Striving for autonomy: The importance of the autonomy need and its support within coaching

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Abstract

Based on definitions of coaching, coaches support their clients with their self-determination as well as their self-congruent, self-valued goals; in other words and with regard to Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), coaches support their clients' autonomy need. In this paper, we present an overview of three research studies on the importance of the autonomy need and its support within coaching. In the first study, we explored the clients' basic psychological needs within the context of coaching and found that coaching was expected to mainly fulfil the autonomy need. The second study showed that, if a client had a high need for autonomy, this need could be fulfilled by coaching which further increased the client's satisfaction with the coaching. In the third study, we found that the coach's empathy seemed to contribute to supporting clients in their autonomy. We conclude the paper with theoretical and practical implications regarding the importance of autonomy and its support within coaching.

Introduction

At the beginning of a coaching process, coaches try to understand what their clients need. By posing questions and listening carefully to what the client says coaches try to explore their clients' inner wishes and goals. Although every client has an individual coaching goal, there may be one need that all these goals are based on: the need to follow a goal that is coherent with own values and inner wishes. This need is – according to Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 2002) – also called the autonomy need. In this paper, we propose that the autonomy need is the need behind wanting such self- and value-congruent coaching goals. Assuming the importance of the autonomy need, our second question is on how the coach can support this autonomy need in order to coach successfully. Various coaching success factor models suggest that the relationship between coach and client plays an important role (Behrendt, 2004; Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2014; Greif, 2008; Passmore, 2007; Wissemann, 2007). In this relationship, the coach should be empathetic in order to truly understand the client's needs (Rekalde, Landeta & Albizu, 2015). Thus, we propose that empathy can be an autonomy need supportive behaviour. In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted a set of studies. In this paper, we describe three research studies on the importance of the autonomy need and its support through coaching. The first study compares different personal development techniques (coaching, training, supervision) with regard to the fulfilment of basic psychological needs, indicating the importance of the autonomy need. In the second study, this autonomy need and need fulfilment is looked at in real-life coaching processes. Finally, we tested whether the coach's empathy can support autonomy.

Literature Review

Before reporting our set of studies, we will describe the basic psychological needs of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and, in particular, the autonomy need as the most important need with regard to coaching; subsequently, we will address the question on how the autonomy need can be supported in coaching, focussing on empathy as an essential coach competence.

Basic Psychological Needs

If coaches want to know what their clients need, it is important to understand what the word *need* means and which needs humans have. With regard to SDT, a need can be seen as an innate requirement that is essential for every human being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). As we seek to fulfil our needs, our needs are our inner motors for our behaviour (Storch, 2004). More precisely, a need defines our motivation, which in turn shapes our cognition and therefore behaviour (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 1989; Jonas & Bierhoff, 2016; Kuhl, 2010). Thus, our needs set the basis for our motivations, intentions, and actions. However, the needs not only set the basis for an action but are also essential when it comes to the evaluation of an action. After every action, the amount of need fulfilment determines how beneficial this action was (Kelley, Holmes, Kerr, Reis, Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). The more need-fulfilling the action was, the more well-being, growth, and goal attainment it triggers; in contrast, the less need-fulfilling the action was, the less well-being and satisfaction it brings. Thus, the fulfilment of our basic human needs is essential (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017), but which basic needs can be distinguished?

There have been many different ways to classify basic human needs (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hull, 1943; Maslow, 1970; McClelland, 1987; Murray, 1938). The most common differentiation is between physiological needs, such as eating, drinking or sleeping, and psychological needs, such as wishing to be part of a community or feel related (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Maslow, 1970; Murray, 1938). With regard to the psychological needs, the most established classification of needs is the classification by SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This theory states that there are three basic psychological needs: The autonomy need, the competence need, and the relatedness need.

Autonomy need

The need for autonomy is the need "to self-organize and regulate one's own behaviour (and avoid heteronomous control), which includes the tendency to work toward inner coherence and integration among regulatory demands and goals" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 252). In other words, the autonomy need is the need to feel self-determined, self-congruent, and value-congruent (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The autonomy need is similar to the concept of self-regulation, as both are about acting according to own values (Baumann & Kuhl, 2013). In order to fulfil the autonomy need, people act according to own motives and values (Ryan & Deci, 2004). When acting on one's own motives and values, the perceived locus of causality is internal and not controlled by others, meaning one is self-determined (cognitive evaluation theory; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The more a person feels that she or he behaves in a self-determined way, the more this person is intrinsically motivated and likely to adopt and sustain the behaviour over the long term (Teixeira, Silva, Mata, Palmeira & Markland, 2012).

Competence need

The need for competence is the need "to engage optimal challenges and experience mastery or effectance in the physical and social worlds" (Deci & Ryan, 2000; p. 252). In other words, the competence need is the need to master challenges, learn new things, and be effective (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The competence need is similar to the

achievement motive, as both are about wanting to feel capable and effective (Schüler, Sheldon & Fröhlich, 2010). In order to fulfil the competence need, people turn to a social environment that supports this need (causality orientations theory; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The more the competence need is fulfilled, the more flow and intrinsic motivation can be felt (Schüler et al., 2010).

Relatedness need

The need for relatedness is the need "to seek attachments and experience feelings of security, belonging, and intimacy with others" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 252). In other words, the relatedness need is the need to feel secure, intimate, and related (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is similar to the affiliation motive, as both are about the desire to connect with others and be cared for (Schüler et al., 2010). The relatedness need can be fulfilled by satisfying relationships that help people feel secure and be part of something (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman & Deci, 2000; relationships motivation theory; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

To summarise, the autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are the core of our behaviour: The higher a specific need, the more likely we act upon it; and the better our actions fulfil our need, the more satisfied and intrinsically motivated we will feel (Sheldon, 2011). Thus, all three needs are important and should be fulfilled, but is there one specific need that coaching clients want to be fulfilled?

Needs within Coaching

When asking about what coaching clients need, coaching definitions may be of use. Although coaching is a popular and effective development intervention (Grover & Furnham, 2016; Kotte, Hinn, Oellerich & Möller, 2016), it has been defined in various ways. Usually, coaching is described as a one-to-one interaction (e.g., De Haan, Day & Sills, 2010). In addition, many coaching definitions state that coaching is about goal attainment, as it is a personal development tool (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010), has an aim (Rauen, 2014), and is about success (Wegener, Fritze & Loebbert, 2014). However, other development interventions, such as consulting or mentoring, are also one-to-one interactions that are goal-focused. Such goal-focus seems to suggest that all personnel development methods mainly focus on the competence need, as goal attainment can be seen as becoming more effective and to have learned something (competence need; Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, we suggest that coaching differs from these other techniques when it comes to the kind of goals because several coaching definitions emphasise that coaching is about self–valued, self-congruent and self-chosen goals (Grant et al., 2010; Greif, 2008; Rauen, 2014). Thus, it seems to be an important point that coaching is about (self-)reflection in order to reach self-congruent goals (Greif, 2008). In other words, a typical coaching client chooses his/her goal self-determinedly and strives to find a self-congruent way in how to attain this goal (Bachkirova & Smith, 2015). Thus, the focus in coaching seems to mainly be that clients get to know themselves – their inner wishes and goals, their resources and abilities – rather than to acquire new skills as it would be the case when the fulfilment of their competence need would be the main focus. In sum, several coaching definitions suggest that coaching is about self-congruent, self-valued and self-determined goals and goal attainment.

Self-congruency, value-congruency, and self-determination are key terms of the definition of the autonomy need (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Being autonomous means that one's thoughts and behaviours are self-congruent and self-determined which means that one behaves in accordance with the self, i.e., personal values, attitudes, interests, and desires (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2006). This leads to the hypothesis that coaching supports clients more in their autonomy than in their competence or relatedness need, as coaching focuses on attaining self-congruent goals (Bachkirova & Smith, 2015; Greif, 2008). Previous studies

already support the notion that coaching nourishes the autonomy need. For instance, coaching clients were more satisfied, when they felt supported in their autonomy (Losch, Traut-Mattausch, Mühlberger & Jonas, 2016). Moreover, coaching clients were more goal-oriented, when they and not the coaches initiated the process and expressed self-efficacy statements self-determinedly (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015; Gessnitzer, Schulte & Kauffeld, 2016).

From this perspective, in coaching the autonomy need (self-congruency and self-determination) seems to be relatively more important than the competence need (learning new skills and mastering challenges) and the relatedness need (feeling secure and related). Regarding the competence need, of course, the client's experience of own abilities and skills can become relevant in coaching and coaching can help the client to self-efficiently attain their self-congruent goals; however, coaching does not mainly build up specific skills and abilities. For building up skills and abilities, a training would be much more useful (Kauffeld, 2016). Similar to the competence need, regarding the relatedness need, a good relationship with the coach is important but only to have a secure, valuing and trusting setting in order to talk about self-valued and self-congruent goals (Baron & Morin, 2009). Thus, the primary focus in coaching does not seem to be about learning new skills or having a deep relationship with the coach but to work on self-congruent and self-determined goals (Jonas, Mühlberger, Böhm & Esser, 2017). However, developing competences and having a beneficial relationship can be part of a coaching, but this would be on behalf of helping the autonomy need fulfilment.

Context-specific need fulfilment

In every social interaction, the need fulfilment is not only about what one person needs but also about how the interaction partner fulfils these needs. This can be best described by giving an example of the coaching client Anne. Anne has a leadership position and her self-congruent goal (autonomy need) is to be an inspiring and visionary leader. To achieve this goal, she decides to be coached to find her individual leadership style and to talk about her ideas of being a good leader. In this example, Anne's inner autonomy need drives her behaviour. She enjoys talking about her goal and exploring her idea of good leadership. She evaluates her behaviour as satisfying and need fulfilling (Kelley et al., 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In other words, Anne undergoes a *loop* from her autonomy need to her behaviour back to her need fulfilment (Jonas, 2015).

When talking with a good friend earlier about the same topic, for Anne it did not feel as fulfilling as it feels with the coach right now. With her friend, Anne did not feel supported in her need, as the friend had a different opinion on good leadership and did not see Anne's point of view. As the coach values her ideas and opinion, Anne feels supported in her autonomy need. Thus, the coach is the one fulfilling Anne's autonomy need by asking questions about her goal and valuing her opinion. Summarised, in a social interaction, the interaction partner is able to fulfil one's needs (Kelley et al., 2003). Thereby, the loops of two people with their needs, motives, cognitions, and behaviours meet and influence each other (loop2loop model; Jonas, 2015). If the social interaction is functioning well, these loops nourish each other, gaining need fulfilment with each social interaction. If the social interaction is functioning poorly, these loops can hinder or violate each other, leading to dissatisfaction and disappointment. As shown in the example, the interaction partner also determines whether the person's needs are fulfilled, making an interaction either more or less satisfying (Kelley et al., 2003). Thus, an interaction partner can be need-supportive or need thwarting (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In this example, the coaching was very autonomy need supportive for Anne but the different opinion of her friend felt more like a threat, as she did not feel accepted. A need supportive versus a need thwarting environment can make a huge difference: For example, people feel healthier and less stressed with an autonomy need

supportive supervisor than with a non-supportive one (Baard, Deci & Ryan., 2004; Deci, Ryan, Gagné, Leone, Usunov & Kornazheva, 2001; Lynch, Plant & Ryan, 2005).

This satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the other's support can be of consequence, as a person will more or less likely choose a follow-up social interaction with this interaction partner (social exchange theory; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998). This could mean that Anne wants a follow-up coaching session to continue talking about her leadership goal, but may not want to talk about the topic with her friend again. However, Anne may not want to talk about private matters (e.g., her family) with her coach but may want to talk about them with her friend. Therefore, people expect specific contexts to support a specific need, such as friends fulfilling one's relatedness need or work fulfilling one's competence need. Due to this expectation, people might look for a context that supports their specific need. Thus, Anne might have looked for a coaching to find her own leadership style which supports her autonomy need; and another person might have looked for a training to learn new leadership skills which supports her or his competence need (Jonas et al., 2017). Summarised, different contexts fulfil different needs and we suggest that coaching mainly fulfils the autonomy need. This leads to our second research question on whether the coach's empathy can be supportive of the clients' autonomy need.

Empathy as an autonomy need support

Being autonomy need supportive means to support people to reflect about themselves and about their self-valued goals, to be understanding, and to let the person share ideas and make choices (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The positive effect of autonomy need support has been shown in an experiment by Oliver, Markland, Hardy, and Petherick (2008), in which participants had either an autonomy-supportive or a controlled environment; Participants in the autonomy supportive environment were much more (self-)reflective, talking more openly about themselves with more positive emotions and assents. As coaching is a process that should foster such self-reflection to attain one's goals (Greif, 2008), the coach should be autonomy-supportive (enable the clients to reflect on themselves). Thereby, clients should choose self-determinedly (Bachkirova & Smith, 2015) which means "let[ing] the client make decisions about what and how to change" (Markland, Ryan, Tobin, & Rollnick, 2005, p. 821). However, autonomy support is not only about letting one choose self-determinedly and enabling one to reflect on him- or herself but also means to be understanding (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Furthermore, when looking at the perceived autonomy support scale (health care climate questionnaire; Williams, Freedman, & Deci, 1998), a scale developed to measure autonomy support in various contexts, this support is not only about letting the client freely choose the topic but about understanding how the client sees things and about the client feeling understood. Thus, being autonomy supportive also means to emphasise and take the other's perspective (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

This "cognitive and emotional understanding of another's experience" is described as empathy (Barnett & Mann, 2013; p. 230). Furthermore, Bachkirova (2011) states that the coach has to "engage with whatever theme is presented" (p. 6). This deep understanding and engagement remind us again of the definition of empathy as an emotional and cognitive understanding of how the other person feels, with recognising that it is not one's own emotion (Cuff, Brown, Taylor & Howatt, 2016). The importance of empathy per se for therapy and consulting but also for coaching is well-known (Neukom, Schnell & Boothe, 2011; Passmore, 2010; Röckelein & Welge, 2010; Rauen, 2002; Schreyögg, 2015); more precisely, empathy has been found as one of the main competences of executive coaches (Rekalde et al., 2015). Empathy helps the coach to truly understand the client and show this understanding to the client (Eckert, Biermann-Ratjen & Bielefeld, 2012). For instance, a coaching study with video analysis has shown that clients felt more understood with a more empathetic coach (Will, Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2016). Connoting understanding can make a

client feel accepted in his/her world with his/her beliefs and values. Therefore, the client may feel supported in his/her autonomy. This understanding makes the coach's empathy to an autonomy need supportive behaviour (sports coaches; Markland & Han, 2012), as empathy can benefit the client's autonomy (Pollak et al., 2011). Thus, we propose that the coach's empathy can support a client's autonomy need.

Methodology

In order to explore the clients' needs in coaching and to understand the relation between autonomy need support and empathy, we conducted a set of three studies. We first compared coaching with other personal development techniques with regard to the three basic psychological needs. We hypothesised that coaching mainly addresses the autonomy need, as the need for autonomy is defined as the need to be self- and value-congruent (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and coaching is about attaining self-congruent goals (Greif, 2008). Building on these results, we next looked at how the three needs are fulfilled within real-life coaching interactions. Finally, as empathy may help the client to be self- and value-congruent (Pollak et al., 2011), we explored whether empathy can be regarded as an autonomy need support.

## Study 1: Coaching, Training, Supervision – Which needs are addressed?

In the first study (Mühlberger & Jonas, 2016), we compared three different personal development techniques in order to elaborate their different need fulfilments. Thus, we asked 95 possible clients with a personal development goal about their basic psychological needs according to Deci and Ryan (2002) in terms of autonomy (e.g. *It is important for me to pursue the goals that make me happy"*), competence (e.g. *It is important for me to learn new and interesting skills"*), and relatedness (e.g. *It is important for me to get along well with my interaction partners"*). Subsequently, the participants read the descriptions of three personal development techniques. These three descriptions were based on the definitions of: a) coaching (Greif, 2008; Rauen, 2014), b) training, and c) supervision (Rauen, 2014). Thus, coaching was described as a support in (self-)reflectivity and self-management, training was described as a support in skill and competence development, and supervision was described as a support in reflecting the business behaviour. The participants were then asked how they expect each of these three personal development techniques to fulfil the autonomy (e.g. *This technique enables me to pursue the goals that make me happy"*), competence (e.g. *This technique enables me to learn new and interesting skills"*), and relatedness (e.g. *This technique enables me to get along well with my interaction partners"*) need. The results show that people indicated that specifically the need for autonomy is addressed in coaching; the need for competence is less important and the need for relatedness plays a minor role. [1] People with a high need for autonomy also expected the coaching to fulfil both the autonomy and the competence need.

In accordance with our hypothesis, the results depict that coaching is expected to fulfil the autonomy need. However, can coaching really fulfil this expectation and fulfil the autonomy need? To answer this question, the second study with real-life coaching processes was conducted.

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[1] Training mostly addressed the need for competence and, to a lesser degree, the autonomy and relatedness need. Supervision mostly addressed the relatedness need and, to a lesser degree, the competence need; the autonomy need was the least important need. This is in accordance with the assumptions by Jonas et al. (2017).

***Figure 1. The possible client's expected need fulfilment with regard to coaching.***
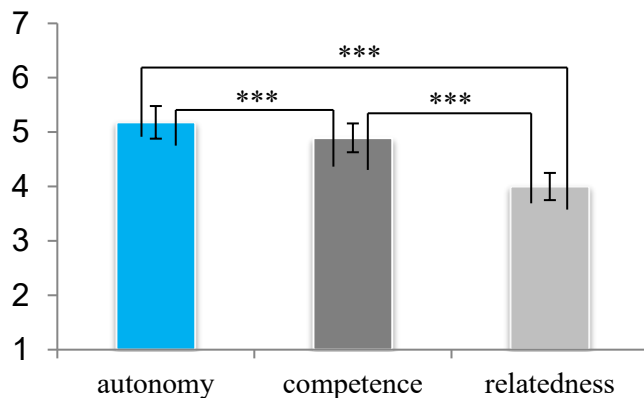
Note. All three needs differed from each other on a *** = $p<.001$ significance level.

Study 2: The autonomy need and its fulfilment within the coaching interaction

In our second study, 112 real-life client coaching sessions were accompanied by research activities (Schiemann, Mühlberger, Braumandl & Jonas, 2016); however, we tried to use measures that were already embedded in the coaching process so that, even with an informed consent, the clients did not feel observed and did not answer in a socially desirable way. Thus, we used three scales of the German version of the Business-Focused Inventory of Personality (BIP; Hossiep & Paschen, 2003), as the BIP was already used for analysing strengths and development fields with regard to the client's goal. The three scales were the design motivation scale for assessing the autonomy need (e.g. *I fight for my beliefs, even if I have to put up with downsides*"), the achievement motivation scale for the competence need (e.g. *I am only satisfied, if I accomplish extraordinary achievements"*), and the sociability scale for the relatedness need (e.g. *I avoid provoking others"*). The BIP was given to the clients at the beginning of their coaching, measuring the needs. With regard to the need fulfilment after the coaching, we used items from the Check-the-Coach questionnaire (Bachmann, Jansen, & Mäthner, 2004) that were related to the autonomy need fulfilment in terms of a together designed process (e.g., *"My coach encouraged me to reflect and co-design the coaching process"*), the competence need fulfilment in terms of learned competences and skills (e.g. *Due to the coaching, I can use my abilities and skills more goal-focused"*), and the relatedness need fulfilment in terms of a positive coach-client-relationship (e.g. *Our relationship was characterised by valuing each other"*). The last items from the Check-the-Coach questionnaire were used to measure coaching satisfaction (e.g. *I am satisfied with the coaching"*).

The results showed that the fulfilment of all three needs leads to satisfaction with the coaching. This is in line with previous research on basic psychological need fulfilment leading to more satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, the clients with a high autonomy need were more satisfied, as their autonomy need was fulfilled through coaching. The need for competence and for relatedness did not play a role with regard to fulfilment and/or coaching satisfaction.

Figure 2. The role of the autonomy need with regard to the need fulfilment and, thus, satisfaction in the coaching process.
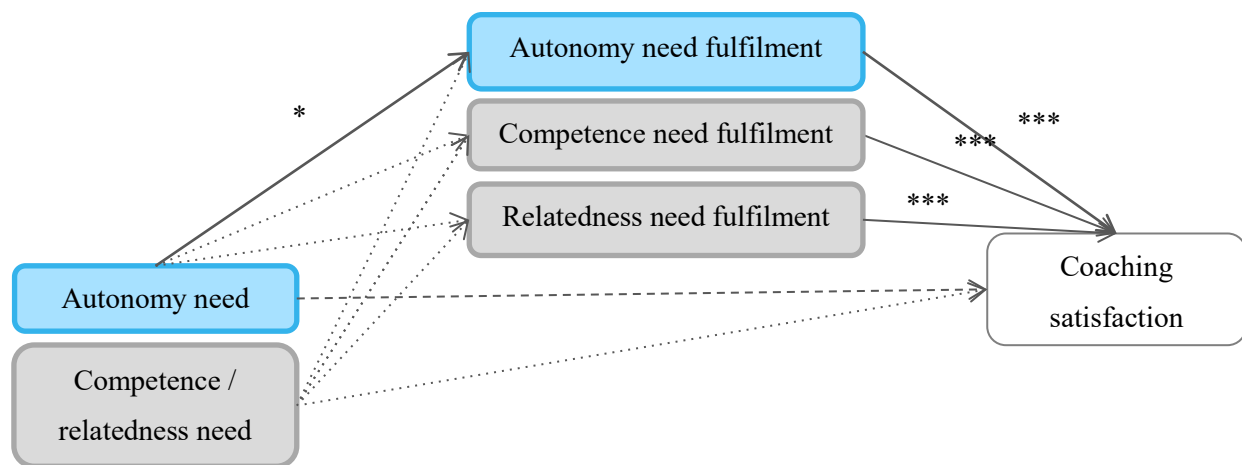
Note. *** = *p*<.001 and * = *p*<.05 significance level.

The study showed that also in real-life coaching processes, the autonomy need played a major role. When clients had a high need for autonomy, coaching fulfilled this need which further made clients satisfied with the coaching.

According to our results, coaches should fulfil all three needs to make clients satisfied with their coaching: Coaches should be friendly and show appreciation, which fulfils the relatedness need; they should address the client's competences, which fulfils the competence need; and they should let the client be self-determined, which fulfils the autonomy need. However, as shown in our study, if clients have a high need for competence or relatedness, they cannot fully achieve this fulfilment within the context of coaching. Only clients with a high need for autonomy can achieve the autonomy need fulfilment through the coaching. Thus, our third study focussed on the coaches and on how they can support the client's autonomy need.

Study 3: Empathy as an autonomy need support
The third study (Schiemann, Mühlberger, & Jonas, 2016) was conducted with 95 coaches with different backgrounds and experiences, in collaboration with XING Coaches (https://coaches.xing.com). In order for the coaches to not focus too much on the analysed questions, we told the coaches that the questionnaire was about new methods of coaching. After an informed consent, we said that before we can talk about coaching methods, we need to know what kind of coaching they as a coach offer. Besides demographics, we here asked questions about the three needs in terms of autonomy (e.g. *My client wants to decide for him-/herself how to design the coaching"*), competence (e.g. *My client wants to feel competent in the coaching"*), relatedness (e.g. *My client wants to get along well with me as his/her coach"*) (adapted from the positive items of the BPNS at work scale; Deci et al., 2001; Ilardi, Leone, Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Kasser, Davey & Ryan, 1992). In accordance with our assumption and result from study 1, again the client's autonomy need is perceived as most important; the competence and the relatedness need did not significantly differ this time (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. The client's needs with regard to coaching.
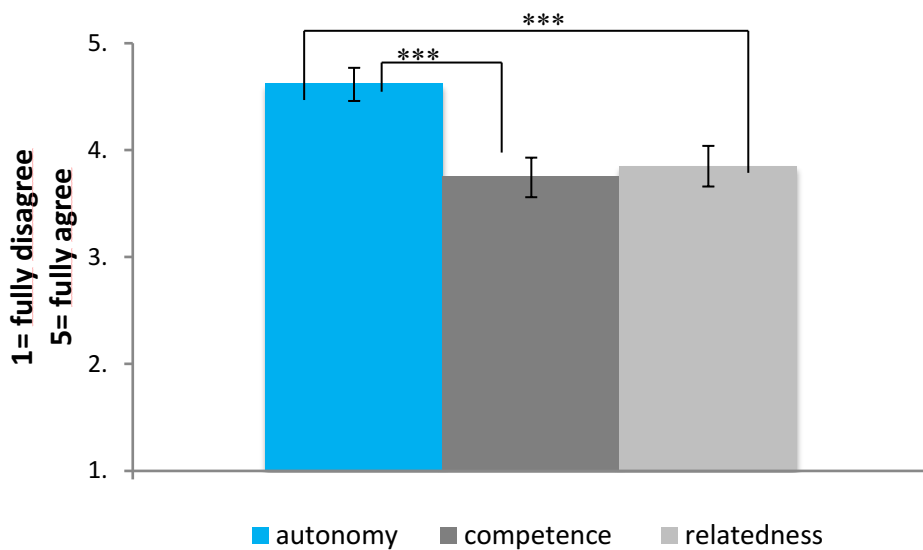
Note. *** = *p*<.001.

Subsequently, we asked the coaches about their autonomy need support as a coach with regard to the Perceived Autonomy Need Support Scale (e.g. *As a coach I encourage my client to ask questions"*) (Williams et al., 1998). The descriptive analysis depicts that this has been rated as quite important with an average rating of 6.16 with regard to the scale ranging from 1 (minimum) to 7 (maximum). Moreover, the coaches indicated that the higher they perceived the client's autonomy need and the client's competence need, the more autonomy need supportive behaviour they wanted to show.

After looking at the importance of the autonomy need and its support in coaching, we were interested in the relation between the autonomy need support and empathy. We asked the coaches on how important empathy is with regard to their coaching that they offer; we derived the empathy items from the empathy definition and differentiation by Davis (1983) (e.g. *showing empathy"*). The descriptive analysis depicts that showing empathy has been rated as essential with an average rating of 85,9% with regard to the scale ranging from 0% (minimum) to 100% (maximum). In addition, the more coaches indicated to support their clients in their autonomy need, the more they indicated that they tried to show empathy.

In summary, coaches indicated that autonomy is what clients need and that supporting clients in their autonomy is crucial. Moreover, the more autonomy supportive the coaches, the more empathy they showed. This result suggests that empathy contributes to supporting clients in their autonomy.

Conclusion

SDT proposes three fundamental psychological needs: Autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002). We hypothesised that, in coaching, clients mainly strive to increase their need for autonomy and that coaches should therefore mainly address and support the autonomy need of the client (also see Jonas et al., 2017). In line with this

assumption, we found that not only potential clients (Study 1) but also real coaching clients (Study 2) and coaches (Study 3) believe that a coaching specifically addresses and supports the need for autonomy. This suggests that the autonomy need is most relevant in coaching and, therefore, should be supported.

The concept of autonomy support does not only mean to enhance autonomy by considering the individual as capable of self-determination but also to empathetically understanding the client and his/her point of view (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Thus, autonomy-supportive coaches also try to truly understand their clients. Could empathy be exactly what a client needs? We suggested that empathy is a behaviour that supports a client's need for autonomy, as empathy can help the client to feel understood and accepted for his/her values and views (Eckert et al., 2012), and has been shown to be beneficial for the autonomy need (Pollak et al., 2011). Our findings show that the coach's autonomy support and empathy are related (Study 3). Therefore, empathising with the client may support the client's autonomy.

Still, our results are only a first step towards understanding the mechanisms between the coach's empathy and the client's autonomy need – especially because we have only asked the coaches, who perceive their empathy differently to objective measures (Markland & Han, 2012; Will et al., 2016). Therefore, studies are planned to further explore the coach's empathy and autonomy need support with regard to the client's autonomy need and autonomy need fulfilment. This may help to understand whether the coach's empathic behaviour plays a major role for the client's perceived autonomy support, how much empathic behaviour the coach should show to support the client's autonomy, and whether there can be too much empathy. As empathy is not a disposition and can change depending on the person's motivation (Zaki, 2014), empathy can also be trained as a coach competence (Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). Furthermore, looking at difficult clients may increase our understanding of when and how the coach's empathy changes in terms of quantity or quality.

In sum, our research suggests that the autonomy need is most important in coaching. Thus, we recommend that the respective coach should be autonomy need supportive, which can mean to provide the client with choices and options and ask self-reflecting questions. Furthermore, we advise coaches to support their clients to explore their clients' inner wishes and goals, strengths and resources. However, we want to emphasize that supporting clients in their autonomy can also mean to empathetically respond to the clients so that they feel understood and supported in their striving for autonomy.

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