Academic Paper

Walking the line: the boundaries between coaching and therapy

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Abstract

This research adds to the literature on how coaches navigate the boundaries between therapy and coaching. It gathers the first-person perspectives of coaches who are also trained in Transactional Analysis (TA), following a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodology. Findings highlight the responsibility of the coach to identify the boundaries; contracting and re-contracting to maintain psychological safety and maintaining a high degree of self-awareness to walk the line between work appropriate for coaching and therapy. Among the implications for coaching practice are considerations about the use of language and terminology and managing the power dynamic of the coaching dyad.

Introduction

Transactional Analysis (TA) is arguably best known as a psychotherapeutic theory (although it is now featured in three additional fields: education, organisational and counselling) offering insight into the intrinsic nature of individuals and what transpires during communication (Berne, 1961). The integration of TA psychotherapeutic theory into coaching practice is still relatively unexplored. The boundaries and potential prerequisites for safe practice are similarly unexamined.

Although there is some use of TA in coaching, this is limited predominantly to the drama triangle and the ego state model (Tilney, 1998). Coach exposure to often simplified views of TA models raises the issue of training and psychological safety if deployed by coaches with minimal TA knowledge and emphasises a requirement of working within safe boundaries (Bachkirova & Baker, 2018; Maxwell, 2009).

This article stems from a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) study exploring the use of TA scripts and strokes in coaching practice. Interviews with coaches who were trained in both TA and coaching allowed detailed exploration of the use of scripts and strokes in coaching, a wider theme

also emerged with potential broader relevance. The coaches acknowledged the need for depth to attain meaningful change but recognised the risk of compromising psychological safety. Two primary categories emerged from the data analysis: 1) Considerations regarding the use of therapeutic language and jargon and 2) Coach monitoring and self-monitoring to maintain boundaries.

In the following sections, I will provide a concise overview of the relevant literature, followed by an outline of the methodology, including participant selection, data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. Subsequently, the findings are presented, followed by a discussion and conclusion with additional recommendations for future research.

Literature review

Analysis suggests overlaps between the fields of coaching and TA, which are possibly obscured by differing terminologies. For example, narrative coaching aligns with TA's emphasis on life scripts and offers avenues for personal transformation (Drake, 2009, 2018, 2007; Tosi, 2010). Similarly, positive strokes in coaching correlate with solution-focused approaches, emphasising strengths and capabilities (Grant & Cavanagh, 2018).

Searches across academic databases and coaching literature sources investigating how and why TA concepts and approaches have been used within coaching yielded limited results. Research into TA within psychotherapy is similarly scant, although recent studies validate its efficacy (Vos & van Rijn, 2022). Central to TA, Strokes influence motivation and psychological well-being (Berne, 1961; Novellino, 2005; Steiner, 2003). Tools derived from TA concepts, including scripts and strokes, are increasingly popular in coaching but lack robust validation (Vos & van Rijn, 2021). Due to limited empirical evidence in TA-coaching integration, broader psychological and therapeutic literature was also examined (Bachkirova & Baker, 2018; Bachkirova & Cox, 2004; Griffiths & Campbell, 2017; Spinelli, 2008) to gain a wider perspective and understanding of the existing research base.

Leading researchers in the therapeutic use of TA similarly recognise the potential for usefulness within coaching. For example, Vos and van Rijn (2022) conducted a systematic literature review and meta-analysis, concluding that TA might be an effective treatment for clients, further suggesting this could be applicable across different settings. Western (2012) emphasises understanding the psyche of the coachee, integrating the 'wounded self' with the 'celebrated self'. He notes the growing relevance of this integration in coaching, suggesting a blurring line between coaching and counselling (Maxwell, 2009; Simons, 2006; Jopling, 2007).

While some coaching programs incorporate broad psychological concepts, including a surface-level understanding of TA principles, the lack of direct empirical research on these concepts, particularly within coaching, highlights a gap in understanding their safe application and transferability.

Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance, acknowledging the socially constructed nature of reality and the pivotal role of social and cultural contexts in knowledge creation. Scripts, strokes and coaching are subjective, socially constructed elements that depend on environmental forces and individual interpretations. Hence, a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach was chosen to align with interpretivist epistemology (Charmaz, 2014).

Participant Selection

Interviewing coaches actively using TA suggested that the nature of the enquiry was suited to a purposive/selective sampling technique (Charmaz, 2014), thus allowing the selection and exclusion criteria discussed below.

The inclusion criteria required participants to be qualified through a graduate coaching qualification or with an accredited body. Additionally, all participants required minimum TA training by attending a TA101 or equivalent self-directed learning. These stages of training, both in TA and coaching, show a level of professional expertise and knowledge whilst demonstrating a foundational understanding of relevant theory and practice. As part of the study, participants were also required to use TA to inform their practice, thus providing the relevant experience and context to support their responses and ideas. Finally, interviewees were required to hold one-to-one coaching sessions with adults; this was simply to give focus and specification within the study. Table 1 below summarises the participants' demographics.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Name	Profession	TA trained Modality	Nationality
Elena	Psychologist and coach	Year 2 of psychotherapy training	British working in the UK
Tracey	CTA, counsellor, psychotherapist, and coach	Psychotherapeutic	Irish working in Ireland
Ava	CTA, TSTA, coach and supervisor	Educational	South African working in South Africa
Sophie	CTA, coach, and supervisor	Educational	French working in Kenya
Collette	Coach	Organisational	South American working in South Korea
Jane	CTA and coach	Organisational	British working in the UK
Malik	TSTA, CTA and Coach	Counselling & Education	Polish working in Guatemala
Michelle	Coach	TA101 & Foundation Year	British working in the UK
Charlie	Coach	TA101 & Foundation Year	British working in the UK
Zara	CTA and coach	Educational	British working in the UK

Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst (TSTA)
Certified Transactional Analysis (CTA)

Data Collection

Participants were interviewed virtually via Zoom, where the average interview lasted 50 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured (Charmaz, 2014), allowing for a non-standardised, non-directive and flexible list consisting primarily of open questions. This allowed rich, in-depth data about participants' experiences and perspectives with an emergent generation of themes.

As the process advanced, core questions were refined, gaining a more profound understanding of emerging themes, as recommended by Charmaz. This process facilitated the evolution of this paper from the original larger body of research; interviewees progressed from initial questions relating to their use of scripts and strokes to encompass broader considerations for safe practice when applied to coaching.

Data Analysis

Following each interview, transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarisation with the data. Open coding was conducted via *in vivo* coding to identify the initial codes, which were refined and reduced into broader categories (Charmaz, 2014; Manning, 2017). Axial coding was used to determine the categories' relationships and capture the emerging core themes and patterns. Data was constantly reviewed by repeatedly comparing information from participants with each other and with codes and categories.

The rigour and validity of the process were ensured by using the three methods. Firstly, by exercising reflexivity (Hay, 2007; Iordanou, Hawley and Iordanou, 2017) assisted by memo writing and a research journal to reflect reactions and assumptions, particularly when analysing the data. Secondly, the theoretical saturation method ensured that data collection continued until no new themes or patterns emerged, guaranteeing that a full range of perspectives and experiences were captured (Bowen, 2006). Finally, a peer review method was used, which further validated the categories and conceptual framework, involving discussing my suggested findings with a peer mentor and university supervisor/researcher/lecturer (Hay, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

I received ethical and supervisor approval for my research from Oxford Brookes University. All participants signed a consent form to be included in the project. They were informed of the process and purpose of the study; they each received and signed a participation sheet before being interviewed. Furthermore, participants chose to be involved based on their own free will, either having been contacted directly by me, or by contacting me directly via the snowballing method, thus avoiding any possible coercion.

To protect the identity of coaches and any mentioned party, I avoided any personal identifiers and ascribed pseudonyms to the participants. In addition, privacy was also emphasised and agreed upon during the interview process.

Reflexive memos and journal writing assisted in avoiding bias and essentialism whilst also reducing the risk of oversimplifying or over-generalising the experiences of individuals: a process Charmaz (2014) called 'interpretive sufficiency', which stresses the necessity of considered claim-making.

Findings

Two primary categories emerged from the data analysis of initial codes and subcategories; these categories are concerned with ensuring safe and effective coaching practice when using scripts and strokes in coaching. The categories are:

a) The beliefs about TA language and jargon (Figure 1)

b) Safety and awareness of boundaries (Figure 2).

These elements are examined below and within the subsequent discussion section.

Beliefs about TA Language and Jargon

This category was reached via subcategories including 'Language ambivalence', which incorporated initial codes, 'language complexity', 'beneficial qualities' and 'limiting qualities'. Topics of 'Implicit' and 'explicit' language were collated via subcategories of 'Coaching from TA, not about TA'. Finally, 'co-creative coaching relationship' and 'light touch language' were merged, creating subcategories of 'Power dynamics', as shown in Figure 1 and the explanation below.

Figure 1: Beliefs About TA Language and Jargon
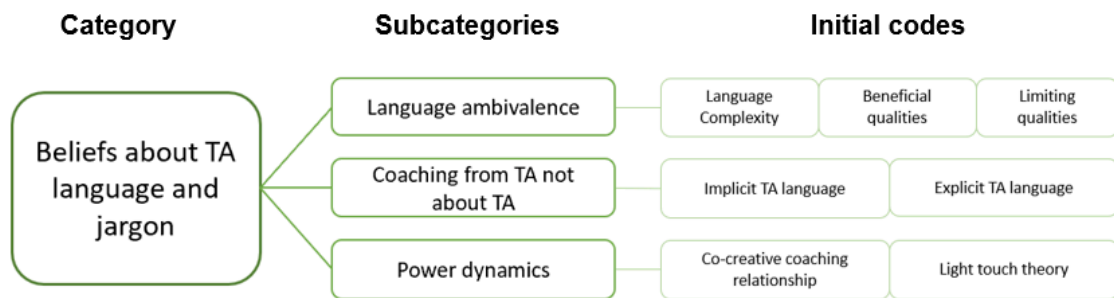
Language ambivalence

Participants expressed mixed feelings about using TA jargon. While some stressed the importance of simplicity, others found value in employing TA terminology. Malik highlighted its dual nature, acknowledging both its limitations and usefulness. Sharing TA concepts with coachees was seen as beneficial for establishing a common language and structured coaching framework. Most coaches agreed that TA language could be effectively communicated to clients without being overly complex. However, some coaches suggested elements of the language might be confusing, especially across cultures. For example, Ava commented:

> *I wouldn't use jargon, I wouldn't use 'strokes', it gets in the way, particularly across cultures […] a stroke is a medical condition of a brain haemorrhage, you know, and then you just get bogged down in, 'well, no, this doesn't mean this, it means that'. So, I would rather talk about appreciation; I wouldn't use the word stroke. It feels too jargony across some of the cultures.*

While all coaches acknowledged the perceived ease of using explicit TA theory in coaching sessions, potential negative implications were also raised. Some coaches believed it appropriate to entirely abstain from using explicit TA language. At the same time, many found it useful but limited the extent to which they incorporated it, as exemplified by Collette, who only provides "very brief explanations" of models.

Some coaches raised concerns about the judgmental nature of TA terminology, as articulated by Malik, who suggested that "naming can create shaming". This shift in language was further supported by comments from Jane, who stated, "I would translate it into words they would understand", and Collette, who added, "I think it's easy to digest, depending on the language you use". Other coaches highlighted a negative or pathological focus, particularly concerning scripts. For instance, as Zara explained:

> *I do have a little bit of an aversion to some of the original TA language because I do believe it pathologises in a way that isn't necessarily helpful.*

Across all the participants, while there are variations in the use of (and comfort with) TA jargon/language in coaching sessions, there appears to be consensus on the need for cautious and strategic implementation. Recognising both the potential benefits and limitations of TA terminology, participants emphasised that coaches must navigate its usage with sensitivity to individual client needs along with awareness of potential wider social and cultural considerations.

Coaching from TA not about TA

Participants largely agreed that they implicitly integrated TA theory into coaching sessions, minimising explicit usage. While participants generally aimed to minimise theoretical language,

none outright rejected its simplified use. Beneath simplified language, coaches applied their full theoretical knowledge, such as 'drivers', 'injunctions' and 'the payoff'.

There was hesitation in introducing explicit theory too early in sessions, which stemmed from concerns about disrupting the coaching alliance and intimidating clients. For example, Tracey highlighted the value of "serendipity" in initial sessions and avoided theory until the relationship developed, adding, "it can frighten some people; it can give others a place to hide".

The coaches unanimously emphasised the importance of both ensuring there is value to the client and obtaining their permission before introducing theoretical concepts. Ava explained:

> *I'm reminded of what Berne said, 'empower the clients', and TA is meant to be like, share it only if it's useful and share it through a vehicle, whether it's the language you use or a diagram that we've adapted, only as it's useful for the client.*

Coaches posited that, particularly for clients with a cognitive orientation, a limited amount of TA theory can be helpful in facilitating a common language or a framework to work from. Contractual obligations also guided coaches to limit explicit theory use to maintain the coaching focus.

In essence, participants implicitly integrated TA theory in coaching, avoiding explicit usage to prevent disruption. However, they're open to introducing theory with client consent, emphasising client autonomy in coaching.

Power dynamics

Participants frequently linked using explicit TA language and terminology to an unhelpful power imbalance within the coaching relationship. All the coaches expressed a desire to hold or build the 'co-creative coaching dynamic'. Therefore, participants reduced or eliminated the explicit use of theoretical descriptions to ensure an equal power balance.

Zara highlighted that describing TA theory risks making "a bit of an imbalance, in terms of 'I'm the one with the knowledge here'". Malik elaborates on this by suggesting it could risk 'objectifying' the coachee because it 'becomes technical and therefore the client becomes something to be worked on'. Michelle encapsulates this point by stating:

> *I find TA generally uses complicated language, complicated concepts, deeply psychological concepts and, in order not to be the expert […] in order for me and my coachee to be on equal terms, I have to find completely different ways of talking about it.*

The participants generally reported using light touch theory and simplified language. They integrate TA theory implicitly, minimising explicit usage to prevent disruption, while prioritising client autonomy. Concerns over power dynamics underscore the importance of maintaining an equal power balance, prompting coaches to adopt a light-touch approach to theory and simplified language.

Safety and awareness of boundaries

This category comprises three subcategories. Firstly, 'coaching v therapy' encompasses: the initial code of 'boundaries', 'depth' and 'contracting'. Secondly, 'parallel perspectives' comprise: 'recognition', International Coaching Federation (ICF) competencies' and 'stuckness'. Finally, 'TA training', 'self-reflection' and 'supervision' comprise the subcategory' knowledge and reflexivity', further detailed in Figure 2 and the following paragraphs.

Figure 2: Safety and Awareness of Boundaries
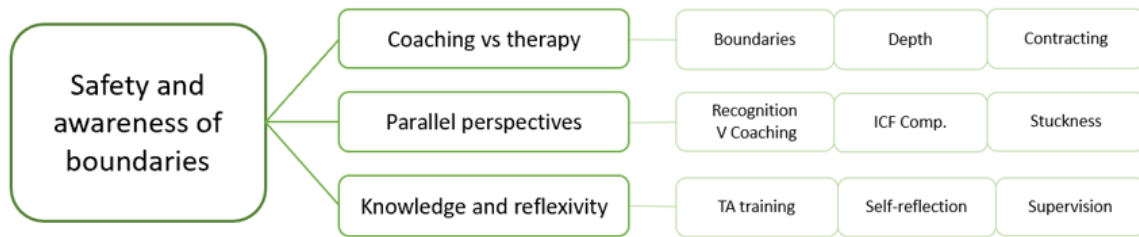
Coaching Vs therapy

Maintaining the boundary between coaching and therapy is essential, with a focus on contractual agreements described by Ava as "the professional level of contracting". Participants stressed the need for a deep understanding of these boundaries, acknowledging that while coaching can be therapeutic, it is distinct from therapy. Adhering to professional contracting terms is crucial, particularly when integrating TA into coaching. Sophia emphasises the importance of respecting these boundaries to ensure safety in the coaching process.

There was a strong emphasis on the importance of depth in effecting long-term change, expressed in two ways: first, having sufficient TA training to address psychological issues without hesitation, and second, engaging in true TA script change work is for more experienced practitioners. Jane stated that working with a script involves:

> *Both the realisation, understanding, acceptance and taking actions against your own patterns or your narrative, making different choices.*

All participants agreed that TA enhances coaching by providing a deeper understanding of clients. However, there was recognition that not all clients may be ready for such depth, and this should be respected.

It was further suggested that the depth necessary to elicit long-term change is balanced with caution, especially for deep script work, as it can resurface past trauma. As Elena explains, script change "is psychotherapy, that's not coaching". There were divergent views about the ethics of boundarying psychotherapeutic work. Elena, who was qualified in both modalities, said she would not feel comfortable giving a client coaching and psychotherapy; however, Tracey highlighted the importance of the contract and would offer a coaching client psychotherapy if it was explicitly re-contracted to do so.

The participants emphasised that maintaining clear boundaries between coaching and therapy is essential, supported by robust contractual agreements. They recognised that integrating TA into coaching requires careful consideration of depth and ethical boundaries. While TA enriches coaching by providing deeper insights into clients, the coaches felt they needed to balance depth with sensitivity to client readiness and ethical considerations.

Parallel Perspectives

The participants indicate a congruency between TA and coaching, asserting that the objectives of TA align with those of coaching. Ava, for example, states that "coaching is essentially about script change" and emphasising that "script is what we do as a coach."

Participants align with the original definition of strokes, emphasising their role as "units of recognition that we all need," as stated by Elena. This underscores the significance of strokes in

building a strong coaching alliance by recognising and responding to the coachees' strokes. Tracey, for instance, finds strokes useful in "helping to reaffirm that they [coachees] are valued," a sentiment echoed by most other interviewees who stress the importance of clients feeling seen and understood.

Many participants commented on the link between strokes and the 'International Coaching Federation' (ICF) core competencies, particularly relevant within competency B3.3, 'co-creating the relationship'. Views surrounding cultivating trust and safety, for example, Sophia said:

> *I think that strokes in coaching is very much linked with the ICF competency framework, that is about creating trust and safety.*

An implicit theme throughout interviews is that investigating scripts in coaching aligns with addressing client 'stuckness', thereby enhancing the capacity to facilitate clients' progress, as Ava explained:

> *What people are doing to maintain their script is what's keeping them stuck, and they come for coaching," and "understanding script and strokes will equip the coach to work with more depth.*

Knowledge and reflexivity

Coaches deliberated on the necessary knowledge level for safe coaching with TA scripts and strokes. Ava reflected, "How much is enough to be effective, and how much can be dangerous and disrespectful and abusive?", questioning the balance between effectiveness and potential harm and emphasising the importance of self-awareness. Participants initially emphasised the importance of academic training, particularly citing TA101 and the foundation year as essential. However, as the interviews progressed, their perspectives shifted towards acknowledging that true safety in coaching lies within coach self-awareness. Specifically, they highlighted the ability of the coach to understand their own scripts and stroke patterns as paramount. Some coaches further elaborated on the necessity of applying their own self-awareness of the theory to recognise how their scripts can influence coaching interactions.

Coaches compared using TA without comprehensive knowledge to incomplete jigsaw pieces, emphasising the need for holistic understanding to work safely and at greater depth. As Malik and others noted, they were concerned that limited self-awareness could inadvertently limit clients. Participants strongly advocated for supervision, particularly by TA-qualified supervisors, to ensure ethical and safe coaching practices. Ava highlighted the need to keep oneself "clean" by using supervision due to TA's holistic framework.

Participants stressed the paramount importance of self-awareness and self-application of theory when using TA scripts and strokes in coaching. They highlighted the necessity of ongoing supervision to ensure ethical practice and maintain clarity whilst upholding professional standards.

Discussion

The themes which emerged very strongly in relation to the prerequisites for safe practice were not anticipated in the initial planning stages of the broader thesis study. These ideas emerged across the wide range of participants as a consequence of using the CGT methodology and challenged a high level of reflexivity in understanding their importance.

Beliefs about TA language and jargon

Beliefs surrounding TA language and terminology reflect conflicting perspectives on its use and effectiveness. While TA was initially intended to be colloquial (Stewart, 1992), its multi-level understanding, from basic explanations to complex script construction, can appear ambiguous to individuals at different depths of comprehension. It was noticeable when looking across the coach responses that those with the greatest length of coaching experience and greater levels of TA training were more likely to demonstrate embodied practice rather than explicit use of theory. This sublimation of theoretical constructs, so that they become almost instinctive until the coach's awareness is brought to them, is a phenomenon also seen in reports of existential coaching and phenomenological psychology practice (Spinelli, 2005).

In coaching, specifically with scripts and strokes, the coaches expressed ambivalence about using TA terminology directly with clients, preferring to minimise complexity by simplifying or using alternate language. Highlighting that language needs to be easily received, especially in the context of script theory, suggests that the participants were grappling with the desire to maintain conversational flow. This could be seen, for example, in them talking about 'the story of our lives' as opposed to script theory, or using script in lay terms, 'the script of our life'. Interestingly, there's a view that strokes can be explained in earlier coaching sessions due to their simplicity.

While literature on the explicit or implicit use of terminology in coaching is scarce, it's clear that language significantly influences sensemaking through coachee narratives and the application of theory by the coach, fostering new meanings through a common language or narrative. Although similar transformative processes have been noted in existing literature (Drake, 2007, 2009, 2018; Tosi, 2010; Stewart, 2011), they are not specifically explored in the context of scripts, strokes, or TA within coaching.

The coaches acknowledge that some clients prefer understanding underlying theory and therefore, drawing attention to the balance between coaching and teaching dynamics (Mclean, 2012). In this, we can see the nuanced shift of level and perspective as the coaches strive to understand what serves the client's best interests in the moment. The approach coaches use to navigate this delicate balance is driven by what the coaches perceive as their intuition and where they feel there is a sufficiently robust coaching partnership with the coachee. For some coaches this was expressed using the concept of the 'thinking open door' as a way of describing individual client capacity and willingness to engage at a metacognitive level with the theory driving their coaching experience (Ware, 1983). Conversely, explicit requests for TA language may mitigate power imbalances, in support of Berne's principle of equal affinity between client and practitioner (Napper and Newton, 2014). Operating from a place of deep self-awareness allows coaches to create collaborative spaces for client development. In TA terms, remaining in the 'integrated adult' state (Mclean, 2012; Pratt, 2021; Temple, 1999) and aligning with core ICF competencies.

Although it is a truism within TA that the concepts are easily transferable across cultures, listening to the participants' discussion around language use and meaning raised the question of whether this is true of the terminology as well as the concepts. Some participants suggested that terminology is easily converted cross-culturally, while others highlighted potential risks and misinterpretations.

Safety and boundaries

Although TA has its roots in psychotherapy (Berne, 1961), it is also used in three further fields: organisation, education, and counselling; accordingly, there is rich precedent for the translation of TA concepts to coaching. However, because it does have psychotherapy at its core, it is necessary to ensure psychological safety (Maxwell, 2009) for coaches and coachees through clear and negotiated boundaries between the level of depth and focus on the past appropriate to coaching and psychotherapy, respectively.

While there was a recognition that the contract between coach and coachee is co-created, in this study, the coaches felt the weight of their responsibility to establish and maintain the boundaries between coaching and therapy relevant to the depth to which the coachee wished to explore. The coaches in this study, working from the dual perspective of TA and coaching, emphasised depth of work to a greater extent than might be expected in other life coaching and developmental coaching, exploring underlying reasons for behaviours and responses. While coaching with depth exists outside the parameters of TA, the participants explicitly believe that additional depth can be achieved using their TA perspective. They suggest this additional depth is valuable to the clients because it supports long-term positive change, a point echoed in the literature (Bachkirova & Cox, 2004).

Where the boundaries sit varied among the coaches and this appeared to relate to their level of training and experience. However, while they all mentioned training and supervision as crucial, these only form part of the equation: self-awareness, insight, and self-reflection are equally, if not more, vital than specific levels of TA training.

When coaching using a TA approach results in aspects which require support and exploration beyond the depth of coaching, coaches must recognise the unsafe territory and redirect or refer onwards or explicitly re-contract for coaches who are dual-qualified as therapists or counsellors (Baker, 2014). The importance of appropriate training and self-reflection for the coaches is emphasised, and regular supervision, particularly by TA-trained supervisors, is regularly highlighted as crucial support to coaching practice, with some researchers calling for a more tailored or systematic approach (Tkach and DiGirolamo, 2020).

Participants note that a sense of 'stuckness' often drives client motivation for seeking coaching, a notion echoed in existing literature (Napper and Newton, 2018). Working with and through narratives formed in the past can lead to forward movement and growth. While TA concepts can provide a route into this narrative work and perhaps facilitate a greater depth of narrative work than a coach without this lens might use, according to the coaches interviewed in this study, it is relatively rare for a coach who possesses sufficient expertise to engage in deep script change work within a coaching context, rather than a therapeutic one.

Relevance to practice

TA essentially comprises simple concepts for practitioners, coaches, and coachees to grasp. This apparent simplicity masks a potential wealth of complexity in their application. For a coach with knowledge about TA, there is the possibility of working at a more profound level within the coaching relationship. However, this depth depends on the coach's self-awareness and TA training. There is a very real risk of slipping into a therapeutic or pseudo-therapeutic engagement unless a coach walks this line carefully to ensure psychological safety for clients. We must never work beyond the limits of our knowledge and training.

There are four key considerations for awareness and practical application. Firstly, self-awareness and self-application of theory are not secondary to training but are integral components of effective coaching practice. Secondly, there are potential risks associated with leaning into theoretical discourse and terminology, which can blur the distinction between teaching and coaching and give rise to an unhelpful power dynamic. Thirdly, it emphasises clear contracting and, potentially, re-contracting as non-negotiable elements in maintaining the integrity of the coaching process and coachee psychological safety. Lastly, this research highlights that whilst the determination of when coaching transitions into therapy is ultimately self-governed by the coach, supervision plays a pivotal role in navigating this boundary.

This research begins to address a gap in the literature on the boundary between therapy and coaching. Since this empirical evidence points to the boundaries between coaching and therapy

being self-determined and policed by the reflexive coach, in order to expand the practical implications of this work, I invite you to reflect on this in the context of your own coaching relationships. Limited research exists on the impact of TA language on coaching outcomes, specifically with cultural variations in mind. A more extensive and culturally diverse participant pool could shed further light on the topic.

Limitations of the study

This paper represents part of a wider study completed within the parameters of a master's dissertation. The overarching study focuses on scripts and strokes to the exclusion of other TA elements, and the contributions from the participants are likely to have been influenced by this focus. I am dual qualified in TA and coaching and have found TA a particularly useful lens in my own work. Accordingly, I potentially hold a positive bias toward TA, which may have influenced the study. This bias could have been mitigated by deliberately seeking participants with less positive views about TA.

The CGT methodology resulted in a relatively small pool of participants who were recruited for their contribution to the theory being constructed. All participants were proficient English speakers. Both considerations may have skewed the findings presented here, and this highlights another opportunity for future exploration in this area.

Conclusion

Participant beliefs about TA language and terminology in coaching revealed different perspectives on the effectiveness of its explicit use. Coaches navigate the complexity of TA theory, preferring to simplify language terminology or use alternative terms to ensure client comprehension. Client preferences for understanding theory vary, emphasising the need for coach responsivity and sensitivity to the different power dynamic this can bring. Explicit requests for agreement to use TA language may address power imbalance while maintaining deep self-awareness, which enhances coach ability to facilitate client development.

Findings offer a starting point for more research and deeper insights into the use of TA elements including scripts and strokes in coaching, and there is a need for more focused research around the impact of using TA within the coaching field. Exploring the nuanced field between coaching and therapy reveals a gap in the literature and highlights the crucial importance of safety and boundaries within the coaching relationship both for TA-trained coaches and the broader coaching community.

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About the author

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