich for investigation.

In summary, this review has examined the available research into questions from several fields, and synthesised them into inter-disciplinary themes where possible. In order to explain the rationale for deciding on the research questions for study, the following conceptual framework (figure 2.2) represents the current literature relating to coaching questions, coupled with what is yet to be discovered. It fixes this research squarely at the heart of the areas as yet unexplored.

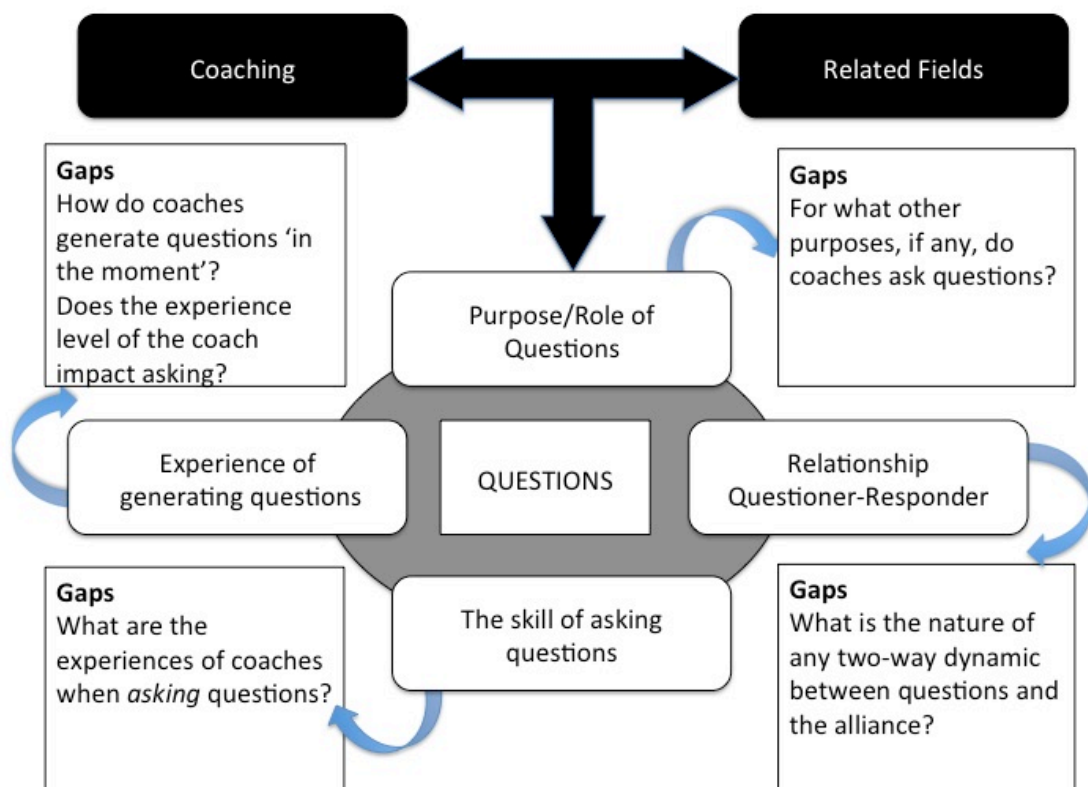


Figure 2.2: A conceptual framework of coaching questions and the current gaps in knowledge

6: An examination of the conceptual framework

A review of the literature produced insights into a range of areas in relation to the concept of generating questions in coaching. Evidence relating to the purpose of questions, the coach-client relationship, in addition to the skills of asking was available for review, in varying degrees of depth. However, there were gaps in relation to the concept too. There was very little literature specifically centred on the experiences of coaches in relation to generating and asking coaching questions. No empirical research could be found relating to how the level of experience of the coach impacted on generating questions. There is a suggestion that the coach-client relationship and questions have a dynamic link between them, although this conclusion is a result of extrapolating from the other disciplines explored in the review of literature. There was a paucity of coaching related evidence exploring this dynamic between questions and the coach-client relationship. Fig. 2.2 represents the broad areas of knowledge that emerged from a synthesis of the literature, coupled with the specific gaps that exist.

While the emergence of these gaps may be apparent because of the nature of the literature, it may also be present, by extension, owing to the nature of coaching and its current state of development. If coaching research is still in its earliest stages of moving away from attempts to prove its efficacy, much of the extant research could have been focused on the client and how to make the intervention more effective both for them and from their perspective. This would be an understandable approach, and may have manifested itself in a bias of literature centred on the client. To some extent, this misses the point that the facilitation of improved client results, and goal achievement etc in part, also relies on the knowledge, developmental stage, behaviours and skills, including the ability to use questions effectively, of the coach.

The areas of research in relation to questions that seem to be currently devoid of literature are as follows:

1. How do coaches generate questions ‘in the moment’?
2. Does the experience level of the coach impact asking?
3. Beyond improved client achievement, for what other purposes, if any, do coaches ask questions?
4. What are the experiences of coaches when asking questions?

5. What, if any, is the nature of any two-way dynamic between questions and the coaching alliance?

The design of this research aims to help uncover new knowledge and contribute to the body of coaching literature in relation to questions in coaching from the perspective of the coach. The final research questions that were explored emerged from the gaps that have been identified in the literature. The following chapter details the theoretical perspectives that informed the selection of the research methodology and the final design. It provides insight into the co-researchers, who were so central to the research, and a detailed outline of the process of data analysis.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology used to investigate coaches' experiences of generating questions in coaching sessions. The chapter outlines the theoretical perspectives that underpinned the selection of both the methodology and the methods that were used to address the research question.

3.1 The research question

The primary aim of the research was to explore the experience of generating questions in coaching. There were three supporting questions that the research sought to investigate:

- 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 of when generating questions in coaching?

The research question itself underwent a number of iterations. Previous versions included elements of the client perspective, as well as an emphasis on trying to produce a theory of 'question-asking'. The journey to settling on the final version of the research question reflects two elements of the process I went through as a researcher. Firstly, as I gradually clarified the understanding of my own theoretical perspectives, I was able to generate a research question that seemed congruent with my own worldview, one that is also evident in my own coaching approach. Secondly, undertaking a focus group discussion helped me decide that I wanted to use my own experience as an integral part of the research rather than try, in some rather contrived way, to 'bracket' my influence outside the process. Responding to these two factors in the way that the research question was finally formulated echoes the approach of Moustakas (1990), who points out that when we enter into a research problem fully and reflectively, both the question and the methodology will flow out of this heightened awareness.

3.2 Theoretical perspectives

The increasing clarity of my own theoretical perspective was an important development for me. Over time I have been able to understand my philosophy as more relativist in nature, and more closely to that stated by Paleč and Risjord (2010, p. 22-23):

“Ontologies are the product of human interpretive interactions with each other and with their environments. These interactions are often very different, constituting different ontologies. They are incommensurable in the sense that no one way of engaging the environment is right or wrong in metaphysical terms.”

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. Taking this anti-essentialist position seems ‘natural’ to me now, although it may of course be a learned stance. Whatever the roots of my philosophy, it seems authentic to me and reflective of how I tend to view the perspectives of people generally, not just those who are engaged as coaching clients.

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.

Defending such an anti-essentialist position has become something that I was gradually able to do without reference to the literature. I am not thrown by the self-referential paradox of perspectivism because I am clear that this is a valid position for me to take because it is *my view*. I do not suggest it is the only ontological perspective to hold; it is just a perspective that makes sense and feels authentic to me. I have since learned that

this was the second-level solution to the paradox offered by Nietzsche (Reginster, 2001).

The highly personal focus of this study meant there was a need to gather the reflections of coaches in relation to their experience of generating questions in their work. The data would therefore be personal and representative. In order to make sense of it within the framework of a context relativist position, a hermeneutic epistemology was adopted. This allowed for retaining the individual nature of experience and an acknowledgement that understanding can never be complete. Husserl considered it important that experiences not be understood as separate to the experience itself in order to be able to pursue ‘the pure generality of their essence’ (Husserl, 1999, p.249). Through his work on the hermeneutics of suspicion, Gadamer (1984) succinctly outlines both the limitations and the aspirations that I also hold in relation to this study:

“We can never be sure, and we have no proofs, of rightly understanding the individual utterance of another ... however, it was never doubted that behind a person’s individuality something common and intelligible could be re-enacted”

(Gadamer, 1984, p.57).

3.3 Heuristic research strategy – The process of selection

The research methodology that was initially planned was constructivist grounded theory, developed by Charmaz (2006) from the original work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later of Corbin and Strauss (1998). However, in a pivotal moment for me that occurred during an initial focus group, I realised a number of factors that felt important in relation to my role as a researcher and the kind of research I wanted to undertake:

- Increasingly, constructivist grounded theory did not feel right. It seemed to be at odds with my understanding of my own ontological and epistemological positions.
- My own passion for this topic was not being satiated by remaining on the fringes of the research. I wanted to become an intrinsic part of the study, with my peers.

- I was most interested in the experience of generating questions, rather than attempting to draw together some theory or framework about how to ask questions, which would necessarily attempt to be generic in nature.

As a result of these reflections, and after a good deal of soul-searching, I decided to abandon constructivist grounded theory as my chosen methodology and instead, embraced Heuristic Inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). On reflection, this change in approach itself was the result of my own heuristic internal search for meaning connected with the research question.

Having discarded constructivist grounded theory as a methodology, it was clear to me that what was needed was an approach that would provide a greater level of coherence between the research question, my own theoretical perspectives, and the need to undertake a study that was seen as credible. It has been suggested that one of the most significant ways that qualitative research can gain credibility – the qualitative investigators equivalent of ‘internal validity’ (Merriam, 1998) – is by adopting research methods that are well established (Shenton, 2004). Without over-analysing the degree to which we can say that heuristic inquiry is ‘well established’, it has long been a variant of phenomenological research designs, having been first discretely outlined by Moustakas in *Heuristic Research* (Moustakas, 1990). However, it was first used and documented by Moustakas in his work on *Loneliness* (Moustakas, 1961) and he acknowledges that much of his design in that work had its antecedents in the work of, amongst others, Maslow (1956) and Polanyi (1958). Furthermore, heuristic inquiry has been employed successfully by researchers to produce original empirical research including on the topics of acculturation (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010), experiences of leadership from different perspectives (Bryan & Starr, 2005), and coaching (Prescott, 2010; Worth, 2012).

Once the critical factors, as I now saw them, of the ‘fit’ of the design and the credibility factors had been addressed, I was aware of other elements that should be reviewed before making a final decision to adopt heuristic inquiry. Table 3.1 shows these additional factors:

Factors for consideration in selecting research methodology
1. Audience familiarity with chosen research approach
2. Researchers' training and experiences with different forms of qualitative designs
3. Researchers' and departments' partiality to one approach or the other
4. Researchers' comfort levels with structure, writing in a more literary or scientific way and the final written "product" that the design type produces
5. Constraints
6. Practicality
7. Time

Table 3.1: Additional factors to consider when deciding upon a research methodology. Adapted from the combined works of Trafford & Lesham (2008) and Creswell et al. (2007).

1. While it was possible that heuristic inquiry was not a familiar research methodology to some, my view was that even a lack of knowledge of the specifics of the approach would not make it inaccessible to a broad audience. There is a clear structure and process that needs to be undertaken and reported and which should make gaining an understanding relatively simple.

2. While I would not consider myself particularly experienced in a range of qualitative approaches, I felt that by taking the guidance offered by my supervision team, and by discussing my research with those who had already undertaken such an approach, I would have sufficient ability to undertake a study employing heuristic inquiry.

3. There was no doubt at this point that having found heuristic inquiry as a methodology, it 'felt' the right approach and was more aligned to my theoretical perspectives. My supervisory team had experience of supporting research students through using heuristic inquiry, but were wholly objective in relation to allowing me to decide whether or not to use it.

4. On first reading other studies that employed heuristic inquiry, there did seem to be a great deal of illustrating particular themes with large amounts of data – often pages of verbatim scripts. This was a consideration for me, in that I wondered how rigorous the research method was if much of the way of sharing findings with audiences was through reproducing large portions of direct quotations from co-researchers. However, the more of these studies I engaged with, the more I became aware that the very point of this style

is to retain a representation of individual experience in addition to a synthesis of the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1990, p.33).

5 (and 7). The main constraint was that while Moustakas puts no time limits on certain aspects of the process steps of heuristic inquiry, and it would have been both a pleasure and indulgence not to hurry or to ‘time by the clock or calendar’ (Moustakas, 1990, p.14), there were external forces at play, plus a practical element which constrained the length of time available.

6. The clear steps and processes laid out by Moustakas (1990) made it highly practical. The steps have some clear echoes for me of my own coaching approach, consequently, the process that was undertaken proved to be relatively straightforward, although time-consuming.

3.4 Heuristic research strategy – the heuristic inquiry design and methodology

In heuristic inquiry there are seven underlying concepts or processes and these support the completion of the phases that heuristic research passes through. Kenny reflects that there is an ‘intimate and natural link’ between these concepts and phases and this certainly seemed to be how they related to each other as the research unfolded (Kenny, 2012). Moustakas outlined the six phases of heuristic research which guide such ‘unfolding investigations’ (1990, p.27) although as Hiles (2001) pointed out, it is clear that Moustakas was alluding to a seventh phase, ‘validation’, which because of its importance to the outcomes of this research, I have decided to include in my approach.

Phases

In this section I have outlined the seven phases that are followed when undertaking heuristic research. Following on from each description is an insight into my own reflexivity work.

Initial engagement: This phase refers to the researcher being moved to explore further a question that is important to them. Moustakas (1990) also requires that the primary researcher have first-hand experience of the phenomenon under study. The experiences within my own coaching had been the very sparks for igniting my interest in exploring further the experience of generating questions in coaching. This phase ends with the development of a question.

As outlined in the introduction chapter, I have always been interested in the micro-techniques of coaching, and these are particularly relevant to my work, which includes a good deal of developing coaching skills in others. More than that, however, I had long been struck by the seeming mismatch between trying to be fully present with clients in coaching sessions, and yet noticing that my questions seemed to emerge from a less than fully conscious place. Exploring this was of real interest to me. I was keen to ensure however, that my own passion for the study did not result in me looking for co-researchers' experiences that matched my own, in order to validate my own experiences. Indeed, exploring any differences in the experiences of asking coaching questions was part of the motivation for the research.

Immersion: The second phase requires the primary researcher to fully engage with the topic and question. Moustakas suggests that the researcher should 'live' the question 'in waking, sleeping and even in dream states' (Moustakas, 1990, p.28). This process allows the researcher to become incredibly close to the question and the range of meanings and implications it may have.

For a period from March to August 2014 I threw myself fully into this immersion phase. In part this was because of the writing of my literature review, which enabled me to stay close to the question from a theoretical perspective. At this time I was writing a regular – often daily – journal reflecting on a wide range of topics that were connected with questions, including but certainly not limited, to:

- Questions that are generated but not asked
- My connection to questions as a teenager, in terms of my own maturation
- 'Big questions' vs. 'small questions'
- Metaphors for the experience of generating questions
- A way of asking questions that I describe as "contrived naivety"

Incubation: As the name suggests this phase requires the researcher to set aside the question and allow a kind of Gestalt process of wholeness to occur. By leaving the question alone for a while, key insights allow tacit understanding and intuition to deepen the clarity with which the researcher understands the problem (Moustakas, 1990, p.29).

The latter part of the summer of 2014 saw my attention turn from writing my literature review to other elements of this thesis. This shift seems to have naturally prompted a ‘leaving alone’ of the question. I seemed not only to change my attention but seemed for a while at least to run out of energy to inhabit the question and continue to reflect any further. I do not think that this meant there was not more to discover, but that I was finding the depth of immersion and the constant nature of it quite draining. I also felt I was remaining in that phase because I ‘should’ and wondered how much more useful information I was likely to glean as a result.

Illumination: Tapping into reflectiveness and tacit knowledge is key to generating new insights in relation to the question, within the context of heuristic inquiry. The insights and corrections to thinking emerge from connections and the deeper development that occurred in the incubation phase.

I had several moments where I understood ideas at a much deeper level than I had done previously. Two particular moments seemed to capture the spirit of the ‘Aha!’ moment for me: The first related to the data used by coaches to generate their questions; the second related to an idea I had not fully appreciated, which was the dynamic between the coach-client relationship and the questions. Both of these ideas seemed to almost jump up from the data and certainly I felt a bit disappointed in myself that I had not been so aware of something that suddenly felt like a ‘truth’ for me, i.e. how coaches use data from such a wide range of origins. I was aware that there was a possibility that such insights, exciting to me in their own way, still needed to be grounded in the material provided by co-researchers. As such I returned to the data frequently but these themes consistently arose from the analysis.

Explication: The “purpose of this phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning” (Moustakas, 1990, p.31). The key here is that the researcher is able to remember the individuality and uniqueness of experiences while trying to draw out some common essences. Through indwelling and focusing particularly, the researcher is able to gain new insights from fresh angles on the data that has been generated.

This stage took what felt like a considerable time for me. In fact it was only at around the time of writing the third draft of the conclusion chapter that I got the ‘essential’ nature of the experience. How this insight came about was both interesting and significant for me, in the sense that it emerged as a result of a single question. The question I was asked by a lecturer at the time was: “What do you want your research to be known for contributing to knowledge?” In answering the question about the central finding, I was able, somewhat feverishly, to jot down the central conceptual findings of the research in what I experienced as a genuine “Eureka!” moment.

Creative synthesis: In what Moustakas defines as the final phase of heuristic research the only person who has had sight of all the data and who is therefore the most familiar with all the processes and steps that have been undertaken to this point, namely the primary researcher, can pull the key themes and components together (Moustakas, 1990, p.32).

My first attempt at the creative synthesis, in the form of my own rendition of a well-known Japanese painting was too ‘constructed’. I was given feedback that a deeper emergence in the findings would prompt a synthesis that would ‘fit’ better. I had to get past the fact that I felt disappointment; it was my creative synthesis of my experience as I saw it at the time, therefore, I rationalised, it must be ‘right’. However, by waiting and working with the findings increasingly deeply, a more apt creative synthesis did ultimately emerge.

Validation: This phase is an additional step to the original phases, but appears to be both implied and also reflected in my own experience of staying with the data and engaging with co-researchers at particular parts of the process, to check the level of resonance of the findings (Hiles, 2001). Repeatedly going back to the raw data and then checking in with co-researchers for the sense of ‘meaning’ that it holds for them is key to this phase. While it is acknowledged that ultimately the primary researcher will affect the final version of key meanings and essences of the experience under study that are represented, it is felt that “verification is enhanced by returning to the research participants” (Moustakas, 1990, p.33).

I did take the personal depictions of the experience that were generated back to each co-researcher for their review. These were generated in the form of word clouds. Pleasingly for me, each co-researcher reported that the words I had captured from the data resonated for them. This response from peers I hold in high esteem felt like validation for the research, the methodology and my ‘grasp’ of their experiences too.

Concepts and processes

Not all phases emphasise or require all concepts to be engaged. Also, some concepts are present in more than one phase. ‘Tacit knowing’, for example, appears as an important concept in five of the seven phases, while indwelling is emphasised in just one phase. Appendix 1 presents an overview of phases, overlaid with the concepts in heuristic inquiry. The result is clearly an overly linear representation of a research approach that in my experience was quite fluid with a regular flow back and forth across the phases.

Table 3.2 outlines the key elements of the seven concepts that Moustakas refers to as important in the development of heuristic research:

Concept	Overview
Identifying with the Focus of Inquiry	Gaining a clear understanding of the research question by inhabiting it fully and deeply and as a result becoming one with it.
Self-dialogue	Creating a deep self-awareness of ‘intellect, emotion and spirit’ and how this relates to, and what it uncovers about, the experience being studied.
Tacit knowing	The key concept that underlies all others within Heuristic Inquiry. Tacit knowing gives “birth to the hunches and vague, formless insights that characterize heuristic discovery” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p.49)
Intuition	A drawing upon of clues; a sensing of patterns or underlying conditions that makes immediate knowledge available ‘without the intervening steps of logic and reasoning’ (Moustakas, 1990 p.23). It forms the bridge between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge.
Indwelling	A conscious and deliberate act of introspection in order to gain a deeper and fuller understanding of the experience under study.
Focusing	A process of clear thinking and reflection that allows researchers to determine key themes and important features of an experience.
The Internal Frame of Reference	Relating the uncovered essences of human experiences back to the individuals who have experienced them. This is achieved by discussing the experiences in an atmosphere of openness and trust (Moustakas, 1990).

Table 3.2: Overview of the seven concepts that underpin the phases of heuristic inquiry

The balance of adhering to a research structure with my own more fluid experience of it has echoes of a review and critique of the heuristic methodology by Sela-Smith who pointed out that there is an inherent contradiction within heuristic inquiry (Sela-Smith, 2002). There is a clear series of steps that exists, despite the fact that Moustakas himself felt that as long as a method or procedure was ethical, and directly related to the question, anything was an appropriate way forward for researchers to pursue (Moustakas, 1990).

The research design had two clear parts:

1. The completion of a focus group.
2. Heuristic research with co-researchers. This part was further separated into four sections, which reflected the suggested flow of heuristic inquiry:
 - i. Telephone briefing
 - ii. Co-researcher reflections
 - iii. 1:1 interview
 - iv. Analysis and validation

Part 1. Focus group

The focus group was drawn together to gather initial information about a topic that a review of the literature had clearly established, very little was known of at that time (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2006). The outputs from the focus group were also a way of helping prompt some thinking in co-researchers about what their coaching reflections might contain or report back on, although doing so in a prescriptive way was avoided as it felt at odds with the research methodology – uniformity was not the aim, rather the representations of individual experiences.

The focus group consisted of five coaches, four of whom were drawn directly from my own professional network and the fifth recruited from an online coaching group (Coaching At Work) hosted at LinkedIn. The group was made up of four females and one male coach whose ages ranged from mid-20s to early 50s. All coaches worked within a business/organisational context. Two of the five were in-house HR professionals who use a coaching approach as a key skill set within their roles in a multi-national financial institution. All coaches use an integrated approach rather than a specific coaching model, e.g. Gestalt coaching (Bluckert, 2010). There was no incentive provided to encourage participation.

I made a conscious decision that all coaches selected for the focus group would not be used in the heuristic co-researcher group. This decision was made in order to eliminate the impact of some of the co-researchers already having been exposed to the study, the topic under investigation, and having their thinking impacted by engaging deeply with the thoughts of others.

Invitations were sent out and accompanied by pro forma, following guidelines as regulated by the University Ethics Committee (See Appendix 2 & 3). All coaches gave their written consent to be included in the research under the constraints of these guidelines. The consent included an understanding that the focus group was to be audio-recorded.

The focus group meeting lasted for 90 minutes and was recorded simultaneously on two audio devices. The audio files were then sent to a private transcription service. Analysing the data was completed broadly in line with heuristic inquiry guidelines, albeit on a short timeframe of six weeks from end-to-end. Initially, I read through the transcripts accompanied by the audio recording. I then read through the transcripts again without the audio and began to pick out themes that emerged both from questions I had asked and from the more open conversational style that was adopted in the focus group. I then left the material for a period of just over two weeks before going back to both the audio and the transcripts to see how what I was hearing aligned to themes that I had initially identified. Where I had missed a theme or important single point, I added it to the 'pot' of questions or prompts that I used to help co-researchers in Part 2 of the study.

Part 2. Heuristic research with co-researchers

The heuristic inquiry co-researcher group comprised eight 'external' coaches who work in business/organisation contexts. Five of these coaches were drawn directly from my own professional network and the remaining three were recruited using a snowballing approach. Selecting the co-researchers was purposive, in that those I selected to invite to take part in the research were determined by their experience as coaches and a judgment that I felt that they would be engaged in the process, were interested in the topic of questions, and were able to provide an appropriate level of insight into the phenomenon under study. Participants were referred to as co-researchers, in line with the guidance of Moustakas (1990, p.57) and throughout the study were referred to using a given pseudonym.

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 3.3: Co-researcher demographic and coach-related information.

Table 3.3 provides an overview of the co-researchers, with both demographic details and some relevant information in relation to their coaching. I was mindful that these co-researchers were drawn from a relatively small and partly connected community, and recruited through my own network, using a snowballing technique. This raised some potential issues over confidentiality and ethics, which were guarded against in part by providing pseudonyms and also in the careful editing of some of the examples quoted in the findings chapters (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012). As part of the recruitment of co-researchers, guidance relating to the research was presented in the form of a participant information sheet and their consent to being part of the research was gained using a participant consent form (See Appendix 2 & 3)

The four steps undertaken with the co-researchers included: i) a telephone briefing, following an expression of interest; ii) recounting reflections on the experience of generating questions in coaching sessions; iii) face-to-face interview; iv) analysis and validation process that included the sharing of reflections between the co-researchers and the primary researcher.

i. Telephone briefings

The telephone briefing took place over three separate calls, which reflects the availability of co-researchers. This briefing:

- Positioned the research
- Outlined the research design process and timescales
- Stressed ethical considerations including confidentiality, consent and the co-researchers' options in relation to withdrawal from the research
- A discussion of what form co-researcher reflections might take and how to submit these

ii. Co-researcher reflections

In line with other studies employing heuristic inquiry (Worth, 2010), I was keen to ensure that co-researchers could have maximum freedom to represent their experiences in a way that was not restricted to simply a written representation, but that made sense to them personally. During the telephone briefing, co-researchers and I discussed what form their reflections might take, and that there was the freedom to choose any way that best represented their experience. There was an aspiration that every co-researcher would submit a minimum of six reflections each, over the course of the four months from the time of the telephone briefing session, but it was left to the co-researcher to decide how best to represent their experiences and to allow for the times when they felt there was some insight to add, rather than a prescriptive process to follow. Some of the themes that came from the focus group were introduced into this conversation to give co-researchers a sense of the data that they might consider reflecting upon. Reflections could be sent to me electronically or by mail. Universally, co-researchers submitted their reflections by email. These came in a range of forms including bullet pointed lists, longer reflective prose and mind maps.

I chose not to ask co-researchers to complete a post-coaching session journal in a formal way, although some did this as part of their usual practice and used that to formulate their reflections. My decision for not doing so was that I was less interested in getting a list of questions that were asked, than a more holistic view of the experience of generating questions. I felt that limiting such reflections to a written, linear process could restrict the potential for richness in capturing the experience.

iii. Face-to-face interviews

The purpose of these face-to-face interviews was to explore the reflections that the co-researcher had submitted, and to examine the themes that had appeared from the analysis of them, in order to gain further insight into each co-researchers' experiences. Therefore, after a period of four months from the telephone briefing, and following the generation of reflections of the experience of asking questions, face-to-face meetings were arranged with each co-researcher. The round of interviews was completed within five weeks. Meetings were scheduled for a maximum of two hours and typically lasted this long. Applying such time-frames to this phase of data generation and a time limit to the interviews, was a result of the research timetable. I was sensitive however to the fact that limiting time for these activities ran counter to the philosophy of heuristic inquiry research (Sela-Smith, 2002). Indeed, Moustakas (1990) suggests that these meetings be open-ended; however, there were pragmatic considerations such as the impacts on co-researchers of meetings that were scheduled for longer timescales.

In line with Moustakas' advice (1990, p.48) I did generate a list of questions to take into the interview and these were:

1. What key examples of this experience can you recall that seem significant?
2. What have you learned about your experience of generating questions?
3. What thoughts are associated with the experience?
4. What somatic changes, if any, did you notice in yourself at the moment of generating questions?
5. What else seems relevant to the experience that we have not discussed yet?

The aim of asking these questions was to add an element of consistency across the co-researchers in terms of the discussions, but it was also clear to me that these were only likely to be a core set of questions and that I needed to remain open to the possibility that discussions could go in many directions as deemed relevant or interesting to the co-researcher. The tone of the meetings was set as a conversation about the experience rather than a formal interview, which was another reason for keeping the number of pre-prepared questions to a relatively small number. In practice, although I did take the pre-prepared questions to each interview, they were rarely employed and certainly not in order. I tended to respond to what co-researchers wanted to discuss in relation to their

experiences and interviews quickly became more like Patton's informal conversational style of interviewing (Patton, 1980). Such an approach is more aligned to heuristic inquiry research (Moustakas, 1990).

I also decided to enhance the recording of data by writing brief notes during the meeting. This was a difficult decision to make. In my coaching practice, I typically take very few notes, because of the impact on my ability to be fully present with my client. However, I wanted to capture any particular reactions or responses that the co-researchers made in order to further enrich the data analysis process. Outlining the intention to take notes and refer to the reflections formed part of the contracting process that was undertaken before starting the conversations. I also referenced the reflections that co-researchers had submitted, and if themes from these were not covered in the interview, I asked specific questions about them towards the end of each interviews. My experience was that typically most themes from the reflections were integrated into the main body of the interview.

These discussions were audio-recorded on two separate devices – one as a fail-safe in case the primary device malfunctioned. The recordings were then sent in MP4 audio format to a professional transcribing company – the same company that had transcribed the focus group audio.

iv. Analysis and validation

A clear approach for analysing data is laid out quite clearly by Moustakas (1990). While trying to remain faithful to the methodology, it became obvious to me early in the analysis that several alterations were required, both from a practical but also from a theoretical perspective. These will be highlighted in the following section, but briefly they included:

- introducing a discrete two-part analysis from an initial analysis of the data from the co-researchers reflections, followed by analysis of the data from the face-to-face interviews
- Immersion in the data as time-bound rather than 'timeless' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 51)
- Taking a less linear approach than is suggested in the text
- Omitting the selection of 'exemplary portraits' and a composite depiction

Moustakas suggests eight steps for analysing the data within heuristic inquiry, and these can be seen in Table 3.4. This acted as a helpful guide to undertaking the analysis of the data that had been gathered. However, as indicated previously, I made certain adjustments to reflect my wish to give each element of the process I had asked my co-researchers to engage with, due consideration. As such, I undertook steps 1-3 with the written reflections that co-researchers had submitted and took these to the interviews. These were presented to co-researchers and used as a prompt for discussion and limited the need for a large number of pre-constructed questions. I repeated steps 1-3 with the data from the interviews and then assimilated these together as part of step 4. Step 2 was time-bound rather than open-ended, as a practical consideration.

Heuristic Inquiry Analysis Steps
1. Gather all the data for each co-researcher
2. Immerse in timeless way with data until it is understood
3. Set aside data then return to it and create individual depiction of experience for each co-researcher
4. Compare depiction with original data. Revise if necessary.
5. Repeat steps 1-4 for each participant
6. Gather all depictions and immerse then rest repeatedly, until universal qualities and themes are internalised and understood. Develop a composite depiction.
7. Return to raw data to select 2 -3 co-researchers who exemplify the group. Represent these as portraits.
8. Develop a creative synthesis of the experience. Develop an aesthetic rendition of the themes and essential meanings.

Table 3.4: Steps in Heuristic Inquiry Data Analysis (Moustakas, 1990)

Once a depiction for the first co-researcher has been completed, the primary researcher moves on to the next set of data and repeats the process, producing the depiction of the second co-researcher. This process was repeated until all co-researchers had a depiction completed in the form of a word cloud (See Appendix 4). Each co-researcher's depiction was offered back to them for comment, to check if it captured the essence of their experience (Moustakas, 1990, p.52). All co-researchers reported that the depictions were 'accurate' for them.

The creation of the individual depictions was followed by the immersion in the data in order to allow insight and emergence of essential themes to occur. I took the data from

all co-researchers, both their reflections and the transcripts of the interviews, and over a period of several weeks reviewed the data, looking for themes that appeared to be important. Initially, transcripts were read and what appeared to be key phrases were underlined (Sandelowski, 1995). These notable words and phrases were transposed onto Post-It[®] notes and then repetitions, metaphors, and theory-related material were brought together to form the themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). A glimpse into this process can be seen into a photographic review below:



Figure 3.1 Photographs showing some of the process of building essential themes

After a good deal of thinking and discussion with my supervision team, I chose not to complete the exemplary portrait and the composite depictions. My rationale for omitting these two steps was entirely based on a sense that to do so would be incongruous with my relativist position of valuing the individual experience. In terms of the concept of an exemplary depiction, that seems to me to be contradictory idea. If we accept that each depiction is ultimately ‘true’ for the individual, exemplary depictions appear to ‘value’ one experience over others. In relation to the composite depiction, my view is more closely aligned to that of Sela-Smith who recommends avoiding the temptation to try to generalise and homogenise the experiences of several co-researchers and in the process lose sight of the individuals themselves (Sela-Smith, 2002).

I have represented the steps that I took in the analysis of the data and indicated approximate timelines in table 3.5. The approximate nature of the timelines reflects the fact that I became aware I was constantly analysing, at least thinking about, the data I had viewed, even before I formally started to analyse them. This sense of living with the

data sub-consciously aligns to this methodology, but was an unplanned step and one I was only fully cognisant of after the fact.

Co-Researchers	Timeline	Principal Researcher
Recruited & briefing	March 2014	
General reflections (6) and return		Immerse in the data & seek to understand
	August	
1:1 Interviews & transcribed	October	Analyse data Allow for incubation
	January 2015	Create individual depictions
Review depictions	February 2015	
	March 2015	Analysing experiences for essential themes
	April 2015	
Review creative synthesis		Develop creative synthesis
	June 2015	Amend creative synthesis

Table 3.5: Showing the research timelines and processes for co-researchers and principal researcher

The themes that emerged from the research are presented in detail in the chapters that follow, but in summary they were grouped into three clear sections: Elements that affected the experience of questions from outside of the coaching session; experiences that either just preceded, or accompanied, the moment of generating a question; and finally, themes emerged around the experience of the interplay between questions and responses and between questions and the coach-client relationship.

3.5 Ethics

Confidentiality is a critically important element in maintaining trust in coaching relationships, as are other ethical behaviours such as keeping records of conversations safe and secure and attributing the work of others to name but a few (ICF, 2008). These behaviour standards and more also apply to research ethics.

As part of the process of gaining permission to undertake this research, there were a range of steps to complete in order to satisfy the University Ethics Committee, which were completed in January 2013. These consisted broadly of ensuring the duty of care to participants, including the use of pseudonyms and ensuring that records of interviews were locked away. The transcription service I used for the typing up of interviews was selected on the basis that they adhered to the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003, the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Telecommunications (Data Protection and Privacy) Regulations 1999. A confidentiality agreement was created and agreed to by both parties.

At the end of the interview, each co-researcher was offered the opportunity to access a free coaching session with an independent coach supervisor, for any issues that may have arisen as a result of the interview. No co-researchers accessed this support. In line with the methodology, output from the interviews was returned to the co-researchers in order that they could assess the level of faithfulness that their experiences had been captured. Co-researchers were given the opportunity to amend the ‘depictions’ if they wanted to. No changes were made.

The challenge of using heuristic inquiry came largely in the writing up phase. Protecting the identity of co-researchers while continuing to represent their experiences as ‘whole’ as possible, did prove challenging.

Summary

Selecting heuristic inquiry as the research methodology was not a straightforward process. It emerged as the approach of choice following an insight from the early days of pursuing grounded theory. It transpired that this was a ‘hunch’ worth pursuing and one that both allowed me to use a well-recognised approach to the research that was also fit for purpose.

The discussion that follows in chapters 4-7 inclusive is represented in a necessarily linear form, but the elements, interesting in their own right, are also inter-related. The findings that emerged and the insights into the experiences have been significant. The discipline of coaching has gained some new information previously unknown and, in line with one of the aims of this methodology, I have learned a lot about my own

experiences with questions, my own coaching, and my own self. In order to facilitate this sense of the whole experience, chapter 4 presents an autobiographical account of my experiences of generating questions that resulted from analysis of my own data in research journals, coaching diaries, and the questions I asked of co-researchers. Chapters 5 to 7 share the experiences of co-researchers in generating questions. Each chapter presents co-researchers' relevant experience in as whole a way as possible, interwoven with relevant literature. Where the evidence suggests that findings are contributing to new knowledge and literature, this has been noted. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with an overview of the research, suggestions for future study and the presentation of conceptual findings, discussed in part through the explication of the creative synthesis.

Chapter 4 The Coaching Dance

This chapter provides an insight in to my experiences of generating questions during the ‘dance’ that is the coaching interaction. It is an autobiographical account of my experiences of working with clients from an *I-who-feel* perspective. I have captured data from several sources: Thoughts and reflections from my own post-coaching session notes; my research diary; and also from the questions that I posed and comments that I made, as part of the interviews with my co-researchers. This latter source of data has been a particularly rich seam for reflexive material. The account has been broken into four sections that relate to specific experiences from my coaching. Reflexive discussions of the account appear at appropriate points in the account.

Pyrrho’s Acolyte

The philosopher Pyrrho founded the school of scepticism following his journey to India with Alexander the Great, where they encountered a range of Eastern philosophical ideas, including the notion that nothing can be known for certain (Thorsrud, 2009). Pyrrho, and later sceptic philosophers, took the position that a preferable stance to take in relation to truth, was one of suspending judgment – known as ‘epoché’ (Husserl, 1999). The effects of someone adopting epoché, includes helping them remain in the role of ‘searcher’ – *skepsis* means “inquiry” or “examination” – rather than slip into a dogmatic position full of judgment. The second effect of adopting epoché is that it helps achieve a sense of tranquillity. These are two key elements that shape my own experience of generating questions within my coaching practice.

This sceptic philosophy was one that was unknown to me prior to commencing this research. However, it resonates for me as a position I have tended to take with my clients for my entire coaching career. I have been guided by an over-arching principle, perhaps not surprisingly formulated as question: “Who am I to judge what or how they (clients) feel, think, or want?” While it is accurate to say that this is not a standard I am able to achieve perfectly in every situation, it is the aspiration to which I channel my focus.

In the following section, I recount an autobiographical, composite account of a coaching session presented in four sequential phases. While the account is fictional, and has been

constructed for the purpose of revealing my real experiences of generating questions, it still provides an insight into those experiences that feels authentically my own. Following the presentation of the account, I explore how my own experiences have been informed, and/or changed as a result of engaging with the research question and the experiences and views of my co-researchers. This answers the call in Sela-Smith's (2002, page 85) critique of Moustakas' heuristic method to "return to the internal perspective" in order to refrain from emphasising the observations of others over the understanding and transformation of self.

The following account includes real details and genuine personal reflections from a number of sources including my own post-coaching reviews, research journal, and interactions with co-researchers. The client 'Steve' is fictional upon whom I have hung real data about my own experiences of coaching.

1. Relief

As I sit in the large glass and steel reception area I take a last furtive glance at my notes from the previous coaching session I had with Steve. I want to be able to ask him about the progress he has made over the past month, early in our conversation today, so he feels that I am invested and interested in him, which I am. Steve comes through the doors and that initial rush of adrenaline kicks in and my heart races a bit. Rapport – smile, stand, collect my case, smile again. Physicality – emanate purpose. Role modelling – be the best of myself. Noticing – how is he looking today? Lost a little weight? He appears to be OK. Looks happy. Lighter in the face; skin-tone seems to have lost some of the grey from last time. Impression or memory playing tricks? Not sure. We'll see. Be open. Maybe nothing...

Into the same meeting room as last time. Smells of the previous inhabitants and some serious work. The whiteboard is covered in what appears to be hieroglyphics, or certainly some advanced quantitative maths. This sparks a little sense of unease. This is the world Steve works in. High finance. A world I know nothing of. Need to keep my focus here. I've done this kind of work before with people from this business sector. I can do this. I am adequate. My skills are adequate to help him.

I will ask about what progress Steve has made on the objectives he set at our previous meeting. In truth this line of enquiry has several purposes. It's partly about him seeing the value I've added. It is partly about him seeing the progress for himself. It is mainly about closing a loop for himself around his own ability to tackle and then resolve quite tricky challenges he has brought to the coaching sessions. "So, Steve, update me on your progress since we last met." Not a question but an enquiry nonetheless. Keep it nice and open. I am eager to give him the chance to get the conversation flowing.

He needs a bit of warming up sometimes. But today his response seems eagerly given and full. Relief. Can be a bit like pulling teeth when his mind isn't fully in the room. Hard for me to get into a rhythm when it is like that and questions can then feel a bit 'clunky'.

Easing into it myself now too. Relaxing – shoulders drop. Find a comfortable way to sit. What I also notice that stops at this point is me trying slightly too hard to put us both at ease. Good to get the first contact done. Back to re-inhabiting myself.

2. Change happens.

"OK, what else do you want to do with that to ensure it 'sticks' as a new behaviour?" This will help ensure the work adds value. I really want him to like ... no love ... coaching. Not me. Happy for it to be any coach. Just as long as I help someone like Steve to appreciate the opportunities coaching offers, then I feel my bigger purpose is fulfilled. There is a greater sense of pressure that goes with being a self-declared ambassador for coaching. It means ensuring change happens and that Steve embeds the work he has done so far, hence the belt and braces question. Adding value into busy, often high-pressure working lives provides me with a sense of worth.

"Is there anything else you need to consider?" Why have I bothered to ask that? Overkill or doubt. I'm not wholly convinced by that last answer. I

really want him to be able to see the change and the benefits it will bring. I'm just unsure he is all the way there yet with his thinking and in galvanizing his own inner resources. Searching. What is my doubt? Let it go for now. I don't want to push too hard but I'll come back to it later on.

Discussion: The self-declared ambassador for coaching

I want my clients to perceive me as fully prepared and highly professional, hence only a “furtive” glance at my notebook and being keen that Steve did not notice that I had momentarily lost the thread of the discussion. Some of that is clearly about me, but more than that, I want clients, through me, to view coaching as something that is undertaken by people who are serious about their work.

I am a passionate coaching practitioner; at least, I am internally. Outwardly, I want people to come to their own conclusions about coaching. I want to avoid the evangelistic approach to convincing them of its efficacy – it clashes with my non-judgmental sceptical position. I do want the work that clients and I do together to produce the evidence that would help them form a positive view of coaching, indeed I want them “to love coaching”. One of the phrases that jumped out of my journal entries was about seeing myself as a “self-declared ambassador for coaching”. This relates directly to my own professional purpose, which I have done some development work on in coaching supervision, but I had not thought of myself in that role, nor given it a label, as clearly as my reflections seemed to capture it.

This mix of factors – client value and my own purpose – result in me working hard in several ways:

- i) in the early stages of coaching sessions to build rapport
- ii) throughout to ensure that actions are generated and positive change occurs, either during or after the coaching sessions
- iii) to develop my own skills, as the voices hinting at my possible “imposter” status can still be heard as inner dialogue occasionally “*I can do this. I am adequate. My skills are adequate to help him.*” These I have sought to quieten through on-going professional development

In order to produce the best climate for coaching, I do work very hard at the start of sessions. Interestingly for me there is still some evidence that I can try too hard on occasion. My journal suggests that a source for this can be found in my sporting background, a time in my life when judging results of performance was much clearer – you either won or lost.

When I was an international sportsman (judo), the starts of competitive bouts were often the most difficult part for me. Once I was settled into the five-minute fight, I was generally fine and able to perform at my best. Until that point I would struggle to get a sense of how the fight was going to go; to me it was an important, but on reflection, an illusive state to seek. Predicting was ultimately fruitless. The legacy effect of this, I think, can be seen in two places of my professional behaviours: The first place the effect can be observed is at the start of presentations or workshops when, according to some feedback, I can come across as a bit stilted, nervous, or rushed. The second place that it manifests itself is when creating some rapport in coaching sessions – occasionally I feel I can try “*too hard to put us both at ease*”. In both cases this initial struggle is aimed at ensuring my clients get the best experience. However, it is also true to say that it is for my own sense of ease, of getting into the best space to do my best work.

In my early days as a coach, this high level of conscious effort was also about seeking approval. As I have gained more experience over the fifteen years or so of coaching, I have become less attached to how clients see me. I realise I cannot ultimately control a client’s state or the chemistry between us. I will do all that I can, as someone who is serious about their work, to facilitate a positive environment that is most likely to foster effective work. How clients respond to my efforts is ultimately down to them.

3. Into and out of the zone

The dance is in progress. Just of being. At times I’m both fully aware and yet wholly unaware. My focus constantly flicks back and forth in between what I’m noticing; how, what I’m noticing, lands with me; Steve’s tempo and his shifts in pace and energy.

As we progress the session, it feels like we get deeper into this zone where time and the outside world don’t exist. Questions come and go. Some I ask.

Some I do not There is no need to force questions or to work too hard at constructing the words I use. They just seem to arrive. Most emerge fully formed and leave me without edit. Some I wait with, for their moment to arrive or pass.

“Oh! No!” I slipped out of the zone. Steve has just given a really long answer and I failed to hold on. I lost my grip on the detail and now I’m a bit lost. I feel like I’m rising to the surface for some air. Being in flow feels anaerobic, starved of oxygen while giving 100% effort to being present. Every now and again I need a rest to break down the lactic acid that has accumulated over such an intense period of concentration. Sometimes I can instigate a break through a question that is a bit more superficial. A question that allows us both to come back up to the surface for some air, following a deep dive of exploration. Sometimes I’ll use humour for a break when I sense the client may need a breather; at other times the client does it themselves. This time I’ve done it by a simple lapse in concentration.

What should I ask now?

I don’t want Steve to know I’m not fully with him. I picked up the last phrase he said. I’ll turn it into a question while I’m gasping for air: “So what is that like when your boss takes the glory from all of your work in those meetings?” His answer – full and apparently frank – suggests all is OK ... Relief. Refocus. Switch on. Relax. Go deep into the zone.

Discussion - Fully aware and yet wholly unaware

I am comfortable with the phenomenon and apparent paradox of being “*fully aware yet wholly unaware*” in coaching sessions. In reality, it is perhaps more accurate to say that this feeling arises as the result of constant fluctuations and redirections of attention: “*My focus constantly flicks back and forth in between what I’m noticing.*” It may also be that I have convinced myself of the advantages of being able to be simultaneously in two minds, as it is an idea I discuss frequently when working with new coaches during development programmes. Whatever the ‘reality’ in relation to the locus of my

awareness, it is a concept that helps me notice what I need to notice, in order to ask questions that hopefully help the client.

This ‘noticing’ starts very early in a coaching session and as a result of this research I am now even more aware that I start gathering data even before I arrive at a coaching session. That “*first contact*” with the client is also a rich place to gather data from which to generate relevant questions. I try to remain open to any significance that may be attached to the signs that I notice, but I notice them nonetheless. “*Impression or memory playing tricks? Not sure. We’ll see. Be open. Maybe nothing...*” All the data goes, more or less consciously, into the direction or forming of the questions that I will then ask.

While I am acutely aware of the client, I am also aware of what is happening for me and the impact this can have on the experience of generating coaching questions. There are certainly times when I am struck by some uncertainty and can sense some of my own ‘*nervousness*’, a feeling that sometimes can prompt me to back off and not to ‘*push too hard*’ with my questions, usually for fear of not wording the questions as I would want.

Following further reflection, I would now say that the above account includes an inaccuracy. I now feel it is inaccurate to say that I notice my ‘*shoulders drop*’ or that I have found a ‘*comfortable way to sit*’ as I settle in to a state of flow of question asking and ‘*just being*’. What actually happens, I think, is that I notice when I move out of these positions or states. Sinking into flow is like being in a warm swimming pool. The water circles around without awareness. I am only drawn actively ‘to notice’ when the water temperature changes sufficiently for me to be aware of being cold. It is at that point that I become aware of the warmth no longer being present. It is the absence that I notice.

4. Some hoops to jump through

I must finish tidily. Despite my years of experience in coaching it is still the part where the process – I still use the word – needs to be fully adhered to. Drawing the string together to gather themes that Steve can take away as actions to complete, ensures the wide range of topics we have discussed

over one hour and forty-five minutes make a difference. It is an important part of my coaching sessions.

“So, Steve based on the conversation today, what are you going to do in relation to improving the situation?”

Several tactical questions follow his answers. Usually to a bit of a script: timing, level of commitment, resources, barriers etc etc. It all feels necessary but a bit uninspiring. It feels like the conversation has both a start and an end that is a bit ‘processy’ and include some hoops we both know we need to jump through before we get into the proper work.

I’m proud of a question I’ve now added to that checklist. Generated in order to help clients reflect on their own levels of capability and designed to build self-efficacy, it seems to bridge the gap a little:

“Steve, what would you needed to have thought about or done in order to have resolved this for yourself, without me?”

It’s not an elegant question yet. Still some work to do but I sense it helps.

The top and tail of a coaching session can feel aerobic. It is a light jog. I am often fully aware of a number of elements. It is easy – probably for both the client and me. Figuratively, we are both in our own respective comfort-zone in the sense that neither of us is particularly stretched by the activity. When the work gets harder – a long hard hill sprint or ‘*deep dive of exploration*’ – the activity becomes more intense and there is not sufficient mental resource to focus on anything other than the client and how they are being, what they are saying or not saying. Clients have reported it is both a highly developmental place to work, but also that it can be exhausting. In relation to the latter point, I would concur. Such work can be extremely demanding. While I think the ability to hold concentration improves with practise, I have come to recognise that I cannot sustain work at this intensity for very long periods without it being interspersed with mini-breaks in the level of intensity.

In relation to the developmental nature of working in this anaerobic, highly demanding space, one of the biggest single realisations that this research has prompted for me is that I prefer to work in this developmental space with clients, than in the more ‘transactional’ spaces of a coaching session. I prefer it because I think that is where I do my best work. I prefer it because that is where the client gets significant benefit. I prefer it because in the eyes of many clients, they are prompted to undertake a level of thinking about themselves they are not asked to do anywhere else in their lives. In that sense, the work I do with them, largely through the questions I ask, is a unique experience for them. That gives the work I do a real sense of purpose.

I often cannot recall the wording of questions I have uttered when working in this way. They genuinely seem to emerge from the depths of my being and appear to have been assimilated as a result of all the sources of data I have consciously and non-consciously gathered. Often they have been generated and asked without my full awareness. Recognising this pattern struck me as somewhat contradictory when one hears coaches – myself included – speak about being fully present for clients. If a coach is truly “fully present” it seems somewhat odd to suggest that questions are often generated and asked while the coach is on their own form of auto-pilot.

As a new coach, I felt that questions asked at the end of a coaching engagement could feel a bit patronising. They were often ‘*tactical*’ in nature, ‘*usually to a bit of a script: timing, level of commitment, resources, barriers etc etc*’. My assumption was that the senior people I was working with would feel that this part of the session and the accompanying questions I asked were unnecessary. I projected my own feelings that having answered all the questions from the coach, I would be more than ready to end the session and go and do what I thought necessary to achieve my goals. Asking further questions at this stage of the coaching process just felt like over-gilding the lily. However, very quickly I realised that this was my view and not shared by my clients. When clients mentioned that they felt a coaching session was helpful, but they were not sure what they were meant to do as a result of it, it became clear that a discrete phase of questions around constructing actions steps was an important part of the coaching process. As part of the study, I was keen to understand how the experience I had was similar to, or different from, that of the co-researchers. While I knew some of the group well, the mere fact that coaching takes place ‘behind closed doors’ meant that I was not

exactly sure what to expect. I was certainly interested to see if there was commonality, I was especially interested too to examine any differences.

Meta-reflections

There are two key meta-reflections for me in relation to the experience of generating questions in coaching that I shall briefly explore in ending this chapter. The first is that questions are not fully my own. The second is that for me, any conception of coaching as ‘clean’, non-directive, or objective, strikes me as flawed. The two concepts are intertwined.

Questions are formed by data that mainly comes from outside of myself. Information ‘from within’ that may be used to form questions, such as my own feelings, is more often than not the product of an interaction with the data that has been gathered from the client or ‘from without’. They are a response to data that I have noticed, or it might be more accurate to say, that has arrived at me. In this sense, it might be accurate to say that, for me, the questions I ask are not really my own conscious constructions. They are often the result of a process that is less-than-fully-conscious; constructed from data that has its origins outside of myself, and are generated for the purpose of helping the client. Thus, they are not wholly mine in terms of their generation or purpose. One might suggest ultimately that the questions are the product of the client. It is probably axiomatic to suggest that without the client there would be no meaningful questions to generate.

And yet, wherever the data originates, the way I, as coach, absorb and make sense of data is uniquely my own. Feelings I have about the client are also solely my own. Another coach may emphasise different data, different feelings. They may interpret that data differently. They might ‘choose’ to construct the questions with different words than I might. As unique coaches with sets of unique influences on our own inner world, we are all likely to interpret the information from clients in more or less nuanced ways. Objectivity thus appears to me to be an illusion. There are no ‘clean questions’, no objectivity in the direction of enquiry. That subjectivity comes from both the client and the coach. Clients can only answer questions from their own understanding, interpretation, or knowledge. Equally, coaches can only ask questions as a result of the limits that their internal organisation capabilities allow. A coach cannot ask a question

they cannot ask. A different coach with different interpretative or organisational capabilities may be able to ask different questions. I would consider that neither may be more effective perhaps but they are likely to be different. This inherent difference in the generation of questions is a form of subjectivity. This realisation has helped me enormously in my experience of asking questions. I am able to accept much more readily that, for me, there is no such thing as the perfect, objectively formed question. The best I can do is to be aware of the effects of my own filters and the limits of my capabilities on the questions I generate. I no longer try for a mythical objectively created question. I ask what I ask based on a singular focus on the range of data that has arrived with me. I suspend judgment and search for a truth that seems to be right for the client. I now try to make the best sense of it in the form of a question that I can, for the benefit of the client.

Chapters 5-7 highlight experiences of co-researchers in relation to generating questions, from elements that influence the experience before the point in time of the generation of the question itself, through the point of generating and asking, to the cycle or 'dance', of question and response, and the effects of questions on the coach-client relationship. In chapter 5, it is shown that co-researchers felt there were many elements affecting the experience of enquiry within coaching, which pre-existed the session itself. Some of these extant elements were related to the background of the coach, while others were related to the specific context of the coaching session, even though they still preceded the generation of questions.

Chapter 5 ‘All the things that help you’

The themes presented in chapter 5 suggest coaches use a range of influences to generate questions that pre-exist any particular coaching session. Sam was very clear that a wide range of pre-existing information helps inform the questions that she subsequently asks:

“It’s all the things that help you with the question in the first place. It’s not about the question, it’s about the environment, the tension, the culture, the system, it’s about everything.”

The range of influences have been collated into two groups: The first group comprises six elements that reside with the coaches and their own ‘history’, or as I have termed it here, ‘background’. The second group of influences consists of elements that rely more clearly on the interaction between the coach and the client within their context. These influences contribute to shaping the experience, but still precede the actual generation of questions. I have termed this latter group of influences ‘precursors’. This chapter will examine each of these two themes in depth, to explore their place in the experience of generating coaching questions. I will explore these themes using excerpts from the co-researchers’ integrated with my own experiences. The final section of the chapter will explore how these findings relate to previous literature.

5.1 Background

An examination of the interviews highlighted six elements which seem to impact the experience of generating questions in coaching and which appear to have their origins within the personal and professional ‘life’ of the coach. While not all elements were reported by all co-researchers in the same way, there was an element of consistency that made them emerge as important across this group. The six individual elements are:

- i. Coach history
- ii. Coach education
- iii. Coach philosophy
- iv. Coach role & responsibilities
- v. Coach experience
- vi. Coach perception of questions

The personal history of the coach – upbringing, coach education, and their developed philosophy – informed how co-researchers in this study saw their role as a coach. A more or less developed view of the role that the coach was ‘supposed’ to play affected the view of what we, as coaches, felt the purpose of questions was in a coaching session. One element impacts one or more other elements in a way that refines the way that questions are ultimately employed within coaching.

i. Coach history

The personal history of the coach was expressed directly and indirectly as an element that contributed to questioning in coaching sessions. For example, when discussing how he is able to focus in coaching sessions, and the impact this had on his questions, Bryan recounted:

“Being one of a family of eleven made me extremely good at being able to shut out that outer stuff and get on with the inner game or get on with whatever I was doing at the time.”

This ability to focus, one of the tenets of the Inner Game (Gallwey, 1976) in turn appeared to help Bryan slip into what he described as a co-created ‘flow state’ with his clients (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), which itself has a direct impact on the questions that he generates in coaching sessions. Ultimately getting into a flow state produces a change in the level of consciousness that Bryan brings to the questions he asks.

Kimberley is 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”

This is an interesting observation by Kimberley that has overtones of the coaching debate around domain knowledge. Clients value having coaches with relevant experience and credibility who can use this for the benefit of the client (Passmore, 2007). In Kimberley's situation it is not technical, role, or business sector knowledge but life experience knowledge that gives her additional credibility with her clients and allows for a different experience of coaching questions.

Sam spoke somewhat haltingly about when she was a child. She had tried to tell significant adults around her about things she knew were important but to no avail. She wanted *'to be heard'* and tried to get adults to be curious about her situation and listen to her by *'raising lots of other things around it'*. She ultimately failed to be noticed as a result of being indirect:

"My strategy wasn't terribly effective. What I needed to do in that situation was to be fairly direct."

This has led her to develop a coaching style that she describes as a combination of being *'genuinely curious'* coupled with being *'direct'* as she offers her clients the chance, through her questions, to be heard but also to get to the heart of the matter. For Sam, the impact of her history on the questions she generates is summed up by her as follows:

"If I have curiosity, be curious but don't shut something down and be direct."

During this research I recorded in my own research diary that I had developed the use of questions as a teenager, as a strategy to engage compliantly in conversations while simultaneously ensuring I was not the focus of the discussion, something that at that age, I found very uncomfortable. That particular element of my own history has certainly impacted my feelings of ease when using questions in coaching sessions – I have had a lifetime of practise.

The level of self-awareness within the co-researcher group of the link between their own background and their coaching practice was perhaps unsurprising. Self-awareness in the coach has been suggested as important to create an effective coaching climate (Moen & Federici, 2012) and has been linked significantly to coaching effectiveness

(Gatling, Castelli, & Cole, 2013). Self-awareness is also an integral part of the modelling a coach can do when working to help executives increase their own levels of self-awareness (Axelrod, 2012). Furthermore, coaches themselves can become the direct focus of attention in professional coaching supervision sessions. As a single example of this, to help illustrate the point, Hawkins' (1985) Seven-Eyed Model for Supervision includes stage 4, which focuses on the coach and how he or she is impacting the client, the relationship, and the coaching process. It may be that this process of self-reflection in supervision has aided the co-researchers in this study to be aware of how some of their own history impacts the generation of questions.

ii. Coach education

Co-researchers shared a range of views on how what they have learned as coaches – in more or less formal professional development settings – has impacted the generation of questions. The impact of coach education appeared to fall into two distinct groups of reflections: The first is how approaches to coaching or individual 'teachers' informed or shaped the questions that coaches ask; the second is the impact specific learned coaching frameworks or 'processes' (Clutterbuck, 2010a) have on the questions that are generated.

Co-researchers were influenced in their practise by professional learning that they had undertaken. Grace, was a *Clean Coaching* advocate (Sullivan & Rees, 2008). She spoke about the process that she had been taught in relation to the '*clean*' methodology. Her awareness of the structure provided by this approach meant that during her training she was "*full of angst about, 'is this the right question?'*" She was able to highlight how this approach helps clients form a robust plan by '*asking lots of questions around the scenario that they've painted of what they want to happen*'. Clearly clean language's prescriptive approach, with its pre-determined and highly stylised questions, impacted Grace's experience of generating questions in coaching that is different from those who use a more reactive style.

Independently, both Skye and Kimberley had recently been through advanced coaching development drawing on the *Time to Think* approach (Kline, 1999). Both were very positive about the approach and Skye noted its impact on her coaching particularly around the space it provides for clients:

“... allowing them to think and not let (ting) our thinking get in the way of their thinking, so a lot more space for them to run with it.”

Her view intimated a ‘*less is more*’ approach, which provides the client with a greater opportunity to think; this in itself impacts the questions she asks, sometimes resulting in her not asking a question she had intended to. Kimberley also reflected on the influence of Nancy Kline’s approach on her questions,

“... it does make me remember to shush a bit longer and wait for more thinking before landing a question and then sometimes if you’ve had your question ready, even the pauses are no good because by the time they’ve finished the next bit, that question’s useless anyway.”

While Bryan did not follow any single coaching approach, he reflected during our interview that his own coaching education affected the questions he asked. He was better at naming clients’ ‘*elephants in the room*’ because of particular influence from ‘*the person who’s been influential on my coaching [education]*’. A recognised psychotherapist and counsellor this particular coach educator has written about making elements in a conversation ‘*figural*’ i.e. bringing them into focus – something Bryan referred to in our conversation (Joyce & Sills, 2014).

Dale reported a different coach education influence: Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP):

“... the training I did on NLP, and the language pattern and all of that, really, really helped me notice in people’s language their scoping and framing and the chunking and all that sort of stuff. So it’s that is [sic.] what I do. All of that. Those questions feel like intellectual type, critical thinking type questions.”

The raised levels of awareness brought about by the training Dale had received in NLP directly impacts his experience of asking questions in coaching, keeping these questions more biased towards cognitively processed questions (Bandler & Grinder, 1979).

Co-researchers also reported using frameworks or models in their coaching. These were often the result of their coach education. Melissa reported that when she first started coaching, she felt positively about the benefit of having been taught some basic coaching techniques:

“... like the GROW model and all that stuff and then there were questions... it was that kind of real basic framework thing. I suppose at that point it gives you something to get started with but it’s also very constraining.”

Mary also still reverts to the GROW model approach at certain times:

“... it might even be just about going back to GROW options. So, given that you’ve told me this and that, what do you want to do with all of that? Where are you going to go? What are your options now?”

The GROW model, made popular in the early 1990s (Whitmore, 1992) is frequently used in the training of novice coaches as a helpful framework that enables coaches to follow a pattern in coaching conversations through four distinct phases (Alexander, 2006).

Goal – establishing what the client wants to achieve

Reality – exploring what has been done so far and where the client is now

Options – uncovering how the client might achieve their goal

Wrap-up – creating a robust plan to achieve the goal

The introduction of this framework can prove helpful, although there is little empirical evidence to substantiate claims to its efficacy for clients and it tends, as suggested by co-researchers here, to be something that novice coaches cling more tightly to than more experienced coaches (Grant, 2011). In a similar vein, what was noticeable was that while co-researchers did mention ‘lists of questions’ there was little reference to open and closed questions. I found this in truth both surprising and pleasing. This research was centred on the experience of coaches, and my own personal agenda was less about the technical elements of the semantic form of questions than getting to the

essence of the phenomenon. The co-researchers in this group are all experienced coaches and this may well inform why they have moved beyond the mechanics of asking questions in a somewhat formulaic way and were able to remain in the realm of the phenomenon.

Grace spoke of the GROW model, but also introduced clean language:

“... various models that you hold in your head, so if you’re using the GROW model or if I’m using Clean Language, then I’ll know that once I’ve asked this question, it might be useful to ask this question or this question.”

The *Time to Think* approach (Kline, 1999), like Clean Language (Grove, 1998), provides practitioners with a set of questions and an order in which these should be asked. Clutterbuck asserts that clean language, with its roots in therapy, has some theoretical rigour, but that coaches should exercise caution not to apply any of these ‘processes’ too mechanistically (Clutterbuck, 2010a).

It appears that coach education, whether engaged in at the start of one’s career or taken up later having developed greater experience, impacts the practise of coaches. They ask different questions with the background influence of either key people or approaches, in addition to the models, frameworks, and processes that they have been exposed to.

iii. Coach philosophy

I would have considered that coaching philosophy may be too ‘big’ an area to impact questions directly ‘in the moment’. However, there were experiences clearly suggesting a relationship between the broader concept of coaching philosophy and the more fundamental, “basal technique” of asking questions (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015). The relationship between philosophy and technique resulted in co-researchers trying to manifest their underpinning values and beliefs through their questions. The analysis suggests there is some degree of inconsistency in how philosophy manifests itself through questions.

Coaches spoke of the importance to them of bringing value to their clients. Kimberley, in her early coaching career, struggled with feelings of competence in relation to her

perception of adding value, and recounted a particular incident where she withheld a particular question from a client and then:

“I got back to my car feeling really rubbish, and like that had been a waste of time and I’ve got this script – I’ve got to fight in myself around bringing value, and I was like well how much value did I bring there?”

Skye expressed that making a positive difference to clients is an important belief that underpins her work: *“I want them to see that I’m adding value.”* She then reflected that our interview had, for the first time, made her think that perhaps in some cases she tended to change questions, and the language she used to construct them, *‘to be more conformist’*. She did this in order to reflect more closely the investment banking cultures in which she does much of her coaching work. By doing so, she felt her questions would have a level of gravitas to them that they may not otherwise have.

Grace also spoke indirectly of adding value, but added a note about her philosophical position that many coaches would recognise, i.e. that the client holds all the answers:

“Ultimately the client has their experience and they have got all the answers within them, and they may well come up with the same things irrespective of what questions you’re asking. That kind of sounds like you’re not adding anything. Some clients might have an idea of where they want to go, irrespective of which word you develop and which questions you use, they will find their way there.”

This underlying belief in the ultimate capability of the client is one which was shared by Mary, who talked passionately about her belief in the ability of the undergraduate students she coaches to bring about life altering change as part of an academic support programme:

“... the motivation of me doing the coaching, it’s not just my job, there’s a real pleasure and a joy in helping somebody nail it, get what they want from something.”

I got a sense that Mary experiences her work as more of a vocation with deep levels of motivation to help the youngsters she works with. This vocational theme was further highlighted when Mary spoke about her view of her role, in relation to how others might view their role as coaches:

“I think for coaches who talk about the money they earn, I think OK that’s what drives their engine, that’s fine but I’m not going to get rich doing [this], the money isn’t the thing, it’s the, I was talking to somebody about this recently, it’s about the change, instigating, being part of catalysing change.”

In a different but related way, the values held by the coach also impacted the questions that they generated. Dale understood that sometimes he struggled to ask questions that were devoid of a sense of being informed by his own value set:

“I can think of examples where I’ve asked questions around things that for me are big value things, which might be about trust, about how people are treated and so on, and I think there may be a sort of an edge to those questions, which is suddenly you’re not in the service of your client.”

He also spoke about checking in with his own sense of asking questions from a position of *‘positive intent’* and if he could confirm this was the case, then he gave himself permission to ask most questions he might choose to.

The single most common philosophical point raised by co-researchers was around their coaching activity and objectivity. There was no agreement across the group as to what this should be, and this may be a reflection of different personal backgrounds and coach education in combination with the inevitable differences in coaching experiences represented in the group. This particular area of philosophical understanding was shared in very overt ways through the data, such as when Mary declared:

“I know I can’t achieve zero bias ... I want to operate as a coach with zero bias, that’s the aim.”

It was also suggested through more indirect assumptions, such as the idea that using Clean Language is an important way to help coaches bracket themselves from the interaction with their clients, or as Grace positioned it, keeping “*yourself separate from what the person is saying*”. Interestingly however, Grace recognised that “*even in Clean Language you have some influence*” as the coach decides what questions to ask based on a word or phrase that seemed important for the client.

Mary experienced trying to manage the balance of objectivity and her own desire to direct the client when she recalled situations when:

“... you’re dying to tell them the solution and you think ‘No I am not going to give a solution, I’ve got to come up with a question to help her decide how she’s going to play this.’”

From Mary’s struggle, we can also get an insight into her deeper philosophical belief in the capacity of her client to generate solutions. We can also glimpse Mary’s view of her role in asking questions to help her client decide for herself, rather than Mary simply telling her client what they should do.

Others seemed to take a different philosophical position about what coaching should be. Bryan was clear that in some situations he was “*more likely ... to offer a suggestion*” a clear hint that he was not aiming to remove his influence wholly from coaching conversations. Kimberley declared in respect of her own philosophy that she wants each client to “*know that the coach is not judging them*”, only to contradict that position later when reporting making a judgment that she had made in relation to her client who was using “*all this dutiful language*”.

These themes of objectivity, bracketing, and being non-judgmental were fascinating to me, particularly as my own views and biases were present in some questions I asked co-researchers. Perhaps the starkest example of my own bias in my interview questions was in relation to this very subject. My interview with Grace was the final one of those I was scheduled to complete. I was learning a good deal from her about Clean Language. It was a very different position from my own views on objectivity in coaching. Some of that difference can be seen in the question I asked her about the concept of objectivity:

“But that is the overriding piece of interest to me, which is that last bit you’ve talked about. Which is, how clean is Clean?”

I was genuinely interested, but in truth, as can be detected in the question, I can remember a growing sense of frustration with hearing what only seems to be one side of the debate, namely that as coaches we should remain objective. I appreciate the view and understand the centrality of the client and their ‘work’. To deny my part in the interaction, particularly by trying to sterilise it through manufactured objectivity, seems at odds with the essentially human nature of coaching. I am present in my coaching interactions. I keep my focus on my client and their ‘work’. I will be judging their responses through my own filters, experiences, and background and what results will be a question coloured by these elements. Denying my presence seems at best naïve and at worst unethical (Banaji, Bazerman, & Chugh, 2003; Chugh, Bazerman, & Banaji, 2005). There appears to me to be a juggling process that coaches undergo more or less effectively which is aiming for remaining objective while being fully present for their clients.

A frequently cited article that comments on objectivity in coaching is that of Wasylyshyn (2003) who states that the top advantages to clients when hiring external executive coaches is their level of objectivity. In this sense, ‘objectivity’ refers to the coach not being employed by the hiring organisation, therefore being more removed and able to remain more objective. Beyond this sense of objectivity there was reference to ‘objectivity’ being a key element of the ‘professional’ characteristic that was highly rated of executive coaches. Wasylyshyn’s work on objectivity is often quoted as accepted wisdom as an important way of being for the coach (Du Toit, 2007; Feldman, 2005). I contend that in the spirit of balance, further work needs be undertaken to explore how different philosophical positions of the coach might impact outcomes.

iv. Coach role and responsibilities

A further theme was how co-researchers saw their role and the responsibilities that were associated with it. This section will highlight examples of this positioning, and show links back to the stated philosophy of co-researchers where that was apparent. For example, Melissa was keen that she facilitated coaching sessions that added value:

*“Do I know enough for this session or this person to be valuable to them?
That’s an anxiety I might hold.”*

For Melissa to be valuable, she was keen to be fully present and also avoid introducing her own agenda. The way she achieved that was to adopt a particular role of *“I’m a kind of bystander”*. She was also clear about roles she would not play in order to help support a particular client:

“I’m thinking of one particular client and I’m thinking that client wants a mummy or a daddy and to be told what to do, and actually that’s not why I’m here.”

Kimberley wanted to avoid being drawn into *“the position of leadership to the questioning or the conversation”* because she saw her role as building accountability within the client through *“making them think better”*. She recounted a recent experience with a new client who wanted her to play a particular role:

“As we were walking back to the car, she said “I’m hoping this is more useful than last time I tried to get some help”, and I said “oh really, what happened last time?” She said “Oh he just asked me questions all the time. Didn’t give me any answers to anything.”

In my experience, and from discussion with peers, Kimberley’s is a fairly common occurrence for coaches. Even when people clearly understand the role of the coach, they can still seek input from the coach. There is suggestion that clients do seek such help and appreciate it when, on the proviso that they have the power to reject any offered solutions, coaches offer some helpful advice (De Haan, Bertie, Day, & Sills, 2010).

Skye clearly saw her role as developing thinking in her clients too: *“I’m kind of being a thought provocateur consciously, depending on what I see.”* She considered that if she fulfilled her role as provoking better thinking, it was her way to help clients achieve their goals and take ownership. It could be considered self-defeating to provide

solutions to clients if such cognitive development is one of the aims of coaching sessions.

Mary was working in a context where the undergraduate students in her charge received two kinds of academic support; one was having coaching from Mary herself, and the other was receiving some mentoring from colleagues. Mary seemed very clear about what areas fell within her role, and which were within the remit of others. As such, this guided the areas and questions she would and would not explore.

“I won’t explore territory that’s not within my territory ... (I) make sure I stay in the territory that I’m confident and capable of working within.”

“Our job is to ask questions that other people don’t ask,” said Melissa, a sentiment echoed by Sam who spoke of her awareness of the broader systems in which coaches undertake their role and into which their questions are asked:

“Human resources, learning and development or the team can’t ask it because it’s loaded ... my job is to ask it.”

Bryan and Mary reflected on how they saw their role and responsibilities in relation to the welfare of their clients. Bryan showed an awareness of both the sensitive nature of some coaching work and the link to the role that questions can play in helping people explore their own inner world:

“There’s always more, there’s always more behind every question. There’s always another question ... We work with improvised versions of who we think we are and that’s good enough for most purposes, and we open that up as far as we dare. The mirror of that is happening in coaching, that people are opening themselves up as far as they dare and it’s part of our responsibility to make that as easy and possible for them as we can.”

These sentiments were echoed by Mary who was keen to ensure at the end of sessions she had closed the conversation off properly in order to:

“... leave the person responsibly in a state where they can go away feeling energised or capable or confident to do whatever it is they have to do.”

There appeared to be a link for co-researchers in relation to their coaching philosophy and their perspective in relation to how they saw their role and the impacts that this had on the generation of questions they asked. There was an awareness of the responsibilities of the coach in relation to the welfare of the client and the boundaries of the coach. There was also insight that part of the role of a coach is to ask questions that other people around the client would not, dare not or do not, ask.

v. Coach experience

As co-researchers gained greater coaching experience in their roles, changes occurred in their practise that influenced the questions they were generating in coaching sessions. This section will look at how co-researchers experienced changes to their questions over time. The areas specifically that emerged in relation to these changes and the impacts on the questions they generated included the use of supporting resources, the differences in levels of confidence, and the role of trust in the process of coaching and of themselves.

In a moment of clarity and simplicity, Skye reflected axiomatically, *“we are always becoming more experienced”*. This insight reinforced an emerging question for me that I had recorded in my own research diary: Had I started to become interested in this topic at the very point that I was moving from a position of less experience towards greater experience, and had that also happened to be the point where the coaching process becomes a less conscious one? I reflected that my ability to generate questions less consciously and my own awareness of that phenomenon happened to coincide. Co-researchers echoed some of this awareness. It was noted by Sam that:

“The reason for my interest in [questions] was because I was conscious of way back when as a starter coach there’s more cognisance in how I asked questions. It was more thought through. I guess you’re thinking about whether you’re being supportive or whether you’re being challenging or whether you’re probing, I would be aware way back when of ‘I wonder if I haven’t asked this type of question, or if I haven’t gone deep enough, etc?’”

Bryan felt that his questions early in his coaching career were very deliberate and when he had less experience:

“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 practise.”

Melissa and Skye found devices such as GROW unhelpful for different reasons. Melissa felt such frameworks became too “*constraining*”, while Skye found that they seemed to get in the way of noticing the important ingredients for generating questions as a result of becoming “*too conscious*”. This development from a novice coach to an increasingly expert coach is accompanied by a move away from the strict adherence to models such as GROW and towards a more nuanced style of analysis and decision-making (Grant, 2011).

As Grace became aware of being increasingly competent in her question asking, it impacted the questions she asked in comparison to the questions she would have asked as a novice:

“[It’s about] confidence and experience again, because I guess at the beginning I might have thought, “Mmm I don’t really want to ask that question, I’m not sure how....” Less so now because the more experience you get the more confident you are of the questions that you’re asking. So if you get challenged, you know you’ll be able to cope with that, you can justify it if you like.”

As co-researchers improved their skills through experience, an interesting development seemed to be recognition that this affected their trust in a number of areas. Dale recounted that the trust he placed on his questions resulted in him editing his questions less; they were “*not sort of pondered on*” and were accompanied by a sense that the question would land well with the client. Melissa described this increasing trust: “*I do trust myself to more or less know the questions that need to be asked.*” Skye seemed high on trust in her abilities to questions and guide her life:

“I trust whatever comes out of my mouth as being good enough and I think those questions are great ... I guess as I’ve grown older, the power of intention, trust in the universe is a driving force in my life.”

In a broader sense, Grace shared an insight that *“what the client gets will be good enough and to trust that”*. It seems that with greater experience comes greater confidence, and with this greater confidence comes the ability to trust the coaching process, questions that are generated, and ultimately coaches increasingly trust themselves.

Skill acquisition progresses through definable stages of competence in relation to levels of awareness (consciousness) of the progress that is being made (Broadwell, 1969).

Stage 1: Unconsciously Incompetent

Novices may not be able to develop a skill or attitude as they are unconscious of their own areas of incompetence.

Stage 2: Consciously Incompetent

With some feedback and/or input a novice may become aware of areas in which they lack the required competence – they can be said to be consciously incompetent.

Stage 3: Consciously Competent

Following a cycle of feedback, coupled with practice, a novice becomes increasingly competent and yet because of the newness of the skill/attitude needs to maintain high levels of awareness in order to succeed.

Stage 4: Unconsciously Competent

With increased proficiency comes an ability to operate on a kind of autopilot. The practitioner is able to perform at a high level without being consciously aware of the skill.

Broadwell’s conscious competence model may help explain why novice coaches find coaching frameworks and lists of questions helpful initially: They have become aware of the gaps in their practice and these resources become very useful in supporting development and in raising competence. Beginners are more consciously thinking through the process, using rules and facts in contrast to experienced practitioners who

use intuition (Dreyfus, 2004). It may also help explain why the co-researchers found such devices ‘constraining’ later on because with experience comes the ability to “perform the appropriate action without calculating ... a compelling sense of the issue and the best move ” (Dreyfus, 2004, p.180).

Paradoxically, it appears from the data that during the early phases of learning, the new skill of asking questions in coaching, increasing the levels of consciousness itself seems to produce interference, which can hinder performance.

vi. Coach perceptions of questions

The co-researchers produced a wealth of data on what they saw as the purpose of questions in their coaching sessions. This clarity of purpose informed and guided the experience of generating questions within specific sessions. Bryan, like others, reflected that the very act of taking part in the study meant “*there is an additional thread of inner dialogue going on about what sort of questions am I asking*”.

Co-researchers identified questions that had a clear purpose to produce an impact for their client. More surprisingly, there were also some questions that were more or less consciously designed to bring about effects in or for the coach. The second dimension that emerged from the data was in relation to ‘where’ the questions were seeking to produce an impact: Some questions were aimed at producing impacts that were more internal, while others were more external in their focus. These different purposes are presented in three discrete parts:

- a. “Making them think better” (Internal-Client)
- b. “Forward momentum” (Client-External)
- c. “It’s about establishing” (Coach- External)

a. “Making them think better” (Internal Client)

Co-researchers used questions with the purpose of helping their clients learn and move forward. As already established, this is in part to serve the dual purpose of adding value to, and being seen to add value, by their clients. Questions achieved this purpose by prompting better thinking in their clients. While Kimberley saw the purpose of her questions broadly as “*making them think better*”, Skye felt that there was often a meta-

cognitive role for them to *“direct thinking towards a particular element e.g. patterns of thinking”*. Melissa, recounting the impacts of a question, felt that the purpose of questions was tightly aligned to her view of the purpose of coaching:

“She’s got more choice at that point. I remember the actual session and her sitting back in the chair and laughing at herself and at the situation. For me that’s the point of the coaching, that you don’t have to be stuck in the old pattern.”

Grace used questions to help clients gain clarity, *“to just clear the path. If that’s what I keep my focus on, that usually works”*.

Sam was clear that the purpose of some of her questions was,

“... to just [sic] look at something that they realise themselves that they really needed to look at ... perhaps from a different perspective.”

Mary saw that the purpose of her questions as specifically including helping her students make progress:

“I’m doing things with the right motive and that motive is to help this person elicit whatever it is they’ve got to tap into, in order to make progress.”

None of the co-researchers are expressly cognitive behavioural coaches, yet there was evidence to suggest that improving thinking had as an underlying purpose, enabling clients to achieve their goals (Williams, Edgerton, & Palmer, 2010). Whether coaches consider themselves as producing ‘transformational’ or ‘developmental’ change (Bachkirova, 2011) in their clients, what is apparent is that a proportion of the questions that the co-researchers ask seek to bring about helpful change in the ‘self’ of their clients. Sometimes this process requires deep reflection if progress is to be made and Mary spoke of questions which *“open a can of worms”* and which can be *“uncomfortable”* for clients, but which are ultimately designed to produce a catharsis or as Melissa described it, *“giving birth”* to deep personal change.

It appears then that co-researchers generated questions to fulfil different purposes in relation to internal change. They wanted to help clients examine their situations and their self with the ultimate aim of learning and being more developed to be able to cope and perform in the future, as summed up by Skye:

“Even questions about the past are about, ‘what is the learning for the future piece?’”

If coaching produces change in individuals through extending the range of flexibility in their thinking (Basseches, 2005), then while listening is an important skill for coaches to this end (Laske, 2006) one might argue that the other element that will prompt such development is the questions that a coach asks of their client.

b. “Forward momentum” (Client-External)

There were also questions asked by co-researchers with the aim of helping clients build a path towards achieving their goals that would ultimately manifest itself in external progress. Skye recognised this output-oriented purpose for questions that in her view should be *“predominantly in line with coaching goals”* and promote *“forward momentum”*. The questions were generated in order to help clients and their organisation. There was also data to suggest that coaches asked some questions for their own benefit.

Coaches asked questions that had change or output as a main goal. Bryan asked this type of question as *“encouragement to continue”* with their thinking. Mary on occasion wanted to *“trigger a reaction so we’ve got some data”* in order to expose *“the stuff that we’ll then work on”*.

Questions were also designed, according to Dale, to help shift people in order that they can continue to focus in the right places. In recounting a specific example where he was working with a client who was not making observable progress, Dale explained:

“... he’s really getting down in the weeds and we agreed that we wouldn’t have, so I would ask him a question to help shift him out of that, and there’s a real sort of purpose behind it.”

One further area that suggests questions can have a purpose to build in order to move things forward towards an outcome arose from Grace. She was specifically referring to a part of the Clean Language methodology that helped clients begin to build a picture of their desired goals:

“So, the questions are designed to develop the metaphor ... You ask questions of the words to develop them into metaphors. Then ultimately you will have a whole landscape full of metaphors, and then that’s what they want to have happened.”

Grace went on to explain how this was then developed into action:

“You’ve asked about all the different bits that they’ve put into the equation and you ask until the first step is something they can do that day or the next day.”

A solution-focused approach to coaching focuses on scoping the desired goals or future state with a client and help ensure that clients build a plan for getting there (Cavanagh & Grant, 2014). There are clear echoes of this approach in how co-researchers view the purpose of their questions. The focus on clients achieving observable goals or change, in part as a result of coaching questions, appears to be linked back to the broader aims stated by co-researchers of adding value for their clients.

c. “It’s about establishing” (Coach-External)

There were also experiences that suggested some questions held a purpose more predominantly for the coach rather than the client. These questions appeared to serve several purposes, namely:

- i. establishing the relationship with the client
- ii. establishing an understanding of the client’s situation
- iii. establishing the credibility of the coach with the client

i. Establishing the relationship: Dale understood that some of the questions he asked had the purpose of getting to know someone better and to develop the relationship with his client:

“... with somebody new, at the beginning of a coaching relationship, if there were questions arising for me, I would ask those questions. A lot of those questions I would ask, signposting that what this is about, is about me getting to know you better or the situation better.”

Bryan acknowledged that there was a particular type of question that was part of the process early in a conversation that helped establish rapport with the client:

“One of the things I’m aware of in those situations is that the choice of the questions we use right at the beginning of a coaching session ... the small talk questions that you get into.”

Skye consciously spends time using questions to establish the relationship:

“I reckon we can do that in a second. If it’s not working I’ll change it. For me it feels like an energetic connection and if I haven’t got it then we change the environment and I still haven’t got it, I’d probably say “I don’t think I’m the right coach for you”, it happens very rarely because I think you self-select somehow and you get the clients you need.”

It was interesting that Skye used her own senses to judge the relationship via the awareness of the level of energetic connection she perceives exists between herself and her clients. This awareness, used early in coaching sessions, appears to be critical in helping to establish both a way of working for the future through the data coaches get about their clients, coupled with an assessment of how things are in the present moment. The information back from the answers to questions helps guide how the coach works with any particular client.

ii. Establishing an understanding of the client’s situation: The GROW coaching model (Alexander, 2006) was referred to by several co-researchers as a part of their

early coach education. The second phase of the GROW model is designed to explore the reality of the client in relation to the situation they have brought to coaching and the goals they want to achieve. It is perhaps not a surprise then that Dale talked of asking questions to help him gain clarity about the client's situation:

"I have actually felt lost just because of the content, so I've needed to ask questions just to understand what's going on. I've actually felt a bit thick because it's just so complicated."

Bryan achieves this knowledge for both parties simultaneously by asking questions at the beginning of coaching sessions that establish this shared understanding, for example, by asking:

"I'm aware that there has been a lot going on for you since we last met, where would you like us to put our time today?"

In doing so he *'focuses down'* on the current situation, which not only helps his client, but will also help him to understand the field into which his questions go during the session, especially at the start when there is a period of *'settling in'*.

Intentional Change Theory (ICT), states that understanding one's current situation is a necessary pre-cursor to effecting lasting change (Boyatzis, 2006). This speaks particularly to the client's understanding of their situation. However, there is also reference in ICT to the client receiving support from others who, importantly, on understanding the client's situation, can provide support for change. This has echoes for coaching conversations and sheds some light on the purpose of some questions being for improving the clarity and understanding for the coach that in turn allows them, at least according to ICT, to be a position to assist in the change process for clients.

iii. Establishing the credibility of the coach: Finally, there was another theme to emerge that I had not anticipated and that Melissa posited as an interesting possibility, during our interview:

“I read something in the Sunday papers yesterday about the clothes you put on every day express what you want to express about yourself, or something. So I’m just wondering about the questions you ask. What are you trying to say about your coaching through the questions you ask? Never even considered that before but there must be something there.”

This interesting idea, that there are questions that might seek to establish the credibility of the coach, was present in the experiences of some co-researchers. For example, clean coaches use “clean” questions to establish their credibility as aligned to their espoused approach. Grace highlighted this possibility:

“I mean some people come to you because it’s clean language, so they know what they’re getting.”

It could be assumed that other ‘schools’ of coaching use certain types of question to reflect the position of the coach. It is certainly a theme I recognised from my own work in coach-development, where coaches use their questions overtly to demonstrate their preferred style. I have observed solution-focused coaches using the “Scale of 1 to 10” question and I have witnessed questions that emerge from a Gestalt approach directed in an ‘empty chair’ dialogue and many more. It also reflects my relationship between my coaching style and my questions as captured in my journal:

“I thought I was a cognitive behavioural coach. My questions certainly seem to be focused on challenging thinking patterns. In fact, in truth, I like being able to challenge thinking that seems faulty. I get a buzz spotting gaps, contradictions, inconsistencies etc and causing clients to view things differently.”

When I reflected on this particular entry I would also admit that part of the ‘buzz’ I got was being perceived as insightful by my clients – more credible. I used the questions, in part (and not often) to show what I could do.

There is an interesting possibility that coaches use questions to establish their credibility with their clients. Sometimes this appears to stem from clarity about personal

style/approach. However, there is also a possibility that this stems from a desire to ‘show’ or demonstrate coaching capability which appears to satisfy the agenda of the coach rather than the client.

5.2 Precursors

The second group of influences that pre-exist the generation of any particular question are more contextual in nature. They exist as part of the field into which any question may be asked. I have termed this group of elements ‘Precursors’. The two elements that were raised and seemed particularly important to the co-researchers were:

- a. The coaching contract
- b. Contextual factors

5.2.a. The coaching contract

The coaching contract for the purposes of this discussion will be taken as referring to a clear agreement between the coach and client that acknowledges the coaching ‘process and shared understandings’ (Cox & Jackson, 2014). Skye, giving some of the control of the sessions to the client, included a specific element on questions in her contracting, particularly around questions that they may find difficult or challenging:

“... sometimes I’m going to be asking you questions that might be difficult and on some days you might think that’s fine and on other days, it’s just too much and you need to tell me.”

Dale contracted in a way to “*provide a set of boundaries for the question*”. These boundaries then appeared to limit the questions and affect the experience of questions for both coach and client:

“Some of the questions have been, not pre-planned, but to script, and that’s about staying to the contract with the client. So if a client has said what he or she wants to work with is such and such, and what we know is what their edge is, where they need to be, where their development is, and so the questions are asked consciously, keeping somebody to that.”

Melissa felt more liberated due to the contract:

“That potentially provides a really amazing piece of contracting there as a coach to set out I want us to have the kind of coaching relationship where we can be free in the questions we ask.”

This sense of ‘freeing’ gained by a solid contract helped Kimberley’s questions:

“When all those things have been contracted really tightly, I find it really easy to choose how challenging to be and when to ask the questions.”

Skye also felt that once good contracting was done she could ask very direct questions,

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

Conversely, Mary was acutely aware that some areas of self-development remained outside the initial academic coaching contract with her students. As a result, asking some questions was off limits. However, when these ‘off limits’ areas got in the way of progress, she re-contracted and was able to generate different questions for her students:

“With some of the characters, ... we did go into that territory because we re-contracted at the beginning of the conversation and then we picked that up and looked at the continuity of how they were dealing with that in subsequent sessions.”

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. It provides another example of 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.

5.2.b. Contextual factors

The two contextual factors that arose particularly from the interviews were that coaching takes place in a wide range of environments and this has an impact on questions; and that coach/client states at any point in time impact the questions too. This section explores these two elements.

Coaching takes place in a number of different environments – on site or off site, in an office, coffee-shop and more. Co-researchers were well aware of the impacts of generating questions in these different spaces and places. Skye felt that environment impacted her questions:

“... which makes me think of presence because I think ... if you didn't have the right environment, you'd be asking the same questions and they wouldn't land.”

Bryan, in joking tone, described himself as ‘*pathologically conflict averse,*’ and felt that the context in which he was working impacted the questions:

“I have had the situation of saying something that caused somebody to get tearful unexpectedly in a room full of other people where we happened to meet for coaching. If I'd known that was going to happen we would probably have met somewhere else or I would have held back.”

This was a sentiment that Kimberley was also very mindful of as she felt that working in some public places with her clients meant it impacted how she positioned questions:

“... then you have to say “I'm mindful that we're in a café and this is good stuff, how do you want to play this?” and they usually carry on and have a good cry.”

Co-researchers reflected on the impact that their own state and that of their clients had on the generation of coaching questions. Some states were described that co-researchers found helpful to their experience of questioning. Dale identified that he was able to ask a ‘*different type of question*’ when certain conditions were in place, “*obvious things,*

like I'm relaxed. I feel confident.” Other states were identified that impacted questions differently: Melissa described how her questions were impacted when she was experiencing tension:

“... maybe if I'm a bit tense ... I think sometimes one of the things that happens in my coaching is it seems like ... my questions might start to actually ... they're not questions, they're sort of a way of pushing the client.”

She went on to explain that when she senses a somatic frustration in coaching sessions it can be a catalyst for positive experience:

“So what made me go to that question? No idea. Just searching for some kind of light. How do I bring fresh air into the conversation at this point? This small point is very important to our session.”

Co-researchers mentioned an echo of this effect, in relation to the state of their clients. When coaches recognised the state that the client was in, it directly impacted the direction of questions that coaches asked. Bryan explored a particular example from a client who had not asked for the coaching provision in the first place but had it provided for by his work. Bryan had sensed that as a result the client been holding back in previous sessions, yet:

“I read on the day that something had shifted in him, his demeanour was different. You know we talked about that initial piece of, “hi, how are you, how are things going?” It felt like he was up for it, and he was very quickly into “here's what I want to work on today,” and it was very real. They'd been real stuff before but it was more superficial. And his body language said that he meant it. And when we started testing that and getting into it, he was [sic] less holding back.”

Grace was also aware that she wanted to have some clarity of the clients' readiness to talk about whatever was under discussion, which she gleaned by checking their state through observing their body language:

“If they’re distressed or eager to move forward, sometimes you can just get that from the body language.”

It can be seen that co-researchers recognise the impacts of a number of precursors on the experience of enquiry in coaching. Their own state and that of their clients has an impact; so too, does the environment in which the coaching session is being held. Perhaps an emotion that would appear to be negative – frustration – can have a positive effect on the questions that coaches ask. It can be the driver to keep searching for a question that helps the client move forward.

Summary

Analysing interviews from co-researchers produced two major themes with underlying, often inter-related, elements that are part of the experience of generating coaching questions. The first theme suggested that questions in coaching are influenced by a significant number of background elements that pre-exist the moment of asking. Many of these influences are ‘of the coach’. The second theme was of contextual elements that are in the field of the coaching session but that pre-exist it.

The background influences include the personal history of the coach, an element that emerged from the interviews unbidden. There were no questions in the interview schedule that sought to explore the personal histories of the coach, yet levels of awareness and reflection on a broader scale enabled co-researchers to meta-reflect (Gray, 2006) and share such insights in relation to the impact on their experience of asking questions.

The education in coaching that a co-researcher received also impacted questions, from two areas. Firstly, ‘influences’ such as coaching approaches or particular individuals directly affect the experience of generating questions. We have seen how Clean Language, Time to Think, and NLP impact the questioning of certain coaches involved in this study. Secondly, supporting frameworks and processes also influence questioning. Useful in the early days of being a coach, findings from this co-researcher group suggested that at an individual level, greater experience resulted in these

supporting structures being used less directly, and in some cases they become a hindrance to being fully present for their clients.

There are excellent scholarly references on the different approaches that coaches might adopt in coaching (Bachkirova, Cox, & Clutterbuck, 2010; Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). These texts set out to help coaches decide which approach to adopt through a detailed presentation of the many alternatives, which may include merging several into a more integrated model of coaching. Any decision about which approach coaches adopt seems, in relation to questions, less important than the realisation that adopting any given approach will have an impact on question generated and asked.

The finding that background elements impact questions also emerged in relation to the philosophical position (e.g. epistemological or values-based position) coaches took, and how they saw their role. Coach education may have played a part in how coaches form their philosophy and define their role and responsibilities. Concerns about remaining objective in coaching were raised by co-researchers and appeared, to me, to provide insight into the philosophical position of some coaches. My own relativist bias came through in one particular interview.

There was interesting insight into the various roles co-researchers played with their clients, and how they saw the role of the questions they asked. Much of the data centred on what it was like posing questions for provoking and challenging clients' thinking. There was also information suggesting co-researchers ask questions for facilitating momentum in the client and establishing the relationship between coach and client. There was the idea from one co-researcher which highlighted that some coaches, including myself, may be using questions for boosting credibility in the eyes of their clients. Cox's earlier assertion about the singular nature of the purpose of coaching questions being for the benefit of the client (Cox, 2013) is a laudable aspiration, but the evidence from this research would suggest coaches ask questions to fulfil a number of purposes, including for their own benefit.

The precursor elements that are in any given coaching session seem to shape the experience of both generating and asking. The coaching contract is well recognised as important in setting boundaries and, paradoxically, is a liberating factor when it comes

to generating questions. The more comprehensive the contract, the freer co-researchers reported they felt in relation to asking questions.

The state of both coach and client impacts questions that do or do not get asked. Frustration, at first glance a negative emotion in a coaching context, can be the catalyst for the emergence of better questions and, as a result, better thinking for the client. Tension, another state that can be negatively interpreted, was less helpful to one co-researcher, while its diametrically opposed state – relaxation – appeared to help another co-researcher. The state of the client was another element to emerge that affected coaches' questioning experience, especially when the environment within which those questions were set, was too public or inappropriate.

In summary, coaches were able to identify a wide range of background influences that shaped the experience of generating coaching questions that pre-exist the coaching session itself. This wide range of extant information was referred to as “all the things that help you” generate coaching questions. Coaches cannot ask questions they cannot ask. It seems it is a unique and individual activity. It is ultimately deeply subjective. The essence of coaching is that two subjective entities – coach and client – bring all their pre-existing influences to a coaching conversation. For the coach, the manifestation of these pre-existing influences is played out partly in their experience of generating questions.

Chapter 6 moves forward to look at the experiences of paying attention to all the relevant information present in a coaching session through to generating and then asking questions. The chapter is divided into three sections and provides a deep exploration of ‘being’ with co-researchers ‘in the moment’ of question generation in coaching.

Chapter 6 ‘In the moment’

This chapter examines how co-researchers experienced being, as Sam described it, ‘*in the moment*’, of creating questions for their clients. From co-researcher accounts, there appear to be three broad elements that represent what happens at that point in time of questioning in coaching: Noticing, forming, and asking, and these three elements have provided the structure for this chapter. A brief overview of each will follow in order to help frame this chapter in order to retain the broad sense of the experience before exploring the detail of each phase.

The first section, ‘*noticing*’ – a term used by both Melissa and Sam – records how co-researchers reported the ways they used information from within and beyond the coaching conversation to generate a question ‘in the moment’ with a client. Co-researchers used data that was provided by the client in the form of direct responses to a comment, observation, or question from the coach. Coaches also used information they had gleaned that may relate to their client from outside of the conversation that was currently taking place.

Despite the intense focus that co-researchers spoke of employing in coaching sessions, there appeared to be an interesting anomaly when it came to generating questions. While a proportion of the questions that they asked were consciously created, there were also a proportion of questions that were much less consciously generated for some co-researchers. These questions seemed to ‘pop’ out of their mouths, often with little or no awareness. Co-researchers had different experiences of generating questions, and some exemplars have been represented in the second part of this chapter that seeks to provide insights into consciously and non-consciously-formed questions. While there were differences when forming questions, there was also a single element of commonality; each co-researcher discussed a somatic element to their question generation, albeit that they described it in their own unique way. There are insights into this somatic element within this second section of the chapter.

A truism of questions appears to be that all asked questions have been generated, but not all generated questions are asked. Co-researchers were clear that there were times when, for a range of reasons, they refrained from asking questions that they had more or

less consciously generated. Sometimes they refrained from asking questions because the timing was no longer right, and at others it was linked to the level of real or perceived challenge. This last effect was offset occasionally by many co-researchers who used a prefacing statement for several reasons, including to prime clients for the question to follow. Of the actual experience of asking the generated question, coaches were acutely aware of the speed of the whole process, that they edited questions on occasion, and that mostly they were unattached to the outcome of asking. Exploration of this third element is provided within the final section of this chapter.

6.1 Noticing

Co-researchers identified that they use a wide range of information from various sources to generate questions during coaching conversations. Sam identified that sources of input came from times and places that originated outside the coaching sessions. She noted:

“I do have a view that we’re coaching when we’re not coaching and that makes a difference. We don’t coach [only] when we sit down and arrive in the meeting room, we coach the minute we’re in their organisation, with the receptionist, in the lift, in the corridor, when you’re making that cup of tea before you sit down, you’re ‘on’. All of that is really, really valuable information that helps you to understand the wider context in which somebody is operating and enables you to speak about or ask questions that might make a difference.”

Sam, in addition to being a coach, is also a highly experienced coach supervisor, and from conversations with her outside of this research, I am aware that she is fully conscious of themes such as the wider ‘field’ in which coaches do their work, that seem to be reflected in her comments

Mary also introduced details into a coaching session from broader origins, e.g. a student workshop:

“It’s data I picked up. In workshops there was an interaction playing out that was, particularly for the female example ... that wasn’t working too well. That was causing some friction... And the question around, “What’s it going to cost for you to let that go?””

Skye also suggested that she begins to collect data very early on in the process to help formulate her questions:

“I guess my thinking about the questions I’m asking, starts forming right from the word ‘go’ when I’m really being curious about what is being presented”

Bryan mentioned that he would bring in pre-existing material from previous coaching sessions into current sessions:

“Typically it might be, “last time we met, these were your overall coaching goals, what we said is when we got together today we would focus on this one, and maybe do some work on that one. Is that still where you are?” Something like that, so those are focusing down type questions.”

Bringing this extant data into a session was sometimes done to see how the client had progressed since the last meeting, as well as gauging his/her state and readiness for coaching. Whatever the specific purpose, it appears that questions that are generated within a coaching session are sometimes built upon information that has not arisen from within the session itself. There was the suggestion that not only are questions sometimes quasi-scripted by coaches for their clients, but that questions also exploit information from beyond the session to do so.

Turning to information elicited from within the sessions, Kimberley explained that she contracts with clients that her coaching sessions, unlike other forms of conversations, do not need to follow a ‘turn-taking’ structure. This framing statement opens up the possibility that some input to questions does not necessarily come directly from a client’s answer. This could result in the session being more conversational and less

formulaic. Aware of these possible impacts, Kimberley still chooses questions based on what the client says:

“I will always try and choose a question based on what they’re saying. It will always be on their [topic], so what they’re talking about leads to the next question.”

While the theme of ‘challenge’ in coaching questions is covered elsewhere in this thesis, Kimberley noted that sometimes the degree of difficulty implicit in a question itself provides a guide for the coach, to help shape the next question. She felt that if a coach had asked a question that makes a client “*uncomfortable*”, something she labelled “*a gritty question*”, a coach may need to re-contract before asking a few more challenging questions. This is an interesting observation that suggested the generation of some questions are impacted directly from the preceding actions of the coach, in addition to the response from the client. Kimberley’s judgment was based on the coach’s perception of the challenge within his or her own question. This judgment affected the challenge in subsequent questions, even to the extent that it might call for re-contracting.

Other co-researchers mentioned that they were particularly aware when clients responded in a way that was especially noteworthy. This noticing could be when there are inconsistencies or incongruence in the answers of clients. Melissa, who uses a Gestalt approach within her coaching (Spoth, Toman, Leichtman, & Allan, 2013), noticed how her clients responded and the impacts of how they were ‘being’ on the coaching conversation:

“For me I would sense a disturbance in the connection between us if the answer was a bit inauthentic or pleasing or bonkers, or anything really. I think there’s also not just a relationship but there’s also the kind of quality of the conversation as well ... I would say that the answers are most steadfast or they seem to be most grounded or authentic when it isn’t a very fast conversation, where there are gaps and you can hear the cogs whirring.”

Mary described that this noticing of information from the client often came from non-verbal sources:

“... spotting when things aren't going very well for the person and it's the body language, the look in their eyes if you can see and asking that question that they wished you hadn't asked them. Because you sense that there's something that they haven't told you, that's really bugging them.”

It became clear from the data that the input for some questions that co-researchers used in their coaching emerged in-the-moment from within the sessions and was the result of noticing verbal or non-verbal responses from the client. What also emerged was that coaches used data from beyond the walls of the coaching session itself as contributing data to aid the generation of their questions. This data capture and input process relied on coaches paying attention to the words and actions of their clients both inside and outside coaching sessions.

In order to gather all of the relevant data that was presented by clients, co-researchers explained that they needed to pay high levels of attention throughout the coaching sessions. What follows is insight from co-researchers into this attention-paying element of 'noticing'.

Grace shared an interesting reflection, that the act of simply listening holds the potential power to lead clients to generate their own solutions in coaching sessions. The silence can prompt solutions being uncovered without the need for further questions. This resulted in her *'going to her default position of listening'* if she was *'not sure that it's the right question or when to ask a question'*.

Melissa also pointed out that listening and being silent could be a really helpful approach. She also felt that silence had a helpful role for the coach in aiding the generation of further questions too:

“... maybe the silence and the presence are also a compost for the questions as well.”

In order for Skye to be able to remain fully curious about what was being presented by her clients, she would listen “*as wide as my listening parameters will go*”. Dale recognised that he was only able to remain fully present if he de-selected the information that had high degrees of technical content, in order for what seemed the most relevant information to remain fully accessible:

“I’ve been invited to sit in on conference calls, a good deal of which I don’t understand ... I would be listening at a different level to ‘how are these people?’... I could only notice that by tuning out what they were actually saying, that I begin to notice...”

It seems obvious to some degree that listening plays an important role in the experience of generating coaching questions. However, it also seemed to play an important role in accessing a state that some co-researchers explicitly referred to as ‘flow’, an altered state of consciousness that is, in part, accessed through an intense focus on the task at hand (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005). High levels of attention, paid over an extended time frame – ‘*at least twenty minutes*’ according to Mary – seemed to be a gateway to the state of flow. In her study on ‘flow’ state and coaching interactions, Wesson records that one of her coaching participants was aware that being in flow resulted in asking questions “*in the moment*” (Wesson, 2010, p.58). It appears this is a state that has an impact on how coaches ask questions. In this study, co-researchers echoed this finding.

Bryan felt that accessing ‘flow’ was possible as a direct result of paying conscious attention, which itself could lead to a level of unconscious attention. This resulted in both coach and client being in a state of co-created or shared flow:

“... when you’re in that unconscious attention it can be almost trance-like but because the two of you are engaged it’s not a trance that’s going on for you alone.”

Bryan also noted that sometimes being ‘stuck’ with a client could be the route to access this shared flow state, accessed through a simple question, aimed at moving out of being ‘stuck’:

“We're actually getting to a certain line of discussion and the level of engagement, it feels like the two of you are very much in a flow. What's interesting is not always, but quite often what I've found is, those moments seem to follow on from a period of being very stuck. The conversation has run dry, we've been going round in circles, we've not really been getting on anywhere. Staring at each other, staring at the walls, “God what do we do now? I wonder what's for tea?” Then even quite a simple question, it could sometimes almost be an observation, and things quite often ... like, “it feels a bit awkward, does this happen, is this a familiar situation?””

The feelings of being in flow were described positively and Skye's experience, when linking it to questioning, was representative of the tenor of how flow resonated among this co-researcher group:

“What strikes me is when I'm on my best form, it's when I'm in this flow, not stressed place... this wonderful flow place ...”

However, flow appears to be a fragile state and one that can be broken “by distractions” according to Bryan or as Mary described when coaches move from unconscious attention to inattention:

“... it's mindful, it's staying in the zone ... do I succeed in doing that? I think 99% of the time yes because fortunately you usually catch yourself if you're drifting off.”

Dale, a former member of the armed forces and, significantly, an experienced martial artist, was less convinced about the special nature of being in a flow state:

“... that sounds like a highly idealised state. That's why I sort of slightly reject the mindfulness thing, because I'm not kind of like, you know, totally in the zone and all that sort of thing. I think practically speaking it doesn't take much to get to that space. It's not uncommon for me to be in

that space. It's not uncommon for me to work with people where I'm in that space."

As a new coach I remember occasionally feeling that entire coaching sessions were a struggle. In those early sessions I was often aware of time, aware of questions, and conscious of the level of progress that was being made. Counter-intuitively perhaps, the more I concentrated, the more difficult I found coaching. It felt like I was trying to 'force it'. I recall some early coaching sessions that seemed like they went on for more than the allotted two hours. As I became more experienced, I was able to relax more and as a result it feels that being in this 'flow' state is now more normal than not. Indeed, an awareness that this research has prompted for me is that the lack of the feelings of flow can be an indicator for me about something I may need to pay attention to. Goldman Shuyler suggests that the presence of these feelings can be considered the foundation of integrity, their absence can suggest that a person is no longer grounded (Goldman Schuyler, 2010).

The experience of generating questions, for all co-researchers in this study, extended beyond just the cognitive elements of analysing and thinking. It included noticing elements that were of, or from, their body. Indeed, Melissa felt that generating questions included a significant physical or sensory element: *"I think it would be more somatic than rational."* Melissa's experience illustrated levels of awareness about the moment of generating questions that suggests it is accompanied by personal, recognisable (to themselves), and translatable experiences. It should be noted here that the data about sensory awareness of co-researchers was not limited to the temporal phases directly before and during the generation of questions. Some awareness of senses such as 'relief' were identified by co-researchers as occurring after a question had been asked and received by a client. This section will largely limit its scope to the findings of sensory or somatic data that appeared before or during the generation of questions.

Co-researchers spoke eloquently about their experience of the moment at which questions are generated and asked. They related their individual experiences in terms of feelings, sensations, and the use of metaphor. They certainly did not categorise them as discretely as I have just done, but when the data were analysed, the moment of

generating and/or asking questions was accompanied by cues that co-researchers seemed to notice from within their own bodies.

Co-researchers used both positive words and phrases to describe the feelings associated with generating questions and some words that might be interpreted, at least in comparison, as more negative in nature. This latter point is captured by Dale:

“... the anxiety is about how that question may land, and if it’s serving the person or if it’s actually not enabling them.”

These feelings of anxiety, or of the frustration already mentioned, were also followed by feelings of relief. Melissa described her own sense of relief in a coaching session when she had created some space for her client:

“Then my experience of that question actually taking her to a different place, was somatic relief as well.”

Sam described how relief was experienced ‘by both’ herself and her client, a CEO, when he finally identified his worry of the loneliness he might experience in his pending retirement. The relief resulted from Sam asking a direct question:

“Eventually I asked – I’m not going to remember it exactly – a really direct question around, “it’s really interesting that every time I go and talk to you about this thing – and I use the open door analogy every time – you make jokes and this and this and this, and every time I go to this and you shut it down. What’s going on?” It was the one thing that then we were able to talk about why he was avoiding talking about retirement, and in so doing we ended up talking about his retirement and what that meant for him.”

Co-researchers also described the positive feelings that accompanied generating questions. Dale, who does much of his work with senior executives in the private sector, explained his experiences of generating certain questions as being accompanied by feelings of “lightness, a playfulness” even when the topic under discussion was quite

serious and the clients he works with are making tough decisions. Grace also experienced this lightness, along with other feelings, when generating questions:

“... it’s euphoria because this has happened. It’s almost a little feeling of dizziness, lightness maybe not dizziness, but lightness. So heavy and light. Wow! So it’s a heaviness, that’s the awareness and then it’s a lightness which feels like that could be sort of a bit of euphoria that this is the question to ask.”

The sensations that co-researchers experienced when they noticed something that appeared important to the questions that they may ask, produced a fascinating range of richly coloured descriptions, a flavour of which are presented below:

Mary: *“... a welling up in the back of your throat.”*

Melissa: *“... my tummy would be a bit kind of butterfly-ish.”*

Dale: *“... an arising from somewhere in your centre, ooh (points to abdomen) like that.”*

Sam: *“... something in what they’ve said that just strikes a chord and it doesn’t go away.”*

Grace: *“... it’s a feeling of irritation that’s all kind of round here, face, head, throat.”*

Kimberley: *“... excitement actually ... a question that lands really well and they go “ooh” and they’re off, and I love that.”*

It appeared that co-researchers were asking questions partly informed by the bodily sensations that they experienced. They were noticing large amounts of data, spoken and unspoken, from within and beyond the coaching session, and then producing questions that were accompanied by their own range of data. I found this ability to assimilate such large amounts of information quickly enough to be able to keep a conversation flowing naturally was a highlight in the research and one that felt very significant. It was important for two reasons: Firstly, it was the point in the research that made me consider whether my interest in the research question happened to coincide with my own transition in capability to a point where I was able to manage all this assimilation of information more effectively, i.e. as a result of having greater experience. The second reason it was so interesting a point in the research was that it made me realise that the sensory information was being used as a heuristic device to help coaches short-cut the

analysis and generate questions that they ‘sensed’ were going to be helpful to their clients.

As will be shown in later sections, the use of figurative language (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994) was fairly common with co-researchers, and may well have been a way for them to go about “*catching those fleeting moments*” as Dale descriptively recounted. Figure 6.2 captures some of the examples of how co-researchers experienced the moment when questions emerged:

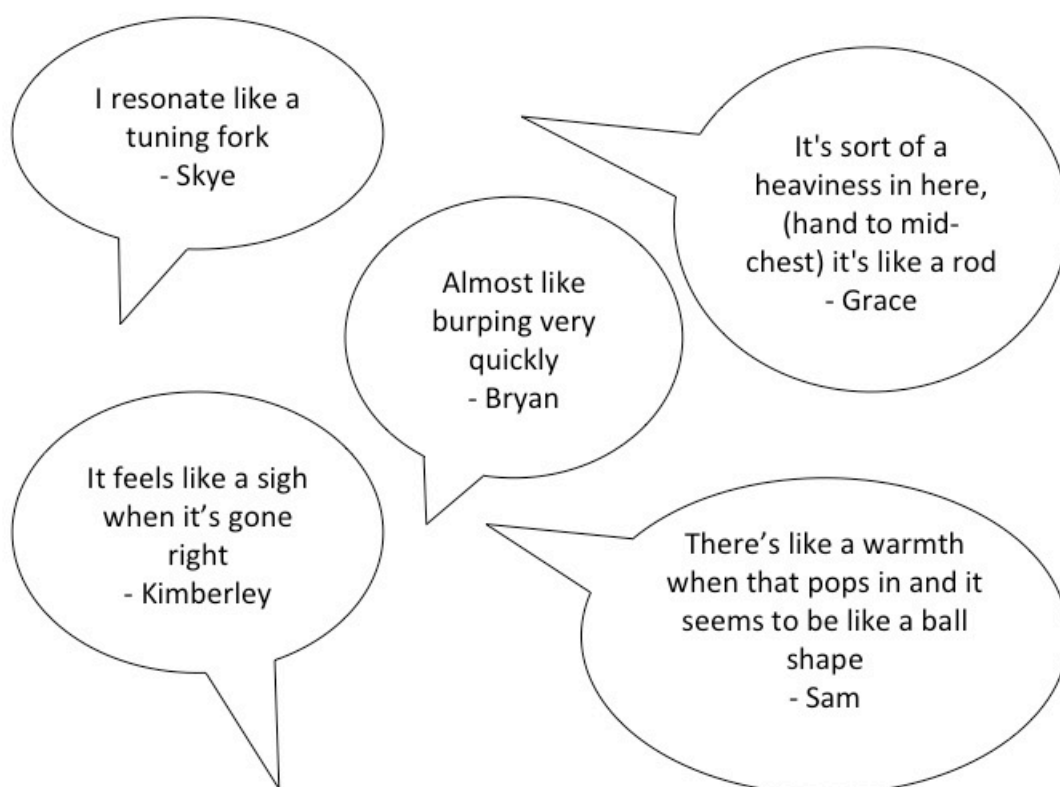


Fig 6.2 Showing a range of figurative language that co-researchers used to describe the experience of generating coaching questions.

The somatic element will be further explored in the section 6.2 that follows, as it seemed so important a part of generating questions of different ‘types’. Co-researchers spoke about differences they perceived in how questions were generated. Sometimes questions were produced as a result of a process that was more conscious and co-researchers had higher levels of awareness at these points of the construction of the

questions. At other times, there were questions that they generated much less consciously. They were aware that there was a difference in these questions and the role they played in coaching conversations. Co-researchers were able to provide insight into their experience of generating and asking these different types of question.

6.2 Forming conscious and non-conscious questions

Bryan, like other co-researchers, felt that simply being part of the research project had made him more aware of his questions, and one specific effect was that he had slowed down the process of generating questions. This slowing had, he suggested, increased the level of consciousness to his questions, although he felt this had not impacted on the amount of time spent in or out of 'flow'. He reflected that the start of coaching sessions might include a higher proportion of consciously-formed questions to help set the context and that once this is established his questions become more reactive in nature:

"I think one of the things that's happening is more of it's coming from them, and less of it is a response to a question I've asked ... so I think away from, if you like, the 'selecting the question from the library' into much more of a 'responding to what they're saying'. Because we've now got to a point where we understand what it is we're talking about... we've got some context."

This idea of understanding the context and the direction of the coaching session to follow seemed to be echoed by Grace when she described the questions used early in the clean language approach to coaching:

"... so you start off by asking what are called the developing questions which are basically 'what kind of?', and 'is there anything else about?', just to get a sense."

Grace described that while these questions asked early in a coaching session were used to build or re-establish rapport or check on progress since the last session, they were also a catalyst for developing a new line of exploration .

Dale felt that clients could often perceive the purpose behind questions that were more consciously constructed and that to some extent this was part of the interplay of coaching sessions. He felt that some of these consciously-formed questions were part of a framework for certain parts of a coaching conversation, which helped keep the conversation aligned to the coaching contract:

“... some of those consciously-formed questions are not to script, that’s too prescriptive, but they’re following a narrative, the constituent parts of which are the contract, where the client said he or she wants to go, what’s happened in previous meetings ... usually I would get some sort of sense of a pathway, so like a spatial awareness of a pathway, a journey, a filling out that space, helping the client take themselves and being attentive to the things that they’ve said they wanted to be, helping them.”

I recognise the way Dale describes these questions and their role when asked early in my own coaching sessions. It is important for me to frame the session in the way that my clients want to. The best way to do that, for me, is to ask what they want to focus on and understand the background context in relation to how they are on that particular day. Once this information is established, and we both have some guiderails to help frame the rest of the session, I am able to move from these consciously-formed questions – which I see as *‘should ask’* questions – to more reactive questions that respond to the client reactions as the session progresses.

Bryan is an experienced coach who describes himself as *“very much in my own head a lot”*. Couple his experience with this internal focus, and his former professional background in logistics, and perhaps it is no surprise that I found him to be analytically strong during our interview. Such levels of awareness enabled Bryan to use these consciously-formed questions when progress in coaching sessions had stalled: *“I reach into the bag of ready-made questions sometimes, if it feels like things are running dry”*. While he used this type of question to re-start coaching sessions that seemed to be stuck, he felt what he was trying to do over time was *“consciously forming questions less consciously”*. Such paradoxical thinking spoke to me of the effects of greater experience. As highlighted earlier, it appeared that increased experience resulted in questions being asked less consciously over time.

Skye spoke of this theme of the impacts of experience on the levels of consciousness that she brings to her questions. She reported that in her experience *“I realise the conscious will get in the way”* and as such she wanted to tap into the potential of her *‘fast brain’* which she felt was less conscious and more automatic. She recognised that she did use *‘slow brain’* (consciously-formed) questions when she lost her focus:

“I would then go back to pretty vanilla logic brain, tried and tested questions, to get me back on track, useful to the client, relevant to the client in the moment but vanilla.”

A *‘slow brain’* question, relying on a logical, more conscious process, was an interesting idea in its own right. What was also interesting for me was the fact that Skye should experience these questions as *‘vanilla’*. I would see this as a pejorative term used to describe something in a negative way, suggesting it was perhaps a little dull. I cannot ascribe such associations for Skye. While being mindful that I may be projecting some of my own views here, framing these questions as *‘vanilla’* seemed to echo my own way of looking at these conscious questions as *‘should ask’* questions. As will be suggested later, co-researchers appeared to me to view some of this more logical, conscious work as less interesting than that which required them to react in the moment and generate questions with less conscious awareness.

A phenomenon that was recognised by many of the co-researchers was the experience of questions *‘popping’* into their head. Grace, Bryan, and Dale all had experiences, which seemed allied to Skye’s, who felt that questions *“pop into my head without warning”*.

Sam suggested that changing focus helps generate these questions:

“I’d stopped paying attention to the process and started paying attention much more to the person that was in front of me. But it was very hard to identify what was it, or what is it, that causes a particular question to kind of pop into my head?”

Sam's change of focus towards her client, rather than the coaching process, seemed to link back to my own recollections that as I stopped trying to *'force'* the process, I entered a state of flow which enabled questions to come more easily. How the coach pays attention seemed to affect the experience of generating questions.

While this sensation was related to the creation of non-consciously-formed questions, it was noticeable that the very 'popping' itself was within the conscious awareness of co-researchers. It seemed to be an example of where coaches are able to switch between levels of attention that appear to range from being unaware to being fully aware.

Alongside these consciously-formed questions, and the sense of questions popping into the heads of the co-researchers, there was also data about questions that were generated non-consciously. Grace described "*a sense of wonder*" that accompanied these questions and Dale experienced these questions seemingly arising "*out of the ether*". Melissa, while analysing what happened in more detail, reflected. "*I suppose in a way it's a mystery*" and described it as:

"... a bit like going into the larder and finding some kind of magic ingredient that you didn't know you had, it's like 'oh OK, yeah good'"

There were interesting differences in how co-researchers represented how such non-consciously generated questions 'arrived' for them during coaching. There was a good deal of awareness that they had generated these questions in a less than conscious way but also no clarity over what made them ask any particular question. Skye felt some of these questions "*come out of nowhere*" and Dale thought that these "*questions are coming from a different place*".

An interesting finding concerned co-researchers' reflections on how they experienced the generation of these non-consciously-formed questions. The responses varied. What became clear was that the responses co-researchers provided were either a 'best-guess' or a conviction that resulted from a processes of personal reflection or discussions in supervision. There was an acknowledgement that, perhaps axiomatically, non-consciously forming questions had little to do with thinking: Sam suggested "*... it doesn't seem very cognitive to me*" and Grace described it as "*not a lot of thinking*".

(pause) *just pops into my head. Not even my head, it almost comes from my body*". Grace also felt that experience and confidence were important factors in being able to generate these questions, a feeling shared by Sam, who also felt that these questions emerged from the experience of the coach:

"All of your experience is serving you in that moment to know that this is a good hunch."

Mary ascribed the origin of the questions to *"a gut instinct, it's not very scientific"*.

There were reflections too on the impact of asking these non-conscious questions. While there was some comment on how these questions affected clients, there were also impacts that affected the coach. Melissa felt reassured to know that the questions would come to her:

"I might feel anxious about something and a question just pops up."

In contrast, Dale experienced these non-conscious questions as anxiety-inducing because of the lack of control that accompanied them:

"I would ask questions that I'm frightened of or scared, not scared, anxious about asking ... those sorts of questions, I have an anxiety because they haven't been edited."

Sometimes the questions that would emerge and be asked from Dale with little or no editing would be *"not so well articulated"* as others he asked, and yet he felt that they would usually *"come out OK"*. The difference between the experiences of Dale and Melissa was noticeable. One coach found non-consciously-formed questions a relief to their anxiety; the other found they produced anxiety, despite the fact that, in Dale's case, these questions were generally 'OK'.

Another impact on the coach that particularly resonated for me was mentioned by Melissa, namely that by being:

“... really, really present with the person ... I was really going with them where they needed to go with it, but really I don't know what questions I asked.”

There are often times when my attention is so fully on the client that there is a degree of loss of self that manifests itself in having no clear knowledge or recollection about the questions that I have asked in a particular moment. I feel highly aware and yet unaware at the same time. As suggested by co-researchers too, the lack of awareness, achieved through high levels of awareness, is not a permanent state within coaching sessions, but something that fluctuates, and certainly for me, can be fairly fragile.

In addition to questions that were either consciously or non-consciously generated, there was a third category that was mentioned by Skye. While she commented that they too seemed to come “*out of the ether*”, she was very clear that they were a distinct third type of question, which were different from just a version of non-conscious questions. She said:

“I think they're different and these seem to be gifts outside of me ... I'm just being a vessel so I'm not judging at all. So, I'm just passing on a message. All of a sudden I've started to sound like a medium!”

These ‘gifts’ were often accompanied by a physical sensation, which Skye likened to the ends of tuning fork going “*zzzzzz*”. During both a telephone conversation and my interview with Skye, she experienced these sensations – a frequency that she reported was unusually high. Her feeling of resonating occurred when either she or I uttered what she framed as an essential truth. The way Skye experienced this particular type of question appeared distinct from question-types identified by other co-researchers. Her linking it to being a medium, while said with humour, felt true for her too. It appeared that she was experiencing the emergence of questions from a different place. Channelling is described as the “communication of information to or through a physically embodied human being from a source ... on some other level or dimension of reality other than the physical as we know it” (Klimo, 1988, p2). It is worth noting here briefly that Grace held an opposing view, that if something resonated for the coach, then it was not going to be about the client, i.e. the coach was working from their own

agenda rather than that of the client. If Skye cannot locate the origin of these questions, and considers them simultaneously something that is bigger than her but also at her “*very core*”, perhaps she is the vessel for questions from another dimension.

I was fascinated by Skye’s account of this ‘third category’ of question, as I came to see them. Although non-conscious questions arise often in my coaching, I have never experienced channelling questions in my coaching sessions. Skye’s experience made me start to wonder whether all coaches could access this special category of question and, if we could, what it would take to do so. It is a question that as yet remains unanswered.

6.3 Asking

In framing the research question, it was important that I allowed scope to explore the phenomenon that these co-researchers recognised, namely generating coaching questions that do not get asked. It was this greater openness in the research question that allowed for an interesting exploration of the experience of co-researchers when it came to unspoken questions.

Bryan was aware of the possibility of not asking questions of the client for a range of reasons that were fundamentally more about the coach than the client. He termed this “*the not asking questions collusion*” suggesting that the coach was colluding with the client by not asking questions that were about certain topics, or had a higher degree of challenge. The reasons he identified that might have lead him in the past to play a role in this particular interaction was in order to protect the relationship – as he saw it – and to maintain the trust of the client in him.

Mary, who was very clear about a number of boundaries for her own practice, was also clear that there were certainly questions she would not ask if they used information/data from another coaching client in her student cohort. This level of awareness around the ethicality of boundaries, confidentiality, and professionalism for coaches, is covered in the Codes of Ethics for organising bodies such as European Mentoring and Coaching Council and others (EMCC, 2010). The potential for coaches to cross such a line by using information from one client during the coaching of another is a real and genuine challenge. It is also one that might well be the reason for a proportion of questions that are generated by coaches remaining unspoken.

Not asking questions in order that the client has more time to think or talk was a repeated theme. Dale, Melissa, and Kimberley all recognised that they used silence as a consciously selected strategy, although how Kimberley came to the realisation of the power of not voicing her questions was one of the highlights of the interviews. She recounted how, when her business coaching women entrepreneurs was new, she would occasionally meet clients in public places, such as a restaurant. She described meeting one of her clients for lunch and while listening to the answer to a question took a bite of her “cheese toastie” sandwich. The cheese inside was so hot she could not ask a question, as she wrestled with eating, even though she wanted to:

“And so a couple of times during the session, when I would have asked a question, I couldn’t because I had hot food, and I had to wait longer than you naturally would have waited, and every single time I had to wait longer than I would have waited, something really interesting came out.”

There was also a recognition that “*questions do have their moment*” as Melissa suggested. There was data that suggested questions were often generated by coaches and then ‘held’ by the coach. Co-researchers experienced holding questions for a number of reasons. Melissa did so at times because her thinking and the subsequent question she was going to ask was a little premature:

“I notice about some of the questions that I hold that I’m not asking, they might have been very challenging, almost like ahead of where the client is.”

It was also apparent that questions can be more or less relevant and the moment in time when they are fit for purpose can be fleeting, as Sam described:

“... it’s a bit like holding the ball, I’ll hold that question ... I put it in my hand, hold it there, I drop it if they’ve moved on, or I’ll bring it back and kind of put it in if it seems to still make sense or be important for them.”

Dale and Skye experienced holding some questions as a way of checking whether they were genuinely for the benefit of the client, or if they were focused on themselves, as Skye described:

“And I hold them with curiosity and I wonder “is this my stuff or their stuff?” in the moment and what I’ve noticed about when I use them, is if they don’t go away, I make the assumption that they’re important.”

If co-researchers concluded either the moment had passed, or that it was no longer suitable, they simply let the question go, unless it recurred within or across sessions, at which point they may decide to ask it.

Providing appropriate levels of challenge in coaching sessions, through questioning, is viewed as a key positive ingredient by clients in a business setting (Passmore, 2010). Co-researchers did not define challenge during the interviews. As such there is no way of knowing if there is a common understanding of the concept across the group. While one might expect that there are individual differences in interpretation, there seemed to be a degree of alignment across the group that challenge was used primarily in order to help the client. Some examples of how challenge was seen as important in helping clients are given below:

Kimberley used challenge in her questions, to help clients who were ready to make change, to think better:

“If they’re ready to have that conversation and they’ve asked for some challenge, if I can ask them questions that make them think better and they know that I’m not judging them, I’m wholly supporting them 100%, then I can give them a whack with a big, challenging question”

Grace increased the level of challenge in her questions in order to help her clients break-through uncertainty:

“... if they’re saying all the right words, but you’re sensing ... a hesitation, then you’ll challenge them.”

Mary explained how she sensed one of her students, ‘*a strong reflective-theorist*’ was procrastinating about having a pivotal discussion and “*they’ve admitted they are putting it off.*” Mary increased the level of challenge to aid self-reflection on the part of the client and tried to promote action from a state of inaction.

Challenge was also sometimes about airing topics that were not being discussed. Bryan challenged one client who appeared to have been holding back in a previous session: “*Are we going to talk about the elephant today?*”

As the research unfolded, I became interested in knowing how co-researchers sensed how much challenge to apply into their questions. It felt to me a rather nebulous concept, and difficult to judge. My own coaching is often described as challenging and while no clients have provided feedback to me that they felt too challenged, I reflected that I had no idea if there was room to be yet more challenging. It appeared that knowing how and what degree of challenge to apply, is more art than science, as Skye said in relation to challenge, “*you follow a hunch sometimes, don’t you?*”

Two co-researchers offered insights into the elements that needed to be in place for coaches to challenge effectively. Mary felt that she needed permission “*to have a very deep and honest conversation and challenging conversation*”. This permission, part gained through the contracting process, was gained through experiencing “*very strong*” levels of rapport. Bryan felt that rapport was a vital ingredient to being able to ask challenging questions too; he also reflected that another important element was empathy.

“It felt like one of those points where if we didn’t name it, then actually we’re going to get stuck dancing around it ... I wouldn’t have taken that risk if I felt we hadn’t got rapport and empathy already.”

Sam, in an example that aligns squarely with her values around ‘being heard’, recounted an experience of asking a question with high challenge of a delegate on a corporate training programme with whom she had no rapport:

“... there was a chap in the audience who was really, really cynical and not helping the performance, if you like, had a lot of things to say but a lot of things that were very, very cynical. I absolutely didn't hold back and made sure I was next to him in the coffee queue and said, “there's something that's really important to you, isn't there, but for whatever reason it's just not being heard in the way that you want it to be heard yet. What is it that's really important to you?” He was so taken aback because I was just a girl in a coffee queue and it wasn't my place to ask him that, but it worked on that occasion.”

Co-researchers felt that the contract gave them permission to ask questions with high challenge. Kimberley summed up setting the conditions for asking challenging questions as follows:

“... when I feel deeply connected with a person, that they like me, that they like the process, that they want to challenge, and all those things have been contracted really tightly, I find it really easy to choose how challenging to be and when to ask the questions.”

Kimberley later reflected however, in slight contrast to her earlier assertion, that balancing all the elements of coaching can be difficult:

“So trying to combine lots and lots of listening and lots of time to think with then asking a really challenging question can be quite a challenge in itself for me.”

The impacts of asking questions with high challenge seem to have impacts on both the coach and the client. For the coach, being challenging can be a challenge. Mary described the internal balancing she experienced around asking challenging questions:

“... something quite brave about “I'm not sure I want to ask this because I can see it might open a can of worms” and on occasions it has. But then it's cathartic.”

Mary's experience of asking questions, almost despite herself, is something I can relate to from my own coaching. Even if the anticipation of asking a challenging question is a bit uncomfortable (for coach, client, or both), it usually turns out to be followed by a sense of satisfaction for me, at having done the right thing by the client.

While acknowledging that this balancing of elements could be difficult and knowing when and how to challenge could bring its own challenge for a coach, Sam was convinced that at times, it was just easier just to *"ask the bleedin' obvious."* The rewards for coaches that were comfortable with asking challenging questions seemed to be worth the risks attached. Indeed, such questions can in themselves be the moments that transform a coaching relationship. Sam was clear that any negative short-term impacts on the relationship were likely to be temporary and produce better coaching in the longer-term:

"I've used the curiosity with a fairly direct question, and somebody's not quite been ready for it. My sense in those situations is, it's probably hit a nerve somewhere but they're not quite ready, or unbeknown to me it's hit a nerve and they're not ready. Then I do back off. But it wouldn't stop me from asking it in the first place. I don't mind like a mini rupture in order to create something greater later on."

I was struck by an apparent contradiction that existed in the way that co-researchers spoke about the freedom to challenge, and yet discussed that they would sometimes prepare themselves and/or the client for a question by signalling explicitly that a certain question was to follow. It appeared to me that for all the discussion about having permission to ask, coaches would sometimes have questions for which – or clients from whom – they felt it necessary to seek a further layer of permission. As discussed, co-researchers reported that they were happy to risk high levels of challenge in their questions once contracting, rapport, and empathy were established, and yet many used a device that would suggest that certain questions, in certain contexts, needed to be positioned or set-up, in order for coaches to be willing to ask and clients to be ready to answer. I have termed this phenomenon 'prefacing'.

Co-researchers experienced prefacing statements accompanied by changes to how they asked questions. In her coaching reflections, Sam wrote that she might preface questions with a smile, *'perhaps even a little bit cheekily'* and Kimberley too employed a smile to accompany a prefacing statement:

'It's kind of a smiley "Ooh! [laughs]. Ooh! This is going to get gritty. Are you happy with that?" and I find it easier to do that with a smile than to go, "Right, are you ready for this to get gritty?'

When reviewing the data it appeared that while coaches position the prefacing as being undertaken for the benefit of the client, the benefits to themselves were far greater in number as summarised directly from co-researcher interviews in Table 6.1:

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 6.1: Showing co-researcher perceptions of how 'prefacing' benefits clients and coaches

Client benefit

When coaches felt that the question they were about to ask might be particularly high on challenge, or be slightly off-course with the rest of the dialogue, they may turn to a prefacing phrase with the express aim of benefitting the client. Two examples of such an approach from several within the data follow:

1. Skye used: *“Are you ready for a bit of feedback?”*
2. Dale used: *“This may sound a bit stupid but ...?”*

The first question nominally offers the client the opportunity to reject the chance to receive the feedback on offer. However, social norms or the perception of power or authority that a coach has in such a relationship may, depending on the client, actually make rejecting such an offer quite difficult. The client may engage with it, even if they did not really want to answer. The second prefacing statement also, on the surface, gives the client the chance not to answer. In reality the prefacing positions the question as possibly *“a bit stupid”* and as such I wonder if clients would be tempted to ask to hear the question based on that way of framing it. While it may achieve its aim of helping the client hold the question *“lightly”* as Dale wishes, it still feels to me somewhat as if the client is being manoeuvred. Skye recognised what she was doing in the example above. She said she might try the tactic of *“tweaking their curiosity”* because, *“I think for them to be hungry for it they’ll hear it more than if they’re not hungry”*.

In addition to giving the client permission to reject the question, prefacing statements appeared to be used to prepare the client for a tougher round of questions. Although a specific example from a difficult conversation, Bryan shared a ‘type’ of precursor he might employ:

“... this may be an upsetting question for you, but “how did you feel when he died?””

Skye had a phrase she resorted to sometimes to help clients feel more prepared for a question:

“... it sounds a bit tough, would you like me to offer it or not?”

When Skye felt moved to ask one of her ‘third category’ questions that seem to have arrived to her from another place, she would often position that with clients specifically in a way that was different from how she would position other questions:

“This may not be relevant so if it’s not relevant, let’s throw it away, let’s move on”. So I’m kind of, I’m framing it differently, so that they can do whatever they want.”

I found it fascinating that these experienced coaches were framing their questions in ways that, on the surface, were designed to help get the client into a state to be able to answer them. I cannot help but reflect that this was little more than a subtle piece of self-deception on the part of the coach. The data suggested to me as I analysed it that these tactics were little more than an attempt to enable coaches, as Sam identified, to *“get away with something”*.

Coach benefit

There were real or perceived benefits for the coach as a result of prefacing. Protecting the relationship was important to co-researchers, and they spoke about creating warmth and a safe environment within which to work and prefacing helped promote this, especially when coupled with some of the changes mentioned above. The collaborative element of the relationship was also promoted by phrases such as one used by Sam: *“Help me out here ...”*

I note from my own research journal that I tend to over-complicate questions. In response to this I will preface questions with phrases such as *“this is not a fully formed thought yet but ...?”* On reflection, I am now convinced that I use this preface as a way of excusing the overly-lengthy or complicated question structure. The benefits for me in the moment are that I do not have to amend my questions. The benefits for the client are less clear. On a related point of working to the coach’s agenda rather than wholly on that of the client, there was data that suggested co-researchers prefaced questions when they were either off-topic or outside of the contract altogether. Skye related how she prefaced some her questions that arrived from outside of herself in a way that made it clear to the client that they may be helpful *“in the bigger scheme but it may not strictly come in the coaching frame”*.

Mary experienced managing risk through the way she prefaced questions, in part, for her own benefit:

“... there is a risk, it frames that question as, “This has a risk of going a number of ways, be prepared.” So, I’m being prepared for what are we opening up here and can I deal with it.”

Co-researchers were keen to ask questions that benefitted their client. It appears that on the surface they were also comfortable with high levels of challenge once certain conditions had usually been established. Yet, despite this, even the experienced coaches here often used a prefacing statement to position a question they were about to ask. Co-researchers felt these precursors were for the benefit of their clients, to get them prepared, as well as for themselves. Despite this assertion, I could not help conclude that prefacing questions, even when apparently for the benefit of the client, was more often than not also for the benefit of the feelings of the coach.

Bryan described, in colourful language, his experience of the moment of asking questions that suggested a level of artistic fluency:

“It’s almost like lyrical poetry you know, with the one line sort of follows from the previous line, leads to the next line.”

The moment of taking a question, more or less consciously generated, then making the decision to ask it was an area in which co-researchers had some very interesting insights. There was recognition that the whole process was, despite the vast amount of information to analyse, incredibly quick. There was also a shared experience of holding questions consciously in the head of co-researchers until the time seemed right, or it had passed. There was an associated feeling of letting the question take flight and a sense of non-attachment that co-researchers found useful to maintain. This section will look at each of these elements in turn.

Sam captured her sense of the high levels of complexity in the moments of asking coaching questions:

“I think being a coach is like having seven, eight, nine eyes and you’ve got an eye on all these bits that kind of help give you the ingredients ...when you put all of those ingredients together it’s like a chemical

reaction. So the chemical reaction, then out comes, in our world, as a question.”

The idea of a chemical reaction was not shared directly by other co-researchers, but they did report on their recognition that the whole process of analysing the vast amounts of data that they received was happening, as Dale suggested, *“in a split-second”*. It was also apparent from the data that co-researchers were aware of the amount of processing they were doing. Mary’s experience was of:

“... stockpiling all the data, playing back bits of it, so ...what they’ve told me is driving what questions I ask.”

The moment of asking questions was sometimes accompanied for Dale by a sense of mentally *“holding questions and waiting for the right time to ask them”*. During our interview, Sam generated a metaphor that described how she felt the holding of the question was like the coach holding a ball of malleable ‘plasticine’:

“... it’s a piece of plasticine in my hand and I hold it until they’re ready to hear it, play with it, drop it, start again with another bit of plasticine if I need to.”

Skye would not initially hold on to a question that arose for her which were not aligned to what the client had contracted to work on; she would *“bat that away”*. However, if the question continued to recur for her, she would ask it on the assumption that this recurrence signalled that it was an important question for the client.

Sam held a self-checking question in her head, which was: *“What is the right question that needs to be asked here?”* This suggested that this meta-questioning helped Sam formulate more effective questions for her clients. The desire to do the best for clients was clear. Yet, this desire was balanced with a paradoxical view captured by Skye who felt that questions when asked *“don’t have to be perfect”*. Grace experienced insight in our interview, when she captured the idea that questions emerge for her as a result of what appears to be a more passive approach:

“On the surface I don’t know what question to ask – I absorb all the information and my system will come up with the question. How strange!”

This was a particularly interesting response from Grace, early during our interview, especially in the context of her extensive use of clean coaching and the prescriptive questions that the approach employs.

Resisting the urge to ask perfect questions was another pivotal moment for me during the research. I had long since let go of searching for ‘silver-bullet’ questions that would transform an individual in one sentence. Yet the views of co-researchers prompted me to reflect that, perhaps as a result of this research, I had become too invested in the questions I asked. Indeed, my own interview questions to co-researchers occasionally became too wordy, too complex, and as a result unanswerable through trying too hard to get the question ‘right’. The effect of being a little too attached to my questions, was evidenced in phrases such as this from Kimberley, who was trying to understand a very long and over-crafted question of mine:

“Right, so, ask the question again in that context.”

While letting go of a great question might occasionally be “*annoying*” according to Skye, there was a sense from co-researchers that it was possible to move on to the next question because there was no attachment to any particular question. Mary reported that she felt no attachment to the outcome of her questions because there was “*no ego attached to it*” an idea extended by Dale, when he added a Buddhist dimension to how he viewed his asking of questions:

“I hesitate to use it, but there’s a Zen quality to it, in that there is a non-attachment to it. There’s this sort of naivety or openness. There’s certainly not an ego behind it, and I’m not concerned about how they respond to it. It’s just offered. It feels like a really light offering.”

Coaches appear to ask questions with challenge in order to help their clients. There was a sense from co-researchers that this level of challenge was possible when empathy,

rapport, and the coaching contract were all in place. These elements gave coaches permission to raise the level of challenge in their questions. Yet there was an additional experience highlighted that described how coaches often preface questions, and that this positioning statement, or action such as a smile, was reported as being done for the benefit of the client. On closer analysis, it appeared that this prefacing statement was also there very much for the benefit of the coach, who could steel himself or herself for the possible reaction from the client of a tougher question. Co-researchers also described how they felt their questions were largely free of ego and that while they 'held' questions for the right time they were also able to let them go if they were no longer appropriate. With greater experience, co-researchers found themselves trusting that their questions would land well with their clients, and therefore they were able to remain unattached to how the question landed. This balancing act suggests another possible paradox within coaching, namely that co-researchers felt a deep desire to help the client and yet remained unattached to whether the questions that they asked were the 'right' question.

Summary

The moment of asking questions in coaching is affected by a wide array of factors that help to shape the experience. Co-researchers spoke of the range of information they access to generate their questions from their clients. Some of this data comes from within the session and emanates from both verbal and non-verbal cues from the client. They also experienced gathering data from sources beyond the session itself, suggesting that the questions that are asked of clients are the results of a blend of current and extant knowledge.

In order to notice and make sense of the relevant information, co-researchers spoke of the deep levels of paying attention that were required. This focus included not just elements that were related to their client, but also to somatic feelings from themselves. When coupled with an appropriate use of silence, these high levels of self- and other-awareness, can help coaches access a level of noticing that would not otherwise be possible (Gunnlaugson & Walker, 2014). Interestingly, the co-researchers described this high level of awareness as almost a gateway into an altered state, termed 'flow' (Csíkszentmihályi, 1975). This state affected the relationship with clients in the moment and also impacted the questions that were generated and asked. The impact of flow on

generating questions therefore seems to be generally positive. It is a state that coaches have reviewed positively (Wesson, 2010), and specifically here in relation to how it helps them establish an environment that aids creating questions that move a client and the conversation on.

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; Streaan & Strozzi-Heckler, 2009).

Exceptional coaches are identified by purchasers of coaching as those who could challenge respectfully and ask difficult questions (Dagley, 2010). Co-researchers had experienced that effective challenge could have a positive, even transformative affect on the coach-client relationship. Co-researchers spoke of being able to challenge clients once they had set up boundaries in the form of the coaching contract and when levels of rapport were high. This would align to evidence suggesting that in order to be able to challenge effectively and work at helpful levels of psychological depth, trust is a critical component for coaches to establish (Machin, 2010). Once these conditions are created, coaches can apply challenge to their questions, albeit that there was little insight from co-researchers about how much challenge they would apply. A knowledge of the theory of adult learning (Cox, 2006; Mezirow, 1991) coupled with knowing the developmental stage of the client may prove helpful (Bachkirova, 2011) in judging how much and what form the challenge could take in order to help clients bring about change (Clutterbuck, 2010b; Theeboom et al., 2013).

When enquiring of clients, co-researchers experienced two types of questions: Those they formed consciously, and those that appeared less consciously. The former often appeared at the start and at the end of coaching sessions or when a coach was struggling with which questions to ask. The latter often ‘popped’ into the head of coaches without

their knowledge. These questions were asked as the result of a ‘hunch’ or ‘gut feeling’. They represent a heuristic process that allows for quick decision-making.

Non-decomposable tasks are tasks that cannot be easily broken down into component parts, as each part is closely dependent upon each other. Skills that are possible to break down more readily, are decomposable (Lin & Carley, 2003). Asking questions may be seen as a non-decomposable skill. Kahneman and Tversky’s pivotal decision-making research suggested that intuition is a poor predictor of decision-making for some skills, notably those that are decomposable. These decomposable skills lend themselves to a more analytical approach to decision-making (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Non-decomposable skills on the other hand are better suited to using intuition to make decisions (Dane, Rockmann, & Pratt, 2012). It would appear that the experienced coaches in this research were able to tap into intuition to make decisions intuitively. Their experience would suggest that they were not analysing very consciously the elements that would help them generate questions, but that they used intuition, in part informed by somatic sensory information, to generate and ask questions.

How co-researchers reported the different experience of asking consciously-formed questions and non-consciously-formed questions was a point in the research that particularly resonated for me. Co-researchers overtly and less directly seemed to me to experience these two types of questions quite differently. Conscious questions seemed to be a necessary part of the coaching process, whereas the energy and language that they used to describe non-conscious questions was distinctly more positive. Such differentiation aligned to my own bias for working in this way.

The point in time of actually asking questions was accompanied by an acknowledgement that some questions were generated but remained unasked. Some questions remained unasked temporarily, which co-researchers experienced as ‘holding’ questions. Other questions remained unasked permanently. These unasked questions became redundant as a result of the client’s thinking moving on beyond the question; sometimes the coach felt the question was too far ahead of the client’s current thinking and, on occasion, these questions were not asked as to do so would cross ethical boundaries because they were generated from privileged information.

Co-researchers spoke of their experience of prefacing some questions they were about to ask clients. Such prefacing was usually verbal but also came through the body language of the coach in the form of a knowing smile. While there were reported benefits to the client of such prefacing, such as preparing them for a question with increased challenge, prefacing was also used to benefit the coach, including preparing them for the response to the question. Overall, the impression I was left with was that the permission-seeking through the use of prefacing, was a bit of a blind-spot for some coaches that may be a form of self-deception (Bachkirova, 2015) in that we claim it is in service of the client when it appeared to be more fully in service of the coaches' agenda. The concept of prefacing questions appears to add a unique insight into coaching research.

When questions were verbalised by coaches, they were accompanied by a lack of attachment to them. Co-researchers reflected that they experienced a kind of neutrality towards their questions. I later viewed this as taking a position of 'unconditional positive regard' for their questions (Rogers, 1961). Co-researchers were keen to add value for their clients yet, counter-intuitively perhaps, had little attachment to the effectiveness of their questions.

In conclusion, it appeared that the experience of generating questions started before the coaching session itself and extended into the very moment of asking. Experience allowed coaches to tap into themselves and their somatic sensations to aid generating effective questions. The delivery of some difficult questions was offset by the use of prefacing statements or signals. Some generated questions were never asked and others were delivered with little attachment.

The following chapter moves beyond the single point of generating and asking questions. It examines the coaching conversation as it unfolds and how co-researchers experience the interplay between coach-client and questions-responses. There is insight into co-researcher judgments of how 'good' their questions are, and the inner dialogue that they experience. The final section explores the dynamic relationship between questions and the coach-client dyad.

Chapter 7 ‘Knock on the door with curiosity’

The previous chapter explored how the experience of generating questions was affected by what co-researchers noticed and the feelings and highly personal experiences they used to describe the point when they decided to ask their questions. It also established that the co-researchers in this study experienced questions that were generated quite consciously, in addition to questions that seemed to appear accompanied by much less conscious awareness. This chapter moves the exploration forward to look at the point in coaching, described by Sam as the time when she “*knocks on the door with curiosity*”. It is the time when questions follow answers, which are in turn followed by further questions, in what could be termed a ‘dance’ of questions and replies as intimated in Chapter 4. The chapter outlines how coaches experience knowing whether their questions are helping their clients and the inner dialogue that can accompany the questions they generate. It also explores how co-researchers felt about the way questions and the coach-client relationship exist in a dynamic relationship. The chapter’s three sections are:

1. ‘Good question’ – The assessment of questions
2. ‘Shall I ... Shan’t I?’ – Inner dialogue of decision-making
3. ‘The bubble of intimacy’ – The dynamic of coach-client relationship

7.1. ‘Good question’– The assessment of questions

In the introduction, I referred to a real example of a client who reflected that I had just asked her a ‘good question’. The first section of this chapter will focus on what co-researchers’ experiences were when it came to the efficacy of their questions; it will also show how they responded, especially when questions were seemingly not working and the alternatives that are used beyond simply further questioning.

Skye, who works exclusively as an executive coach, was clear about the challenge in knowing if questions she asks really are ‘good questions’. She was also clear that the client was best placed to make that decision and that coaches would be well served by letting their questions go and not being attached to them:

“What we may think is a great question, may not be the great question for a client. It may be wonderfully clever or smart or relevant or whatever but actually, it’s whether the client thinks it’s a good question or not and we never know. We just have to let go of that, good or not good.”

Other co-researchers echoed the awareness expressed by Skye, that knowing how effective their questions are for their client can be challenging for coaches. Indeed, Bryan felt that *“we probably get quite a fractional understanding”* but that *“what we get to is a good approximation and a good enough approximation to shift a situation”*. Here, Bryan appears to be suggesting that he feels he cannot get a ‘true’ sense of the situation of his client nor the effectiveness of his questions. Being comfortable with what it is possible to ‘know’ appeared to be sufficient for Bryan to continue to ask questions that, importantly, still added value for his clients by helping them make progress.

Like Bryan, I wonder if I am able to get more than a *‘fractional’* insight into how good a question is when I have asked it. It feels to me like a balancing act between wanting the question to land well and yet not over-analysing it when, by doing so, can interrupt the flow of the dialogue. Perhaps counter-intuitively, one way to side-step the need to judge the efficacy of questions is to stop worrying altogether about how ‘good’ they are. As Sam explains:

*“It actually doesn’t matter if it’s the question or not, it might take you just into a different space to have a conversation. It doesn’t worry me that that’s not **the** question. What does often happen even if that’s not the question is that it just shifts where the conversation goes to maybe, and that I find in a coaching context an enjoyable place to play because it kind of creates a permission to play to see where the response is coming from.”*

From Sam’s experience it would appear that the only person who can accurately assess a question’s effectiveness is the client and therefore, as long as the question is asked with positive intent, trying to assess it becomes a redundant process.

This was different from how Melissa reviewed how her questions were helping her clients. She tapped into and relied on her intuition to judge what the results of her questions were. Melissa appeared to be able to sense whether a question was helping. Her level of certainty, of 'knowing', was informed by the responses of her clients as follows:

"I maybe have a bit of a barometer. If the client's quite quiet after a question then I would know that I was onto something, that then they were really engaging with the question. That would be my instinct. Sometimes they might suck their teeth and say 'ooh, that's a good question', which means 'ooh, that tests me a bit, that makes me go into the territory that isn't entirely conscious'."

Melissa's confidence in her ability to use her 'barometer' accurately may have arisen from the fact that she is an experienced coach who has undergone Gestalt coaching education. This greater experience, according to Mary, "increases trust in the questions that are asked" to help her clients. This increased trust resulted in lower levels of attachment to the question for her.

Grace uses clean language in much of her coaching but was also clear that a greater experience as a coach was accompanied by an increase in the number of intuitively generated questions (cf. consciously generated). Grace felt the result of this increase in the ratio of non-consciously generated questions being asked of coaches was that "[the questions] should be giving the client a better experience". Interestingly for me, Grace did not say these non-consciously-formed questions were 'better'. She limited her feelings to the fact that her greater experience should give clients a better experience, as she was able to ask questions more effectively.

Other co-researchers could not or would not draw conclusions about the impact of their own coaching experience on the efficacy of their questions. Sam pointed out:

"... there was a period in which I suddenly realised I'd stopped thinking about the questions that I was going to ask and suddenly the questions

came. That doesn't mean to say that they're any more or less effective, it's just that they emerged from the conversation. It was very hard to say what was that turning point? Was it my confidence? Was it my level of experience?"

While Bryan reported that he had a “*gut feel*” occasionally that sessions had been more helpful to clients, and Mary recounted a particular question that she judged “*did the trick*”, there was no coach-centred insight into the effectiveness of specific questions asked. Melissa felt it was impossible to really know how helpful questions were for clients and hinted that there may have been better questions to be asked at any point in time:

“I think we can't know – it's not an exact science – because we don't know what the righter question would have been. We can't measure its outcome exactly”

Co-researchers were clearer that sometimes they were able to gain insight into the efficacy of their questions indirectly from their clients by their reaction. Skye identified that, especially when she was asking questions that were unconsciously generated, her clients would provide her feedback that might typically take the following form:

“Yes, that's really it” or “that's really important to me” or “you're right, it's a home truth”.

While Skye felt that such spontaneous reactions from clients might suggest there was an authentic resonance of something important for them, Melissa was more cautious of quick responses to questions by clients:

“Some of her answers I have a sense aren't really authentically hers but she's trying to do the right thing in coaching. Sometimes that happens because she'll give the answer really quickly and, I don't know, there's almost like a look on her face or something, I can sort of feel it being [...] actually I have no sense of her inhabiting those words whatsoever.”

Bryan had experienced direct feedback from a client about questions he had asked in order to help the client make significant decisions and action plans in relation to their career: *“It’s helped me to get somewhere I wouldn’t have got on my own quicker.”* Mary recounted receiving feedback from a particular client that had come unbidden. The client spoke of the effectiveness of Mary’s questions in a coaching session. Mary summarised this experience, thus:

“... you’ll get the random bit of feedback from somebody that you haven’t asked for because in coaching, that’s not ... but then you go, “that was the right question then”! So you get vindication of having asked the right questions, sometimes played back, not when you’re expecting it.”

It seems that some of this group of experienced coaches were not concerned about whether their questions were good or bad, right or wrong, and that, in fact, they felt they were not best placed to comment on their effectiveness. They relied on their questions to aid the engagement of their clients and generate positive impacts for them, sometimes beyond the session itself.

My own experience is different. I find myself in coaching meetings often self-checking how a question is being delivered by me and how it appears to have been received by the client. Often my brain feels like it is working a little ahead of the words coming out of my mouth. The result of this is that I can project to the end of a question and know that the words I was going to use are not as I would want them to be. The result is I can end up changing questions mid-sentence in order to edit the words I was going to use. Ironically perhaps, it can make my questions less clear than might be the case for other coaches. There was an awareness of this trait from the questions I asked in the interviews with co-researchers. One example from the interview with Bryan highlights the point:

“I’ve asked about 15 questions there, as a demonstration of how not to ask them.”

I feel more invested in the questions than some of this co-researcher group, although not in the finding of a mythical 'perfect' question. I just find myself noticing how a question resonates for me as I ask it, in addition to how it appears to 'land' with the client. My belief that the quality of the coach-client relationship impacts on the work we can do together, prompts me to protect it through crafting my questions actively. Following early and clear contracting with clients, I am not aware that I change the level of challenge in my questions in order to secure the relationship.

Despite the apparent difficulty in knowing how well their questions were helping clients, what is interesting is that there was no mention of co-researchers actively investigating within their coaching sessions about the quality of their questions as part of a process of feedback. It is not something I do either. The gathering of the indirect evidence, while possibly informative, is fraught with pitfalls such as using one's own intuition or the feedback from the clients, as a gauge of effectiveness. A more overt process of enquiring generally about whether the questions are working and producing what the client wants to achieve from the session, was not mentioned.

Without any overt feedback loop being present in relationship to coaching questions, it was noticeable that Bryan sometimes feels uncertain about the efficacy of his questions and raises this openly with his clients. He does so through the use of another question, in order to check in, but also, it could be argued, to keep the ownership and power with his client:

“One of the things I do find sometimes, I’ll say explicitly “this isn’t working is it?” So we’ll go back and do something different.”

If it was felt the questions were apparently not working, co-researchers changed approaches, either working differently with their questions, or ceasing a line of enquiry altogether. They also used other tools or techniques. Kimberley recounted that sometimes just using more questions was not an effective strategy in terms of helping clients:

“... they genuinely don’t know and are irritated to be asked more questions about a thing they have no idea what to proceed with. There’s something

around, 'I've asked it a couple of ways, and still they don't know', and they're starting to show that they wish you'd stop asking the same thing. I've noticed a change in their voice tone, 'I don't know, I don't know', it's a kind of, 'obviously I don't know, so stop asking me'. They don't actually say "stop asking me", but that's the signal.

Even when other tools and models are employed with clients, they are usually accompanied by questions. Indeed, Mary recounts using a tool from student workshops to frame lines of questioning:

"And usually in all the workshops that I've run, Johari's Window becomes a piece of the communication, so we can use that to frame "Here's where we're going with these questions, how comfortable are you that we go there?"

Grace, as an advocate of clean language coaching (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000; Sullivan & Rees, 2008), explained how she makes extensive use of metaphor as a technique in combination with her questions

"... the desired outcome, is to build a picture of what they want. But for me it's like almost like a Salvador Dali, you know it's some sort of abstract painting, a landscape for metaphors. I guess the intention is to remove them from the immediate issue, so that they're thinking about things in a slightly different way. So the questions are designed to develop the metaphor."

In addition, the use of metaphor within clean language is used in Gestalt coaching to help clients develop a "healthier worldview" through a process of experimentation (Allan & Whybrow, 2007) and in NLP coaching to increase flexibility and bypass conscious resistance to change (Grimley, 2007). More generally, it is also used by coaches to help clients "grasp experience and make it palpable" (Cox, 2012, p.18).

I know Sam both from within and outside of the research and she uses a lot of metaphor in her general language and in coaching. She experienced a type of

chemical reaction with some clients that allowed her to generate a metaphor that she was confident resonated for them. I asked her how she knew that they were being received in a helpful way:

“You don’t. If it’s there I trust that it’s there for a reason, so try it and see and it might resonate with them, it might not. There was something when I did my training where we really covered metaphors, and what I noticed was that some people really, really struggle to get any metaphor at all, it wasn’t how they processed things. Whereas it did come very, very easily – as you probably can gather – to me. I think the metaphor comes from the chemical reaction, and more often than not I suppose because it was something that I found easy, I could confidently say that it quite often lands well.”

The use of ‘discovery tools’, such as the Wheel of Life, in coaching (Kimsey-House et al., 2011) is useful in helping clients define their autobiographies and life stories (Vogel, 2012) and explore internal maps in systemic coaching (Whittington, 2012). They help raise self-awareness, but in order to work with them and gain insight, it is my experience that such learning can only be gained through the use of questions or at least some imperative sentences (e.g. “Tell me ...”) that ask the client to engage with the model/technique and apply it to the context under discussion in the coaching session. Merely presenting a model such as Johari’s Window (Luft & Ingham, 1961), for example, would mean little to a client who had not seen it before if not used in combination with some explanatory input and some exploratory questions.

It seems then that co-researchers are not attached to their questions and are largely not concerned about whether they are ‘good questions’ or not. The basis for such an approach appears to be that the client is the person best placed to experience questions as effective or otherwise. Coaches do not have an overt process for receiving feedback on their questions, other than when they perhaps sense that questions are not working. When coaches introduce other techniques or models, such as metaphor, these are often accompanied by questions, which they feel helps to build the effectiveness of the chosen technique.

7.2. 'Shall I ... Shan't I?' – Inner dialogue of decision-making

Co-researchers experienced the process of generating and asking questions as accompanied by some inner dialogue. There was evidence that this internal conversation was used in a variety of ways to help guide their coaching practice and particularly to shape, inform or check questions. This section presents these experiences and relates them to relevant literature. Dale, who during our interview struck me as deeply reflective, experienced inner dialogue in relation to the timing of asking questions:

“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’”

As a beginner coach, Sam used inner dialogue related to the process of asking questions. Perhaps the questions to herself about the questions she was asking may suggest a lack of confidence that accompanied her being a relatively novice coach:

“... way back when, as a starter coach, there’s more cognisance in how I asked questions, it was more thought through. I guess you’re thinking about whether you’re being supportive or whether you’re being challenging or whether you’re probing. I would be aware way back when of ‘I wonder if I haven’t asked this type of question, or if I haven’t gone deep enough, etc?’”

Skye also challenged her ability early in her coaching career especially in relation to her questions that arrived from ‘outside’ of herself:

“I think when I was an inexperienced coach, I wondered whether it was a gremlin of mine ... so I was more critical and judgmental of it, “this isn’t the right time”, “this isn’t the appropriate question”, “it’s not even related”, so I would, my gremlin would, certainly give it a hard time.”

However, these feelings of uncertainty around questioning, reflected in some of this inner dialogue was not limited to the early days of coaching. Co-researchers experienced a continuing inner dialogue about their questions despite their greater

levels of experience. Bryan, in what appeared to me as only a partly-joking tone, described his experiences of continuing inner dialogue:

“There’s a bit of internal dialogue going on for me often, is something like, “God what happens if we run out of questions? ... why did I say that?””

Melissa reflected on a particular experience where none of her questions seemed to be helping a client confront an issue, and the doubt that arose for her around how to continue to help the client:

“My thought process was, ‘in the bigger scheme of things I’m not sure that this is really important but it’s really touching her. How do I help her?’”

Kimberley was aware that the inner dialogue she experienced may get in the way of staying focused and she was clear stopping her internal conversation would help:

“... sometimes that timing of the question can make me start having a chat to myself in my head, which I have to shut up.”

Skye used her inner dialogue to check-in with herself during her coaching, in relation to where the locus of the questions she was asking could be located. Keen that she should be asking questions for the benefit of her clients, she nevertheless was aware that some questions appealed to her too:

“I’ve got that radar on all the time and I, (pause) is my focus of attention on them now? Am I just having a wonderful experience myself? I know that I’m primarily focused on my client but there are times when I think “oh that’s a really good question, I wonder what that could be like for them?” So I could then start processing myself I guess.”

Dale also used inner dialogue in a similar way to Skye, namely to check the intent of his questions and that they were not going to prompt shame in the client,

“I just have to hear myself think it through and think that, probably I’m over-protective, that the question, as long as I’m checking with myself that I’m asking from a positive intention and I’m being supportively challenging, that there is absolutely no sense of shaming them.”

It was a particularly interesting moment in the research when I became aware that this inner dialogue used by co-researchers, took the form of questions. As noted previously, the purpose of the inner dialogue was mostly, although not exclusively, used to check on a number of factors in relation to the questions that co-researchers generated and asked. If meta-cognition is a form of “thinking about thinking”, then this questioning about questions might be termed “meta-questioning”. However, as shown below, there was also inner dialogue that did not take the form of questions.

Skye shared that her inner dialogue has sometimes moved from judgment solely about the questions to judgment about herself, even as a more experienced coach:

“So I think, “I’ve forgotten what I was going to say then”, it tends to, my experience is, it tends to bring out the persecutor rather than the rescuer, which then puts me into even more of a tailspin: “I have got this wrong, I’m not a good coach”, now this is all me projecting potentially and I have to say it hasn’t happened recently, so presumably I’m more experienced so it doesn’t get in the way anymore.”

As an international sportsman in my youth, I was exposed to sports psychology while it was still in its infancy in the UK. One of the areas that my sports psychologist and I worked on was the constant chatter that seemed to be going on inside my head. This inner dialogue can be both helpful when managed well and destructive when not. The range of ways that the co-researchers used inner dialogue has some echoes of how elite athletes use it. There are four broad categories of self-talk, or internal dialogue, that elite athletes use (Austin, 2008): Negative, positive, technical, and neutral.

In addition to Skye's negative self-talk, all of the remaining categories of inner dialogue were present in the data for this co-research group. Sam for example reflected, more neutrally, on her sense of curiosity that she experiences with her questions:

"I think my questions come personally from just an absolute deep sense of curiosity: "Now that's really weird, or really interesting, or really odd", it doesn't matter what the curiousness is about, but that's where I can sense that it comes from."

Melissa, when recounting that she was in the process of reviewing transcripts of her own coaching as part of on-going professional development, felt that working on her questions was:

"... like sculpting it or something, 'yes, this bit, if I re-ask it in this way that's what feels like is trying to come out here'."

This technical reflection, not in the form of a question, appears to have a sense of providing some reassurance for Melissa to it.

When the mind becomes too active, such as may be the case with a lot of internal 'chatter', it can get in the way of effective coaching (Cavanagh & Spence, 2013). However, being able to quieten the mind and lower the volume on the inner dialogue is a learnable skill (Kauffman, 2010). Developing this ability to focus the mind is a useful form of training that can be used both before sessions as a form of preparation or in-session, as a way to refocus:

"The concept (mindfulness) can also be used during coaching sessions through maintaining watchfulness over the mind, and continually bringing it back to focus on the coachee, whenever the mind starts to wander."

(Passmore & Marianetti, 2007, p.134)

7.3. “The bubble of intimacy” – the dynamic of coach-client relationship

This section uncovers how co-researchers reflected on their relationship with clients and its link with their experiences of asking questions. The feelings associated with a special inter-human connection are explored when presenting the idea of being in bubble with the client during coaching, something Skye described as the *‘bubble of intimacy’*. Co-researchers also shared their experiences about the effects that the strength of connection and rapport had on questions. There was suggestion that the questions can also have impact on the relationship. This dynamic of the effects of questions on relationship and *vice versa* is explored.

When a relationship is working in coaching it can feel like a special way of being with another human being. Melissa described how this special relationship felt both for her and via feedback, for her client:

“... it’s sort of like being in a kind of bubble with that person. I had suspended rational judgment, I’ve just been with a person [...] and one of the bits of feedback I got in that session was that I was really, really present with the person.”

It is noteworthy that accessing this ‘bubble’ seems to be possible as a result of letting go of judgment and in just ‘being’. The result of being in this special place for the client was that it felt like Melissa was really ‘present’ for them. This dichotomy had taken up a good deal of my own reflection time as a coach too. My questions often came best when I too was in a bubble of a relationship. I experienced that to enter that phase of the relationship regularly required me to stop being certain parts of myself, e.g. judgmental. I experienced settling into this state as ‘being by not being’.

Skye seemed aware that a deeper level of the coach-client relationship had a positive effect on how her questions emerged that she summarised as *“the level of trust or intimacy or humanness or something, needs to be there for these questions to work”* and *“when the bubble is working perfectly, loads of questions pop up”*.

Dale felt that the level of rapport did not have to be profound but that the strength of the relationship impacted how he engaged with clients. Again, the metaphor of the bubble

was present for him too which he tries to create a mental picture of when working with clients:

“... you get this sense that you’re in a bubble with this person, or other times you’re not, that you can’t do it, but you can almost visualise this bubble, and, if I can get that bubble around somebody, that gives that sort of space. As I say, I don’t have to like the person very much, but there’s something that allows me to get the bubble around them, otherwise I don’t feel that. I still feel slightly withdrawn from them and so on.”

Two points were particularly interesting for me from Dale’s experience: The first is that there is a hint here of how the lack of intimacy, i.e. no bubble prompts Dale to experience his own withdrawing from the client; the second is that Dale suggested it was his role to wrap the bubble around the client.

This image of a ‘bubble’ can be found in the world of sport psychology of elite athletes. Research into how athletes feel when in competition revealed that the idea of competing while “in a bubble” was a shared experience across many of those interviewed (Cratty, 1984). Interestingly, athletes mostly refer to the bubble being around only them, i.e. not team colleagues or opponents, and the role of the bubble was more about promoting a sense of the invincibility of the athlete, e.g. in martial arts, whereas our co-researchers were extending the bubble to include their clients too, and seemed to imply a safe place for both rather than only the coach.

Dale went on to express that there might be an ideal level that coaching relationships would fall within – neither unfamiliar nor too familiar – in order to be most effective:

“... it makes me think, and I hadn’t thought this before, sort of the sense I have is that there’s sort of a bandwidth, an optimal bandwidth maybe that the relationship needs to be free and open, but there needs to be professional boundaries around it so that those questions are asked, because they come from a place of not knowing.”

This was a feeling that was echoed by Grace:

“I think that starts to become difficult to have a coaching relationship with somebody that you’ve known for a long time. I find it more difficult to maintain a coaching relationship with somebody the longer I’ve got to know them ... it’s difficult to remain objective”

Strengthening and deepening the relationship however had no impacts on the questions that Skye asked: *“Do the questions change over time? I haven’t noticed that they do, I keep an eye on that.”* Although for Kimberley the depth of the relationship did impact the questions:

“... when I feel deeply connected with a person, that they like me, that they like the process, ... I find it really easy to choose how challenging to be and when to ask the questions.”

Kimberley, who worked with clients who could become quite emotional, seemed to suggest that the degree to which her clients liked her has an effect on her questions, particularly around the level of challenge that she brings to them. I have considered whether my own human need to be liked affects my willingness to challenge sufficiently at times in my own coaching. I have assumed a position informed by Rogerian humanism and try hard to apply not only unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961), but also a form of non-possessive altruistic love (Assagioli, 1973) in coaching my clients. In order to achieve this, I feel I also need to pay my clients the respect of helping them as best I can and, mostly, this has resulted in me asking the questions that appeared to have needed to be asked. This again feels like a precarious balancing act at times as I care deeply by not caring so much that it gets in the way of my coaching and my questioning.

To some extent my experiences are echoed by Melissa who felt that, *“if a coaching relationship is working well, my guess is that it doesn’t matter if you ask a wrong question, it will endure”*. Here she seemed to suggest that the state of the relationship certainly does impact the generating of coaching questions.

Sam recognised the alternate side of the dynamic between relationships and questions, i.e. the interplay between the questions that were asked and their impact on the coach-client relationship. Recounting a relationship that seemed a bit stuck she spoke about how one particular question transformed the relationship.

“The whole dynamic between us switched, it was like all our conversations up until then had been a prelude to this moment ... even the topics that he brought to our business coaching, changed after that.”

In coaching, the suggestion is that if the coaching alliance is not working then it is best to bring in another coach (de Haan, 2007). However, the experience that Sam recounted would suggest that, even when a sense of relationship ‘stuckness’ remains over a number of sessions, a question may prove to be the catalyst that puts the coaching relationship back on an even keel, and may indeed make it stronger than it would otherwise have been.

When Skye gets a little stuck with the forming of her questions, it could prompt a change in the client that Skye suggests is unintentional. Nonetheless struggling to generate her questions does have an impact on the relationship, as she explains:

“I work with a lot of people pleasers and rescuers, they don’t need to be looking after me but something I do might provide a hook for them, so I suspect it does impact.”

This particular insight, that something the coach does with their questions can prompt an unintended reaction from the client, prompted me to reflect about why I use humour in my coaching – something I mentioned in my own research diary:

“Why do I often accompany my questions with humour? What am I trying to achieve? I think in part it is to maintain the essentially inter-human nature of the coaching relationship. It lightens the mood. It is frequently directed at myself, so I wonder if that self-denigrating nature is designed to enable the client not to worry about shooting for ‘perfect’ but just to go for

it and feel increasingly capable? It may of course just be a way of getting the client to like me and/or the whole coaching experience!”

I value a sense of humour highly. I experience the benefits of humour both for myself and my clients, as a way of establishing the relationship as an essentially human endeavour. There is little doubt to me now that accompanying some questions with a lightness of touch is also designed to deepen the relationship and as a by-product of that improve the experience of coaching.

Humour is a tool to be used carefully of course, as its misuse can have a negative impact on the alliance. For this reason it has generated much discussion within the fields of psychotherapy and counselling (Goldin & Bordan, 1999). The use of humour in coaching has been cited as a positive behaviour in both the coach and client (Griffiths & Campbell, 2008). Within the field of Positive Psychology Coaching, the appropriate use of humour is seen as one of a range of key characteristics that coaches might benefit from developing (Kauffman, Boniwell, & Silberman, 2010). It can, when done well, add a lightness to questions that reduces the perceived status of the coach by clients and thus provide greater equality in the relationship (Cavicchia, 2010).

Advice to coaches from the area of relational coaching (de Haan, 2007) suggests there are ‘Ten Commandments’ to follow to increase effectiveness. The sixth commandment is to work on the coaching relationship and to discuss it explicitly with the client if that helps make it stronger. Indeed, de Haan goes on to suggest that coaching is neither about the client or their challenges, but is all about the relationship. 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).

Summary

The moment of asking a question that a coach has generated is often followed as quickly by being engulfed in a new round of data from the client, as they respond, verbally and non-verbally, to the enquiry. This continuous to-and-fro provides a rhythm to coaching sessions, but it also requires a permanent state of high presence on the part of the coach to capture and use the data to make judgments about what they could do

next, “this space becomes a velvet void, pregnant with possibility” (Spoth et al., 2013). This chapter has examined how this rhythm is affected by questions and also the part the part questions themselves play in affecting the rhythm.

The chapter reviewed three key themes that emerged from the data: The co-researchers’ experience of how they know if their questions are facilitating the progress their clients are seeking; the inner dialogue that co-researchers experienced while in this rhythm of conversation with clients; and finally the dynamic of a cause and effect association between the coach-client relationship and questions. This summary provides an overview of these findings and relates them to relevant literature.

Once the client has answered a question, the initiative returns to the questioner, in this case the coach. If, as co-researchers suggested, client progress is important to coaches, then the ability to assess effectively ‘in the moment’ the answers received and the quality of their questions, would seem to be a really important skill to develop (McGee et al., 2005).

Yet this research provides evidence that the experienced coaches in this study relied in part on trusting their intuition, to know that their questions were working for their clients in combination with a sense of being non-attached to the outcome of their questions. Increased trust in relying on intuition is an acknowledged characteristic of more experienced coaches (de Haan, 2008), and this research echoes that particular finding. Non-attachment is a key element in creating a safe coaching environment and promotes a sense of humility that helps clients appropriately resist or push back against some questions that may not have ‘landed’ for them (Sieler, 2010). It is also part of a paradox noted within narrative coaching; namely, the balance of being wholly engaged with the client while simultaneously remaining unattached (Drake, 2008). This appears to be another of the balances that coaches have to manage, i.e. being fully invested in and engaged with their clients while remaining non-attached to whether the questions that they ask are the ‘right’ or ‘best’ that could have been asked.

Part of the difficulty of knowing if questions are helping the development of the client was captured in a question posed by Dale in his interview: “*When do we expect the change to happen in people?*” The answer he offered to his own question was to posit

that transformational change tends to happen in the moment, i.e. within the sessions, but that he also recognised that clients committed to change that they then pursued between one coaching session and the next. Such progress, especially in relation to ‘self’, can be a lifelong process and something that can be facilitated through work with others, e.g. a coach; however, it is incumbent upon the coach “to understand the mechanism of change and learn about how to identify the developmental trajectories of their clients” (Bachkirova, 2011, p.44).

The theme of client progress is a term that itself would require clarification in a coaching context, as its very definition depends on who is defining it (Prescott, 2010). Prescott’s heuristic inquiry research with experienced coaches found that a number of paradoxes arose when understanding the concept of progress, including that a coach’s view of the lack of progress a client was making did not match the actual progress that the client made, it is just that this progress is often hidden from the coach. Indeed this perceived lack of progress is an anxiety that experienced coaches expressed as ‘critical moments’ in coaching (de Haan, 2008). Secondly, indicators of progress as defined by the coach did not match those of their clients. Finally, the client is, according to coaches in this study, the ultimate arbiter of progress (Prescott, 2010). These indicators seem to have an importance for this research. If indicators of progress are different for coaches and clients, and that progress is often not observable by coaches, then the way questions apparently ‘land’, or the answers supplied in response to questions, may *not* be especially helpful indicators of progress.

That questions can bring about change for clients would seem to be supported by the experiences of co-researchers in this research, and it is certainly reported to me often by my own clients (Greif, 2010). The idea that individual level change can be prompted by questions is supported by wider research from within the field of psychotherapy that looked at questions as a therapeutic intervention in their own right. Questions that prompted patients to review their progress as a result of their personal agency rather than the result of external causes, promoted changes in both attribution and behaviour (Healing & Bavelas, 2011). This may have an implication for coaching, in that asking questions about progress explicitly might help both coach and client create and sustain change more effectively.

Some co-researchers felt that the client is the only person who can make an accurate judgment about the helpfulness of questions, but this relies to some degree on their levels of self-awareness, openness, and a willingness to be honest (Kretzschmar, 2010). If, at times, clients themselves do not know what they do not know, it may make it difficult on occasion to make judgment about the efficacy of questions. At best, clients may be guessing or using intuition to rate the effectiveness of any questions asked of them. They may also be trying ‘to please’ the coach, an experience that Skye recounted.

Inner dialogue was a common experience, albeit at a uniquely individual level, which co-researchers discussed. This inner dialogue often, but not exclusively, took the form of a self-directed question. This meta-questioning was directed at the coach themselves and their work.

Other internal dialogue experienced by co-researchers was neutral in nature, while other examples showed coaches being negative or critical about themselves. A heuristic study by Kimblin (2009) used the Inner Game (Gallwey, 1976) as a framework to explore how the psychological interferences, identified in Gallwey’s work, were experienced by coaches. Kimblin’s co-researchers experienced internal self-talk, or inner dialogue, in a number of ways, including being self-critical and focusing on technique (Kimblin, 2009). This study supports some of those findings in that coaches certainly fell into using inner dialogue to critique their technical question-asking ability, as well as using self-directed criticism.

Analysis of the data identified that the coach-client relationship and the questions that are asked seem to share a symbiotic relationship. The stage of the relationship affects the questions that are asked, while the questions that are asked also affect the relationship. There is no literature that directly alludes to this dynamic. However, it is clear that the relationship is considered by clients to be a very important element in coaching effectively (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007). In order to achieve this effective coaching relationship, Bluckert (2005) suggests a number of factors including that the balance of challenge and support is well struck, despite that fact that it is one of the most difficult critical success factors to get right. He suggests coaches might benefit from getting specific feedback about whether the right balance is being struck for the client (Bluckert, 2005).

This chapter concludes the presentation of findings shared in chapters 4 to 7. The following chapter is the conclusion, within which the creative synthesis that has emerged from all of the findings is presented, with a description of the phenomenon of generating coaching questions.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

In this chapter I will present an overview of the study and the findings and conclusions that emerged from the experiences of the co-researchers. The chapter starts with a review of the origins of the study, the purpose of the research, the chosen research design, and limitations of the study. Presented next is an outline of the primary and secondary research questions that were settled upon. This section is followed by a presentation of the findings in relation to these research questions. In line with the heuristic inquiry methodology, the conceptual findings of the research are presented as a creative synthesis. There is an outline of the contribution the research makes to knowledge and coaching practise. Finally, there is a comment on possible future research that could follow on from this study.

8.1 The origins of the research

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 significant, positive 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.

At some untraceable point in my own development as a coach, I began to realise that I was asking questions that were not being formed consciously. I was less-than-fully-aware of where my questions originated from, or why I chose a particular way of phrasing them. A proportion of questions would flow from me, seemingly from my non-conscious. My focus on the questions I asked became much less about open versus closed questions, or avoiding leading questions, and more about this other experience. While initially I felt that these were in some way ‘special’ and more effective than those questions that were more consciously generated, over time I began to realise such

judgment of them was naïve. All questions that I asked could be more or less effective; how they emerged was not a deciding factor in their efficacy.

The phenomenon of how coaches ask questions was an area that held sufficient interest to research. I wanted to gain some insight into how my experience and that of other coaches compared and contrasted. In order to achieve that insight, it was important to explore the experiences of coaches in generating questions. It felt important to see what experienced coaches could ‘capture’ and recount in relation to how they experienced generating and asking coaching questions. The challenge was to gain an insight into their processes and see how they compared to my own as well as to if/how they could make a process that seemed at least partly non-conscious emerge and become a little more known. I was also aware that because of the research methodology I finally selected, I would also become more aware of, and more informed about, my own experiences of generating coaching questions. All of this data would be useful in my work helping other coaches develop their skills, and it would also be valuable to my own coaching practice.

8.2 How the research was designed and undertaken

The initial phase of the study included work with a focus group of five coaches of varying levels of experience from my own coaching network. After a false start employing Grounded Theory, I felt the need to discover a methodology that allowed for my own deeper involvement in this research. Heuristic Inquiry fitted the purpose and created the opportunity to achieve a greater degree of closeness to the research.

Eight co-researchers were invited to join the research. 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. Next, a methodological decision was made to omit the creation of a composite depiction, which seemed at odds with the philosophical underpinnings of heuristic research. I did however share my own experiences of generating questions. Finally, I produced a creative synthesis of the whole experience of generating questions using my own experiences, informed by the insights from co-researchers. Both of these elements are presented in the research.

8.3 Limitations of the study

The research did not include the experience of clients and was limited to that of coaches for several reasons, including:

- **Relevance:** Data from clients was deemed less relevant specifically to the experience of generating questions than the data that coaches could produce.
- **Scale:** As a result of the limited time available, and the nature of the research context, it was felt that including client data would extend the research too widely.
- **Clarity:** By limiting the data to that of coaches, analysing and interpreting the data was not impacted by influences from any client data.

The essentially individual nature of 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).

It is also apparent that, as mentioned, there are epistemological inconsistencies within the methodology, a central one – the production of a composite depiction – have been addressed within this research by omitting them. The inclusion of my own reflections

and using an *I-who-feel* (Sela-Smith, 2002; Wilber, 1977) perspective where appropriate, has also addressed to some extent the potential trap of looking at the experience of generating questions in coaching as ‘an experience’, rather than focusing on experiencing generating questions (Polkinghorne, 2005).

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 may therefore seem on the lower end of that figure, 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.

8.4 Research questions

Following a 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. Indeed, there was almost no research literature into question generating/asking in other talking interventions either (e.g. psychotherapy). A limited amount of practitioner and reference literature was discovered, but the information and advice contained within it was not produced as a direct result of empirical research. The result of the review was that an opportunity to contribute to knowledge presented itself in the shape of researching this area. Following several iterations, the following research question was formulated:

“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?

8.5 Contributions to knowledge and practise

In chapter 5, co-researchers highlighted the role that questions play in coaching and what factors influence the generation of them. Questions are a key tool available to coaches that help them to help their clients. Questions can prompt changes in thinking and help aid the planning of solutions to the challenges that clients bring to coaching. This research suggests that coaches also use questions for other purposes too, including establishing the coach-client relationship and, to some extent, establishing the credibility of the coach. These findings provide new insight into the purpose that questions can fulfil for the coach.

The results from the research also suggest that the experience of generating questions in coaching is a complex phenomenon. While it relies on using information from within the coaching session, it is also clearly an experience that is affected by elements that pre-exist any particular coaching session itself. Questions are ultimately informed by background factors that are ‘of the coach’, including the coach education they have received and their perception of their role. The influence of these background factors on the questions that coaches generate is marked. They lead to questions being asked which are deeply subjective in nature, and yet which are simultaneously aspiring, for many coaches, to achieve a level of objectivity in order to keep the focus on the agenda of the client.

In relation to coaching questions there was an important finding with regard to the coaching contract. The contract aims to set and agree guiderails that help contain the direction of coaching conversations and assist in setting boundaries for questions that can and cannot be asked. It became clear that a tightly constructed contract affected the experience of asking coaching questions. However, despite this finding we did see evidence that coaches were not always limited to questioning within these restrictions.

The implications for coaching practise of these findings seem to be in the arena of raising the awareness of coaches and coach educators, including supervisors. The findings may help coaches and coach educators focus on establishing clear purposes for the questions that are asked. While the purpose maybe wider than being limited directly to progressing the situation of the client, coaches and clients may both benefit if coaches are aware of times when they are generating questions that have the sole purpose of boosting their own credibility. Coaches may want to consider how they construct their coaching contracts to reflect the purpose of questions. Supervisors may also be more aware now, as a result of these findings, that coaches can cross the boundaries of contracts when asking certain questions. Exploring the awareness, rationale, and ethics behind such decisions that coaches make to work outside the contract may prove helpful to all stakeholders involved in coaching.

Chapter 6 highlighted a key finding from the research, that 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. 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 the client. This influencing might be to answer a question the coach was particularly ‘invested’ in, or to ease their own feelings, perhaps of discomfort at the topic or level of challenge in the question to follow. 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.

When it came to the moment of asking questions, co-researchers recounted how there were times they would hold back from verbalising a question that they had generated. It appears that questions have a useful shelf life that is sometimes fleeting, in which case coaches may let them go, although they may only do so following a period of holding onto them, to see if an appropriate moment arises to use them. As long as coaches were comfortable that their intention was pure, many resisted becoming attached to whether the question they asked was the ‘right’ question, as they perceived it, or not.

Chapter 6 also provided further insight into the moment of asking questions. It appears that some questions are formulated with greater degrees of conscious awareness and these 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. 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. Furthermore, I reflected that for some co-researchers, and also for me, these two types of questions were spoken of in ways that implied, more or less explicitly, different feelings of positivity. The consciously generated questions were seen as positive and necessary, while non-consciously generated questions seemed to add a positive element of mystery and wonder to the coaching process. Interestingly co-researchers would not be drawn to conclusions about the relative efficacy of each type of question, although it was felt that greater coaching experience was likely to lead to a higher proportion of non-consciously generated questions being asked.

There are implications for supervisors and coaching practice that arise from the findings from chapter 6. As coaches gain more experience, they may be asking a higher proportion of their questions less consciously. When this finding is coupled with the fact that more experienced coaches seem less attached to their questions, there appears to be a gap in relation to how coaches know if the questions they are asking are as effective as they might be. It might prove helpful to find ways of ‘checking-in’ with a client that ensures both the credibility of the coach and the quality of the interaction.

Co-researchers reported in chapter 7 that using inner dialogue was a regular feature of the experience of generating questions. Coaches use these internal conversations as a kind of compass to ensure that their questions are pointed squarely at the client. 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. This took the shape of the internal critic, commentator, or doubter. 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. Coaches may be able to use the findings in relation to inner dialogue as part of their own reflective practice. Post-coaching session reflections in journal form, or with a supervisor, might include specific exploration of the effects of the inner dialogue of coaches, perhaps especially where that dialogue is of a self-critical nature.

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 and how coaches know if their questions are achieving their intention. Co-researchers recognised that the state of the relationship impacted their questions, and that their questions impacted the relationship. This question-relationship dynamic seemed axiomatic to me, but only after it had been raised by a number of co-researchers. While I was tacitly aware of this dynamic, its revelation was helpful to reinforce the centrally important role that questions have in coaching. It appears to me that they are not only a tool for generating ideas, plans, or revealing faulty thinking in our clients, they are also a key ingredient in developing the relationship which itself is vital to working effectively with clients. Less effective questioning, or questions that touched an area that was uncomfortable for the client, may cause a momentary schism in the relationship, something that co-researchers were not concerned about, as long as they were sure that their intention behind the question was 'pure' or positive. Rifts in the relationship that were a direct result of the question(s) that had been asked, were also the catalyst to developing the coach-client relationship, both instantly and over the longer-term. The stronger relationship that resulted from a rupture allowed different, sometimes more developmental, work to be addressed. 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.

8.6 Creative synthesis

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. Firstly, there is my reflection on the nature of questions and how we as coaches experience them. Secondly, 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 would interpret 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 nature of questions

The more I have explored questions and reflected on their nature, the more convinced I am that they are experienced by coaches as ephemeral sentient entities. Co-researchers referred to them as 'being', of 'emerging' and of 'birth'. Questions are not solely 'of the coach'. They are the product of coach, client, and the wider system. They are the product of the whole history of the coach – everything that the coach is, shapes both their experience of generating questions and the questions themselves. Questions therefore are genetically unique. The wording of questions may be the same when uttered by two different coaches, but ultimately they are unique because of who has enquired.

Questions arrive, often unannounced, and bring joy to coaches when they do. They are sometimes held and moulded and they are sent off into the space between coach and

client. They can also fade away to nothing. They can be more than just the tools for the job of coaching. They are the means by which coaches fulfil their central professional purpose. They are a means for self-actualisation.

The coaching paradoxes

Following several iterations, I settled on the final symbol (Figure 8.1) 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.

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.

For me, the black represents deepening levels of awareness from which the light of a question springs. The white part of the symbol represents how I experience the way clients answer such questions with a growing sense of awareness brought about through their thinking that ultimately results in their generation of an answer (the black dot). Their answer is played back and the cycle starts again with my growing awareness – albeit unconscious and often very quick – leading to the next question.



Figure 8.1: The creative synthesis representing the coaching experience paradoxes and the nature of questions.

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.

This paradox is represented in the yin-yang symbol as the shared space between the black and white halves, black for objectivity and white for subjectivity. The white circle

in the black half represents the inevitable presence of subjectivity within an aim for objectivity; the black circle in the white half represents objectivity set within the subjectivity of a human being.

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. This represents another experience paradox that coaches apparently have to manage.

The black area in the yin-yang symbol represents the desire to help, the white area represent non-attachment. Held within the deep desire to help is the concept of letting go. Within the concept of letting go lies the deep desire to help.

8.7 Suggestions for further research

Following the completion and presentation of this research, it would appear that there is plenty of rich ground for future researchers to take this knowledge and build upon it. Three areas follow that may be of particular interest to the generation of new knowledge, and that might also produce insights to further inform coaching practice.

Perhaps the most obvious place to explore next would be into the part of the coach-client relationship that this research did not attempt to cover, namely 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 ‘triangulation’ of the findings from this study.

Co-researchers and I were both unclear about the relative efficacy of the questions that we asked. 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. As has been shown, these insights could be used to further knowledge and aid practice in a number of ways. The experience of generating questions has been presented as a complex process, impacted by a wide range of elements. Questions are pivotal tools that are integral to coaching, and hopefully this research has provided a unique and useful insight into the inner worlds of the coach.

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Appendices

Phases of Heuristic Inquiry						
Initial Engagement	Immersion	Incubation	Illumination	Explication	Creative Synthesis	Validation
Discover an intense interest, a passionate concern. Develop a question.	Lives the question to get intimate with it.	Retreating from intense focus. Allowing creative awareness to emerge.	A breakthrough into conscious awareness of themes. Reflecting essential but remaining open to tacit knowledge.	Examining the new learning from Illumination. May include new insights. Organizing comprehensive depiction of essences of experience	'Final phase'. Creating a narrative depiction. Solitude and meditation important to allow creative synthesis.	Primary researcher depicts essences of experience from all the data, the process and sources.
Alignment of Key Concepts Relative to Phase						
Identifying with focus of inquiry						
Self-dialogue	Self-dialogue			Self-dialogue	Self-dialogue	
Tacit knowing	Tacit knowing	Tacit knowing	Tacit knowing		Tacit knowing	
Intuition	Intuition	Intuition			Intuition	
				Indwelling		
				Focusing		
Internal frame of reference				Internal frame of reference	Internal frame of reference	Internal frame of reference

Appendix 1: A table showing the relationship between the phases of heuristic inquiry and the key processes that take place during each phase (Moustakas, 1990)

**Appendix 2 Co-researcher Participant Information Sheet
Participant Information Sheet - Coach**

Study title

“Good question” An exploration into the experience of generating coaching questions

Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research study because you have been identified as an experienced, currently practising, coach. Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. You will be asked to take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The primary aim of this project is to gain understanding about the experiences that coaches undergo in generating coaching questions. Data will be used to construct a framework for the generation of coaching questions that will contribute to both coaching practice and research.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been selected to participate in this research because you are currently a coach working with business organisations. Twelve coaches will be recruited for this phase of the study.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you do not take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you choose to participate you will be asked to undertake the following:

- i. You will be asked to complete reflections on the questions you asked during coaching sessions, in addition to reflections more generally about your experience of generating coaching questions. A minimum of 6 such responses would be ideal. They will be returned on a regular basis. These can take any format that helps you express the essence of your experiences.
- ii. You are asked to return your responses in whichever form is easiest for you. This can include: email, scanned attachments, metaphors, visual images, physical journals, etc. Responses that are sent by post, submissions to a joint file that is used solely by co-researchers, or depositing responses.
- iii. Within a period of approximately one month following receipt of your six responses you will be asked to participate in one audio recorded semi-structured interview (15-20 mins) with the researcher. This meeting will be face-to-face wherever possible. The focus of the interview will be your reflections on the experience of generating coaching questions.

There will be a time cost to you for writing your reflective journal/responses plus for the semi-structured interview. You should consider if this is time that you are willing to contribute.

We have invited up to 12 experienced, currently practising, coaches to be involved in this research, which, while an appropriate sample size for this kind of study, can put you at risk of being identified. We have taken every step to maintain both confidentiality and security of data as these are such central elements in both the coaching relationship and research.

We have structured the research in a way to ensure that the quality and extent of your coaching sessions will not be adversely affected. Furthermore, your own coaching is not being judged, it is only your insights into the questions that you ask we are interested in understanding further.

In the unlikely event that you feel adversely affected by participation in the research, you may access free 1:1 support for up to 3 months. In such circumstances, alternative development opportunities will also be made known to you.

You should be aware that at any point in the research you can withdraw from the research without giving a reason.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Coaching research: this is an area that has yet to be explored through empirical research and thus this study will contribute to an understanding of a key micro-skill of coaching.

Coaching practice: this is an area that will benefit as a key skill area of the work of coaches will be explored and understood in greater detail than has been the case to date. This will allow coach educators to be more informed in the way they develop coaches.

Coach participants: It is hoped that you will have a much greater understanding of the questions that you ask and the reactions of your clients, than was previously the case. You will also have access to a large amount of data about your own practice through the journal, the video of your practice and the joint interview with your client.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

Your participation in the study will generate a lot of valuable data about coaching and questions. In order to provide you with the sense of security that your input will be protected, it is important that you understand what will happen to the data you generate.

Firstly there are legal limitations to confidentiality. This means that in certain circumstances relating to law enforcement, as the researcher, I can be obliged to disclose information, either by court order or by proactive legislation

Secondly, every step to keep both data and your identity confidential will be taken, as outlined below.

The journal/responses that you write will be collected by the primary researcher. The researcher will analyse the contents. Both the journal and the analysis will be kept in locked facilities.

Semi-structured interview: this will be recorded on audio equipment. The researcher will analyse the contents and the contents will be transcribed. (See note above re transcription services). The audio data will be stored in a locked facility.

In the **final written report** your identity, including the name of your business, plus that of your client and their organisation will be anonymised. Indications will be made as to the experience of coaches and the business sectors in which you work. Direct quotations from the data will appear in the final report. These will be attributed to the coach by pseudonym only and no reference will be made to the organisation in which either are employed.

All electronic data, video- and audio- recordings will be held securely, password protected and encrypted, either at the University or on my own computer. All data generated by the study must be retained for 10 years, in accordance with the University's Policy on Academic Integrity.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If having read this Participant Information Sheet you have any further questions please contact me directly using the contact details below.

If you have decided that you want to participate you should complete the attached consent form and return it by post to the address below at your earliest convenience. (SAE attached).

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the research will appear in a final thesis that will contribute to a Doctor of Coaching and Mentoring (DCM). An executive summary of the research will be made available to you on successful conclusion of the Doctoral programme.

The intention is to publish the results of the research in relevant academic journals, links to which will be provided to you on request.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This is a self-funded research study.

I am a student of the Business School at Oxford Brookes University, where academic staff will support the research that I am undertaking.

Who has reviewed the study?

The research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee, Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for Further Information

For further information please contact:

Name: Glenn Wallis

Role: Research student

Phone: 07769700098

Email: 12080429@brookes.ac.uk

Name: Dr Elaine Cox

Role: Director of Postgraduate Coaching and Mentoring

Phone: 01865 488350

Email: ecox@brookes.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, you should contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk.

Thank you

Thank you for taking time to read the information sheet.

Date

6th June 2014

Appendix 3 - CONSENT FORM Phase 2

Full title of Project: An exploration into the generation of coaching questions.

Name, position and contact address of Researcher: Mr Glenn Wallis DCM Research Student, Oxford Brookes University. Contact: 12080429@brookes.ac.uk

Please initial box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Please tick box

Yes No

I understand that one coaching session will be video recorded

I understand the interview will be audio recorded

I understand my journal will be read and analysed

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

