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## ‘But How Often Does This Happen?’: Problem Reducing Responses by Coaches in Email Counselling

*Joyce Lamerichs and Wyke Stommel*

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the interactional dynamics of email counselling from a conversation analytic (CA) perspective. The conceptual apparatus of CA has been successfully applied to study turn-taking and the sequential placement of email messages (cf., Stommel, 2012; Stommel & Van der Houwen, forthcoming; Vayreda & Antaki, 2009), as well as the ways in which accountability is managed in online talk to do with health (cf., Guise, Widdicombe, & McKinlay, 2007; Lamerichs & Te Molder, 2003). Participants’ interactional concerns in email counselling are therefore treated as an empirical matter and not a priori different from speakers’ orientations in spoken interaction.

In this chapter, we demonstrate how coaches orient to the dilemma of promoting self-directedness in their clients while also giving ear to clients’ concerns. Managing this interactional dilemma appears to include more than focusing on ‘a problem to be solved’, as GPs attend to in consultations (Heritage & Robinson, 2006, p. 75) or ‘aligning with a person and their troubles’ (Jefferson & Lee, 1981), particularly as staff in therapeutic contexts might resist helping the client to achieve particular goals (See Pino, Chapter 34, this volume). Rather, we find that coaches recurrently employ a set of five interactional strategies or ‘problem reducing responses’: (1) demonstrating reading; (2) optimistic formulations and questions; (3) agency ascribing compliments; (4) ‘depersonalising’ problem descriptions; and (5) contrastive questions. Our analysis explicates the patterned ways in which clients react to these responses followed by a discussion of the implications for professional practice.

### **Online counselling**

Online counselling can be defined as ‘any type of professional therapeutic interaction that makes use of the Internet to connect qualified mental health

professionals and their clients' (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004, p. 270). It is believed to increase the quality of healthcare and its cost-effectiveness and provides convenient and anonymous access for people with mental health problems, who are known to be reluctant to seek treatment (Barak & Grohol, 2011). Online mental health interventions in the Netherlands are considered promising because of high Internet penetration rates, a positive outlook on self-management in dealing with matters of health and illness, and a willingness to consider online help (Sorbi & Riper, 2009).

Online mental health interventions, which are mostly based on cognitive-behavioural self-help programmes, have increasingly proven to be effective (see Sorbi & Riper, 2009). Little is known, however, about the communicative practices that accompany these online sessions. And while treatment adherence benefits from frequent contact with a therapist, it remains unclear how therapists' involvement specifically matters (Andersson, 2009). Professionals themselves also indicate to struggle with their role and the effectiveness of their communicative practices in an online setting (Chester & Glass, 2006; Schalken, 2013). Before examining the latter in greater detail, we first turn to discuss relevant CA studies on online counselling.

### **Conversational studies of online counselling**

CA studies of online counselling have highlighted the challenges counsellors are faced with when demonstrating 'active listening' through continuers and formulations. Chat counsellors on the Australian-based Kids Helpline were shown not to use continuers whereas formulations were frequently offered 'in overlap' with clients' ongoing and extensive problem presentations. As a result, it remained unclear whether formulations in chat were used to summarise or to prompt a continuation of the client's problem presentation (Danby, Butler, & Emmison, 2009).

Although they may work differently online, the aforementioned practices of 'active listening' are constitutive of the counselling relationship. CA research has offered a contribution to this field of study by showing how several other features of the counselling relationship are interactionally accomplished. Stommel (2012), for example, has explored the use of address terms in email counselling showing how clients frequently proposed to use more informal address terms than counsellors were using. And although counsellors usually accepted, they sometimes reverted back to the formal register, not demonstrating sensitivity to the nature of the relationship they co-constructed with their clients. A similar insensitivity was discovered in the analysis of counsellors' responses to clients' complaints in email counselling (Stommel & Van der Houwen, 2014). While the professional-client relationship was preserved by aligning with the clients' negative assessments of the online counselling programme, counsellors treated the assessments as questions rather than complainables, thereby failing to fortify the relationship with their clients.

Another aspect of counselling relevant to the analysis we present here is how counsellors harbour clients' agency by using particular question formats. Chat counsellors on the Australian Kids Helpline employed indirect requests to propose a change from chat to telephone counselling. The question format reflected counsellors' understanding of contingent issues such as privacy or anxiety that made a transition to telephone contact difficult (Harris, Danby, Butler, & Emmison, 2012). Stommel and Van der Houwen (2013) have also shown how the clients' ability to realise improvements was emphasised by formulating positive aspects of the clients' account.

In her work on face-to-face therapy, MacMartin (2008) showed that fostering clients' agency is not always unproblematic. She found that 'optimistic questions', which were designed to invite answers from clients that affirmed their competence and resilience, were often resisted by sarcastic responses, downgraded optimism, or jocular remarks. MacMartin also showed how counsellors dealt with patients' disaffiliative turns, by incorporating material from previous turns and 'recycling' questions. We will point to similar practices in our data.

### **Troubles-tellings**

Online counselling is essentially about responding to clients' troubles. There is a tradition in CA that has looked at troubles-tellings and their receipt. In their classic study on a troubles-telling sequence in everyday talk, Jefferson and Lee (1981) showed how 'interactional asynchrony' (1981, p. 402) occurs when a recipient to a troubles-telling does not align with the telling and engages in advice giving. The friction seems related to the closing implicativeness of advice: once advice is offered, continuation of the troubles-telling appears interactionally difficult. This was also the case in online support groups, where it was shown that providing advice or asking further questions resulted in a different receipt from the troubles teller and author of the opening post (Stommel & Lamerichs, 2014).

The interactional risks of non-aligning responses to a troubles-telling have also been addressed in telephone counselling, where call takers seek ways to prevent bringing a client's problem presentation to a premature close (Potter & Hepburn, 2003). This chapter explores the interactional dilemmas that occur when coaches employ 'problem reducing responses' when replying to clients' problem tellings in email counselling.

### **Project overview**

Our online counselling data come from a counselling programme that was offered to people with moderate symptoms of depression and anxiety disorder. The programme was set up to investigate the possible benefits of online counselling via chat and email when clients received different levels of support from a coach (Donker et al., 2009). Coaches were trained to give ear to clients

in the way a neighbour or a good friend would do and to refrain from using particular psychotherapy techniques (Donker et al., 2009).

For our study we collected over 200 emails from 21 clients who took part in email counselling with four different coaches for a period of five weeks. The email threads usually consisted of 11 messages per client (five by the client, six by the coach, a welcoming message included).

We draw on CA for analysis of the data. CA's central focus on turn-taking, sequential placement, and turn design lends itself particularly well to study different types of computer-mediated communication, such as online discussion groups (Stommel & Lamerichs, 2014) and online counselling (Stommel & Van der Houwen, 2014).

Our analysis started by close reading the email threads which led us to identify patterns in how coaches replied to clients' problems. We then examined the ways in which clients and coaches responded to each other throughout the five consecutive weeks. On the basis of this sequential analysis, we identified five main types of replies coaches employ, which we referred to as 'problem reducing responses', as well as some 'counter-moves' clients recurrently engaged in.

Participants structure their emails in paragraphs, often separated by a blank line suggesting a topical orientation. This structure is maintained throughout the email thread, as one paragraph sets up an interactional space for the next (see Vayreda & Antaki, 2009, for a discussion), thus demonstrating members' methods for managing the ongoing interaction (see Extracts 5 and 6; cf., Reed, 2001).

We found that the actions in these paragraphs occur in a particular order, with optimistic or critical questions by the coach typically placed at the end of a paragraph. The interactional significance of the order in which actions occur will be further examined in our analysis.

A final remark is needed about the presentation of our data. As each email in our data set consists of one to two pages and email threads vary between 10 and 34 pages (respectively, 4,550 and 11,950 words), we are not able to present the interactions in full. We present two rich sequences that illustrate the response types we have identified, based on a full analysis of our data. We have included an idiomatic English gloss that captures the local interactional meaning (Hepburn & Bolden, 2013) and in which typing errors are preserved to remain as close to the actual interaction as possible. For the Dutch extracts, see Appendix 1.

## **Analysis**

We focus on five patterned ways in which the coaches respond to clients' problem presentations in email counselling: (1) demonstrating reading (S1), (2)

optimistic formulations and questions (S2), (3) agency ascribing compliments (S3), (4) 'depersonalising' problem descriptions (S4), and (5) contrastive questions (S5). We also show how clients engage in practices that involve countering the specific claims made by the coach (e.g., presenting the problem as legitimate) and how they are taken up by the coach. In Extracts 1, 1CL is the first email by the client and 2CO is the second email by the coach and so on.

### 'Bad mothering'

In Extract 1, the client introduces herself first of all as a single mother who keeps busy taking care of her four-and-a-half-year-old son. By describing the other activities she engages in, besides raising her son, in less detail and as less significant ('studying for a while', 'a small job', line 5), she downplays their significance in favour of constructing a primary identity as a mother.

#### Extract 1: CL1-1031

((2 lines omitted))

- 1 I am a 42 year old woman and this is where I am at this time in my life:
- 2 My most important occupation is caring for and being busy with my 4,5 year old son.
- 3 Since 4 years I have been raising him on my own.  
((12 lines omitted))
- 4 My son is doing well, although I find it difficult to do everything alone with him with little time to myself and little good sleep.
- 5 Am studying for a while now and have a small job.
- 6 Feel like I am surviving rather than living.
- 7 Often afraid to die and who will have to care for my son (deeply Christian family I don't want him to end up with.
- 8 Think negatively about myself, often feel like a bad mother, why do bad things happen to me, burden of a stringent dad in the past, missing out on genuine interest in me as a person by my parents.  
((5 lines omitted))

Her problem presentation starts in line 6 with a clichéd pre-announcement: 'Feel like I am surviving rather than living', emphasising the contrast between the two categories ('surviving' vs. 'living') highlighting the seriousness of her situation. What follows is a summing up of different concerns that are constructed as persistent, recurrent fears ('Often afraid to die') and negative

thoughts and feelings ('often feel like a bad mother'), stressing their felt intensity (lines 7–8). She concludes by drawing on two externalising explanations (line 8) that account for the 'weight' on her shoulders.

In the first paragraph of their reply, coaches routinely start by complimenting the clients for their courage to write about their personal life to a relative stranger (data not shown here). Lines 1–10 in Extract 2 display the second paragraph of the email by the coach.

**Extract 2: 2CO-1031**

- 1 In your email you wrote that you're a single mum of a  
4,5 year old son.
- 2 And that you are solely responsible for caring for and  
raising your son.
- 3 You point out that you have the feeling that rather  
than to live yourself, you are being lived.
- 4 And even more so, you have the feeling to have to  
survive.
- 5 Understandable you feel this, it's really something to  
raise a child on your own!
- 6 To be mum and dad at the same time and not to be  
able to share the care and the responsibilities with  
someone.
- 7 It takes a whole lot of energy and a lot of strength  
and commitment are needed for that.
- 8 And you have all that, as you've cared for your son for  
four years already.
- 9 And you're doing a good job, since you wrote that he is  
doing well.
- 10 Still you point out you feel like a bad mother. How  
does that show? And what do you think at those times?

In lines 1–3, the coach starts with a 'neutral' summary of what the client has written, which demonstrates reading (S1). She continues by drawing on the client's feelings of 'living' versus 'surviving' (lines 3–4). Reiterating the contrast and building from that ('And even more so', line 4) stresses the seriousness of the client's emotional state. In lines 5–7, the coach further demonstrates her understanding of the client's feelings and uses a clichéd expression ('it's really something') as an agency ascribing compliment (S3). By pointing to two tough implications when raising children on your own, the coach elaborates on what is laudable: 'being mother and father at the same time' and not being able to 'share the care and the responsibilities with someone' (S3). In doing so, the coach at the same time depersonalises the client's problem as a generic

situation all single parents may find themselves in (S4; cf., Weiste, 2015, p. 26). In line 7, the coach stresses how much effort is needed to raise a child on your own ('a whole lot of energy', 'a lot of strength and commitment'). Cast as big demands, these efforts get worked up as character traits to compliment the client on (S3). The coach then takes the compliment one step further: in offering up the client's own words as proof of how good things are 'in real life' ('And you're doing a good job, since you wrote that he is doing well', line 9), she offers an optimistic formulation and an agency ascribing compliment (S2 and S3).

In what comes next, the coach sets up a contrast with the client's description of feeling like a bad mother. The 'still' prefaced gloss in line 10 ('Still you point out you feel like a bad mother') suggests that these feelings are unwarranted for. The contrast is elaborated on with two questions (S5). Asking the client to specify concrete instances of behaviour and accompanying thoughts suggests that this information is needed to more accurately establish what the client's problem is. Extract 3 is the client's reply. In the preceding paragraph of this reply, the client has asked to be addressed less formally by the coach (data not shown here, but see Stommel, 2012).

### **Extract 3: 3CL-1031**

- 1 When I feel like a bad mother that usually is when I am tired and can't stay calm if my son does not want to listen.
- 2 I shout sometimes and feel I am getting very angry inside.
- 3 I wish I could always say the 'right' things to him.
- 4 Now I have the idea that by my being exhausted, I convey things I don't want: 'it's normal to shout, mummy can't cope, mummy doesn't love you etc.
- 5 Afterwards I then always try to talk with him but that is also difficult.
- 6 He often asks 'mummy do you still love me' when he is just playing, and that is why I think he does get damaged because mummy can't cope sometimes.

In lines 1–2, the client describes the routine instances in which feeling like a bad mother comes up. Glossing her son's concurrent behaviour as uncooperative renders her own inability to stay calm (line 1) legitimate and understandable. The client presents one noticeable feature of her behaviour as incidental ('I shout sometimes', line 2) and describes the anger that wells up insider her as an autonomous force (line 2). It constructs her behaviour as atypical and as something she cannot be held accountable for. In line 3, the client points

to her wish to always say the 'right' things. Drawing upon this aspiration in an ideal world sets up a contrast with what comes next, where the less-than-perfect reality is rejected but also presented as something she is unable to prevent (cf., Wetherell, Stiven, & Potter, 1987). Describing her condition in a nominal style ('my being exhausted', line 4) speaks to its causal force as something that exists outside herself and for which she can only be held partly accountable (see also lines 1–2).

The 'things' she does not want to convey are then listed further as normatively sanctionable ideas and as representing her son's thoughts when confronted with his mother's behaviour. In pointing to her routine attempts to talk about what happened afterwards (lines 5), the client emphasises her ability to act in the normatively preferred way of dealing with such situations in a rational manner. In line 6, the client uses reported speech to show that even while engaging in the spontaneous act of playing, her son frequently asks, 'do you still love me'. It prepares for the conclusion that this counts as proof that some damage is done and further legitimises her concerns. Drawing on her son's reported thoughts and words, the client demonstrates how her behaviour impacts her child and establishes her problem and its consequences as real. In line 6, the problem of having 'feelings of being a bad mother' gets rephrased as 'mummy can't cope sometimes', which highlights the client's inability to behave differently rather than it stemming from any other motives. It shows another instance of accountability talk by the client, in response to the email by the coach. Extract 4 is the second paragraph of the coach's reply, which started with the coach agreeing to using informal address terms (data not shown here).

#### **Extract 4: 4CO-1031**

- 1 You point out that you, most often when you're tired, can't react like you would want to react when your son doesn't want to listen.
- 2 Instead of staying composed and calmly say the things you want to tell him, you feel angry and you shout sometimes.
- 3 Because of this you are afraid that you give him the wrong messages, like you would not love your son and would fail in raising him on certain occasions.
- 4 You're afraid that because of this you damage him.
- 5 When there is a lot on your mind and you are tired, you want peace of mind and at those times you may react differently from how you would want to when your son doesn't want to listen.
- 6 I can well imagine that you're afraid to give him the 'wrong messages'.

- 7 All you want is being a good (perfect!) mom and to give your son the best and most loving upbringing.
- 8 When you, because of stress, uneasiness (his too), fatigue, can't give this to him, it feels like you are failing.
- 9 But how often does this happen?
- 10 Is this always the case or are there also moments when you can be the mother you want to be for your son?

The coach starts with an elaborate paraphrase of the client's words (S1), mirroring the client's previous distinction between *not being able to* react the way she would *want* to react. Hence, the coach not only ratifies the client's inability account and acknowledges the client's fears but also highlights (as the client did) the role of the son in these circumstances (line 1). In doing so, the coach aligns with the account provided by the client. Note how the coach casts the client's concerns as fears (lines 3, 4, and 6) and furthermore as hypothetical ('like you would not love your son', line 3; see also line 6, where 'wrong messages' is put in between quotation marks), suggesting they lack a grounding in reality. In line 5, the coach provides a general gloss of what one would (ideally) want if one is tired and has a lot on one's mind. The 'you' in line 5 is ambiguous and may both refer to the client and provide a general gloss of how these things work for everybody. It constructs the client's worries as plausible and remains ambiguous about whether her situation represents a common experience, thereby offering a 'softened' depersonalising strategy (S4).

The coach continues by showing her understanding of the client's fears and ties them to the client's desire to be 'a good (perfect!) mom' (lines 6–7), complimenting the client on her ambitions as a single mother (S3). The client's (high) standards are linked to her feelings of failing (line 8) which are cast as inevitable when faced with particular (external) circumstances (e.g., the son's behaviour, see lines 1 and 5). This works to reduce the client's responsibility when failing. This externalising account provided by the coach prepares for a further question, which is designed as a contrastive 'but-prefaced question' ('But how often does this happen?', line 9). It suggests that failure does not frequently occur (S5). The subsequent questions in lines 9 invite a similar response: formatted as an alternative-offering question, the extremised 'always the case' is unevenly balanced in comparison to the more positively framed option and invites an answer affirming the latter (S2; cf., Antaki & O'Reilly, 2014).

In sum, in her first reply to the client's troubles-telling the coach started by demonstrating reading (S1) and complimenting the client on her achievements (S3). The client's problem was then cast as one that might not be tied to the client as a person but germane to all single parents (S4), after which

further compliments followed (S3). A contrastive question (S5) followed early in the email thread (Extract 2), in response to which we saw the client carefully underlining the legitimacy of her problem and engaging in accountability talk on multiple occasions. The coach's subsequent response in Extract 4 oriented to this uptake by offering an explicit acknowledgement of the client's inability account, compliments (S3), and understanding. The depersonalisation strategy was presented in a softened manner and the contrastive question (S5) designed to invite an 'optimistic' answer (S2). Extracts 5 to 7 will demonstrate how a coach engages in more alignment work, after the client resists some of the coach's strategies.

### **'Being too self-reliant'**

In Extract 5, a male client writes in his opening email that his self-reliance, which he values as one of his biggest assets in his professional life, is 'troublesome' in his social life.

#### **Extract 5: 1CL-1371**

- 1 I am a self-employed entrepreneur who helps private individuals and small businesses with computers and the like, am doing that for 3,5 years now and I do well, my week is mostly fully booked.
- 2 Self-employed means planning everything on your own and such, means also bringing in all the discipline, motivation and solutions yourself.
- 3 That fits me like a glove.
- 4 Have previously owned a shop and worked a couple of years as a deejay.
- 5 This fits in with the difficulties I experience socially if there is no business situation at hand; I am TOO independent and always present myself as a loner.
- 6 That pattern is so deeply-rooted that I can't manage to bring about any change there.  
(27 lines omitted in which the client talks about his family)

The client presents himself in a positive light and emphasises how the qualities his current job requires seamlessly fit his personality and suggests how previous jobs have been similar in this respect (lines 3–4). In line 5, the client then contrasts the traits that have been so 'rewarding' in his professional life to be 'troublesome' in his social life, explicating a paradox many more clients draw on. By presenting his self-reliance in an extremised fashion ('TOO', line 5), he redefines his strong point now as a problem. Note how 'loner' (line 5) could

even be heard to be more negative than 'self-reliance'. It also suggests a persistent and conscious way of presenting himself in the world. In line 6, the client works up the suggestion that change is the preferred option. Suggesting that his character traits are too entrenched accounts for why he has not been able to do so. In this setting, this may also position him as someone looking for advice to accomplish change after all and invite counselling talk from the coach.

**Extract 6: 2CO-1371**

- 1 You write to me that you have been a self-employed entrepreneur in IT for 3,5 years.
- 2 You are doing well and that is worth a whole lot in times of economic downfall!
- 3 The work activities that go with this job fit you like a glove.
- 4 Especially the independent aspect agrees really well with you.
- 5 It's nice to know about yourself where your strong points lie.
- 6 Are there more strong points you could name that apply to you?
- 7 The drawback to being independent is that you maybe become a bit distant if you are too self-reliant.
- 8 Is that also something you mean to say when you write that you present yourself like a loner?
- 9 You talk about a pattern that sits so deep that it's difficult to change.
- 10 But why would you want to change this? Isn't a person allowed to be who he is?
- 11 If you would want to change it then what would the ideal situation look like?

The coach starts with a 'neutral' summary ('you write to me') that demonstrates reading (S1). Compliments about the client's achievements and his ability to identify his strong points (S3) follow in lines 2–6. Inviting the client to name more strong points is similar to asking 'optimistic questions' (MacMartin, 2008) and asks the client to stress his competences and successes (S2).<sup>1</sup> The coach then draws on the client's concern about being too self-reliant in a cautious manner, employing a 'double conditional' to formulate an upshot: there *might* be a down side to being independent *if* you are too self-reliant. She casts the potential downside in comparable cautious terms ('maybe', 'a bit', in line 7). It is

formulated as a generalised upshot (S4) and followed by a checking question about the meaning of the word 'loner' (line 8).

In line 10, a contrastive but prefaced question is posed that attends to the implied need for change in the client's email: 'But why would you want to change this?' (S5). The (candidate) idiomatic answer category in line 10 ('Isn't a person allowed to be who he is?') invites the client to respond to the question in a way that emphasises his qualities rather than a need for change (S2). The candidate answer is also a clichéd expression that may pose a solution for people in general and not only for this client (S4). The hypothetical question in line 11 enquires after an ideal situation and invites an 'optimistic' response (S2). The client has placed his response immediately underneath the preceding paragraph of the email by the coach, creating topical coherence (Reed, 2001).

**Extract 7: 3CL-1371**

- 1 Practically speaking it is not a problem at all, but it is when I am with people.
- 2 It seems like there is also a fear of people there, being afraid to get hurt (from a rational point of view there isn't much reason for that).
- 3 Also being who I am is not an ordinary thing for me.
- 4 I am over-conscious and that prevents spontaneous actions and apparently I think it's important how I might be looked at or whether I would do something that provokes response.

The client offers a qualified agreement, which stresses that there is a real problem in his social life and resists the optimistic gloss by the coach. The legitimacy of his problem is increased by pointing to underlying deeper fears in line 2 that are presented as autonomous emotions that can be 'located' but not necessarily explained for in rational terms, thus rendering them beyond 'conscious' control. In lines 3–4, the self-evident, idiomatic expression by the coach is dismissed as being far from an ordinary matter nor a general truth. The client then engages in accountability talk that present causes that determine his behaviour and which are cast as partly lying beyond his comprehension ('apparently I think it's important ...', line 4). Extract 8 is the reply from the coach after this 'resistant' response from the client.

**Extract 8: 4CO-1371**

- 1 You have told me something about how difficult you sometimes find it in social situations.

- 2 When it comes to work, you manage well, the contact with customers goes well.
- 3 But as soon as the contact gets to a relational level, then some fear pops up.
- 4 Would you say that insecurity could play a role in that?
- 5 I can tell you from experience that many people experience a certain tension at moments when they engage in social interaction.
- 6 You suspect that your biggest fear lies in the possibility of getting hurt or being judged by others.
- 7 I can imagine this fear because of the sensitive side within you.
- 8 It's unpleasant if people take advantage of that.
- 9 Something like that does not contribute to opening up again.
- 10 Have you had bad experiences at times when you showed feelings to someone?

The coach employs various strategies here to realign with the client. She starts by stressing the conversational nature of the exchange ('you have told me') with which she demonstrates reading (S1) albeit in a more colloquial manner. She acknowledges the client's claim that there are problems in his social life and aligns with the client's suggestion that fear may play a role (line 4). The coach then cautiously proposes insecurity as an additional causal factor for the client to consider, the plausibility of which is further enhanced by quantifying that causal claim as a 'general cause' for many people (S4). Lines 6–9 offer an elaborate formulation of what the client's fear is about, starting by literally conveying the client's words, with which she demonstrates reading of what the client presented as an underlying problem (S1, 'you suspect', line 6). This is followed by demonstrating understanding and by proposing another causal argument for the client which states that his current fears and behaviour are rooted in a previous experience of being taken advantage of (lines 8–9). The coach then checks with a follow-up question whether the client has actually had any such negative experiences when opening up to other people. In doing so, the coach not only aligns with the client's externalising' causal reasoning but also extends it (see also lines 3–4).

### **Professional relevance**

Clients were shown to strongly orient to contrastive questions (S5) asked by coaches. Hence, coaches could benefit from a more detailed understanding of

Table 15.1 Professional practice highlights

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1. Coaches should be aware of the response requirement invoked by contrastive (confrontational) questions, and how countering the claims embedded in these questions may invoke resistance in clients' receipt as an interactionally relevant next matter.
  2. Coaches should be aware of the importance of question format and question design and attempt to use a variety of question formats, including (checking) questions that ask the client to elaborate on aspects of the troubles-telling.
  3. Coaches may benefit from employing interactional strategies that not only 'neutrally' demonstrate reading but also convey a more active acknowledgement of the client's problem.
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the response requirement induced by these questions. The sequential implicativeness of questions in emails is enhanced by their position at the end of a paragraph. Furthermore, the design of the questions, contrastive and critical of the client's problem, was shown to render a response from the client as a relevant matter to deal with in their next email. When these questions are taken up as a critique by clients, as we have shown by examining their receipt, we can begin to see how they become central to the interactional dynamic of email counselling.

It is important to critically consider the effect this has on the practice of counselling and that is why we want to pose the question whether it is desirable if online counselling talk seems to predominantly invite (legitimising) accounts from clients. It seems that this type of receipt is not in line with the organisation's goals of showing understanding and giving ear to client's concerns, nor with eliciting self-directedness in clients. A 'defensive' or 'resistant' reply might even be considered counterproductive, because it works to reify the client's problem. The counselling relationship might be hampered as a result, as it blocks other types of talk.

We have also shown how coaches subsequently engage in realigning work, such as reinforcing or contributing to the clients' causal arguments. Although client resistance and counsellors' ways of dealing with it are considered part and parcel of doing therapy (see Sidnell & Stivers, 2013 for a discussion), it might be worthwhile for coaches to facilitate modes of interaction in email counselling whereby clients engage in less 'defensive' reasoning practices. For a simple summary of the practical implications, please see Table 15.1.

## Summary

This chapter has demonstrated how coaches employ five interactional strategies when responding to clients' emails: they demonstrate reading as opposed

to a more explicit acknowledgement of the client's problem (S1); they promote and highlight positive aspects rather than problems (S2 and S3); they cast the problem as a concern many or all people encounter (S4) and they pose questions that are critical of the client's problem and ask the client to elaborate or explain (S5).

We have shown how these strategies, and in particular the contrastive questions (see Extract 2, line 10; Extract 4, lines 9–10; Extract 6, line 10) have a strong sequential impact. They invoke countermoves in clients' emails with which they cast their problems as legitimate (e.g., by offering 'proof' of its existence and by addressing an underlying, deeper problems), and they elicit accountability talk (e.g., identifying external causes, stressing how the desire to do better is hampered by practical constraints, presenting the problem as incomprehensible). These countermoves illustrate how the 'problem reducing responses' by the coach are received as disaligning with the troubles the client has put forward. We found that in their subsequent responses in Extracts 4 and 8) coaches 'retract' and realign with the client, incorporating the 'resistance work' by the client where they previously failed to fully acknowledge their problem.

## Appendix: Extracts in Dutch

### Extract 1: 1CL-1031

((2 lines omitted))

- 1 Ben een vrouw van 42 en hier sta ik op dit moment in het leven:
- 2 Mijn voornaamste bezigheid is zorgen en bezig zijn met mijn zoon van 4,5 jaar.
- 3 Sinds 4 doe ik de opvoeding alleen.  
((12 regels weggelaten))
- 4 Met mijn zoon gaat het goed, alhoewel ik t moeilijk vind alles alleen te doen met hem met weinig tijd voor mezelf en weinig goede nachtrust.
- 5 Doe sinds kort n opleiding van 1 dag per week en heb n klein baantje.
- 6 Heb t gevoel dat ik aan t overleven ben ipv leven.
- 7 Vaak bang om dood te gaan en wie er dan voor mijn zoon moet zorgen (zwaar christelijke familie waar ik niet wil dat ie terechtkomt).
- 8 Denk negatief over mezelf, voel me vaak slechte moeder, waaorm overkomen mij rottingen, ballast van strenge vader vroeger, gemis van echte interesse in mij als persoon door mn ouders.

**Extract 2: 2CO-1031**

- 1 In uw e-mail schreef u dat u een alleenstaande moeder van een 4,5 jarig zoontje bent.
- 2 En dat u de zorg en de opvoeding van uw zoon in uw eentje draagt.
- 3 U geeft aan het gevoel te hebben dat u in plaats van zelf te leven, geleefd wordt.
- 4 En zelfs nog meer, u heeft het gevoel te moeten overleven.
- 5 Begrijpelijk dat u dit voelt, het is ook niet niets om een kind in uw eentje op te voeden!
- 6 Om vader en moeder tegelijk te zijn en de zorg en verantwoordelijkheid niet te kunnen delen met een ander.
- 7 Het kost ontzettend veel energie en er is veel kracht en toewijding voor nodig.
- 8 En dat heeft u ook, u zorgt namelijk al vier jaar voor uw zoon!
- 9 En dat doet u goed ook, aangezien u schreef dat het met hem goed gaat.
- 10 Toch geeft u aan dat u zich een slechte moeder voelt. Waar uit zich dat in? En wat denkt u dan?

**Extract 3: 3CL-1031**

- 1 Als ik me een slechte moeder voel is dat meestal als ik moe ben en niet rustig kan blijven als mijn zoon niet wil luisteren.
- 2 Ik schreeuw weleens en voel me dan erg kwaad worden van binnen.
- 3 Het liefst zou ik altijd de 'juiste' dingen tegen hem zeggen.
- 4 Nu heb ik het idee dat ik door mijn uitgeput voelen hem dingen meegeef die ik niet wil: 'het is normaal om te schreeuwen, mama kan het niet aan, mama vind je niet lief etc.
- 5 Later probeer ik dan altijd met hem te praten maar dat is ook lastig.
- 6 Hij vraagt vaak 'mama vind je me nog lief' als hij gewoon aan het spelen is, en daaruit maak ik op dat hij er toch schade van oploopt dat mama het soms niet aankan.

**Extract 4: 4CO-1031**

- 1 Je geeft aan dat je, voornamelijk wanneer je moe bent, je niet kan reageren zoals je zou willen reageren wanneer je zoon niet wil luisteren.
- 2 In plaats van kalm blijven en rustig die dingen zeggen die je wil vertellen, voel je je kwaad en schreeuw je wel eens. Hierdoor ben je bang dat je de verkeerde boodschappen aan hem meegeeft, zoals dat je niet van je zoon zou houden en zou falen in de opvoeding op bepaalde momenten.
- 3 Je bent bang dat je hem hierdoor beschadigd.
- 4 Wanneer je veel aan je hoofd hebt en moe bent, wil je rust en dan reageer je wel eens anders dan dat je zou willen wanneer je zoon niet wil luisteren.
- 5 Ik kan me goed voorstellen dat je bang bent om hem de 'verkeerde boodschappen' meegeeft.
- 6 Je wilt tenslotte een goede (perfecte!) moeder zijn en je zoontje de beste en meest liefdevolle opvoeding geven.
- 7 Wanneer je, door stress, onrust (van hem ook), moeheid, dit niet kan geven aan hem, voelt dat alsof je zelf faalt.
- 8 Maar hoe vaak komt dit voor?
- 9 Is dit altijd zo of zijn er ook momenten waarop je wel de moeder kan zijn die je wil zijn voor je zoon?

**Extract 5: 1CL-1371**

- 1 Ik ben een zzp 'er die particulieren en kleine ondernemingen helpt met pc's en aanverwante zaken,
- 2 doe dat nu 3,5 jaar en het gaat goed, m'n week is meestal helemaal vol.
- 3 Zelfstandig betekent alles zelf indelen enzo, betekent ook alle discipline, motivatie en oplossingen zelf inbrengen.
- 4 Dat is me op zich op het lijf geschreven.
- 5 Heb eerder al een winkel gehad en heb ook een aantal jaar als als deejay gewerkt.
- 6 Dit sluit ook aan bij de moeilijkheden die ik heb in het sociale verkeer als er geen sprake is van een zakelijke situatie; ik ben TE zelfstandig en stel me altijd als een einzalganger op.

- 7 Dat patroon zit zo diep dat het me niet lukt daar verandering in te brengen.  
((27 lines omitted))

**Extract 6: 2CO-1371**

- 1 U schrijft me dat u sinds 3,5 jaar bezig bent als zelfstandig ondernemer in de computerbranche.
- 2 Het gaat u goed en dat is heel wat waard in deze economisch mindere tijd!
- 3 De bijbehorende werkzaamheden zijn u op het lijf geschreven.
- 4 Vooral het zelfstandige aspect ligt u erg goed.
- 5 Het is fijn om van jezelf te weten waar je sterke punten liggen.
- 6 Zijn er nog meer sterke eigenschappen die u van uzelf kunt noemen?
- 7 De schaduwzijde van zelfstandig zijn is dat je misschien wat afstandelijk wordt als je té zelfredzaam bent.
- 8 Is dat ook iets wat u bedoelt wanneer u schrijft dat u zich opstelt als een 'einzelfganger'?
- 9 U heeft het over een patroon dat zo diep zit dat het moeilijk is om er verandering in te brengen.
- 10 Maar waarom zou u dit willen veranderen?
- 11 Een mens mag toch zijn wie hij is? Als u het toch zou willen veranderen hoe zou de ideale situatie er dan uitzien?

**Extract 7: 3CL-1371**

- 1 Het is in praktische zin zeker geen probleem, echter wel in omgang met mensen.
- 2 Het lijkt of er ook een angst voor mensen zit, bang gekwetst te worden (rationeel gezien lijkt daar niet veel reden toe).
- 3 Ook zijn wie ik ben is niet gewoon voor me.
- 4 Ik ben overbewust van mezelf en dat voorkomt spontane acties en ik vind het belangrijk blijkbaar hoe er eventueel tegen me aangekeken wordt of dat ik iets zou doen wat reactie oproept.

**Extract 8: 3CO-1371**

- 1 Je hebt me iets verteld over hoe moeilijk je het soms vindt in sociale situaties.
- 2 Op zakelijk gebied red je jezelf prima, daar loopt het contact met de klanten wel.
- 3 Maar zodra het contact op 'menselijk' niveau komt, dan komt er wat angst om de hoek kijken.
- 4 Zou je kunnen zeggen dat onzekerheid daar een rol bij speelt?
- 5 Ik kan je uit ervaring vertellen dat er bij veel mensen een bepaalde spanning opkomt op momenten dat zich in het sociale verkeer bevinden.
- 6 Je vermoedt dat jouw grootste angst zit in het mogelijk gekwetst of beoordeeld worden door anderen.
- 7 Ik kan me die angst wel voorstellen gezien de gevoelige kant die je in je hebt.
- 8 Het is niet leuk als mensen daar misbruik van maken.
- 9 Zoiets draagt er niet aan bij om jezelf weer snel bloot te geven.
- 10 Heb jij slechte ervaringen gehad op het moment dat je gevoelens aan iemand liet blijken?

**Note**

1. It is beyond the scope of this chapter, but our data also show how clients may resist or demonstrate hesitancy when answering optimistic questions. This client does so for example when asked to identify more strong points.

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