QueSCo – Questioning Sequences in Coaching

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

"Effective questioning lies at the very heart of the coaching conversation" (Grant & O'Connor, 2010, p. 102).

"Questioning Sequences in Coaching" (QueSCo) is the first international and interdisciplinary research project on coaching. It is funded by national funding organizations from Austria (FWF, Lead Agency), Germany (DFG), and Switzerland (SNF) and runs for 36 months (March 2021 to February 2024). Its home bases are the English Department of the University of Klagenfurt, the Leibniz-Institute for the German Language in Mannheim, and the Department of Applied Psychology at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences. The project is headed by Eva-Maria Graf.

QueSCo investigates questioning practices in business coaching. Coaching as a helping profession builds on the interaction between coach and client, addresses clients' work-related problems and aims to ultimately facilitate clients' change (Graf & Spranz-Fogasy, 2018a; Graf, 2019). While coaching is becoming increasingly popular, its academic foundation is still under developed, particularly in the context of coaching process research. This (predominantly qualitative) research addresses what coach and client actually do together on a moment-by-moment basis in their conversations, and looks into the effectiveness of coaching interventions (Fleischhacker & Graf in print).

The analysis of questioning sequences (i.e., questions – client reactions – coaches' reactions to clients) as an essential change-inducing intervention (Peräkylä et al., 2008) thereby represents a major research gap: Though questions are presented as central and powerful tools in practice literature, there is hardly any empirical research on questions in coaching (Graf et al., 2020; Graf & Spranz-Fogasy, 2018b). The aim of QueSCo is therefore to develop a coaching-specific typology of questions as well as questioning sequences and to investigate their function and change potentials: How do questions locally and also globally contribute to clients' change?

Theoretical models in psychology describe change via specific developmental phases clients pass through (Greif & Benning-Rohnke, 2015). Yet, these are not observable. What can be observed and linguistically analyzed is the sequentially organized coaching interaction, i.e., the coaching conversation and its development (Deplazes et al., 2018). Here, the sequential relations between the participants' turns ensure the transformation of clients' experiences and the generation of new knowledge, which contribute to the process of change across and beyond successful coaching interactions (Peräkylä, 2019).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Which kinds of questions and questioning sequences occur in business coaching?
- How often and where do they occur along coaching sessions or processes?
- What are the coaching-specific functions of questioning sequences?
- Which sequences are (un-)successful?
- How can we understand the relationship between the frequency of (un-)successful questioning sequences and their local and global effectiveness?

The data consists of authentic, video-/audio recorded, and linguistically transcribed coaching processes from systemic solution-oriented business coaching. By drawing on German, Austrian, and Swiss data, the project covers the entire German-speaking coaching market. So far, the corpus consists of 14 processes, 52 sessions, and approximately 11,000 questioning sequences. The project uses a mixed-methods research design, in which qualitative linguistic (Conversation Analysis, Interactional Linguistics) and qualitative/quantitative psychological (Qualitative Content Analysis, Descriptive Statistics) methods are combined.

QueSCo builds on the following, at times simultaneous, steps:

PROJECT STEPS

1 Development of a first, preliminary coding scheme in terms of the formal, functional, and interaction-type specificities of questions in coaching based on an existing corpus (Graf 2019) with the help of "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1969) from other helping professional formats, particularly psychotherapy, by the linguistic team.

2 New data generation in close collaboration with coaching practice, i.e., audio/video recordings of authentic coaching processes as well as questionnaires to measure clients' goal attainment. The audio-visual data is linguistically transcribed according to cGAT (Schmidt, Schütte & Winterscheid 2016).

3 Using the new coaching data, a coding manual for the phases of coaching is developed by the psychologists, based on the established phases of change as described in the "Turn-Sequence-Session-Phase" (TSPP) model (Deplazes et al. 2018).

4 A typology of coaching-specific questions (1st position) is developed primarily by the linguistic team via in-depth data (re-)analyses. In collaboration with the psychologists, 12 coaching-specific question types attributed to 7 main functions are identified.

5 The typology of coaching-specific questions (1st position) is expanded to include categories for possible client reactions (2nd position), coaches' reactions (3rd position), as well as prior actions (positions -2 and -1) to questions. The third positions are carved out from both a linguistic and a psychological perspective. In this way, a collaborative typology of questioning sequences is developed.

6 Both teams establish a definition for (un-)successful sequences from their own disciplinary perspective. The typologies are transformed into a manual as a basis for the coding of the entire data set.

7 ... CURRENT STEP
After the successful completion of Interrater Reliability tests, all questioning sequences are coded using MAXQDA according to the categories established in steps 5 and 6.

8 With the help of Descriptive Statistics, the data is quantitatively analyzed to determine the frequency of (un-)successful questioning sequences with respect to coaching phases, sessions, and processes. At the same time, the data is analyzed with the help of Interactional Linguistics / Conversation Analysis (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018; Sidnell & Stivers 2013). A particular focus is on the functions of questioning sequences to initiate, process, and finalize the individual coaching phases of the TSPP model.

9 In accordance with the interdisciplinary conceptualization of the project, the results are integrated and interpreted from a linguistic, psychological, and coaching practice perspective. This allows more fine-grained explorations regarding the relationship between the local and global change potentials of questioning sequences in coaching.

10 During and towards the end of the project, the findings are presented at international conferences and published in various German- and English-speaking academic media (see project website). The findings will be published in an academic monograph or an edited volume, and a summary will be prepared for coaching practitioners and training institutions.

POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

The results as well as the QueSCo project idea offer many possibilities for follow-up projects such as a) investigating other interventions like formulations, extensions, or interpretations in coaching or b) investigating other intersections of linguistic and psychological coaching research like success factors. Additionally, questioning sequences might be an interesting starting point to research the working alliance in coaching (e.g., Graf & Jautz 2022).

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QUESTIONING SEQUENCE – EXAMPLE

	Pos.*			
Prior action	-1	1	CL*	right (.) and it's like this because at this point i realise that i then also quickly
		2		(0.41)
Question		3	CL	maybe (.) i'm afraid and then i quickly start comparing myself again because i see my weaknesses more in this moment °h and then i start comparing okay she really knows her stuff here an with food and i know nothing at all about what uhm the difference now is between °h uh this an that °h but uh [mm]
Client reaction / response	2	4	CO*	**[do you]** perceive this as weak[ness]
		5	CL	[((smacks lips)) y]es actually (.) yes
		6		(0.85)
Reaction to client's reaction	3	7	CL	myes
		8	CO	just asking provocatively uhm if you talk to your sister about energy efficient
		9		(0.24)
		10	CO	construction and your sister is not well-ver[sed in this °h] **would you interpret this as [weakness]**

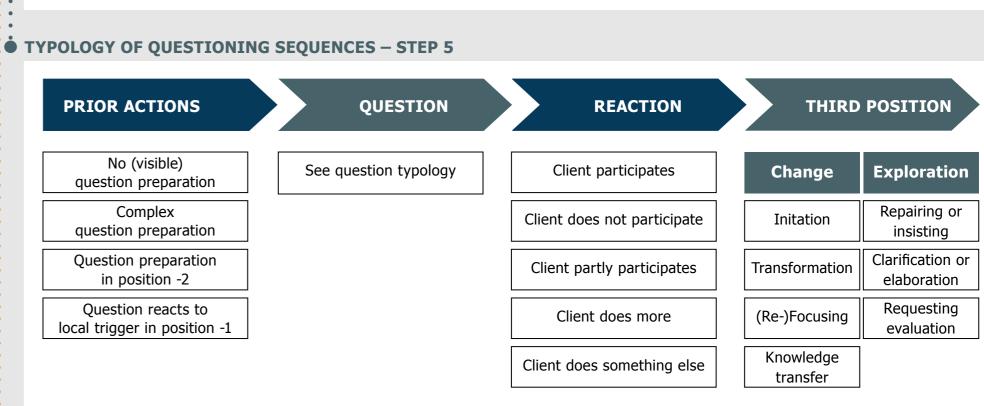* Pos. ... Position / CO ... Coach / CL ... Client

TYPOLOGY OF COACHING-SPECIFIC QUESTION TYPES – STEP 4

BASIC FUNCTION	QUESTION TYPE(S)
Relationship management	Question managing the (working) relationship
Agenda thematizing	Question topicalizing the agenda
Defining the concern and formulating the goal	Question topicalizing client motivation, goal, and/or process expectations
Defining the underlying problem	Question topicalizing problematicity
	Question topicalizing problem explanations
Developing solutions	Question topicalizing ideal solutions
	Question topicalizing resources
	Question topicalizing hindrances
	Question topicalizing solution strategies
	Question evaluating interim results
Transfer and securing results	Question securing results and topicalizing (solution) implementation
Evaluating the coaching	Question evaluating the coaching (process)

TYPOLOGY OF QUESTIONING SEQUENCES – STEP 5

PRIOR ACTIONS	QUESTION	REACTION	THIRD POSITION	
			Change	**Exploration**
No (visible) question preparation	See question typology	Client participates	Initation	Repairing or insisting
Complex question preparation		Client does not participate	Transformation	Clarification or elaboration
Question preparation in position -2		Client partly participates	(Re-)Focusing	Requesting evaluation
Question reacts to local trigger in position -1		Client does more	Knowledge transfer	
		Client does something else		

CODED QUESTIONING SEQUENCE – STEP 7

		Pos.*			
Question reacts to local trigger in position -1		-1	1	CL*	right (.) and it's like this because at this point i realise that i then also quickly
Question topicalizing problemacity			2		(0.41)
Polar interrogative question			3	CL	maybe (.) i'm afraid and then i quickly start comparing myself again because i see my weaknesses more in this moment °h and then i start comparing okay she really knows her stuff here an with food and i know nothing at all about what uhm the difference now is between °h uh this an that °h but uh [mm]
Client participates (is responsive)		2	4	CO*	**[do you]** perceive this as weak[ness]
			5	CL	[((smacks lips)) y]es actually (.) yes
			6		(0.85)
Change = Transformation		3	7	CL	myes
Question topicalizing problemacity			8	CO	just asking provocatively uhm if you talk to your sister about energy efficient
Polar interrogative question			9		(0.24)
			10	CO	construction and your sister is not well-ver[sed in this °h] **would you interpret this as [weakness]**

* Pos. ... Position / CO ... Coach / CL ... Client