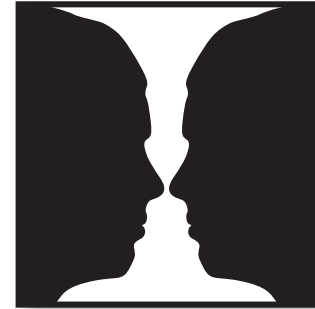


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Relationship as one of the most important active ingredients in therapy and coaching psychology

By Ole Michael Spaten

Abstract

This article seeks to gain a clearer understanding of the coaching relationship through a specific question: “Is (the concept of) relationship one of the most important active ingredients in therapy and coaching psychology?” Firstly, a short introduction to the research field is presented, followed by a short timeline of how Palmer, (O’Broin) Henderson and Gyllensten found their way into researching in the coaching relationship field. This leads to a discussion of the definition of the coaching relationship and the notion that a more consistent definition would be very valuable. Lastly, the article points out that the coaching relationship is an important ingredient with respect to the effectiveness and outcome of coaching. However, the complexity of the coaching relationship construct calls for a new synthesis of theoretical ideas, and thus further research should be conducted.

Keywords: *The coaching relationship, coaching, coaching psychology, working alliance in coaching*

Is (the concept of) relationship one of the most important active ingredients in therapy and coaching psychology? Relationship is not easy to define: From an overall point of view, Pearsall (1999) suggested that it is the ‘...way two or more people or things are connected’. Less broadly, Gelso and Carter defined the therapeutic relationship as the “feeling and attitudes that counselling participants have toward one another and the manner in which those are expressed” (Gelso & Carter, 1985, p. 159). From clinical research we know that “understanding and acceptance”, congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1975) are

crucial, and clients frequently state that the most helpful aspect of therapy is feeling supported and understood. For a long time transference and countertransference, the working alliance and the real relationship have been areas of research interest (Horvath et al., 2011). Hougaard (2004) remarked that the therapeutic relationship, therapeutic alliance, and so-called non-specific factors (therapist-client relationship, client expectations and common clinical strategies) are the most significant factors determining the outcome of therapy (Wampold et al., 1997).

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When did the coaching relationship come into focus?

Stemming from the important research base noted above, when did the relation between coach and coachee come to be a focus of investigation? It is an extended history; inquiries in coaching are based on the hundred-year-long experience and systematic research in psychology, psychotherapy and adult learning (Grant & Palmer, 2002; Spaten, 2010). Professor Stephen Palmer, a pioneer in the field, who has been in psychotherapy since the mid-1980s and assumed that the coaching alliance and relationship were important in facilitating coachees in achieving their goals. In a similar vein, and from their knowledge base and training in counselling and psychotherapy, Gyllensten and (O'Broin) Henderson also supposed that the relationship in coaching was vital to its process and outcomes (Gyllensten, 2020; Henderson, 2020).

A short timeline: Leading scholars in the research field of Coaching Relationship

Professor Stephen Palmer, Dr Alanna (O'Broin) Henderson, and Dr Kristina Gyllensten were among the first scholars to investigate this important research area. In the early 2000s, Stephen Palmer was doctoral supervisor to Gyllensten and Henderson, and their scientific curiosity led to years of subsequent research into the coaching relationship. Stephen Palmer (2020) states: "I was supervising Kristina Gyllensten for her doctorate research and in one of her studies nine participants were interviewed about their experiences of coaching, and 'the coaching relationship' was identified as a main theme. There was limited published research into this area so we realised it was important to publish these research findings (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007). I was also supervising and publishing articles and chapters with Alanna Henderson (formerly O'Broin) for her doctorate research, which focused on the coaching relationship", and a portion of these investigations was published in the same year (in O'Broin & Palmer, 2007). In a study from 2011 de Haan et al. found that executive coaches appreciated their coaching relationship and skills such as understanding, encouragement and active listening, more than specific coach interventions, as already discussed by Wampold et al. (1997). As early as 2001 McGovern et al. stipu-

lated that the quality of the "coaching relationship was perceived as critical to coaching success by 84 percent of coachee participants" (O'Broin & Palmer, 2019, p. 471).

The beginning of the century

At the beginning of the century, Gyllensten was focusing on coaching and occupational stress in her research, as Palmer mentioned above, while Kristina was training to become a counselling psychologist. To this temporal introduction Gyllensten adds "...within the field of counselling and therapy the relationship between the client/patient and therapist has always been considered important" (2020).

As mentioned, Alanna (O'Broin) Henderson is another of the leading scholars in the research field of the Coaching Relationship, and a close collaborator with Stephen Palmer. The first question in my interview with Alanna was: "When and how did you realize that the working-alliance / relation between coach and coachee was an important topic"? Alanna answered: "My contact with the helping professions began when I retrained as a Chartered Counselling Psychologist in the UK, in 1998, following a career in the financial sector in Fund Management. Working with therapy clients showed me first-hand how important the relationship was as a common factor: in engaging clients, and supporting and underpinning the work, regardless of theoretical approach adopted. The psychotherapy research evidence-base has long supported this premise, with a moderate yet robust significant working alliance-outcome association across theoretical approaches being shown for decades across multiple studies..." (Henderson, 2020). This hundred-year-long heritage, and a strong research foundation in psychotherapy, is essential to keep in mind. In the 1990s, and at the beginning of the new millennium, the interpersonal relationship between coach and coachee garnered little attention (Greensfelder, 2012). At that point in time there were little or no dedicated coaching relationship research findings supporting the claim of its key importance in the coaching context. Precisely, this notion is robustly sustained by the broad research literature presented shortly here and extended in Spaten, 2020. The research methods which were prominent during this period – qualitative self-report studies or case studies – focused more broadly on coaching

variables: Whether coaching worked and how it differed from therapy.

Active ingredients

Palmer, Henderson, Gyllensten and other scholars then brought the coaching relationship to and the fore as a timely topic of exploration. Since this pioneering time the number of inquiries surrounding the coaching relationship, as one of the *active ingredients of coaching*, has gained momentum. Alanna explains that, "... evidence, including meta-analyses (Graßmann et al., 2020), accumulating on importance of relationship quality (usually measured as Working Alliance) to coaching effectiveness, although exploration of mediating or moderating effects requires further research (see Zimmermann & Antoni, 2020), and is arguably likely to be equally relevant (see O'Broin, 2016) given the multifactorial complexity of coaching as a process" (Henderson, 2020).

Overall, we now know that coaching grows fast and is very effective. Since the early days of research, coaching psychology has found increasing evidence to support the idea that coaching is an effective form of intervention (e.g. Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh & Parker, 2010; Theeboom, Beersma & van Vianen, 2014; O'Broin, 2016; Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2016; Graßmann, Scholmerich & Schermuly, 2020; de Haan, Molyn & Nilsson, 2020). According to Henderson there followed an increased emphasis on functional similarities between therapy and coaching in order to gain a better understanding of coaching practise (O'Broin, 2016). "Common factors", or non-specific factors, such as client factors, theory and techniques, and client expectations were identified (Wampold et al., 1997; O'Broin 2016; Spaten 2018).

Following the accumulation of research documenting the effectiveness of coaching, O'Broin and Palmer stated that research studies were seeking to "identify the *active ingredients* of coaching" (2019, p. 472). Alongside the apprehension of greater complexity comes the requirement for the "...development of research methods and strategies that are suitable in addressing coaching as a complex phenomenon" (O'Broin, Spaten & Olesen Løkken, 2016).

The importance of identifying how the coach contributes to creating an effective relationship with the coachee has also been shown to be of considerable importance (O'Broin et al., 2016).

The need for a clear coaching relationship definition

A conceptual identification may well be that a coaching relationship is "two people engaging in a systematic process where different issues presented by the coachee are explored in collaboration between the coach and coachee" (Spaten et al., 2016). Stephen Palmer approved multiple statements – a nonexistence of shared agreement – and emphasised that there "...is no agreement in the precise definition of the coaching relationship" (Palmer, 2020). During my interview with Alanna (O'Broin) Henderson (2020) the following was identified about the lack of agreement on a definition:

The lack of consensus on a definition of the coaching relationship means that multiple referents are used for the term. This means use of the term can therefore range from a proxy for the whole coaching process, to more specific usages, such as a descriptor for rapport, or a component part of the coaching relationship, for example, Working Alliance. Whilst other component parts of the coaching relationship, such as the Real Relationship (Sun et al., 2013) have been posited as relevant markers. Recently other Common Factors, or active ingredients such as resilience and self-efficacy (de Haan et al., 2020) have tentatively been designated as putatively more important to coaching effectiveness. Working Alliance is the predominant component part of the coaching relationship that has usually been measured and found to be associated with coaching effectiveness in research studies". (Henderson, 2020)

Whereas this complexity of the field is significant a short and precise definition would be valuable for research purposes. Kristina Gyllensten (2020) delivers this by maintaining that "Alanna O'Broin and Stephen Palmer's definition is good: 'a unique, co-created, evolving relationship comprising the coaching alliance plus additional client and coach contributions'" (O'Broin and Palmer, 2007, p 295).

Kristina Gyllensten (2020) also leans towards this now classic definition: "The coaching alliance reflects the quality of the coachee's 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, 2010a, p 4).

Despite the multiple usages and definitions of the term, different coaching backgrounds and conceptual approach variations, it is generally accepted

across different forms and approaches to coaching that the working relationship between coach and coachee should be an effective working relationship based on a coaching alliance.

The coaching relationship

Among the broad range of scholars mentioned above a couple of central definitions should be pinpointed in this article. One of the first studies with important findings concerning the coaching relationship was conducted by Gyllensten & Palmer (2007). Their research was a qualitative study of coachees from two organisations considering their experiences of coaching. Their investigation showed that the participants identified the coaching relationship as a main theme and that this relationship was highly dependent on trust and transparency. The study led to a further conclusion that the coaching relationship was an important aspect of coaching, but that other aspects, such as the goal-oriented focus of coaching, were consistently identified as important components in the coaching alliance (O'Broin, 2016).

These studies sparked a myriad of articles and book chapters over the past decade (e.g. Kemp, 2008; O'Broin & Palmer, 2010a, 2010b), as well as further dedicated coaching relationship research studies (e.g. de Haan, 2008; O'Broin & Palmer, 2010c). Among other things they pointed to a) the importance of the negotiation of power in the coaching alliance, b) the coaching outcome and the relationship in general appears to depend on the coach's awareness of power issues and c) the ability to go beyond the asymmetry between coach and coachee, both in coaching and consulting psychology (Spaten et al., 2016; Sapezinskiene et al., 2016). Some of the differences between coaching and counselling have also been emphasised (Palmer & McDowall, 2009; O'Broin, 2009, 2010a).

Following the early articles by Gyllensten and Palmer, and O'Broin and Palmer the first book explicitly focused upon the coaching relationship was *The Coaching Relationship: Putting People First* edited by Palmer and McDowall (2010). This important book was followed by *Coaching Relationships: The Relational Coaching Field Book*, edited by de Haan and Sills in 2012. Later coaching research studies (de Haan, Duckworth, Birch & Jones, 2013), including a large-scale global outcome study (de Haan, Grant, Burger & Eriksson, 2016) have found significant links between the coaching relationship

(working alliance) and coaching outcomes (Baron et al., 2011). Lai and McDowall (2014), de Haan and Gannon (2017), and Graßmann, Scholmerich and Schermuly (2020) have identified similar connections in their examination of the field. The review by Lai et al. indicated that an effective coaching relationship could be associated with subsequent positive coaching outcomes. Another key point which was particularly prominent in their review was that the coaching relationship is a central focus of both coaching research and practise, and how it influences the effectiveness of coaching processes and outcomes. Forming a strong alliance/coaching relationship has also been a central component of a cluster of executive coaching, leadership coaching, and human development models of the mid-1990s (Henderson, 2020). With increased confirmation of this important association of the global coaching relationship with coaching effectiveness, interest in the coaching relationship is likely to continue (O'Broin, 2018; Henderson, 2020). However, the question of *how* the coaching relationship influences coaching outcomes remains largely unexplored (Palmer, 2020). Despite the increasing amount of accumulative literature in the coaching field (regarding both the relationship itself and the 'active ingredients' in the coaching relationship) it has been confirmed across research contributions that coaching (and the coaching relationship) is a complex process. We can sum up that coaching is an evolving, complex, interpersonal, multifactorial and multi-level activity. Because of its complexity it is recommended, and seems constructive, to conduct a broader investigation involving further systematically strict, empirical and evidence-based coaching research. In the search for the 'active ingredients' in the coaching relationship (de Haan et al., 2020) this exploration should encompass findings from all existing empirical research from the last twenty or twenty-five years, both in general and as an overview and presentation of the single studies and chapters alike (see Spaten, 2020).

Findings

Some of the important research findings concerning the coaching relationship so far have been summarised below for clarity.

- Commitment to the coaching process and goals from both the coach and the coachee is central for a successful outcome of the coaching. The

goal-oriented focus is an integral part of coaching. The coach and coachee should establish mutually agreed upon goals.

- It is essential for the coach to have sufficient psychological education in order to understand the different emotional aspects of the coaching process and hence to be able to differentiate between diverse forms of intervention.
- The coach must pay attention to both behaviour and emotions in the relationship, with respect to both the coachee and the coach.
- The effect of the coach's personality and ability to be empathic, trustworthy and non-judgmental in the working alliance is highlighted as an important finding.
- The coach should pay attention to issues of power in the coaching process, including the asymmetrical relation between coach and coachee.
- It is important for the coach to have a solid theoretical foundation, but the coach's personality and the interpersonal relation has a vital impact on the coaching relationship and its outcome.
- The coach should continually reflect and develop upon their practice.

These are some of the most important research findings in the coaching relationship field which can contribute to a better and broader understanding of what is at play when we address the complexity of the coaching relationship.

Conclusion

This article has drawn upon a variety of research within the field of the coaching relationship (Spaten, 2020). Throughout the article this field of research has been discussed, including how the coaching relationship may be defined. It has been made clear that the coaching relationship is understood in a variety of ways, and this has resulted in many different areas of research within the purview of this relationship. However, there is generally agreement that the coaching relationship should be based on a coaching alliance. Moreover, it seems that a short and specific definition for coaching relationship is of great value. The article began with a question regarding whether the coaching relationship is the most important active ingredient in coaching. The general answer is *yes* – much of the research points towards the coaching relationship being the most important ingredient with respect to coaching outcomes, such that it is associated

with effectiveness. In addition to this coaching is an ever-evolving, complex, interpersonal, multifactorial and multi-level activity.

With that said because of the complexity and multifactorial dimensions of the relationship it is not yet possible to say *what* specifically this ingredient is and *how* it affects the outcome of coaching. The research in this field is limited, and these questions should be investigated further with respect to systematically strict, empirical and evidence-based coaching.

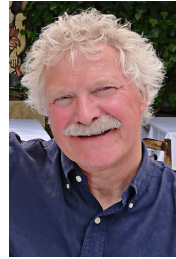
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