Academic Paper

The Experience of Deep Connection in Coaching Relationships

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Abstract

This paper explores how coaches experience moments of deep connection with their clients in coaching relationships. Although there is a growing interest in the coaching relationship and its importance in coaching, the topic remains under-researched. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to gain a rich ideographic understanding of the connection by interviewing six coaching participants. The findings reveal that connection is important to coaches. Their accounts encompass moments of genuine meeting, warmth, intensity, intimacy, openheartedness and strong affective bodily sensations. The research raiseS some interesting questions for coach-educators and practitioners alike, including, what coach capabilities are required to work sensitively and ethically with these intensities.

Introduction

As human beings we are able to have deep connections with one another and in this text, I will argue that coaches are not immune to such experiences within coaching relationships. The word *connection* is often used colloquially to describe a special encounter with another person, for example, 'when we met, we had a great connection'. The 'con' element of the word connection comes from the Latin 'com' meaning 'together with' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2021). The research question might then also ask, how do coaches experience significant moments of being together with their clients?

The connection between coach and client is particularly relevant considering the coaching relationship is insufficiently researched (Bachkirova, Rose & Noon, 2020). The purpose of this study is to further the understanding of the coaching relationship by investigating the relational phenomena of connection. Beyond assessing if coaches experience moments of connection with their clients the study will also answer the question; how do coaches experience the connection

within coaching relationships? In answering this question, the paper will shed light on the thoughts and feelings of coaches as alongside how they make meaning of their lived experiences of connection. The study also aims to assess what kind of implications for practice the element of connection has for coaching.

Literature Review

The literature review around the coaching relationship shows that it is widely acknowledged by almost all within the coaching practice and academic field that the relationship is at the heart of positive coaching outcomes (de Haan et al., 2013). The value of the coaching relationship is stressed by O'Riordan and Palmer who view the relationship 'as a proxy for the coaching process in itself' (2021, p. 21). This moves the relationship into the foreground when considering what is central to coaching.

Importantly the 'quality of the relationship between coach and client is considered the most important factor in the outcomes of coaching' (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2018, p. 7). However, Ianiro et al. (2013) suggests there is little known about the coach and client interaction, or how these interactions form the coaching relationship (de Haan, 2008). Additionally, Ianiro et al. (2014, p. 1) also indicate the 'interpersonal behaviour in coaching remains unexplored'. In particular, there is a lack of research investigating the qualitative characteristics that shape coaching relationships (O'Broin & Palmer, 2010a) such as the connection.

Popular terms which are repeatedly cited in the coaching research literature that lie close to the connection and describe what is happening in-between coach and client are the rapport (Gan & Chong, 2015) and the bond (O'Broin & Palmer 2010a) as featured in the working alliance. However, the focus of the research around the working alliance is more on the shared agreement on goals and trust (O'Broin & Palmer, 2010b) rather than in depth meeting between coach and client.

There are other concepts within the coaching literature that exist to describe important relational dynamics, such as critical moments (de Haan, 2008), which articulate a sudden shift in the coaching process. There is also the research around emotions in coaching emotions (Cox et al., 2016). However critical moment nor the work around emotions can be compared to the relational intensity of connection described in the psychotherapeutic literature (Mearns & Cooper, 2005).

If we assume 'the active ingredients' (McKenna & Davis, 2009) within coaching are likely to be the same in psychotherapy, then it seems relevant to investigate if coaches experience something analogous to relational depth (Mearns & Cooper, 2005). Relational depth is described as a moment of profound relational engagement when the therapist and client are relating deeply, feel present, and there is sense of warmth and acceptance towards each other (Mearns & Cooper, 2005).

From another psychotherapeutic perspective Friedman (1985) and Hycner (1991) who come from an existential and humanistic approach have both written about instances of 'I-Thou' meetings. These are instances, originally written about by Martin Buber (1958) during which aloneness is overcome and there is a mutual experience of being real and fully encountering one another as human beings in very meaningful way.

While the I-Thou encounter has been written about within a coaching context (Reynolds, 2005), there is no existing research on the topic within the academic literature in coaching. Considering the psychotherapeutic literature widely agrees that connection is the 'primary determinant of effective therapy' (Kauffman and Bachkirova 2009, p. 4), connection might also be equally relevant to coaching.

Methodology

The research question how do coaches experience connection was investigated using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in accordance with Smith et al. (2009). IPA was chosen as a research method because it allowed me as researcher to understand the participants subjectively lived, embodied or emotional experiences (Smith and Osborn, 2014). It enables the interpretation of rich descriptive data and allows for meaning to be made of ambiguous and complex human experiences which are hard to communicate (Smith and Osborn, 2014).

Participants

The participant sample was 'selected purposefully' (Smith et al, 2009, p. 48) by contacting coaching supervisors who helped recruit participants in there network. Within the recommended small sample size of six participants (Smith et al., 2009) there were three male and three female participants. It was important to recruit a mixed sample of participants who did not all come from one specific coaching approach, as I wanted to assess if the connection might be apparent regardless of coaching modality or experience.

Data collection

To collect data, interviews were chosen as they enable the development of relationships, allowing participants to become more open and share their lived experience (Smith et al. 2009). Due to our current circumstance at the time of Covid-19, recorded interviews were conducted online via Zoom. The sixty-minute semi-structured interviews were facilitated by asking open-ended questions (King et al., 2010) which were informed by the research question (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Analysis

I followed the six stages process suggested by Smith et al. (2009) to analyse the data.

Stage one

Listening to the interview and reading and rereading the interview transcript to familiarise and immerse myself in the data.

Stage two

Taking first notes of anything that appeared to be interesting while staying close to the experience of the participants. Notes were composed of descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments.

Stage three

The emergent themes were developed by re-reading the original transcript as well as looking at the initial notes taken in stage one.

Stage four

At this point I was looking for connections across the themes by mapping out how the themes relate to one another.

Stage five

I simply repeated stages one to four again with the next transcript and did this again until I had gone through all six transcripts until every theme became explicit and connections across them

were made.

Stage six

I identified relevant connections between the themes of each transcript. This allowed for patterns to become apparent across cases. Themes from different cases helped to illuminate each other and I was able to assess which themes across the whole data set were the most relevant.

The analysis of the data developed firstly by looking at the particular, then picking up on shared elements; moving from the descriptive to interpretative (Smith et al., 2009). Elements of the data which appeared at first specific to singular accounts of participants became comparable between the different accounts of each participant. This indicated the clear relationship between the 'whole in light of its parts, the parts in light of the whole' (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 12).

The relationship between themes were highlighted even further through the use of a visual mapping technique (Braun & Clark, 2013), originally used within a thematic analysis, to graphically represent themes (Smith et al., 2009) in proximity to one another. Looking at the themes in this way enabled me to reject some irrelevant themes and move prominent themes around to form clusters, which represent the most salient items within the data map. These clusters became the superordinate themes, representing the most important information in relation to the research topic.

To analyse the data, I have utilised a double hermeneutic approach. The participants spoke of their interpretation of the research topic and I in turn have my interpretation of their interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). The emphasis was on an inter-relational process of shared meaning making (Bryman, 2008).

Philosophical Position

My interpretations were influenced by my interpretivist epistemological position, which infers that the research participants and I are interdependent and reciprocal in our interaction (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Additionally, interpretivism implies that reality is multiple and relative (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

To expand on my research paradigm, I looked at Heidegger's idea of 'dasein'(Heidegger et al., 1962) or being in the world as an ontological position and assed what the epistemic implications where for my reasearch. Being-in-the-world also means being-with, or 'mitsein'. We are always in a with-world or 'mitwelt' Heidegger et al., 1962). To unpack my own philosophical position, I will bring the phenomenological ideas of being-in-the-world Heidegger et al., 1962) alongside Timothy Ingold's (2015) thoughts.

Ingold (2015) who comes from the field of anthropology provides some interesting ideas. The word *data* has its origins in Latin and comes from *dare*, meaning to *give*. Data is something that is given and should not be extracted from the world in which we are participating in. To do this would, 'expunge knowing from being' (Ingold, 2015, p. 6). This ontological commitment to the being-with and in the world means; 'We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world' (Barad, 2007, p. 185). The latter lies in stark contrast to objectivism and its implication that there is a single reality which exists 'independently of individual or social experience' (Bryman, 2008, p. 18) which can be objectively measured.

Ingold (2015) makes a distinction between two scientific practices, one form of science being is a practice of throwing a hard ball at the surface of the world; with each hit of the ball a datum is generated. When this act is repeated again and again, enough data is accumulated for a scientific breakthrough. Alternatively, Ingold (2015) proposes a 'soft ball' approach to research, with each impact of the ball onto the surface of the world the soft ball bends and warps. It forms an impression on the world and the world makes an impression on the ball. Each responds and is

transformed by these encounters in a 'relation of correspondence' (Ingold, 2015, p. 8). This idea sits in opposition to the conceptualisation that things can be researched or theorised in isolation from the world and the social relations we live in (Ingold, 2015).

When hermeneutics is applied to lived experience (*erlebnis*) understanding becomes the moment when life begins to know itself (Dilthey, 1976). Knowledge finds its way to be known as the research process unfurls with life and with those with which we engage (Ingold, 2015).

Ethical consideration

Ethical standards were ensured by following the rigorous university procedures. All the participants were reminded that they were taking part on a voluntary basis and if they wanted to opt out of the study at any stage they could do so. Before the interview commenced, participants signed a consent form which indicated that their name would be kept anonymous, confidentiality would be upheld.

Findings

The findings were grouped into three distinct themes:

1. *Optimal relational state*
2. *Relational zone*
3. *The Variance of Intensity*

Within these themes the variance between the different descriptions of connection became apparent.

Optimal relational state

Participants reported the connection to be central to coaching, they indicated the connection gave them a sense of purpose.

> After a session where I experience connection, I'm like on top of the world, I'm like, oh this is perfect you know; this is why I love this job. (P1)

Beyond the connection affecting the participants mood, coaches said they also felt a sense of ease, when absorbent in the coaching process, experiencing an effortless state of flow and having intuitive insights.

> I'm feeling effortless, like there's a flow, like things are dropping into the space, insights are arising. Whatever, there's just a fluidity between us and it's very awake. I would say, I feel awake, effortless in flow. (P3)

Another participant spoke about a authentic and 'deep emotional' connection with their client which could be interpreted as empathic relatedness. For him these qualities of the relationship enable insights that appeared to be helpful for the client.

> That genuine deep emotional connection, I feel I can make those intuitive leaps that can be really insightful and help. (P2)

Relational zone

Coaches used the words vulnerability and tenderness to speak about connection as a genuine human encounter.

Participant 4 experienced a deeper human relatedness that transcended the perceived dissimilarities of life experiences between herself, and her clients this was linked to showing up in the relationship as an unedited version of herself.

> I am more inclined to be focused on the connection, it can be even more sweet to feel like, this person is a completely different character, has lived a totally different life but we have this shared humanity, or this shared experience, shared tenderness. (P4)

The theme also represented a sense of interconnectedness where coaches stopped seeing difference between themselves and their clients and feeling like they were fully in their client's world.

> A lot of emotion in the room, from her and from me because I felt completely in her world really quickly because […] at the time but I felt very deeply connected to her very quickly and I think that was a result of that emotional energy. (P6)

Participants also described a sense of intersubjectivity as a coherent field or energy moving between themselves and the client, receiving the client within their nervous system and feeling a shared resonance:

> I receive you; I experience you inside my nervous system. So, if I'm aware of that, there's already a connection, it's not like you're far away and you're through a screen, there's more, I'm actually receiving you inside me so if I'm aware of that I open my nervous system and my energetic field to include you and to invite you then there's going to be more resonance between us and more connection between us. (P3)

While participant 2 recognised that there is something important happening in the space in-between' himself and the client. He locates his sense of self or his awareness within the "energised" co-created space of connection.

> I'm in the space between us, the time and the space between us and it feels kind of like I suppose a very engaging, very energising space to be. (P2)

The Variance of Intensity

The final theme showed two polarities within the data. On the one end of the spectrum participants used the following words to describe their experiences: light, soft, intimate, glowing, warmth, open heartedness, affection and joy rising in their body.

> With this particular person it would definitely be closeness, warmth … um… acceptance. Upon further reflection the participant elaborates: I reduce the feeling down, like straining it, it's like glowing, you like glowing here. It's like a warmth, affection, yeh. (P1)

Another participant reported a somatic response within her body and located a sensation of 'joy rising' whilst making a hand gesture moving from her stomach to her chest. She identifies as being a person who 'naturally smiles' often. Letting herself feel more of this embodied heartfelt enjoyment ascending and 'coming out' during moments of connection, permits her to be a more authentic version of herself rather than incongruously acting as a coach.

> The atmosphere felt much more fun, enjoyable and relaxed. And what I felt in my body, I felt like joy rising, and I always, I smile a lot naturally but when moments of connections happen, I just feel like I'm smiling so much more and it's like, if I have to place it in my body it's like a feeling rising from my stomach, up and coming out. So like, it's almost as if I'm allowed to be more myself as a person rather than myself as a coach. (P1)

While another participant reports:

> There's a sweetness in it and there's an underlying joy in a way at just experiencing connection, feeling the connection. There's intimacy in that place. (P4)

On the other end of the spectrum the coaches' descriptions include powerful physical experience.

Participant 6 shared a very strong somatic response when recalling the memory of the connection. The visceral experience of the past event was brought was brought into the present during the interview. He spoke of goosebumps coming over him while the interview was taking place. Both the bodily sensation he spoke of and his description of 'coming down' from the experience, suggests the connection can in some instances be described as a heightened state.

> It's making my hair on the back of my neck stand up now because it was such a powerful sort of cry and we spent the rest of the time sort of uh, almost coming down from that you know. (P6)

The best example he could find to illustrate the feeling of 'powerful' connection between him and his client was the 'primitive emotional' response he had at the birth of his son. The use of this strong emotional and meaningful event in his life as a comparison to the sensation of connection speaks of the extremity and significance the experience of connection was for him.

> The closest I can get to it, is the feeling I had when our first son was born where there was an instant powerful emotional reaction from me and the reaction was very primitive but felt completely right at the time… (P6)

Although the 'strong visceral' response felt appropriate to that coaching relationship at the time, he did express that it was 'almost scary'. This could mean a boundary was almost crossed because the feeling of hyper-connection was on the edge of being too much and what was happening in the relationship could get 'out of control'.

> A very powerful, visceral response actually and as I say almost scary because it felt as if it could be out of my control or get out of my control and it was very, it was very powerful. (P6)

Importantly participant 4 said they felt the relationship required more of boundary as the connection reached the point of too much intimacy.

> Curious to see, like, whether this kind of like hyper connected feeling, whether that will settle into something that feels more pedestrian or whether it's going to stay like that. But like, in terms of intimacy, it was like holy shit, like how do I manage the possibility of too much intimacy. (P4)

The coach continues:

> I think that was the first time I thought, ok, what's an appropriate level of openness for me to have because what she is offering, what she is wanting is a level of connectedness that probably needs to be boundaried. (P4)

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings show the data only partly relates to the coaching research literature as the data seems to resonate with a collection of psychotherapeutic or other texts. Elements of the data can be compared to the transpersonal concept of intersubjectivity, embodied empathy (Sleater and Scheiner, 2020) or 'empathic attunement' (Cooper, 2005, p. 10) in the sense that the coach felt the client in their nervous system or spoke about shared resonance.

Additionally, the warm glow of open heartedness, love, shared tenderness of relating deeply and genuine encounter were echoed in Buber's I-Thou philosophy (1958) and the construct of relational depth (Mearns & Cooper, 2005). While the experiences of joy effortless intuitive insights and flow strongly echoes flow being grounded in positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi,1990). In this context it would appear the connection for some participants is about an effortless optimal relation state when coaching is working at its best. However, in stark contrast to this it is the descriptions of connection as; energised, intense, hyper-connection, almost out of control, scary or overwhelming intimacy and vulnerability that require further thought, in terms of their relation to psychotherapeutic relationships and implication for coaching practice.

The need to establish a boundary during the hyper connected, intense, very intimate state of connection, might speak of the coach's attachment style (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and indicates how closely related the data is to the psychotherapeutic experience of the client practitioner relationships (Mearns & Cooper, 2005). This similarity between the two professions is supported by de Haan (2008) who claims that the difference is marginal and exists in emphasis only. It is this fine line between psychotherapy and coaching highlighted in the findings of this study which requires further consideration.

Implications for Practice

There are implications for coaches when they experience an increase in felt intimacy with their clients. In that moment, coaches need to become reflexive about the nature of the relationship. Self-reflexivity in this context implies both becoming aware of the coaches' practice at large (Bachkirova, 2016) as well as taking the opportunity to sense feeling-fully into the nature or quality of the relationship in the moment within the coaching session. Asking; does the client feel near or close or does the atmosphere feel warm, intense, or intimate? Enquiring in this way might enable reflexivity of felt affective details of the relationship, allowing for coaches to respond and regulate their own engagement in their relationship accordingly. The data suggests it is important for the coach to identify whether the connection feels, intense or too intimate and the relationship needs to be more boundaried. It is this self-reflexivity around the connection, the relationship and the coaching process that should be explored within supervision (Bachkirova, 2016) to ensure safe and ethical practice. In terms of ethical practice coaches must work to the extent of their capabilities to practice ethically (Bachkirova and Kauffman, 2009).

Implications for Training

The focus of coaching should be on the coaching relationship (Bachkirova, 2016). It is therefore vital for coaches to develop an awareness of themselves as the instrument within the relationship (Bachkirova, 2016). As part of their professional and self-development, they could also assess their own competencies and skillsets when working with emotions and intense connections. If the coaches are working with such deep connections as the findings show, it is important for ethical reasons that they become aware of the boundaries between coaching and the psychotherapeutic elements within their practice (Bachkirova and Kauffman, 2009). The question is, what form of learning is necessary for coaches to develop the ability to work with such profound relational situations as the findings show?

Previously within coaching education, due to the growing popularity of coaching as a profession there has been a proliferation of fast-track courses which focus on developing skills and adding up hours of practice to prove proficiency (Bachkirova, et al., 2017). This may lead to coaches not being well prepared for intensities of deep connection.

Academic courses provide more than straightforward skills training for coaches to begin to work within the profession. Higher education creates the possibilities for knowledge creation in addition to 'integrating knowledge into practice' (Bachkirova et al., 2017, p. 33). While the latter are essential requirements, according to the result identified it seems that coaches also require additional other forms of learning. A logical suggestion could be that coaching education needs to include a more of an experiential component within the curriculum for coaches to work with connection.

While there may be a limit to how transferable the psychotherapeutic literature is to coaching (de Haan, 2008), historically within psychotherapeutic training, students are often required to undergo in-depth experiential learning to encounter their own life experiences. Learning outcomes of this may be that practitioners are able to become aware and hold their own experiences in relation to their future clients (Truax, 1964). Practitioners might also develop sensibilities towards affects, emotions, or self-regulation (Grant, 2006) and be reflective of their own attachment style (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991). This could result in coaches being more self-aware and develop themselves as an instrument (Bachkirova, 2016) of coaching. Which may lead to coaches being more competent to work responsibly during moments of connection.

Such personal and professional developments are needed as an ethical prerequisite for practice because coaching bodies, such as the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), in their guidelines require coaches to be appropriately qualified to work with their clients and honestly represent their relevant experience and qualifications (EMCC, 2016). This research indicates that suitably qualified means upholding a duty of care towards the client by being fully proficient to work with moments of profound intensities of connection, deep psychological contact, intimacy and felt intersubjectivity. As coaching is still an unregulated profession (Joo, 2005) there is scope for underqualified practitioners to engage in precarious relational situations that may be beyond their competency and experience.

Validity and Limitations

The rigour that is needed for reliable qualitative research was only upheld to the limit of my abilities as this was my first piece of academic research. My subjective interpretations were a product of my life experiences and previous assumptions.

Phenomenological methods to research are often criticized for being less transferable because findings are ideographic and subjective (Paley, 2017). The generalisability of the study is also limited due to the small sample size (Gray, 2010). Additionally, Braun and Clark (2013) criticize IPA as an approach for being primarily descriptive.

However, adopting an idiographic approach (Smith and Osborn, 2014) to research and being curious about the descriptions of distinct subjective experience (Smith et al., 2009) is important as 'subjective meanings play a crucial role in social actions' (Walliman, 2006, p. 15) and our understanding of them.

Further Research

A natural progression from this research might be to take the data on flow or intuitive insights as a cue to assess the efficacy of connection, asking how it might positively affect the coaching process. Looking at the connection as a display of the optimal coaching relationship might seem logical,

considering the importance of the coaching relationship to coaching outcomes (de Haan et al., 2013).

However, before researching the optimal functioning of the relationship, the first requirement for further research would be to assess if the connection is experienced by coaching clients and ask if they also experience similar deep connection and if so, how? This would be vital as coaching in general is in service of the client (Bachkirova et al., 2017).

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