Insights into the nature and role of listening in the creation of a co-constructive coaching dialogue: A phenomenological study

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Abstract

Despite its importance, there seems to be no research into listening in coaching. Of the few texts that explore it, only Cox (2013) presents a theoretical foundation. In contrasting coaching's constructivist nature with therapy's reconstructive disposition, Cox suggests that misunderstandings are key, causing coach and client to review their values and assumptions, whereas in therapy, empathic listening aims to minimise misunderstandings. This research explores the interpretive nature of listening in coaching through the experiences of a few coaching partnerships. Challenging client perspectives, by focusing on values, assumptions and emotions appeared pivotal to their experience of being heard.

Key Words: Listening, interpretive, authentic, empathy, challenge.

Introduction

Coaching's Holy Grail is to create relationships that free clients to fully express themselves, enabling them to better reflect on and learn from experience and expand their self-awareness in order to address their challenges. Key to this is the coach's ability to listen effectively, without judgement and with curiosity, providing a safe space in which clients feel heard (Rogers, 2008, Cox, 2013). Here listening isn't inert; it covers ways of communicating that allows clients to know that they have been heard, incorporating verbal and non-verbal communication, felt sense, emotion and intuition.

Practitioners acknowledge its criticality to coaching (e.g. Brockbank and McGill, 2006; Cox, 2013; Hawkins and Schwenk, 2010; O'Broin and Palmer, 2009; Whitworth, Kimsey-House, K., Kimsey-House, H. and Sandahl, 2007). Other helping disciplines also acknowledge this: the social sciences (Rogers, 1980; Stewart, 1983), communications theory (Collins and O'Rourke, 2009) and business management (Scharmer, 2008). The research of Dagley (2010a, 2010b, 2011); Day, De Haan, Sills, Bertie and Blass (2008); De Haan, Culpin and Curd (2011); Lai and McDowall (2014); and Page and De Haan (2014) also highlight its importance in the coaching relationship. However, whilst I found references to the interpretive nature of some coaching interventions (Day et al., 2008) and the use of active listening (Lai and McDowall, 2014; Mavor, Sadler-Smith and Gray 2010), none provide detail as to what these terms meant.

Some practitioners attempt to explain listening in coaching, such as Brockbank and McGill (2006), Cox (2013), Hawkins and Smith (2006), Whitworth et al. (2007) and Woodcock (2010). Others have drawn on therapeutic models (e.g. O'Brion and Palmer, 2009), however, whilst therapeutic models

provide a foundation on which to build, their application to coaching has not been subject to rigorous research. Of these practitioners, only Cox (2013) proposes a theory-based model of listening in coaching.

The importance of listening articulated by these contributors is also recognised by many psychologists (e.g. Gallese, 2003; Myers, 2000; Rogers, 1980; Stewart, 1983), philosophers (e.g. Heidegger, 2010; Hyde, 1994), communication specialists (e.g. Collins and O'Rourke, 2009; Shotter, 2009) and management theorists (e.g. Scharmer, 2008). All see communication as central to what it means to be human. Here again I found some common ground regarding the potential of interpretive listening to help the speaker to learn from experience.

Literature Review

In the absence of any research into listening in coaching, I initially explored the part that listening seems to play in the development of the coaching relationship. From there I studied the nature of consciousness and the self, to build some understanding of the challenges facing coaches when endeavouring to facilitate change in their clients, and what this might mean for listening in coaching. Finally, I extended my search into the broader field of listening, drawing on, for example, philosophy, psychology and management theory, in order to explore the potential implications for coaching.

Listening and the coaching relationship
Research suggests that the relationship is key to successful outcomes (Bluckert, 2005; Boyce eta al., 2010; Grant and Cavanagh, 2004; O'Broin and Palmer, 2009; Wang, 2013). It also seems more critical for developmental and transformational coaching than skills and performance coaching (Sun et al., 2013). Although some question the importance of listening to the relationship (Baron and Morin, 2009), the weight of evidence suggests otherwise (De Haan, 2008; Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker and Fernandes, 2008; Tompson, Bear and Dennis 2008). Furthermore, the research suggests it goes beyond showing empathy, to include sharing what the coach notices, using "whole body listening" (Mavor et al., 2010: p. 835), using active listening (Lai and McDowall, 2014; Page and De Haan, 2014) and interpretive coaching interventions (Day et al., 2008).

These contributors concur with many philosophers, therapists and management theorists in seeing communication as central to productive relationships. However, although they refer to the value of active and interpretive listening, their texts provide little explanation of these processes or insight into their efficacy. Also, whilst seeing listening as the coach's primary skill, the literature is virtually silent on "how and what they actually listen to" (Bachkirova, Sibley and Myers, 2015, p.2), which brings us to the concepts of consciousness and the self.

Consciousness and the self
The fact that coaching seeks to improve client self-awareness suggests we don't know ourselves as well as we might (Dunning's, 2006). What then is the self and what interferes with our perception? Whilst we feel conscious of being our own self (Blackmore, 2003; Stevens, 1996; Wade, 1996), there are varying views on what consciousness and the self are and their link to brain activity. Popper and Eccles (1983) believe in a controlling non-physical self, or mind, but cannot explain its workings. If this were so, we might expect to find evidence of a place in the brain where consciousness sits, however, research implies otherwise (Baars and Gage, 2013; Crick, 1994; Libet, 1985; Zeki and Bartels, 1998;). Others (Churchland, 2013; Dennett, 1991; Metzinger, 2004) argue that the phenomenal self is nothing more than a by-product of brain activity and an illusion.

Growing evidence also suggests that consciously controlled free will is predominantly illusory; we become aware of our intent to act and assume a causal relationship. We know that our brains do many

things unconsciously, for example, our perception of our surroundings is partly unconscious, but the results of perceptual processing are consciously known. Baars and Gage (2013) note that there are no completely conscious or unconscious cognitive tasks, as far as we know. Can consciousness, then, have a causal effect? Haggard, Newman and Magno (1999) and Libet (1985) found that we do not consciously initiate voluntary acts but we can consciously intervene to control outcome.

What then drives our unconscious decisions? Whilst perspectives differ, many contributors see a multiplicity of, mainly, unconscious 'mini-selves' built on assumptions developed as a consequence of experience. Claxton (1994) sees the brain as linked sub-minds with mini-theories of how to deal with situations based on experience. Humphrey (2002) describes phenomenal experience as a means of keeping perceptions honest, suggesting we are made of many selves with their own responsibilities that "have become co-conscious through collaboration" (p. 12). Evidence suggests that creative thinking can happen unconsciously, whilst some skills (e.g. leadership, management etc.) require experience to achieve higher levels of performance (Churchland, 2013; Lewicki, Czyzewska and Hill 1997).

What of our conscious experiences? Our internal and external linguistic ability helps us separate ourselves from our surroundings. In this way the self feels very real. Zeki and Bartels (1998) see a multiplicity of consciousness that become unified with self-consciousness through language. Baars and Gage (2013) suggest executive brain functions operate during conscious states to "process self-relevant information" (p. 240). Dennett (1991) sees this narrative stream as being composed or edited by different parts of the brain as they perform and when this happens it is that part of the brain that is the observer: "a something it is like something to be" (p. 136).

The narrator, then, plays a key role in creating the illusion of self, and it is not as well informed as we might believe. Stevens (1996) wonders how conscious we are of our feelings and their ubiquitous presence and origins in early experiences and Bachkirova (2011) talks about the poor quality of information getting through to the conscious mind and the narrator. These and others (e.g. Blackmore, 2003; Claxton, 1994; Humphrey, 2002; Kegan and Lahey, 2009) hypothesise how people might identify and deal with these interferences between perception and reality, suggesting that our maturity and stage of human development has consequences on our ability to address them. Whilst change is difficult, these theories suggest we can influence our predominantly unconscious free will by increasing self-awareness through learning from experience and creating new knowledge for unconscious processes to draw on. The challenge for the coach in listening to the client is to be able to help identify the interferences that might be stopping them from achieving their potential.

The developing field of listening
I initially focused on those few authors who have attempted to explain, to some extent, the process of listening in coaching (Brockbank and McGill, 2006; Cox, 2013; Hawkins and Smith 2006; Whitworth et al., 2007; Woodcock, 2010). One thing that they have in common is a belief in listening beyond building empathy and not just to allow the client to feel heard. Whilst empathy helps build rapport, I see two flaws in the use of the empathic model in coaching. First, it is reproductive in nature, used in therapy to minimise misunderstandings (Myers, 2000) so as to recreate client experiences in order to diagnose and prescribe. This stands in stark contrast to coaching's constructivist disposition (Cox, 2013). Second, it is built on the fiction that we can put ourselves in someone's shoes and know their experiences (Stewart, 1983). I suggest an interpretive approach is a more productive one (Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 2010; Hyde, 1994; Stewart, 1983) and more pertinent to coaching (Cox, 2013).

Hyde (1994), building on Heidigger (1968, 2010), suggests a phenomenological hermeneutic approach leads to greater insights than an empathic one, a position Cox (2013) supports in developing

her definition of authentic listening, which she combines with the rapport building benefits of active listening. As Hyde (1994) noted, regardless of how hard we might try to be objective, we hear things from our own perspective. Consequently, the very act of trying to be authentic is itself inauthentic, so, by inference, revealing this self-interest is at the root of being authentic. In testing understanding, coaches may then demonstrate that they have misunderstood their clients. However, in so doing, more information can be draw out, helping clients better express themselves. In essence, misunderstanding can lead to the implicit becoming explicit, potentially bringing new information into conscious focus. Cox (2013) highlights this in making the claim that:

> In coaching being misunderstood by the coach could have useful consequences for clients, since it causes both to examine their perspectives and beliefs, which in turn enables them to look more closely and constructively at what they intend (p. 57).

Dagley (2010b) seems to support this when identifying coaches' interpretive skills as integral to clients achieving perspective shifts. Day et al., (2008) reported that the non-judgemental sharing of reflections and felt experience at moments of tension led to deeper relationships, whilst failure to do so often led to a breakdown. Dagley's (2010a) suggests that knowledge is created rather than simply exchanged, with coach's eliciting and focusing attention on information through interpretation and challenge. In Dagley (2011), the clients highlighted their coach's ability to be attentive and use their perception to notice things at a deeper level and bring it to their notice, often leading to significant behavioural changes.

Here then, we see the potential for an interpretive way of listening to help clients shift perspective and get insight into their challenges. It is in this context that Cox (2013) suggests that misunderstanding the client isn't to be avoided, as it can enable knowledge creation. The objective of my research was to explore my participants' experience to discover if these concepts were present and how they were used.

Methodology

Philosophy
I see reality as socially constructed and subject to on-going revision. This is rooted in Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenology evolved as a reaction to positivism and is based on the belief that knowledge is created through the interaction between researcher and participants. Husserl (2012) introduced transcendental phenomenology as a way of exploring consciousness through the description of conscious experiences, where the researcher brackets the normal stance, setting aside preconceived ideas and beliefs. Heidegger (1968) believed that, not only is the act of bracketing impossible, it isn't desirable. Researchers must critically reflect on their own biases, assumptions and preconceptions and reveal them to open themselves to challenge. I am drawn to the search for the meanings embedded in experience, rather than to Husserl's descriptive approach. Therefore, I have taken a phenomenological hermeneutic stance.

Approach
Whilst findings constructed through a quantitative approach can be a means of interpreting experience rather than defining reality, I preferred to take a more overtly interpretivist stance as more appropriate to provide rich, contextual data. Whilst quantitative techniques can add to data gathered via qualitative techniques, the timescales and potential complexity and cost implications ruled out a mixed methods approach in this instance.

Whilst my question is based on Cox's (2013) theory based model of listening, I'm not trying to prove any element of that theory, neither am I trying to conceptualise the phenomenon of listening in coaching, or to develop an alternative theory. As a result, I ruled out several qualitative approaches, such as Grounded Theory Method, Action Research and Narrative Analysis. Because I believe that there is benefit in the researcher's perspective on the data, I also ruled out Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis. I eliminated other approaches that I could have used, such as Phenomenology, Case Study and Heuristic Research, because of time factors.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Template Analysis, which when "employed within a broadly phenomenological approach is in practice very similar to IPA" (King, 2012: p. 429), were the most congruent with my philosophy and research question. They also seemed achievable in my time frame. Both explore participants' lived experience and their sense making of it. They also allow the researcher to make sense of participants' sense making. I elected to use Template Analysis over IPA because of its flexibility. It combines an inductive and deductive approach that allows for some a priori themes to be defined in advance, relevant to the research topic (see Table 1, below), to be "used tentatively, with the possibility always considered that any a priori theme may need to be redefined or discarded" (King, 2012, p. 430). It also allows for the template to be refined iteratively through the process of analysis, reducing some of the analytical workload and allowing a larger number of participants than would normally be the case with IPA.

Participant selection

I approached my network, a client's coaching panel, two coaching bodies and LinkedIn coaching forums. My focus was on developmental coaching, defined by Bachkirova (2011) as facilitating changes in clients that result "in a sustained increased capacity to engage with and to influence their environment and to look after their internal needs and aspirations" (p. 4). Coaching for behavioural change challenges coach and client, the level of trust required is typically greater, the intensity of the relationship more pronounced and the potential for misunderstandings more pervasive, as clients can often struggle to articulate their challenges. Criteria included: voluntary and not remedial client involvement; beyond the initial contracting stage; and over 250 hours coaching experience. Of 40 coaches, 6 volunteered. Of these, two dropped out for logistical reasons.

Empathic Stance	Coaches demonstrate by their demeanour their desire to be there for the client, holding a helping orientation, showing an appreciation of what their clients are going through "with a sense of benevolence, curiosity and interest" (Thwaites and Bennet-Levy, 2007, p. 597).
Active Listening	Shotter (2009) refers to the verbal and non-verbal ticks that indicate we are listening and understanding. Collins and O'Rourke (2009) include the listener testing their understanding through mirroring and reflecting back.
Authentic Listening	Authentic listening "involves helping clients to explore their values and beliefs in relation to the paradigms and theories that they hold fast to" (Cox, 2013: p. 55).
Misunderstanding	An intervention that suggests a misunderstanding has occurred, either through my interpretation of the data, or the comments of coach or client. It is not a judgement of the quality of the intervention.
Self-Awareness	Interventions that bring aspects of client behaviours into conscious awareness. This includes my observations of these moments, even where the client and/or the coach haven't explicitly observed it.
Feeling Heard	This is a reference to the client's feelings of being heard by the coach and is a consequence of the listening skills of the coach.

Table 1: A priori themes

Research design and data collection

Data was collected via audio recorded coaching sessions and interviews with coach and client. The interviews were conducted separately following the recorded session. I used the recordings to inform my interview questions. Coaches and clients were asked not to listen to their recording, as my interest was in their perceptions of the session and not the recording. Individual interviews allowed exploration of the differing perspectives of coach and client and avoided the potential difficulty of exploring what could be seen as negative situations.

Interview participants were asked to share their own perspectives (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012) using a semi-structured approach (Arther and Nazroo, 2003; Bryman, 2012; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2012) based on the Critical Incident Technique (CIT - Flanagan, 1954). I developed questions based on the a priori themes, which centred on my research topic (Saunders et al., 2012), whilst allowing the opportunity to probe further as the interviews unfolded (Arther and Nazroo, 2003). Questions were refined between each interview (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012).
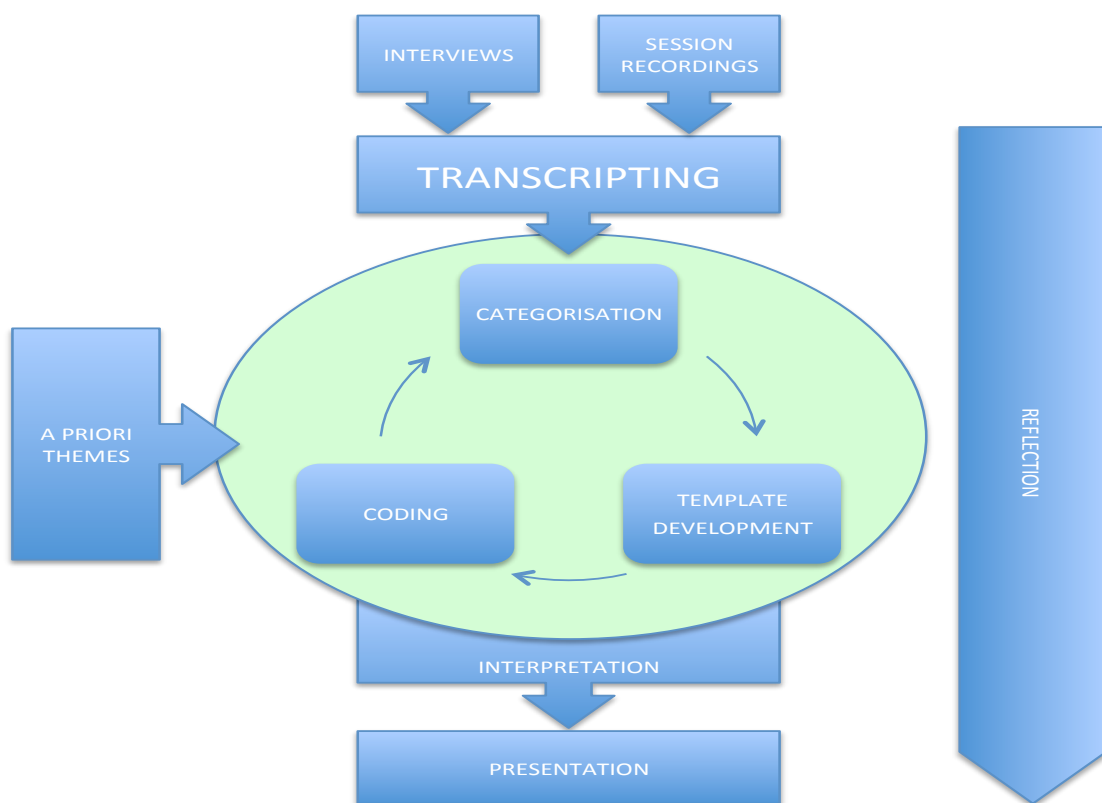
Figure 1: Data analysis process

Figure 1 illustrates the data analysis process. The session and interview transcripts were iteratively analysed using Template Analysis (King, 2012). The a priori themes informed the initial cycles and an initial template was produced and refined using the data captured through the transcripts from the first coach/client pair. The template was then refined through the analysis of data from the remaining coaching pairs.

Findings

Table 2, below, provides the final template, consisting of seven main themes and seven Integrative Themes. Integrative themes are "themes that seem to pervade much of the data, cross-cutting many or all of the other thematic clusters" (King, 2012: p. 432). The act of identifying and extracting these themes simplifies the presentation of the data.

Main themes
1. *Rapport Building:* Interventions that contributed to the creation and maintenance of trust. All the coaches acknowledged their client's strengths and successes. All participants mentioned the strength of the bond between them, echoing the research of Dagley (2010a) and Gregory and Levy (2012). This also came across in the clients' expressions of a sense of non-judgemental support and a willingness to talk about things they wouldn't ordinarily discuss.
2. *Acknowledging the Client's Story:* Demonstrating attention to client stories with brief statements, (e.g. 'yes' and 'okay') and sounds, like 'mmm' (Shotter, 2009). Three did this extensively and, generally, unconsciously, the fourth, markedly less. Counter intuitively, the latter noticed her use of it the most, stating: *"it really irritated me."* The most frequent user was the least aware. The former was the least experienced coach and the latter the most. Clients didn't mention these interventions, referring more generally to their coaches' attentiveness.
3. *Interpretive Listening:* These codes are based on Stewart's (1983) model of interpretive listening and focused mainly on values, emotions and assumptions. Here, the coaches actively shaped the conversation (Dagley, 2010a, 2010b). When clients focused on detail or things out of their control, three coaches drew them back with a focus on values, assumptions and emotions. The non-judgemental stance of the coaches was in evidence and they seemed to feel no attachment to their utterances (Dagley, 2010b and Day et al. 2008).

THEME	LEVEL 2 CODE	LEVEL 3 CODE
1. Rapport building	1.1. Social Exchanges	
	1.2. Using Humour	
	1.3. Client Focus	1.3.1.Requesting/Providing Topic
		1.3.2.Acknowledge Client Strengths/Capability
		1.3.3.Reviewing Prior Actions
	1.4. Client Notes Value of Session	
	1.5. Preparation	1.5.1.Contracting
		1.5.2.Coach Preparation
2. Acknowledging Client's Story	2.1. Non-verbal Acknowledgement	
	2.2. Brief Acknowledgement	
	2.3. Using Silence	
	2.4. Mirroring	
	2.5. Checking Non-verbal Cues	
3. Interpretive Listening	3.1. Checking Perception	3.1.1.Clarifying - Exploring Values
		3.1.2.Clarifying – Exploring Emotions & Feelings
		3.1.3.Clarifying - Exploring Assumptions
		3.1.4.Clarifying - Exploring 'Facts'

THEME	LEVEL 2 CODE	LEVEL 3 CODE
		3.1.5. Clarifying - Challenging Assumptions/Beliefs
		3.1.6. Paraphrasing/ Summarising/ Reframing
		3.1.7. Adding Examples
	3.2. Drawing on Knowledge of client	
	3.3. Insights	3.3.1. Coach Offers Alternative Perspective
		3.3.2. Client Sees Alternative Perspective
		3.3.3. Client Acts on Insight
		3.3.4. Coach Tests Client's Application of Insight
	3.4. Coach Uses Metaphor	
	3.5. Call to Action	3.5.1. Client Develops an Option
		3.5.2. Coach Offers an Option
		3.5.3. Client Adopts Coach's Option
		3.5.4. Coach Tests Client's Resolve to Act
4. Interruptions	4.1. Coach Interrupts For Clarification	4.1.1. Client Listens
		4.1.2. Client Ignores
	4.2. Coach Interrupts To Refocus	4.2.1. Client Listens
		4.2.2. Client Ignores
	4.3. Coach Interrupts To Support	4.3.1. Client Listens
		4.3.2. Client Ignores
	4.4. Client Interrupts	4.4.1. Coach Listens
		4.4.2. Coach Ignores
5. Misunderstood	5.1. Coach Misunderstood Client	
	5.2. Client Misunderstood Coach	
	5.3. Researcher: Coach Misunderstood Client	
	5.4. Researcher: Client Misunderstood Coach	
	5.5. Coach Confirm Client's Understanding	
	5.6. Client confirms coach's Understanding	
6. Non-Coaching Interventions	6.1. Advice	6.1.1. Client Asks for Advice
		6.1.2. Coach Offers Advice
	6.2. Becoming Directive	6.2.1. Leading Question
		6.2.2. Closed Question
		6.2.3. Directive Intervention
7. Distraction	7.1. Focus on Process	
	7.2. Collusion	
	7.3. Need to Understand Client Story	
	7.4. Analysing/ Diagnosing	
	7.5. Coach's Self-interest	
	7.6. Coach Plays Another Role	
INTEGRATIVE THEMES		

A.	Empathic Stance
B.	Self-awareness, Shifting Perspectives & Encouraging Self-reflection
C.	Dance and Play
D.	Feeling Heard & Understood
E.	Active Listening
F.	Authentic Listening
G.	Intuition

Table 2: Final template themes

4. _Interruptions:_ Interruptions were usually interpretive in nature and focused on emotions, values and assumptions. Some coaches were more practiced at this and more likely to affect their client's perspective. Clients didn't refer to them as interruptions, preferring to talk about the quality of their coach's interventions. The client least interrupted craved more challenge and feedback.

5. _Misunderstood:_ Some coaches thought they had misunderstood their client, however, no client felt they were misunderstood during their recorded session. I identified examples that neither had noticed. Whilst there were few, most either didn't disturb the flow, or triggered further reflection in the client.

6. _Non-Coaching Interventions:_ These were rare and tended to build on the discussion. As a rule, the clients seemed accepting of them and the rapport was unaffected. However, I only came to look for these incidents after starting the analysis, so I have not had the opportunity to fully test the thoughts and feelings of the clients involved.

7. _Distractions:_ These were rare, though more prevalent for the less experienced coach. Some coaches had other roles with their clients that came to the fore at times, indicating a shift in the purpose of their listening. There was no evidence of push back from the clients, who often seemed to welcome the support. As I only came to look for these incidents after starting the analysis, I have not had the opportunity to check in with the clients.

**Integrative themes**

A. _Empathic Stance:_ The coaches' descriptions of empathy were about their helping orientation, akin to Thwaites and Bennett-Levy's (2007) Empathic Stance, rather than therapeutic empathy in its entirety. This appreciation of the client seemed to act as validation of their experiences, resulting in the coaching being more than a routine process for client and coach (Day et al., 2008).

B. _Self-awareness and Shifting Perspective:_ Where interactions seemed to focus on or result in a change in perspective and greater self-awareness. This seemed to involve a mix of interventions across the themes. However, a lack of challenge or a failure to reveal what was occurring to the coach seemed to result in a struggle to move the client forward. One client said: _"My reflection after was: What have... we achieved in that… session? Had there been a eureka moment? …I didn't necessarily feel we had moved on."_

C. _Dance and Play:_ 'Dance' comes from Co-active Coaching, where the coach follows the movement of what is occurring in each moment, the ups and downs of the conversation. This is similar to the 'Play' theme described by Stewart (1980, 1983), highlighting the heuristic quality of the turn-taking form in which the playful nature of the conversation is creative and insightful. These descriptions seemed to capture the essence of sections of the recorded sessions. The moments when this description seemed most apt involved a range of interventions across most themes, but particularly themes 2 and 3 (Day, 2008; Dagley, 2010a, 2010b, 2011).

D. _Feeling Heard and Understood:_ Here I wanted to understand the clients' experiences. This theme seemed to cut through many of the other themes, as evidenced by one client:

At times he could let you talk for quite a long time (Theme 1 and 2), but as I finish… he will then repeat certain parts… that I had almost forgotten (Theme 2) … At the time, I didn't

*think a whole lot about the comments, but (my coach) had latched onto that one word…
and… brought it back and teased it out a lot (Theme 3) … it was… the one big thing that I
got from the (session).*

E. *Active Listening:* Listening to instil a sense of non-judgemental support, leaving the speaker
    feeling heard, encouraging them to talk openly. This was evident in the data, supporting the
    findings of Lai and McDowall, 2014 and Page and De Haan, 2014. This was seen through a
    combination of interventions from Themes 1, 2 and 3. At times, these interventions came through
    interruptions (Theme 4) and as a result of the coach's intuition (Integrative Theme G).
F. *Authentic Listening:* This emphasises the creative nature of the dialogue, which came to the fore
    when the coach explored the client's values, feelings and assumptions. The session where there
    was little reference to these and in which the coach interrupted the least, was the one where the
    client felt a lack of progress:

    *Sometimes I feel that (my coach) holds back… She's sees the issue whereas I might not
    have any awareness of it, but isn't going straight in (and feeding it back to me). Yes, she's
    trying to lead (me) on to the answer, but maybe my preference is just more for straight
    talking.*

G. *Intuition:* Ever present, with its unconscious knowing breaching the conscious mind via
    perception (Myers, 2002), intuition could influence most interventions. However, it is difficult to
    witness and consequently there is limited information in the data. Once again, I have limited
    insight as I only came to look for these incidents after starting the analysis, and have not had the
    opportunity to check in with the clients involved.

Discussion

In the following paragraphs I have endeavoured to stand back and look at how this thematic analysis
contributes to providing an understanding of the process of listening in coaching in general and, more
specifically, the creative nature of the coaching discussion. At the macro level, four things emerged,
elements that seem to be more fully present for the three sessions in which the client's felt they had
moved forward, but less so for the one in which the client felt he had been treading water.

1. The relationship
For these four partnerships, the relationship seems to be foundational and, to a marked degree, built
on the empathic stance of the coach. All four clients described a bond with their coaches with a
warmth that suggested something akin to a mixture of friendship and a professional relationship.
Although only one coach explained 'empathy' in the therapeutic sense, all described what amounted
to be their desire to hold the Empathic Stance as defined by Thwaites and Bennet-Levy (2007), who
wrote: "An empathic stance infuses other aspects of empathic skill… with a sense of benevolence,
curiosity and interest" (p.597).

   The data suggests to me that this bond is based on more than using active listening techniques. It
suggests a genuine caring for the client on the part of the coach and a willingness to be vulnerable and
open as a consequence on the client's part. Here there seems to be some support to the belief that the
relationship is key to successful outcomes (Bluckert, 2005; Boyce eta al., 2010; Grant and Cavanagh,
2004; O'Broin and Palmer, 2010; Wang, 2013). It might be fruitful to pursue this line of research
further to understand, for example, the nature of this bond and the role of the empathic stance versus
active listening in maintaining it. It strikes me that the latter is a technique that can be learnt, whereas
the former is more closely linked to personal values and developmental maturity (Thwaites and
Bennet-Levy 2007).

2. Challenging perception

Shifts in perspective seem to come more readily where there is a challenge to perception, using both active listening and the more directing (but not directive) interpretive listening. For example, one coach described what happens when a client stops focusing on what they can control: *"(I will interrupt) without rudeness, but it's still being direct"*. Another coach described a challenging intervention: *"(he) was expressing a view that… life happened to you and I wanted to challenge that to say, 'No, we can actually have some… choices'. I wondered what his choices (were)."*

These challenges were delivered without judgement or attachment. For example, one client said: *"I was a bit taken aback (and his challenge) stuck in my head and I've used that myself since to other people and also in my own thinking… that was a big moment… for me."* In one partnership, the lack of challenge was recognised by the coach: *"I'll let them carry on for far too much without interrupting."* Her client told me he wanted more challenge from her. The lack of challenge also seemed to influence the client's memory of the session. During his interview I highlighted two of his coach's interventions, which he felt were deep, but he had forgotten them and had not acted on them.

3. The authenticity of the coach

These interventions seem to carry more weight when they are the coach's honest and unvarnished perceptions, with nothing held back. Though honest and unvarnished, these perceptions are delivered out of curiosity, in the service of the client, not necessarily tentatively, but without attachment. One coach described this well: *"I try to be attentive to the person and listen to the words and also what else is happening as well, their body language as well. But it's also listening to myself as well."*

In another example, a client expressed a desire for what sounded like a more authentic stance from his coach: *"Sometimes I feel that she holds back a little bit… She's sees the issue whereas I might not have any awareness of it… trying to lead you on to the answer yourself, but maybe my preference is just more for straight talking."*

4. Being misunderstood

No client recalled being misunderstood in their recorded session and three couldn't recall an incident in any previous session. The fourth felt it had happened, but he could not recall a specific incident. Two coaches couldn't recall an incident in which they misunderstood their clients. Another told me: *"I probably misunderstand my clients all the time, but I'm not attached to understanding everything about them."*

The least experienced coach did recall and incident: *"I just remember at the time thinking 'I haven't really listened or I haven't really understood the point he was making' and I made light of it… I just felt there was something there that didn't quite fit. I might have taken him off track."* Her client recalled the incident and didn't see it as a misunderstanding, although I felt it was. Two things struck me about these incidents: first, the coaches never pushed their point, they accepted the client's response and moved on; and second, they seemed to have no bearing on the relationship; the bond was strong enough to take the misunderstanding.

Conclusion

I opened this paper by suggesting that coaching is a conversation in which the relationship is such that the client feels able to put herself in a vulnerable situation, safe in the knowledge that the coach has her best interests at heart. I see these conversations as a co-creation between coach and client, in the client's service. Hence my interest in Cox's (2013) integrative model and my research question: Being misunderstood by the coach: useful for clients? As my work progressed I came to see this less as a literal question and more as a metaphor for the interpretive nature of listening in coaching. This

study has sought to get some insight into the experiences of coaches and clients of the coaches listening skills, with a focus on the creative nature of the conversation.

In its own humble way, this research is ground breaking and highlights a number of implications for coaching. The four broad elements highlighted in the discussion section above seem to be more fully present for the three sessions in which the client's felt they had moved forward, but less so for the one in which the client felt he had been treading water. Even though the coaches had different coaching models and styles, they adopted similar ways of listening and demonstrating their listening. However, the clients of the two coaches that were better able to articulate their approach to listening were more enthusiastic about the benefits they had from the coaching. This suggests that there may be a clear benefit to be achieved by extending this research to develop a deeper understanding of how listening works in coaching.

The clients in this study noticed things that they might not ordinarily share with their coach, as they don't normally reflect on it in the way they did during the interviews. Their insights might be helpful to the coach and, by extension, themselves. It struck me that this could also be a powerful aid for practice development. My research also reconfirmed for me the value of using session recordings for personal reflection on coaching practice, as a tool to support supervision and potentially as an aid to support coaching clients.

Although I feel this study contributes to the coaching knowledgebase, it is limited. I had great difficulty recruiting participants, leaving me with little choice than to work with all my volunteers. Whilst each made a significant contribution, two weren't pure coaching relationships and I may have chosen differently with a wider choice. Participant numbers were small and not representative of the wider coaching population, consequently, outputs are not generalizable. However, my goal was to gain some deep insights into people's experiences, rather than to generalize and predict behaviour.

The fact that sessions were recorded and I interviewed the participants seemed to have some influence on them. Many commented about the recording of the sessions. For example, one coach commented that his attention to his listening was heightened during the session. Three of the participants commented that they hoped the sessions would prove useful to me. For example, one client said: *"I'm also aware that I want to give your colleague something useful… I'm hoping I'm going to be an interesting case study."*

I allowed a week between the recorded session and interviews to transcribe the recordings and prepare my questions. A number of the participants commented that the lapse of time left them with gaps in their recall of the session. The data still provided rich content and I was able to provide specific examples from the sessions during the interviews. However, with hindsight, I could have found a way to achieve all this with a much shorter turn around between session and interview.

The sheer volume of data, some 178 pages and almost 100,000 words, had its challenges. For example, finding the time to totally immerse myself proved problematic, as was my ability to keep my focus and consistently apply the template in my analysis. Whilst I believe I was rigorous, involving others could have raised the quality of the coding and the analysis. For example, using additional researchers would have enabled comparison and refinement of coding and raised the consistency of the analysis. I could also have undertaken a peer review of my coding and tested my interpretations with my participants. However, I didn't have the resource to involve others or the time to undertake peer or participant reviews.

Although I had eliminated case study as an approach, it struck me as I progressed through my analysis that a case study based around one or two partnerships, would potentially have allowed me to involve others, such as my participants and peers. I was also limited, for cost and logistical reason, to capturing data through voice recording only, eliminating a significant source of data that might have been captured through video recording. Finally, I am acutely aware that I started this study with a strong affinity to Cox's (2013) model, something I have had to bare in mind as I progressed, to ensure, as best I could, that I kept an open a mind. I leave it to my readers to decide how well I might have achieved that.

Whilst this research barely scratches the surface of the topic of listening in coaching, I believe it demonstrates that in developing ones listening skills, it is not just about how you listen, it covers how you have demonstrated you have been listening and your understanding of what you have been listening to and listening with. My reading of the literature doesn't suggest that coaching practitioners recommend empathic listening in coaching and my research suggests that when coaches refer to empathy, they are referring to the empathic stance and not the full empathic way of being described by the likes of Rogers (1980). Empathy and active listening may be the foundation upon which a strong coaching relationship is built, but they are not sufficient to trigger changes in perspective and behaviour.

It appears to me that interpretive interventions, focused on the client's values, emotions and assumptions, are akin to shinning a torch fleetingly into the client's story. In so doing, they provide the opportunity for the client to build on the coach's intuitive interpretation of their story, correcting it if needs be in the process, reflecting Cox's (2013) description of authentic listening as a *"Dialectical co-construction and interpretation of meaning"* (p. 54). I believe that what would benefit practitioners is further research that expands our understanding of what the key components of effective listening in coaching are and how they effect the conversation. I particularly believe these findings suggest that further research be carried out into the co-constructive nature of the coaching dialogue and the role that listening plays in creating the conditions for such a conversation to flourish.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my contributors. I feel humbled by their generosity in inviting me into their world as an observer. It was a privilege from which I feel I have learnt a lot about my own practice. I have also thoroughly enjoyed my immersion in the literature, and apologies to my wife and friends for boring them with my fascination for the topics I have explored.

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