

Desperately seeking...a theory of the coaching relationship

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Abstract

This short article calls for the opening of a dialogue on developing a dedicated theory of the coaching relationship. In light of the limited development of broader models of coaching process and coaching outcome to explicitly formulate the role of the coaching relationship; the need to evaluate the utility and extent of the working alliance in coaching; the urgent requirement for a coaching relationship model capable of translation across multiple coaching delivery media, and the need to accommodate an interpersonal and contextual perspective, an argument is made that a coaching relationship model is timely. Developments in the allied domains of relationship science and psychotherapy research may further inform a conversation for taking such a theory forward.

Key words: coaching relationship, coaching relationship theory, working alliance, social psychology theories

The impetus for writing this article calling for a dialogue on a theory of the coaching relationship arose from initial observations in several areas of coaching and coaching relationship research and practice previously outlined (Henderson & Palmer). These observations will be explored further below.

THE COACHING RELATIONSHIP IN MODELS OF COACHING PROCESS AND COACHING OUTCOME

In a context where coaching theory lags coaching practice, the quest for greater understanding of coaching processes and their impact on coaching outcomes continues unabated. Not least because organisations increasingly require evidence

of the effectiveness of coaching, and practitioners and researchers seek the means of creating the optimum coaching process and outcomes with their coachees.

The coaching literature comprises a number of coaching models largely *describing* coaching processes. These are based upon:

- coaching research findings (e.g. De Haan & Duckworth, 2013, citing *common factors* such as the coaching relationship amongst several others predicting positive coaching outcomes).
- theoretical assumptions, some of which include discussion of the coaching relationship (e.g. Passmore, 2007) and some of which do not (e.g. Whitmore, 1992).
- combining coaching research findings with theoretical assumptions, either

including integrated specific mechanisms of change (e.g. Zimmermann & Antoni, 2018) or not (e.g. Greif, 2008).

Whilst these models of coaching process and coaching outcomes largely include coaching relationship components, they have not yet fully addressed the questions of the nature and influence of different factors with each other, or the sequence of influence of factors, over time.

EVALUATING THE EXTENT OF THE WORKING ALLIANCE IN COACHING RELATIONSHIPS

The correlation of working alliance with coaching outcomes has repeatedly been found, including in large-scale (De Haan et al., 2016) and meta-analytic coaching research studies, (Graßmann, et al., 2019), however there have been challenges to the supremacy of the working alliance in coaching relationship research studies. In following a finer-grain explanation for coaching processes at work in coaching, further questions have been raised, and largely remain unanswered about the indirect role of working alliance in combination with other coaching variables (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2020) on coaching effectiveness, as a possible mediator variable, and over time (De Haan et al., 2020; Zimmermann & Antoni, 2020). The lack of correlation of *coach* and *coachee* perception of Working Alliance with each other, and of Working Alliance *perception* with Working Alliance relevant *behaviours* in the same coaching dyad have also been found in a videotaped interaction analysis study (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015).

Other relationship factors, associated with the therapeutic alliance, such as the 'real' relationship (Sun et al., 2013) have been posited to offer contributions to the coaching relationship in coaching; and the greater importance of the goal-focused aspects of the relationship, rather than satisfaction with the coach-coachee relationship, have also been asserted (Grant, 2014), although the working alliance construct was not measured in this particular study.

Others have noted issues with the definition of coaching (Zimmermann and Antoni, 2018) and definitions and measurement of the coaching relationship and working alliance, (Lopez, 2017; O'Broin, 2016).

In summary, the adoption of the working alliance as a metric of the coaching relationship has proven useful and pragmatic in the absence of a dedicated coaching relationship theory, however needs to be examined further and in a more exacting manner in terms of the extent of its utility.

CONCEPTUALISING A THEORY OF COACHING RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS DIFFERENT COACHING MEDIA

The sheer number and speed of coaches and coaching psychologists transferring abruptly to video-mediated delivery of coaching relationships in the wake of the rapid onset of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions raises another impetus for a theory of the coaching relationship. Given the limited number of research studies on video-mediated coaching, and in particular video-mediated coaching relationships, an explanatory theory covering coaching relationship delivery across different media is called for. It may well be the case that adapting the coach's approach to the video medium, in terms of use and emphasis of interpersonal skills, use and application of techniques, and coachee preferences, as well as more practical adjustments to the technical aspects of working in the video medium may require particular attention and focus for training novice coaches.

AN INTERPERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE COACHING RELATIONSHIP

A number of scholars have suggested the relevance of social psychology theories in explaining the coach-coachee dynamics in the coaching relationship. Jowett et al., (2012), using a coach-athlete relationship model (Jowett, 2007), offer a dyadic conceptualisation of the coaching relationship, drawing from Interdependence theory and Social Exchange Theory. Similarly, Ianiro et al., (2013) found the higher the coach's dominant behaviour (in the sense of self-confidence) the higher the coachee's self-rating of goal attainment outcomes, drawing from an interpersonal theory perspective, whilst Lai and Smith (2019) gave the executive coaching relationship a triadic focus of coach-coachee and organisation, in a conceptual framework of the three-way joint coaching alliance, underpinned by Social Identity Theory, recognising social context including cultural diversity and power dynamics.

LEARNING FROM RELATIONSHIP THEORY DEVELOPMENT IN RELATIONSHIP SCIENCE

Current developments in allied domains of relationship science and psychotherapy may add additional perspectives to the current discussion.

Relationship science

Relationship science focuses on different types of relationships, primarily close relationships, and is a theory-rich discipline, drawing from Interdependence Theory, Attachment Theory, and Evolutionary Theory amongst others. Recently there have been moves to reclassify, and integrate relationship theory (Finkel et al., 2017). Relationship principles arising from this process, such as *responsiveness* have been suggested to be applicable in the coaching context, in the form of *Perceived Partner Responsiveness* (see O'Broin & Palmer, 2010; Henderson O'Broin, 2019). There may be further opportunities to apply other relationship science principles in the coaching relationship context.

The relationship science domain may have more to offer the current discussion in raising the possibility of using the principles within the four-set structure comprising (a) What is a relationship? (b) How do relationships operate? (c) What tendencies do people bring to their relationships? (d) How does the context affect relationships? as a first step to guide theory development in a bottom-up manner, for developing new theoretical perspectives on coaching relationships.

In discussing the predominant consensus in the theoretical paradigm in the relationship science field that these principles encompass, Finkel et al., (2017) also raise two points that seems applicable to the current discussion. The first point is that using these principles may help broaden and define the explanatory power of working alliance theory applied in the coaching context. The second point recognises that there may be downsides from such a cohesive perspective, and that science may benefit from the competition of conflicting ideas. This point seems apposite to the situation in the coaching relationship research context where there is no home-grown dedicated coaching relationship theory base as such, however adoption of the working alliance with its robust and long-term empirical support in the psychotherapy context contains some parallels within coaching, with a majority consensus position in terms of acceptance of the working alliance in the coaching context. Hence giving voice to some alternative accounts of the coaching relationship may serve to sharpen, challenge, and encourage the development of further alternative perspectives to this dominant view.

A last word from alliance theory

With its derivation and long history in psychotherapy research context, the current state of alliance theory (Horvath, 2018)

contains a number of isomorphic parallels with the working alliance in coaching, and may contain certain salutary markers for future research and practice in coaching relationships. Definitional and measurement issues of the working alliance construct; development of, yet limitations to both theory-based and empirical 'bottom-up' research approaches exist in both domains. Whilst a detailed treatment of these similarities and the potential ways forward in addressing some of these problems in terms of the coaching relationship is beyond the scope of this article, initial indicators of some future directions which appear to offer possibilities for coaching will be mentioned.

Some of the propositions raised in psychotherapy research regarding the relationship as a common ingredient (Horvath, 2018) that might hold resonance in the coaching relationship context are:

- whether relationship variables (e.g. alliance, empathy, repairing strains in the coaching relationship) are the same *kinds* of variables
- whether relationship variables are fully or partially similar or dissimilar in different types of coaching
- how variables influence and relate to each other (do we need classifications recognising the possibility of hierarchical, complementary variables for instance)
- whether certain variables are common to all forms of coaching, and others specific to certain forms or types of coaching
- whether the lack of correlation between sources (e.g. coach, coachee, observer) is a method problem related to the instruments employed, or reflects different underlying variables.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article has argued that a dialogue on a dedicated theory of the coaching relationship is both necessary and timely. The impetus for such a theory arises from a number of observations on the coaching relationship and coaching context. Broader models of coaching process and outcomes currently inadequately account for the role of the coaching relationship; likewise the extent of the working alliance in coaching, and its relation to other relationship and coaching variables has yet to be established. The rapid adoption of video coaching by coaches in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic raises questions which a theory of the coaching relationship across coaching delivery media needs to answer. The applicability of social

psychology theories to the coaching relationship have been suggested, and the relationship science domain may offer further perspectives on these and related theories which may take theory development further. This is both in terms of adding to working alliance theory, and in encouraging alternative possibly conflicting accounts of the coaching relationship. Finally, finer-grained questions within alliance theory in the psychotherapy context may hold resonance around the question of exploring the extent of the coaching relationship as a common ingredient. The observations and comments in this article are those of the authors, based on their own perceptions of a pressing and overdue need for dialogue about a dedicated coaching relationship theory. It is hoped that those researchers active in the coaching relationship field will respond to this article with their own opinions, suggestions and recommendations on taking this conversation forward in the interest of developing more effective coaching relationships with our coachees. ■

Citation

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