Where we have been, where we are now, and where we might be heading: Where next for the coaching relationship?

Alanna O'Broin

Abstract

The advent of the current stage of coaching research seeking to identify how coaching works, or the 'active ingredients' of coaching has taken coaching relationship research into a more prominent position.   In exploring the questions of what we know about the coaching relationship and its role in coaching and coaching outcomes, and how we might go about finding out more, this article overviews the coaching relationship research in the coaching context of certain prevailing assumptions: that coaching works, the functional similarity of the coaching relationship with the therapeutic relationship, and that the coaching relationship is an 'active ingredient' of coaching. In the process, this exercise raises emerging issues of the definition of coaching, the definition of the coaching relationship, and measurement of the coaching relationship, which it is proposed are considerations when contemplating coaching relationship research studies and in our evidence-based approach to coaching practice. Suggestions for future research studies are made based on this discussion.

Keywords: *coaching relationship, coaching alliance, executive coaching, literature review, coaching relationship research*

Introduction

The coaching research has long asserted that the coaching relationship is fundamental to coaching processes and outcomes, and recent research on the 'active ingredients' of coaching (De Haan, Duckworth, Birch and Jones, 2013; De Haan, Grant, Burger and Eriksson, 2016) has signalled the coaching relationship as a prime candidate for focus. In practice however, what do we actually know about the coaching relationship and its role

in coaching and coaching outcomes? How should we go about finding out more?

This article addresses these questions by first overviewing the coaching relationship research from the perspectives of where we have been (early studies), and where we are now (the current research base). The article then considers the coaching context in which coaching relationship research has taken place, wherein assumptions, including the one that the coaching relationship is

an 'active ingredient' of coaching exist. Two further issues in the coaching relationship research context, arising from this discussion: how we define the coaching relationship, and how we measure it are also explored before examining where we could be heading (future research directions and methods).

The coaching context

Before overviewing the coaching relationship research it is helpful to first outline several points pertaining to the coaching context which are closely allied to the questions being asked in this article. These are the definition of coaching, the assumption that coaching works, and the assumption of functional similarity between the coaching relationship and other helping relationships.

Debating the definition of coaching

Even before preoccupation with the question of whether coaching is effective or not, the question of what coaching is occupied early coaching researchers, and indeed continues to be hotly debated. Linked to the assumption that coaching works, the definition of coaching remains a consideration in undertaking coaching research and in coaching practice. Various definitions of coaching exist in the literature, often reflecting the coaching background in which the definition arises (Peltier, 2001), or the role or the conceptual approach taken (Skiffington and Zeus, 2000). Distinguishing coaching definitively from other forms of helping such as psychotherapy and mentoring has thus far proven elusive, particularly when defining coaching in terms of its purpose (see Bachkirova, Cox and Clutterbuck, 2010; Grant, 2011). Definitions of coaching psychology too, add to this variation, in emphasising the psychological underpinnings of coaching (adapted from Grant and Palmer, 2002). In essence, the debate continues unresolved, and it is unlikely that a consensual definition of coaching will be reached in the foreseeable future. Our research endeavours therefore need to be aware of this point and proceed accordingly with clarity in the definition of coaching underpinning their approach. It is noteworthy however that most coaching definitions acknowledge their foundation upon a collaborative, purposive relationship (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh and Parker, 2010).

The assumption that coaching works

Following on from the question of the definition of coaching is another of the first fundamental questions that has been addressed by coaching researchers and is relevant to this discussion: whether coaching is effective. From small beginnings in the early 1990s, when studies were mostly uncontrolled group and case studies, the research base began to grow, with early reviews of the coaching research concluding that evidence lagged practice (Kampa, Kokesch and Anderson, 2001; Kampa and White, 2002). As the coaching research database expanded, both in breadth and depth, several reviews of the coaching research literature were published (Grant et al., 2010; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011); a systematic review followed (Lai and McDowall, 2014); and more recently, meta-analyses (Jones, Woods and Guillaume, 2016; Theeboom, Beersma and van Viaanen, 2014), all asserting the effectiveness of coaching.

The purpose for making this point here is not to review the research literature on the effectiveness of coaching. Those review studies referenced in this section will instead provide such an evaluation should the interested reader wish to study them further. Rather, the purpose is to emphasise that the generally accepted conclusion amongst coaching researchers, with varying degrees of conviction about sufficiency of evidence to support this conclusion, is now that coaching as an intervention is effective. Further research directions are therefore predicated on confirmation of this fundamental assumption of the effectiveness of coaching. Progress to the further question, of which are the 'active ingredients' at work in successful coaching, can logically proceed.

The assumption of functional similarity between the coaching relationship and other helping relationships

Whilst the early years of coaching research and literature were characterised by the tendency to differentiate coaching from therapy, including their respective relationships (Hart, Blattner and Leipsic, 2001), more recently there were discussions in the coaching literature of both similarities and differences between the interventions, and between the coaching and therapeutic relationships (Bachkirova, 2007; O'Broin and Palmer, 2007; 2010a; 2010b). The emphasis on working with similarities

was proactively taken up in a paper by McKenna and Davis, (2009), with a direct call to executive coaches to heed, learn from and utilise some of the so-called 'common factors' or 'active ingredients' commonly used in psychotherapy (Asay and Lambert, 1999), such as the coaching relationship, client factors, theory and techniques, and client expectations. They proposed broad principles of coach practice based on these psychotherapy literature findings, arguing the coaching *practice* case for exploring synergies further between coaching and psychotherapy as a way of better understanding how coaching works (see also Hernez-Broome, Boyce & Kraut, 2012).

The McKenna and Davis (2009) paper received a mixed reception in the executive coaching world, with strong advocates and critics at both extremes, although rather more benefits than drawbacks were demonstrated in identifying functional overlap between the two relationships, and leveraging the use of therapeutic 'techniques' to be adapted where appropriate for the coaching context. As well as in practice, there were advocates for drawing upon psychotherapy for avenues for *research* questions also applicable in the coaching context (Smither, 2011).

De Haan et al. (2013) carried the McKenna and Davis, 2009 and Smither, 2011 arguments further, by asserting that although studies, including their own (and see also De Haan et al., 2016) indicated that coaching was effective, coaching research was unlikely to produce Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) to the extent found in psychotherapy outcome research. This was for practical reasons of a lack of pressure from customers and limited funding for research. De Haan et al. (2013) argued that on the basis of the similarity of coaching and psychotherapy, the indicative evidence to date justifies the assumption of (i) the clients' perceptions of outcome as meaningful measures of effectiveness, and (ii) similar effectiveness for coaching to that demonstrated in psychotherapy outcome research. They therefore invoked the greater importance of now expending research effort on identifying the 'active ingredients' of coaching in coaching effectiveness.

Greater general acceptance of the assumption that the coaching relationship is functionally similar (in some respects) to other helping relationships, in particular the therapeutic relationship has encouraged coaching researchers and practition-

ers to draw from other domains for research and practice purposes. Furthermore, the argument for assuming similar effectiveness for coaching to that of psychotherapy outcome research based on indicative coaching research outcome study findings to date has added impetus to the research drive to identify the 'active ingredients' of coaching.

The rationale for assuming functional similarity between the coaching and therapeutic relationship is a pragmatic expedient, especially in the absence of extensive funding for coaching and whilst research on the coaching relationship remains in its infancy. In addition to the potential valuable contribution of this strand of research, it is also worthwhile to consider that the context of executive coaching differs from therapy. There may be significant or nuanced differences between the two relationships which it would be important to uncover and useful to the knowledge base of both domains.

The assumption that the coaching relationship is an 'active ingredient' in coaching

We now come to examine the assumption in the coaching research that is central to the discussion in this article, that the coaching relationship is an 'active ingredient' in coaching. In order to evaluate whether this assumption is supported, the early coaching relationship research will first be overviewed, followed by that of the past decade to the present day.

Where we have been – early coaching relationship research

It was not until the late 1980s that executive coaching was used as an organisational intervention to improve performance and as we have already noted, the coaching literature consisted mainly of discussion papers in the 1990s, some of which attested to the importance of the coaching relationship or aspects of it (e.g. Levinson, 1996; Sperry, 1993). It is therefore unsurprising that literature on the coaching relationship up to the end of the 1990s consisted mostly of discussion papers bearing in mind that the first review of executive coaching was published only shortly after the millennium (Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001).

McGovern, Lindmann, Vergara, Murphy et al., (2001) reported that 84% of American coachees perceived the quality of the coaching relationship as critical to coaching success in a study focus-

ing on Return on Investment in coaching. Forming a strong alliance or coaching relationship also featured largely in a cluster of executive coaching, leadership coaching, and human development models of the mid-1990s (Katz and Miller, 1996; Kilburg, 1996; 2001; Laske, 1996), although a study by Wasylyshyn (2003) was the first outcome study to report the importance of the ability to form a strong coaching alliance in coaching.

A feature of the early coaching relationship research was the comparison of the coaching and therapeutic relationships, largely seeking to distinguish the two (Hart et al., 2001) as part of the early delineation process of coaching as a separate domain. In the process the coaching relationship was perceived as more collegial (Levinson, 1996; Tobias, 1996), more egalitarian and collaborative (Grant and Cavanagh, 2004), and less need was considered necessary for client self-disclosure (Saporito, 1996). A second feature was the call for standards and credentialing for coaches (Brotman, Liberi and Wasylsyshyn, 1998), also serving to spotlight the role of the coach in coaching. Less emphasis was placed on the role of the coachee at this time. Theoretical coaching frameworks were put forward, with differing descriptions of the coaching relationship (Anderson, 2002; Kilburg, 1996; Laske, 1999).

The perception that the coaching relationship is an important variable in coaching and to coaching outcomes has prevailed since the early days of coaching literature, however up until a decade ago in the middle 2000s, its fledgling research base consisted of qualitative self-report studies or case studies, or studies focusing more broadly on multiple coaching variables impacting on coaching, including the coaching relationship. Ironically, during this time the literature had sought to largely differentiate coaching from therapy rather than seeking similarities through functional similarity. As the shift in focus from whether coaching works to how coaching works occurred, so has the interest in interpersonal, relational variables. Along with the increased focus were calls for research examining a finer grain level of detail than previously (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006).

Where we are now – current state of coaching relationship research

The mid-2000s witnessed the beginning of dedicated research studies on the coaching relationship. The first of these, Gyllensten and Palmer, (2007) was a qualitative study of coachees from two organisations on their experiences of coaching, with findings of three sub-themes, trust, transparency, and the valuable coaching relationship. Participants reported the importance of the coaching relationship, that it was one of the first occurrences in their experiences of coaching, and emphasis was placed on the supportive listening role of their coach. The need for techniques and goal-focus was also raised by the participants.

Mutual aspects of the coaching relationship
Trust

A number of mutual aspects of the coaching relationship have been studied and found to be key or to play a supplementary role in coaching effectiveness, with findings on the role of trust most frequently discussed. Jones and Spooner (2006) in a qualitative study aiming to identify common characteristics and coaching needs of high achievers identified coaching needs of ultimate trust in their coach, as well as coach credibility. The importance of *building* trust in the coaching relationship is a common theme (Boyce et al., 2010; Dagley, 2010; Nangalia and Nangalia, 2010; O'Broin and Palmer, 2010c; Passmore, 2010). The Nangalia and Nangalia (2010) qualitative interview study examined the influence of social hierarchy in Asian culture on the role and status of the coach, and client expectations. Of note were the findings that a minimum of three or four meetings were required before trust was established with clients and that all the coaches adapted their style when working with local clients.

The process of establishing and maintaining trust between coachee and coach was explored in a study of high level director coachees by Alvey and Barclay (2007), with particular focus on those characteristics contributing to the building of trust from the coachee perspective. Two themes were identified in respect of characteristics of the coaching relationship: *Individual Receptivity* (willingness to change, disclose, be open to feedback) and *Connection deepens over time* (expressed as mutual respect or trust), with coachee-coach bonds tending to increase as the relationship developed, subject to confidentiality agreements and the coachee perception of growth. Findings indicated the potential influence of the chronological order in which trust impacting factors occurred, and that subsequent steps might enhance or reduce previously-built

trust, inferring the potential for change of trust levels over time. Suggesting the complex interaction of relational, situational, and behavioural factors in the development of trust in coaching relationships, the authors concluded that these factors require consideration in order for executive coaching to be an effective leadership development tool. Although included under the rubric of mutual aspects for the purpose of this discussion, the verdict remains out on whether mutual trust is required for a successful coaching relationship and effective coaching, or whether the coachee's perspective on trust is paramount.

Other mutual aspects of the coaching relationship

Further mutual aspects of the coaching relationship identified in the coaching relationship research include *respect* (Alvey and Barclay, 2007; O'Broin, 2013), *collaboration* (Boyce et al., 2010; O'Broin and Palmer, 2010c).

The topic of power is a further mutual aspect that is rarely addressed in the coaching literature and holds the potential to affect relationships including the coaching relationship (Welman and Bachkirova, 2010); although the topic has received more exposure in the mentoring literature (Ragins, 1997; Manathunga, 2007). Spaten (2016) investigated those experiences, both successful and challenging, arising when Danish middle managers conducted employee coaching with their employees, from the perspective of both coachees and coaches. The main theme of 'power and moments of symmetry' was discussed in the study. Assessing the power balance in the coaching relationship was found to be key, and the coaching relationship itself was shown to be crucially important for future leader co-operation. Invoking the use of a symbolic helix-figure to represent the occurrence of moments of symmetry between coachee and coach in the coaching relationship, it was found that the most fruitful coaching was achieved during coachee experience of moments of symmetry and equality with their coach, and the importance for the coach to be able to achieve such moments was highlighted, using their relational competencies.

A series of studies exploring interpersonal interaction processes in the coaching relationship have been recently conducted (Gessnitzer and Kauffield, 2015; Ianiro, Schermuly and Kauffeld,

2013; Ianiro, Lehmann-Willenbrock and Kauffeld, 2014; Ianiro and Kauffeld., 2014 using videotaped coaching sessions and interaction analysis). All these studies reported coach interpersonal behaviors linked positively with working alliance. The first of these, Gessnitzer and Kauffeld, (2015) also used questionnaires, and found that coachee initiated agreement on the goals and tasks dimensions of the working alliance were positively related to coaching success, however the coach initiated agreement on these dimensions was not. Bonding behaviours did not influence coaching success, and there was no correlation between the behavioural and questionnaire data.

Ianiro et al., (2013) found that similarity of coachee and coach on dominance and affiliation behaviour predicted positive coaching ratings of quality of coaching relationship and goal attainment outcomes. Ianiro et al., (2014) found that reciprocal friendliness behaviours were positively linked to working alliance. Ianiro & Kauffeld, (2014) found that coach dominant-friendly behaviour was in turn positively related to coachee rating of working alliance after session 1 and after final 5th coaching session. Coach pleasant mood prior to coaching session also predicted the amount of in-session dominant friendly interpersonal behaviour, and was positively related to coachee working alliance ratings. Collectively these studies, using actual videotaped coaching sessions, and interaction analyses begin to address the area of interpersonal processes in the coaching relationship which have previously remained undiscovered. Early indications suggest that coach awareness of their affective states, and use of interpersonal behaviour may help establish effective coaching relationships and influence coaching outcomes. Similarity/difference factors, as well as more complex interactions of variables may be able to be explored in the future however these findings are promising in beginning to explore the 'waterline' which Fillery-Travis and Cox, 2014 proposed.

The association between coaching relationship and coaching outcomes

The first published research study reporting a direct positive link between the coaching relationship and coaching outcomes was that of Baron and Morin (2009). Using a sample of internal manager coaches and manager coachees receiving coaching

as part of a leadership development programme in an American organisation, the authors found that working alliance was related to coachee self-efficacy with regard to facilitating learning and results.

In a study that explored relationship processes and the role of coachee-coach relationships on coachee-coach match and coaching outcomes in a sample of 74 dyads whose coachees were participating in coaching in a military academy leadership development programme, Boyce et al., (2010) found that overall relationship processes (rapport, trust and commitment combined) positively predicted coachee and coach ratings of coaching outcomes.

De Haan et al., (2013) reported a further research outcome study investigating 'active ingredients' including the working alliance in a sample of 156 coachees and 34 external coaches, finding client perceptions of coaching outcome were significantly related to their perceptions of the working alliance.

In a further, large-scale global executive coaching outcome study of 1,895 coaching relationships, that overcame previous sample size and homogeneity limitations in coaching relationship research studies, De Haan et al., 2016 built on findings from previous studies (De Haan, Culpin and Curd, 2011; De Haan et al., 2013) reporting significant correlations between both coachee- and coach-related strength of working alliance and coaching effectiveness.

In a meta-analytic study seeking to understand those mechanisms underlying effective coaching outcomes, in terms of the effects of coaching on relationship outcomes as well as the effect of the coaching relationship on coachee outcomes, Sonesh, Coultas, Lacerenza and Salas, (2015) found a significant effect of coaching impact on overall relationship outcomes (the effect of coaching on the sub-component generic coachee-coach relationship was significant, however on the sub-component working alliance was not). In terms of the coachee-coach correlation with goal-attainment coachee outcomes, this was significant, particularly so in the case of the working alliance, although analysis was based on inclusion of only two studies, suggesting caution on generalising these findings.

As the studies noted here demonstrate, evidence is accumulating confirming the importance of the strength of the coaching relationship to coaching effectiveness, from both the coachee and coach perspective.

A potential mediating role for the coaching relationship

Several of the studies reporting an association between coaching relationship and coaching outcomes were also noteworthy in demonstrating a mediating effect of the working alliance. Baron and Morin (2009)'s study reported a mediating role for the Working Alliance between the number of coaching sessions and coaching outcome of development of a manager coachee's self-efficacy. This implied that the amount of coaching received influenced the development of the coachee through its effect on the coachee-coach relationship. Furthermore, Boyce et al., (2010) found that relationship processes (rapport, trust, and commitment) mediated the association of coachee-coach match compatibility with coaching outcome (satisfaction) and credibility with coaching outcome. In De Haan et al., 2013's research study, again the working alliance was found to play a mediating role, in this case between self-efficacy and range of techniques, and coaching outcomes. Finally, and convincingly given its size, the De Haan et al., (2016) study found that the working alliance mediated the effect of self-efficacy on coaching effectiveness. This study also noted that the task and goal aspects of the working alliance were stronger predictors of positive coaching effectiveness than the bond aspect. The authors concluded that working alliance strength is a key ingredient in coaching effectiveness, particularly from the coachee perspective, and placed emphasis in the coaching relationship on the importance of a goal and task focus.

Coachee contributions

Whilst executive coaching theoretical frameworks have posited effects of coachee attitudes and characteristics on coaching outcomes (Joo, 2005; Kilburg, 2001) research studies on coachee contributions to the coaching relationship and coaching outcomes remain relatively scarce. It is encouraging however that broader outcome studies are now tending to include measures addressing both coachee and coach (and further stakeholder sources in some cases) and comparing these often differing perspectives.

In a large web-based questionnaire study, De Haan (2008) examined those issues in executive

coaching which coachees found most helpful in bringing their issues forward. They found that almost regardless of specific coach behaviours, coachees reported valuing the helpfulness of their coach indicating that coachees evaluate their experiences of coaching more generically, than with regard to specific techniques or interventions.

Coachee openness (O'Broin and Palmer, 2010c) was found to be an important precursor in engagement of the coachee, and often linked with listening, rapport and trust. In situations of disengagement, such as coachee withdrawal, misunderstandings or confrontations, an attitude of openness was often seen as vital in resolving these disruptions, both in maintaining engagement, or for re-engagement with the coachee. Participants considered that it was the coach's role however to get the relationship back on track, re-engagement could bring with it potential for positive change. Conversely, a closed coachee attitude was considered a barrier to coaching work. was commitment.

Another study by Bouwer and Van Egmond, (2012) of coachees, coaches and their managers in the Netherlands, aimed to identify those factors contributing to successful completion of a coaching programme. It was found that client commitment was the most important factor identified by coachee, coach, and managers, although the study was conducted on a small sample.

It is particularly true of research on the coachee's contributions to coaching relationship and outcomes that research lags practice, although the recent studies focusing on interpersonal behaviours of coachee and coach are making their contribution in this regard. In keeping with the assumption discussed above of the functional similarity of coaching with psychotherapy, with its attribution of the largest portion of variance to client or extra-therapeutic factors, there is a particular motivator for more studies focusing on the coachee's attributes, characteristics and perspective. It is predicted, and indeed strongly suggested that this is a promising direction for future research focus.

Coach contributions

A number of coach attitudes and characteristics have been linked with effective coaching, and the development of strong coaching relationships. The ability to forge such a strong coaching relationship has been found in several studies (De Haan, 2008; Gyllensten and Palmer, 2007; McGovern et al.,

2001) with 86% of coachees in a study by Wasyly-shyn, (2003) rating this ability as the top personal characteristic of effective executive coaches.

Further individual coach attitudes and characteristics have been identified, and will be mentioned here although space prohibits detailed examination of each study. *Credibility of the coach* (Alvey and Barclay, 2007; Boyce et al., 2010; Dagley, 2010; Jones and Spooner, 2006); *an accepting approach* (Gyllensten, Palmer, Nilsson, Regner and Frodi, 2010); *being non-judgmental* (Passmore, 2010); and *adapting to the coachee* (Jones and Spooner, 2006; Nangalia and Nangalia, 2010; O'Broin and Palmer, 2010c).

As has been shown in psychotherapy research where empathy has been shown to be a pantheoretic key factor in establishing the therapeutic relationship, so has empathy been suggested to translate as a potentially important variable in coaching relationships (Kilburg, 1997; O'Broin and Palmer, 2009), and found to be so in a study by (Dagley, 2010). It is pertinent to mention that empathy, akin to several other constructs discussed in this article, has no universally accepted definition. Given the absence of research on this area of coach ability, an analog questionnaire and interaction analysis study by Will, Gessnitzer and Kauffeld, (2016) seeking to examine the perceptions of 19 coachee and coach dyads in a German university on the role of coaches' empathic skills in their coaching, and to identify and measure coaches' empathic behaviour patterns influencing the coachee's behaviour in coaching, was timely. Their results were that coachee and coach perceptions of coaches' expressed cognitive empathy did not correlate. Assessment of coach empathic communication behaviours found that paraphrasing but not addressing counterpart's feelings, had an influence on coachee perception of the empathy of their coach, although only initial analysis on first meeting was conducted. In addition to coachee perception of empathy, coachees showed in an interaction analysis an immediate positive and observable reaction to coach empathic behaviour by agreeing with the coach expressed cognitive empathic statements.

There is also evidence of coach attributes being more collectively researched in the coaching literature. Boyce et al., (2010) as discussed previously found that the relationship processes of rapport, trust and commitment combined positively

predicted coachee and coach coaching outcomes; in addition they mediated match criteria of credibility with coaching outcomes.

In their systematic review of evidence from coaching psychology research, drawing from coaching experts in the field, (Lai and McDowall, 2014; 2016) found not only that the coaching relationship was a key focus for coaching research and practice, but also that five key coach attributes play a significant role in effectiveness in coaching and coaching outcomes. These five attributes were building trust; understanding and managing coachees' emotional difficulties; two-way communication; facilitation and helping coachees' learning and development; and putting a clear contract and transparent process in place. An initial coaching psychologist competency framework was also proposed.

Emotion in coaching relationships

Several studies have examined emotions in the coaching relationship, in terms of using and working with emotion. As has been noted in the literature, coaches vary in their personal theories of emotion and the degree and depth to which they will examine them, both with their coachees, and personally (Cox and Bachkirova, 2007; Cremona, 2010). Both authors advocate that coach training would benefit from inclusion of work on the role of emotions in individual change.

Critical moments in coaching have been explored in a series of studies. Experiences of experienced coaches in critical moments in coaching were examined in a study by Day, De Haan, Sills, Bertie and Blass, (2008), who found that coaches revealed unforeseen anxiety and intense emotion in critical moments. Tending to be turning points in the coaching process, these critical moments polarised either into insight, or a distancing or breakdown with the coachee. Key to a positive outcome appeared to be coach ability for multiple awareness and responses: of coachee's reactions, of their own emotions, of being able in turn to link these with the unfolding critical moment, whilst simultaneously reflecting on this real-time experience in a way to facilitate coachee awareness. Conversely, distancing from the critical moment was associated with avoidant or aggressive responses from either coachee or coach.

De Haan, Bertie, Day and Sills, 2010's direct comparison study built on previous work by examining critical moments of coachees and coaches directly after their coaching session together. Finding no major or consistent differences in the nature of emphasis of critical moment selected by coachees and coaches, the authors posited two types of critical moment, both of which are part of coaching practice. These were 'run-of-the-mill' moments taking place in everyday coaching, and rarer, more extreme 'special occurrence' critical moments, with possibilities of transformation, resistance, or ruptures to the working alliance.

Diversity and matching

As has been noted in the literature, (Wycherley and Cox, 2008) matching of coachee and coach in terms of single, surface-level diversity factors, of gender, culture, age, and personality has received limited research attention and provided mixed results.

Scoular and Linley (2006) examined the role of personality, using Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI: Myers, McCaulley, Quenk & Hammer, 1998) and goal-setting in a study of perceived effectiveness of coaching. Whilst there was no difference in terms of the goal-setting condition, coachee and coach MBTI profile differences on temperament denoted significantly higher outcome scores. The De Haan et al., (2013) and later De Haan et al., (2016) large scale study both found that coachee perceptions of coaching effectiveness were significantly related to coach and coachee-rated strength of working alliance however unrelated to coachee or coach personality and to personality matching. Coachees did not complete full MBTI questionnaires however therefore the authors advocate caution in interpreting their results on this point. De Haan et al., (2016) concluded that focusing on appropriate coach selection, rather than matching on personality diversity factors might be more important.

In a coaching programme where coachees were questioned on their choice of coach, Gray and Goregaokar (2010) found in initial qualitative results that female coachees tended to choose female coaches, a decision perceived as a view of their coaches as a role model of business success, whilst male coachees tended to also choose female coaches whom they perceived as more approachable on sensitive issues. Quantitative analysis found no significant difference in choice of coach gender.

Bozer, Joo and Santora, (2015) examined the effects of gender similarity and perceived similarity

on executive coaching effectiveness in coaching dyads drawn from clients of Israeli based organisations providing executive coaching. They found that there was no overall significant effect of gender or perceived similarity on outcomes of career satisfaction or organizational commitment, however a negative significant gender similarity effect on coachee outcome of coachee self-awareness for male executives with female coaches. The authors concluded that overall there was no need for general matching or gender similarity matching of coaches and coachees.

In a mixed method study Dobosz and Tee (2016) explored coach age as a possible influencing factor in coachee selection of their coach. They found that although age in itself was not a significant criteria for coach selection, (rather rapport was rated as the most important coach attribute), age was considered by some as a signifier of credibility and experience. Certain market niche opportunities especially apposite for younger coaches were identified, such as working with emerging talent and in 'young leader' programmes.

All told, the last decade has progressed our understanding of CR and its role in coaching outcomes by some margin. Research studies have confirmed direct positive associations between CR and coaching outcomes, and a possible mediating role between the CR and other variables in coaching outcomes. Research has also begun to explore the mutual interpersonal dynamics and processes between coachee and coach, as well as single and clustered coach and coachee attributes influencing the coaching relationship.

In terms of the assumption that the coaching relationship is an active ingredient in coaching, available evidence indicates strongly that it is, however there is much work needed before the emerging coaching relationship research can confidently and rigorously assert this claim. In the meantime, there is the need to continue to conduct further studies, at a range of levels of detail from the strength and quality of the broad relationship down through to the specific microanalysis of interactions between coachee and coach; from perspectives of coachee, coach and stakeholders; for its whole duration; and examining multiple variables, in order to consolidate and extend our understanding about the coaching relationship and its role in coaching and coaching outcomes.

The coaching relationship in three instances

Turning now to the associated issues when considering the coaching relationship in its research context, the first of these is how the coaching relationship is defined.

Definitions of the coaching relationship

Given the difficulties in the broader definition of coaching outlined above, it is perhaps unsurprising that the coaching relationship has experienced similar hurdles when it comes to definition.

Until relatively recently, the term 'relationship' was considered the parlance of common language. Only with the rise of relationship science was it deemed necessary to conduct academic studies on relationships (see O'Broin and Palmer, 2010a). This research demonstrated a variety of meanings of the term relationship, and its referents, although *mutual influence* is now generally accepted as the trademark of interactions between partners in a relationship, (Berscheid and Rees, 1998; Rees, 2007).

Coach background and conceptual approach variations have also resulted in different degrees of emphasis on the importance of the coaching relationship and of its composition. Nevertheless, the need for an effective working relationship is generally accepted across different forms and approaches to coaching (Stober and Grant, 2006; see also O'Broin and Palmer, in press).

An important point to note in the coaching literature and research base is the multiple usage of the term 'coaching relationship.' Usage can range from the broad to the more specific, sometimes in the same text. For instance the term coaching relationship at its broadest might signify a proxy for the whole coaching process; or it might be described as a 'common factor' of coaching as distinct from say, specific factors such as techniques; or as a component part of the coaching relationship (e.g. Working Alliance or 'Real Relationship'); or determined by a particular conceptual approach (e.g. Cognitive Behavioural Coaching); or rapport or other mutual characteristic of the coaching relationship; or a combination of two or more of the above. This variation of usage creates problems, both in written understanding, in terms of conflation of terms, and when defining, operationalizing, and attempting to measure and compare the construct concerned. From a research perspective it is

also a problem. When terming the coaching relationship broadly we are not necessarily addressing the area of coachee-coach interaction and communication, the very central point of intervention, or the 'waterline' of coaching, as Fillery-Travis and Cox (2014) phrase it, which has rarely been examined in the coaching relationship research to date.

The working definition of the working relationship, or coaching alliance, adopted in this article is as follows:

> 'The coaching alliance reflects the quality of the [coachee] and coach's engagement in collaborative, purposive work within the coaching relationship, and is jointly negotiated and renegotiated throughout the coaching process over time.'
> (O'Broin and Palmer, 2007, p.305)

The foregoing points raised in this section highlight the importance of clarity and definition when approaching discussion or research on the topic, not only of the coaching relationship, but of any constructs, processes or outcomes, in coaching. In addition to the coaching relationship in its broader, global sense, we also need to explore the whole spectrum of its influence, including interpersonal interaction and communication. Whether difficult to research or not, we need to know more about all areas of the coaching relationship if we wish a greater understanding or what actually happens between coachee and coach *in vivo*.

The second associated issue to be considered in the coaching relationship research context is one that has received negligible attention, that of measurement of the coaching relationship.

Measurement of the coaching relationship

Validated measures of the executive coaching relationship are non-existent. To date measuring the coaching relationship in research studies has, in keeping with the assumption of functional similarity with helping relationships tended to involve adapted use of measures from other domains. Some of these, such as the Perceived Quality of the Employee Coaching Relationship (PQECR) (Gregory and Levy, 2010) are relatively close to the executive coaching domain; and the 3+1Cs Model of Two-Person Relationships (Jowett, 2007; Jowett, Kanakoglu and Passmore, 2012; Ianiro et al., 2013)

was adapted for use in the executive coaching context from the coach-athlete context in sport. Other measures such as the Perceived Autonomy Support (PASS); individual measures of satisfaction with the coaching relationship, the Goal Focused Coaching Skills Questionnaire (GCSQ) (see Grant, 2013) have also been used as relationship measures in coaching relationship studies.

By far the most frequently used measure in coaching relationship research studies from the psychotherapy domain is the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI) (Horvath, 1981; Horvath and Greenberg, 1989), adapted to replace the term 'therapy; with 'coaching' in its questionnaire) for use in coaching, although the 'Real Relationship' measure (Gelso and Hayes, 1998) incorporating the relationships dimensions of *realism* and *genuineness*, has also been used, in a study (Sun, Deane, Crowe, Andersen, Oakes et al., 2013).

Given the absence of validated executive coaching relationship measures, a strong rationale for using the Working Alliance as a measure of the coaching relationship exists in the assumed functional similarity of the respective helping relationships, and indeed the working alliance theory and practice psychotherapy literature includes extensive use of Working Alliance questionnaires in other neighbouring domains. Despite the assumption of similarity, no published correlations of Working Alliance with validated executive coaching relationship measures in a coaching sample exists, (although O'Broin, 2013 confirms a moderate to strong positive correlation in an unpublished study), so as yet we do not have the research to confirm where the relationships are similar and different from a measurement perspective.

Notwithstanding better understanding of the overlap and differences between the coaching and therapeutic relationship, there are also potential issues of measurement of the Working Alliance in the psychotherapy context that we need to be aware of as they could equally apply in the coaching context. Multiple measures of the Working Alliance exist although only four measures account for approximately two-thirds of the data on their use in the therapy context, with the WAI being the more frequently used measure (Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger and Symonds, 2011). Whilst overlap amongst these measures exists, there is some margin of difference in terms of construct measured (Hatcher and Barends, 1996). Presently this is not a direct

issue in the coaching research literature in terms of use of Working Alliance measures as such, as the tendency has been almost exclusively to use the WAI adapted to the coaching relationship. Studies do exist however using other measures as proxy for the coaching relationship (Smith and Brummel, 2013); studies that compare component parts of the coaching relationship (Grant, 2014), and studies that use partial coaching relationship measures from other coaching domains such as sport psychology (Ianiro et al., 2012). There is therefore potential for unequal comparison if these are aggregated as like-for-like coaching relationship research studies when the detail suggests otherwise.

This latter point introduces a further measurement question on whether the global Working Alliance or sub-scales are most relevant for measuring the coaching relationship, a point disputed in the psychotherapy outcome literature, along with whether there are in fact two subscales, of bonds, and goals/tasks combined, of the Working Alliance (Andrusyna, Tang, De Rubeis, and Luborsky, 2001) rather than the three sub-scales of goals, tasks and bonds posited by Bordin (1979).

All in all, using measures from other domains is arguably necessary particularly at this stage of development of the coaching relationship research base, however there is a further argument for development of measures deriving directly from executive coaching samples in order to ascertain directly the attributes of the coaching relationship, as well as those similarities and differences inherent in the coaching relationship when compared with other helping relationships. When measures from other domains are used, careful consideration of the measurement and construct issues should be applied in any research endeavours. We might hypothesise that there could be coachee, coach and context differences in the coaching relationship compared with the therapeutic relationship, and any nuances discovered in terms of similarities *and* differences would usefully inform both domains.

Discussion

Several themes can be distilled from the various discussions in this article that help inform where we might be heading in terms of future coaching relationship research. These themes are the importance of clarity in definition and measurement; the importance of learning from functional similarities and differences between the coaching and other

helping relationships, and using our understanding of other helping relationships, particularly the therapeutic relationship, to help avoid research issues of needless repetition of similar studies (Lowman, 2005).

The first of these themes, clarity in definition and measurement echoes one voiced earlier, by Grant et al., (2010) in a review of coaching research on the subject of variation in outcome measures in coaching outcome studies. These authors suggested that in order for meaningful comparisons to be drawn between coaching effectiveness studies, consistency in outcome measures where possible was desirable. This point is arguably germane in the coaching relationship research context where clarity in definition of the coaching relationship, and how it is measured and contrasted across studies would enable more meaningful comparisons of like with like.

The second theme encourages researchers and commentators alike to explore fully the benefits of any functional similarity of the coaching relationship with other helping relationships (see also De Haan and Gannon, 2016). Drawing upon findings on 'active ingredients' in the therapeutic relationship has already offered a rich mine of possibilities of psychotherapy metrics, research strategies, and principles for practice which the coaching and coaching relationship research and practice domain has only begun to explore. Likewise, dissimilarities in the respective coaching and therapeutic relationships are also likely to exist, and may be meaningful, in terms of direct comparisons with other helping relationships in research studies, and in terms of independent lines of exploratory research on the coaching relationship. These dissimilarities also deserve research attention.

Finally, the third theme concerning measurement of the coaching relationship suggests that, in line with its functional similarity with the therapeutic relationship measures, such as the Working Alliance Inventory adapted for use in coaching have value in research studies. Returning to the topic of variation in use of measures, where different Working Alliance measures are employed, comparisons should be made like-for-like in order to avoid conflated conclusions. The virtues of developing coaching relationship measures deriving from the executive coaching context and perhaps from any future coaching relationship theory is also proposed as a useful extension of the research

so that any nuances of the coaching relationship may be teased out in more detail. Comparison of coaching relationship and therapeutic relationship measures in studies could prove illuminating for both domains concerned.

Where we are heading – future coaching relationship research directions

Drawing from the foregoing discussion, suggestions for future coaching relationship research directions are given below:

- more theoretical development in coaching psychology and coaching, particularly models of the coaching relationship
- continuing to draw upon allied helping relationships – to research both similarities and differences
- awareness of and particular attention paid to definition of constructs discussed and measured in coaching relationship research
- More studies to improve homogeneity of coaching interventions and outcomes being compared
- detailed evaluation of the coaching relationship as a possible mediator and moderator of other coaching variables
- continuing to explore helpful coachee and coach characteristics in coaching relationship, as well as combinations of characteristics
- continuing work exploring similarity attraction/ as well as complementarity in coaching dyads

Further suggestions for research method considerations in coaching relationship research studies are as follows:

- Development of coaching relationship measures on executive coaching samples
- less reliance on self-reports
- include other sources in addition to coachee and coach self-report measures
- Measurement of CRs from different perspectives in the same dyad and study
- Measurement of CRs longitudinally ie throughout the duration of coaching rather than solely at one point
- Separating coach and methods e.g. where there are several coachees per coach
- Measurement of CRs using microanalysis through phases of coaching

Conclusions

So, to return to the original questions posed in the introduction of this article, our discussion has highlighted that we have evidence to support the assertion that the global coaching relationship is associated with coaching outcomes, and that the coaching relationship may perform a mediating role in relation to other variables on coaching effectiveness, although the coaching relationship research base is in its infancy and more studies are need to corroborate these indicative findings. In particular, confirmation of the association from perspectives of all participants, over the duration of the coaching programme, using consistent measures of relationship and outcomes would help to provide further corroboration, as well as any differences in perspectives. Work on the role of the coaching relationship remains early-stage, although interaction analyses studies to date are beginning to demonstrate the complexity of the dyad's interactions when studied in greater detail. The latter studies also highlight the need to develop those research strategies and methods capable of measuring micro-processes and human interactions in real time.

In response to the question of how we should go about finding out more, this article has raised the issues of definition and measurement as two broad points of consideration when conducting research on the coaching relationship; a number of more specific suggestions are also provided here. It is hoped that this article has provided its readers with helpful indicators to consider when conducting research on the coaching relationship, and when building effective coaching relationships with their coachees.

Contact

Alanna O'Broin
Productive Living Limited
3 Love Lane
Cheam
Surrey
SM3 8PS,
UK
alanna@productiveliving.co.uk

Alanna J O'Broin

Dr Alanna O'Broin PhD is a Chartered Psychologist and holds a PhD from City University London, UK. She is also an accredited member of the International Society for Coaching Psychology.

Previously an investment analyst and Fund Manager for Investment capital group 3i, Alanna is a practicing coaching psychologist, working primarily with executives in achieving their developmental and performance goals. She also runs a small therapy practice.

Her doctoral research was on the coaching relationship, and she has authored and co-authored a number of book chapters and peer-reviewed articles on the coaching relationship and related topics, including parallels between sport psychology and coaching psychology. Alanna was Co-Editor of An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice, a Consulting Editor of The Coaching Psychologist between 2013 and January 2016, is a member of the Editorial Board of the Annual Review of High Performance Coaching and Consulting.

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