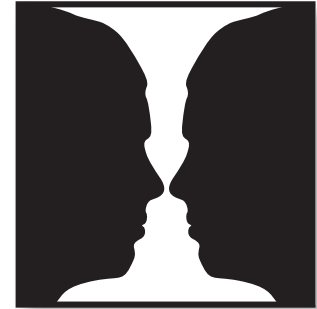


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Relationship quality

Exploring its potential impact on negative effects of coaching

By Alanna Henderson O'Broin

Abstract

Early research on negative effects of coaching proposes a role for relationship quality as a possible protective factor against negative effects. This article begins by briefly contextualising and outlining the relationship quality findings in relation to negative effects of coaching. Then, taking the question raised in the research of whether negative effects of coaching can change to positive effects, the role that the coaching relationship may play in this question is examined further, drawing from the negative effects research database, relationship science and positive psychology, psychotherapy research, and the critical moments coaching research literature. The definition of negative effects, types and categories of negative effects are then discussed in relation to the question of changes in negative and positive effects, after which a second wave Positive Psychology approach to the coaching relationship, and findings from the Critical Moments in coaching research are offered as areas providing opportunities for expanding perspectives on research and practice in this area.

Keywords: *Negative Effects of coaching; relationship quality, Positive effects of coaching; working alliance in coaching; 2nd wave Positive Psychology approach*

Introduction

Notwithstanding the multifarious positive effects of coaching relationship quality on coaching processes and coaching outcomes, the advent of emerging research on negative effects of coaching is discussing and exploring the further potential of the relationship as a protective factor against negative effects.

Positive effects of coaching relationships

So, why do we seek to foster effective coaching relationships? The most obvious answer according to coaching research outcome literature is because of the positive effect of the coaching relationship (usually measured as the working alliance) on outcomes (Baron & Morin, 2009; De Haan et al., 2016; Graßmann et al., 2019). The implications of this link in coaching practice being that fostering effective coaching relationships with our coachees

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is likely to result in positive and desired coaching outcomes. The coaching relationship also impacts the process of coaching, through the need for development of trust (Alvey & Barclay, 2007; Gray et al., 2015) for instance. Forging a strong and effective coaching relationship is likely to be helpful when resolving any disagreements in coaching (Day et al, 2008), and in assisting in helping the coachee stay committed through challenge or adversity in coaching (Audet & Couteret, 2012).

Positive and negative effects of coaching

We are perhaps, used to demonstrations in the coaching literature that coaching ‘works’, with several meta-analyses of research studies, (Jones et al., 2015; Sonesh et al., 2015; Theeboom et al., 2014) confirming the positive effects of coaching on coaching outcomes. These meta-analyses confirm the positive effects of coaching on coaching outcomes, however we discover little about the incidence, development, possible improvement or deterioration of positive effects during the course of coaching.

Harmful or negative effects of coaching on the other hand have received little coverage, Berglas (2002), or have been treated as a taboo subject (see Kilburg, 2002) until recently, when the small extant research on negative effects received scrutiny in a literature review (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019).

The negative effects research informs us that negative as well as positive effects of coaching do exist, even in successful coaching engagements; that negative effects tend to occur frequently (usually more so for coaches than coachees), and are largely of low to medium intensity. Most of the negative effects, for both coachees and coaches, fall into the Psychological well-being category which broadly corresponds to the ‘affective’ category identified by Jones et al., 2015 in their meta-analytic framework for positive effects of coaching (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019). Although few studies have measured negative effects over more than one time period, it seems important to do so, as there were changes in negative effects in those that have; for instance most negative effects did not last for more than four weeks (Schermuly et al., 2014) and in another study, relationship quality was a predictor associated with number of negative effects at two time periods; eight weeks later with a larger effect (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2016).

Relationship quality and negative effects in coaching

These recent studies include findings of a link between relationship quality and negative effects in coaching. In a meta-analytic study exploring working alliance and its relationship with client outcomes in coaching, Graßmann et al., 2019 found that working alliance was moderately and robustly linked to all coaching outcomes, (affective, cognitive, results or goal attainment) however related most strongly to positive affective and cognitive outcomes. Working alliance was also found in the study to be negatively related to unintended negative effects. Low relationship quality was also linked with a higher number of negative effects in a study testing different constructs as antecedents of negative effects in coaching (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2016). Whilst further studies are needed to corroborate and expand our understanding of these early findings, implications are that the coaching relationship may play a role (directly or as a mediator or moderator) in promoting positive, and protecting against, or reducing, negative effects in coaching.

Interesting in themselves, these emergent research studies in this literature linking high relationship quality with fewer negative effects of coaching, and tentatively suggesting that relationship quality may play a protective role against negative effects in coaching (Bozer & Jones, 2018; Graßmann & Schermuly, 2016), may prove a further, compelling incentive for seeking to establish effective coaching relationships.

Furthermore, these findings on negative effects raise an important question raised by Schermuly & Graßmann, (2019), namely, *can negative effects become positive effects?* An affirmative answer to this question has obvious implications for coaching outcomes and begs the question of which variables enable such changes. The extant research cannot provide an answer; however, this article develops further the discussion on the role that the coaching relationship may play over and above its broad link with negative effects, at a more detailed level of examination. How we might explore its role further in this question is argued to be usefully pursued through drawing from the negative effects research database, allied domains of relationship science and positive psychology, psychotherapy research, and the critical moments coaching research literature.

Defining Negative effects

For the purposes of this discussion, examining the definition of negative effects is a useful starting point. As the authors of the recent literature review on negative effects in coaching state in relation to negative effects, “*Clarification of the concept and its background has not been conducted in detail so far*” (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019). The few early discussions of negative effects emphasised coaches overplaying their influence with coachees and organisations, and underestimating psychological problems of their coachees (Berglas, 2002); what can go wrong in coaching (Hodgetts, 2002) and the severe yet unproven nature of negative effects, (Kilburg, 2002).

More recently, negative effects in coaching have been defined as side effects (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2016; Schermuly, 2018), akin to those of drugs in medical science. This latter conceptualisation defines negative effects as:

“harmful and unwanted results for [clients/coaches/organisations] directly caused by coaching that occur parallel to, or after, coaching.”
(Schermuly, et al., 2014, p. 19, p. 169; Oellerich, 2016)

Whilst this latter definition has been helpful in seeking to include perspectives of the respective participants in coaching (recognising the possibility of different evaluations of even the same effects of coaching for coachee, coach, organisation), and in excluding unwanted events that may happen by coincidence rather than the causal effect of coaching, it is firmly situated in a medical model framework which is arguably less apposite for a coaching than for a psychotherapy context.

Types, and categories, of Positive and Negative effects

Examining the categories and types of negative (and positive) effects of coaching is also valuable here (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019). If we look in more detail at the types of negative effects for the three groups of participants – coachees, coaches, organisations, we notice differences. Although four of the categories of negative effects for coachees and coaches are the same, even in the same categories (Psychological health/well-being) the content of the negative effects differs. For coachees

for instance, triggering of in-depth problems that could not be dealt with in coaching was the most frequently reported negative effect (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2016), whilst for coaches, being personally affected by coaching topics, and being scared to not fulfil the role as coach were the most frequent in their last completed coaching process (Schermuly, 2016). For the coachee, many of the negative effects experienced were of decreases – in life satisfaction, relationship quality with supervisor, job motivation, experience of meaningfulness of their job, job satisfaction, whilst for coaches, many were negative affective responses – usually of anxiety and doubt (e.g. insecurity, scared of doing something wrong, feeling over-challenged, and also disappointment (about not observing the long-term influences of coaching, and frustration (that the coachee’s problems could not be resolved, or about ineffective coaching).

It is interesting to compare the nature of these types of coach negative effects with the critical moments research in coaching where critical moments are defined as the ‘*moments of exceptional tension experienced by the coach, verging on ‘ruptures’ within the coaching relationship*’ De Haan et al., 2010). Implied parallels with these two areas are explored further in the section on Critical moments in coaching below.

In the research literature, negative effects have been classified into six categories, or types, for coachees: Psychological health (or well-being – the largest category), as well as categories of Social Integration, Performance, Evaluation of work role, Material losses, and Other (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2016). These categories roughly parallel those of Jones et al., (2015) whose meta-analysis described a framework for positive effects of coaching, comprising affective, cognitive, skill-based and results-oriented coaching outcomes. Social Integration was a category considered unique to negative effects of coaching by Schermuly & Graßmann, (2016). For coaches there are seven categories of negative effects, four of which are the same as for coachees – Psychological health, Social Integration, Material losses, Other, as well as three specifically related to the coach’s perspective – Unpleasant feelings toward the client, Unpleasant behaviour towards the coach, and Results-related disappointment (Schermuly, 2016). Negative effects for organisations have received little coverage, with only one study listing types: Client development not fitting the organi-

sational conditions, Client questioning too much after the coaching process, Problems with supervisors, Loss of reputation, Layoff, and Colleague's jealousy (Oellerich, 2016).

Whilst some of these types of negative effects appear more obviously negative (such as job loss for the coachee, being threatened or stalked for the coach), such severe negative effects occur rarely. Others could be classified as neutral or positive if perceived differently, for instance from another party's perspective or by the participants at a later time period, or if the situation or circumstances changes. Examples are given below in Table 1 of negative effects that could be categorised as positive or neutral.

These negative effects findings plausibly suggest that throughout the process of coaching, both positive and negative effects occur; it is possible that whilst negative effects may occur, develop further and remain negative for the duration of coaching, some negative effects may *change* during the coaching process, ie after initial categorisation, may be evaluated later as positive (and vice versa for initial positive effects). It is also the case that negative effects (and by implication positive effects) can be *perceived differently* by the various stakeholders. Taken together, these findings feasibly imply that, not only may some negative effects of coaching become positive effects, however also that

the opposite may be true, ie that in certain cases positive effects may become or be construed as negative effects. Of course, these are tentative assertions which require exploration in research studies. Both these sets of possibilities could have critical implications for coaching process, outcomes, and training. They also argue for the need to identify those variables such as possibly the coaching relationship, which have been shown to influence negative effects for the better.

A dialectical approach to positive and negative effects

Having proposed that the existing definition of negative effects in coaching may not fully capture the breadth of its scope, or its relation to positive effects, a dialectical approach underpinned by a second wave Positive Psychology (SWPP) framework (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016) incorporating Positive approaches to optimal relationships (Knee & Reis, 2016) is now suggested to add to the discussion.

Rather than a binary view classifying phenomena as either positive or negative, this SWPP 'dual-systems model' (Wong, 2011) takes a more nuanced, synthesised, and contextual approach to the complex state of well-being. This model discusses well-being as the 'positive plus negative,' or the negative as an additional transformative source of well-being to the existing positively-based component.

Negative effects for:	Example of Type of negative effect*	Alternative possible impact of negative effect	Alternative perceptions of specific negative effect
Coachees	Decreased life satisfaction	Motivator for coachee to change life circumstances?	Could change to a positive effect if the coachee makes positive work/life changes
Coaches	Difficulties to be an effective communicator	Motivator for coach to improve communication skills/reflect on experience/make changes?	Coach can use their experience here as a basis for professional development in these areas/be a more reflective practitioner. Potentially a positive effect later
Organisations	Client questioned too much after the coaching process	An example of coachee empowerment, assertiveness, or change in attitude.	May have resulted in a positive outcome from the coachee's perspective, if not the organisation's

Table 1. *Examples of Negative Effects and possible alternative perceptions* (*Negative effects for coachees, coaches Schermuly, 2016; organisations (Oellerich, 2016).

In the negative effects literature, Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019 cite social psychology research demonstrating the complexity of close dyadic relationships (Duck & Wood, 1995). They also argue that the theoretical framework of Social Exchange Theory (SET; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) can be applied to close relationships such as coaching, and in particular assist our understanding of negative effects. SET describes the helping relationship in coaching as a source of resource exchange, and confirms that both positive and negative effects are incurred for parties involved in close relationships.

More specifically, on the topic of close relationships, the familiar characterisation of affective ratings and using the Osgood semantic differential (Osgood et al., 1957) evaluation of good-bad, evidence has shown that assessment of an entity is better represented by a bivariate approach denoting the presence or absence of favourable attributes, and unfavourable attributes. In other words, a good coaching relationship is not simply the absence of a bad coaching relationship.

Gable & Reis, (2001) describe these attributes as the *appetitive* and *aversive* systems, suggesting that the favourable and unfavourable attributes are assessed via mechanisms which are separate, then an overall attitude results which combines these assessments. In affect research too, both causes and mechanisms of positive affects and negative affects have been distinguished from each other (Watson & Tellegen, 1985).

In the dialectical tension between the opposing, or interacting elements of positive and negative effects of coaching, the dynamic evolves and interplays during the coaching process. As has been described above, psychological health (or well-being) is a primary category of negative effects identified for both coachees and coaches in the negative effects in coaching literature. Well-being is also a central dialectical process in SWPP, described in terms of three principles.

- *Principle of appraisal* – the difficulty of categorising phenomena (such as emotions) as positive or negative
- *Principle of co-valence* – emotional states may involve complex, interwoven light and dark shades
- *Principle of complementarity* – involves ‘dynamic harmonization’ of the dual continua of well-being and ill-being.

If we apply these SWPP principles to positive and negative effects in coaching, we find that there may be difficulties in defining or appraising some negative effects (especially in the psychological health category of an affective nature) by all parties, in all situations, or at all times as negative, as they are situation and context-dependent. Some negative effects may also include conflicting feelings, as described in the coaching context where there may be growth opportunities from combining light and dark (Sims, 2017; Green & Palmer, 2019), or how complementary emotional states may be employed in handling life challenges, (Wong, 2011). This latter discussion of negative effects within a SWPP approach adds a further dimension to the question of whether negative effects may change to positive effects. This is by recognising (most notably in the context of negative effects defined as affective Psychological Health effects), in certain situations negative effects may be not only unavoidable and unwanted, however may be justified, and even necessary intrinsic components of a later positive effect and positive coaching outcome (see Schermuly-Haupt et al., 2018 for discussion of this point in the context of cognitive behavioural therapy).

Critical Moments in coaching

The research literature on critical moments in coaching (see De Haan, 2019) may provide an additional illustration of dialectical tensions at work in the coaching relationship. Critical moments are defined as ‘*an exciting, tense, or significant moment with your [coach/client]*’ (De Haan & Nielß, 2015), hence they include events across the spectrum of positive/negative effects, and are concerned with what is happening in the coaching process, or the sub-outcomes, or momentary changes, rather than on coaching outcomes.

In the critical moment research, coaches and coachees most frequently both reported *new insights* and *moments of realisation* (De Haan et al., 2010) whilst sponsors of coaching reported *changes in the coachees’ behaviour* such as communication or interpersonal skills, as critical moments of their coaching (De Haan & Nielß, 2015). What is perhaps most interesting in the present discussion is that critical moments fell into two types:

- (i) *run-of-the-mill*, to be expected relatively frequently in coaching, generally part of successful coaching, and tending to be described by

participants as largely positive and constructive

- (ii) moments of exceptional tension experienced by the coach, verging on ‘ruptures’ in the coaching relationship, characterised by struggle and strong emotion. These critical moments were expressed as doubts, anxieties or struggles of the coach, or misunderstandings, anger, re-contracting and referral, withdrawal or termination of the coaching relationship. Although essentially these latter critical moments could be described as ‘negatives’ they were also viewed as important resources of information; and sometimes offered potential breakthrough moments. The key determinant of the outcome of the critical moment appeared to be whether reflection was shared and continued after the critical moment (De Haan et al., 2010).

Again, on the topic of affect, we see that moments of high emotion in coaching can be coupled with positive or negative outcomes, which is determined by how both the coachee and coach perceive, and handle, critical moments as they develop, as described above. There are it is suggested, parallels, for instance with the intensity and frequency of negative effects and critical moments, with the different perspectives of organisations or sponsors, and with the findings that there may be a sub-set of more severe effects alongside the more ‘everyday’ negative effects which accompany successful coaching.

Discussion

This discussion will focus on the two areas introduced in this article, which are proposed to add an alternative perspective and ideas for future research and practice directions for exploring further and in greater depth, the role of coaching relationship quality in negative effects.

First, moving back to discussion of the link between relationship quality and negative effects, a number of aspects of relationship science and positive psychology relationship findings are cited and briefly outlined below in the context of negative effect and relationship quality findings. These are Situational and Contextual considerations in negative and positive effects; Self-disclosure promoting partner responsiveness; and Mutual Cyclical growth.

1. Situational and Contextual considerations

‘...it does not seem constructive to define processes, positive or negative, purely on the basis of whether they are beneficial or harmful to the individual or relationship. Virtually any relationship activity... can result in negative or positive outcomes depending on context and how the transaction transpires.’ (Maniaci & Reis, 2010)

If we consider the examples of types of negative effects found by Graßmann & Schermuly, 2019 and listed above in Table 1, we can see that these ‘negative’ effects could be manifested as negative or positive effects in different circumstances, or by other participants in the same situation.

2. Self-disclosure promoting partner responsiveness

Close relationships facilitate disclosure of both positive and negative events. Self-disclosure is considered important not so much in its own right, however for its facility for creating the conditions for partners in a close relationship to display responsiveness. *Perceived partner responsiveness* subsumes the general idea situated within several close relationship theories

‘...that when partners are responding supportively to important needs, goals, values, or preferences in the self-concept, emotional well-being and effective emotional self-regulation is facilitated. On the other hand, when partners are seen to be responding critically or when their response is perceived to be controlling or contingent, emotional well-being suffers and emotional self-regulation is impaired.’ (Reis et al, 2004; Reis, 2012).

We can see here the relevance of this concept to the coaching relationship. Supportive partner responses to self-disclosure are argued to promote intimacy and closeness in relationships (Reis et al., 2016). Where this concept becomes particularly relevant to the coaching outcome context is the further observation regarding responsiveness and goal attainment. Whilst also studied in aver-

sive contexts of conflict resolution and social support, an appetitive side to responsiveness, the Michelangelo phenomenon, suggests that a partner's responsive support of personal goals facilitates movement towards these goals and facilitates relationship well-being (Drigotas et al., 1999). Fitzsimons and Fishbach (2010) also demonstrated that people feel closer to those instrumental in assisting them in attaining their desired goals.

3. Mutual cyclical growth

Interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) states that the actions of each partner influence the other partner's thoughts, feelings and behaviours. The theory can be applied to those situations where one partner's needs, goals or preferences contradict their partner's (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996) as well as those where interdependence can be employed in a mutual cycle to promote development of intimacy in a relationship (Rusbult et al. 2001). Promoting virtuous cycles involves a partner's perception of the other partner's behaviour to benefit their relationship (pro-relational behaviour) in turn fostering his or her own pro-relational behaviour in a cyclical pattern. The concept of mutual cyclical growth has potential applications in the coaching relationship, in which the coach may engender feelings in the coachee encouraging reciprocal behaviours.

Second, turning to address the coaching critical moment research literature, this is argued to be synergistic with the assertion of Safran et al., 2011 that managing working alliance fluctuations is the core of therapeutic practice. The defining feature of the alliance is therefore seen as the process of negotiation, in which both participants of the dyad's contribution to the interaction are enacted and collaboratively explored. This rupture-repair cycle may hold relevance for at least some coaching relationship situations where negative effects happen. We need to remember of course that coaching differs from psychotherapy, and that this line of research on rupture-repairs was conducted with psychotherapy clients in some cases with severe issues, however as McKenna & Davis, 2010; O'Broin & Palmer, 2019 assert, there is potentially benefit from drawing from domains such as counselling and psychotherapy in promising areas. Such areas could be explored further in relation to coaching,

with a view to shedding light on the more rare misunderstandings, strains, or ruptures in the coaching relationship, which often lead to derailing or premature ending of coaching programmes. These explorations may also provide possible avenues for addressing and improving ruptures and strains, as has been pursued in the psychotherapy domain (Safran & Kraus, 2014).

Horvath (2018) for instance highlights research programmes researching repairing alliance strains (or ruptures); as well as investigating links between specific critical events in therapy (insight, innovative moments, confrontation) and the alliance at the moment-to-moment level (Rosa et al., 2017). This approach could also accord with findings where a strong coaching Working Alliance (particularly agreement on tasks and goals aspects) was shown to lead to greater goal attainment (Carter et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The link between relationship quality and negative effects increasingly appears to be an important one. More research studies are needed to corroborate this link, however where we focus our attention on exploring the role of relationship quality, and the possible protective factor which the coaching relationship might provide against negative effects of coaching is also an important question. How we define negative effects themselves, and in relation to positive effects, is a further consideration that has been addressed here, and is germane to the question of whether negative and positive

effects can change over the process of coaching. Drawing from other domains, in this case employing an SWPP approach, and from parallels with Critical Moment research literature, also appear to offer fruitful avenues for taking a situational and context-dependent perspective to examining in greater detail, the role of relationship quality in the the complex, multifactorial, ongoing, evolving coaching process that produces positive and negative effects of coaching.

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