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Academic Paper

Exploration of relational flow in dyadic coaching conversations: Circumplex map of relational flow

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Abstract

Flow as a subjective, optimal experience plays a facilitating role in individual personal growth and development across different work contexts. However, little coaching-specific research has investigated the concept of flow and none has explored the specific relational experience of flow within the dyad of coaching. This qualitative study uses a Conceptual Encounter methodology to addresses this gap from the coach's perspective. Findings indicate the creation of an important connection between coach and client during relational flow not otherwise recognised in normal life. A new conceptual understanding of flow in coaching and the coaching relationship is established, differentiating it from individual flow. Relational flow is described and mapped for the first time. Important implications for coaching practice and coach education and development are discussed.

Keywords

flow, executive coaching, coaching relationship, oneness

Article history

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Introduction

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, p.36) referenced flow as an "optimal experience in which an activity or experience seamlessly unfolds (flows) from moment to moment" (1975, p.36) such that "the individual operates at full capacity" (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p.90). Flow and flow theory has long inspired me with hope, explaining that "poised between boredom and worry" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p.35) lay this sweet spot of high-quality flow. As an executive coach, I have experienced occasions of flow - when time seems to stand still, I am completely absorbed in what I am doing, and everything flows beautifully and effortlessly in the service of my client. I am left feeling fulfilled, knowing I was at my best and believing I made a difference. Unfortunately, in my coaching practice I have also experienced the boredom or anxiety that Csikszentmihalyi (1975) describes. I felt compelled therefore, to explore the difference being in or out of flow could make to

coaches and the coaching profession, necessitating the need first to clearly identify and describe the experience of relational flow in coaching itself.

The way we identify flow is, I believe, of great importance to all practising coaches for two reasons. First, slipping either side of that balance into anxiety or boredom has been shown to make a significant difference to people's well-being, contentment and fulfilment as well as their role performance (Ilies, Wagner, Wilson, Ceja, DeRue & Ilgen, 2017; Delle Fave, Massimini & Bassi, 2011; Salanova, Bakker & Llorens, 2006). Second, it became clear that investigating flow in coaching from the coach's perspective is important when we recognise that the coaching relationship is a key influence on coaching effectiveness (De Haan & Gannon, 2017) and that the self of the coach impacts that relationship (Bachkirova, 2016).

Our ability to recognise and describe subjective experiences of anxiety or boredom is well researched (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; LePera, 2011) and generally widely understood. This stands in contrast to the limited research knowledge about the experience of flow within either the dyadic relationally-specific context of coaching (Wesson & Boniwell, 2007; Wesson, 2010; McBride, 2013, Whateley, 2017) or within other helping relationships such as nursing, therapy or teaching (Grafanaki, Brennan, Holmes, Tang & Alvarez, 2007; Wilhelmsen, 2013). The literature since 2000 provided limited further insight into how flow may be described in dyadic helping relationships, however it does appear to recognise the existence of flow in coaching and has opened up a more significant understanding of flow's potential causes and effects.

Flow researchers mainly reference the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990) as a basis for defining or explaining the experience of flow. As flow is a subjective experience it is open to individual interpretation and understanding (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). However, it is also reportedly consistent across contexts and cultures (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). Previous coaching researchers (McBride, 2013, Wesson, 2010) assuming this consistency with relational flow, used standard definitions of flow to establish a common base of understanding with all participants prior to commencement of research. Likewise, quantitative researchers in the wider helping relationship research, utilise standardised expressions of flow within flow measurement tools (Bakker, 2005; 2008) when operationalising flow.

I argue that assuming consistency and taking this presumptive approach in relationally based contexts raises methodological issues potentially prejudicing participants views, undermining the credibility of findings and missing potentially important relational differences to individualised flow. Two important considerations therefore emerge which informed the design of this research. First, in recognising the critical importance of the relationship in coaching (De Haan & Gannon, 2017), using an individually-focussed description of flow that doesn't take this dyadic influence into account may be sub-optimal. Second, recognising the centrality of the self of the coach as the instrument of coaching within that relationship reinforces the opportunity to investigate flow in coaching from the coach's perspective. These reflections led to the formulation of the research question as: "What experiences do coaches identify as flow within coaching conversations?"

This paper firstly summarises the key areas of literature that have informed this exploration. It then introduces the methodology used to inquire into the research question before outlining and discussing research findings and implications for flow and coaching theory. It concludes by recommending that educators, supervisors and coaches augment their practice by using flow and the flow map as an additional lens on coach professional development.

Literature Review

As outlined, there appears a lack of academic literature describing the phenomenology of relational flow. For instance, beyond the sparse research in coaching (Wesson & Boniwell, 2007; Wesson,

2010; McBride, 2013), the majority of empirical research appears to focus on the operational aspects of flow: the quantitative measurement and operational implications of flow. Given the importance of the special helping working relationship inherent in the coaching conversation and the fact that the research question is bounded by the coaching conversation itself, the review extended to encompass flow in helping work contexts that exhibit similar dyadic relational qualities, such as nursing, therapy and teaching.

As all researchers appear to reference or specifically quote the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990) as the basis of understanding flow, it may be helpful to first understand how he describes individual flow and defines the six individual elements of flow. The most complete description of how participants may experience flow holistically is "as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between the self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present and future" (1975, p.36) and that flow experiences "give participants a sense of discovery, exploration, problem solving - in other words, a feeling of novelty and challenge" (1975, p.30) that "imply transcendence, a going beyond the known, a stretching of one's self toward a new dimension of skill and competence...by matching one's skills against a physical obstacle or against the boundaries of one's own competencies" (1975, p.33). Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2009; 2021) refined Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) elements of flow as: focus, merging of action and awareness, sense of control, altered sense of time, loss of self-consciousness and enjoyment.

The broadly qualitative coaching specific body of exploratory research does not explore or map the experience of relational flow. Research does however appear to indicate the existence of the experiences of flow in coaching (Wesson, 2010; McBride, 2013), with indicators of how flow may be encouraged (Wesson, 2010; Wesson & Boniwell, 2007) and its potential fit with existing coaching competencies (McBride, 2013). Wesson (2010) extended her 2007 theoretical proposition by specifically exploring the subjective experience of flow during coaching conversations. Her grounded theory research used coach participant lived experiences both as evidence for the existence of flow in coaching, and in the identification of factors deemed necessary to facilitate flow.

Assuming flow to be a positive experience, McBride's (2013) research aimed to provide a new perspective on coach development and coaching competencies. For instance, McBride drew connections between coaches' descriptions of their entry into flow, such as focus, absorption and deep listening with presence, claiming presence to be a "triggering process that propelled them (coaches) into the flow state" (McBride, 2013, p.52). Finally, Whateley (2017) considered executive experiences of flow in order to operationalise flow through coaching at work. Whilst helpful in identifying coaching as a useful intervention to "support the executive in cultivating the individual, organisational and work conditions to increase the likelihood of flow experiences at work" (Whateley, 2017, p.3), it did not yield any new insights relevant to relational flow.

However, coaching research identified some extra and specific coaching and relationship flow characteristics which may potentially differentiate relational-based coaching from other individually based contexts. For example, Wesson (2010) highlighted mirroring, pace and engagement, whilst McBride (2013) distinguished characteristics such as confidence, relationship depth, oneness and transcendence of experience above the norm. Specifically, through thematic analysis, coaches reported a deeper and richer closeness between themselves and their clients. Through this deepening of the relationship, a mutual, transparent, open and discovery-based mindset reportedly facilitated a willingness to explore challenges together. Interestingly, McBride (2013) specifically linked coaches' descriptions of the relational experience of flow with the transcendent nature of the flow experience that Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990) occasionally referenced between individuals and the task undertaken. This transcendence seems to describe an elevation of experience above the norm; for example, using spiritual analogies such as Church, Holy Spirit, divine and sacred, and energy references such as feeding off each other's energy, stillness and a merging of energies to become one. These extra findings indicate the possibility that whilst flow shares some common

characteristics across contexts, relationally based flow may also have some contextual and specific characteristics which may have been missed in previous, more individually based flow research.

The wider research body for flow in helping relationships has focussed predominantly on quantitatively operationalising flow. By assuming flow to mean absorption, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation (Bakker, 2005, 2008), nursing, therapy and teaching researchers chose to quantitatively measure flow's cause and effect in their respective workplaces. For instance, in nursing to examine flow and its potential to effect an improvement in nurse resilience and a reduction in exhaustion (Bringsen, Ejlertsson & Andersson, 2011; Colombo & Zito, 2014; Zito, Cortese & Colombo, 2015); in therapeutic practice to distinguish how flow moments may lead to practitioner growth and mastery (Wilhelmsen, 2013; Grafanaki, Brennan, Holmes, Tang & Alvarez, 2007) and in teaching to identify a contagion effect of flow between teacher and pupil with subsequent spirals of positive affect and growth as a consequence (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003; Bakker, 2005: 2008; Rodriguez-Sanchez, Salanova, Cifre & Schaufeli, 2011). However, this was the first flow research into these new work contexts and both nursing and therapy researchers reported difficulty in understanding and explaining lower than expected flow results (Bringsen et al., 2011; Wilhelmsen, 2013; Colombo et al., 2014). Further exploratory qualitative research allowed the contextual differences to emerge and explain the results. For instance, the more fulfilled nurses felt spending time caring for patients, the greater the flow experienced; yet their increasing administrative burden undermined their enjoyment and offset flow.

The studies of flow in relationships all seem to conclude that fostering flow is a positive aim for practitioners and their clients in relational-based work contexts. The aim of the review, however, was to identify the experiences coaches recognise as flow in helping dyadic relationships. Figure 1 references the voices of practitioner lived experiences, obtained qualitatively and used as empirical evidence for both Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) characteristics of flow and for additional identified relationship-specific characteristics. No additional descriptive empirical data emerged from the quantitative papers, as the researchers' voices were dominant, the definition of flow assumed and the voices of participants unrequested.

It may be argued that two main issues arise from McBride (2013), Wilhelmsen (2013) and Wesson (2010) sharing non-relational-based prescribed definitions for flow with participants before fieldwork commenced. These issues may be seen to pose a risk to the validity of their descriptive findings. First, even though initial flow descriptions are seen as consistent across other work contexts, the initial research was conducted across mainly individual, task focussed contexts rather than dyadic, helping relationship work contexts. As such, it may not fully represent relational flow. Secondly, sharing these descriptions before the research potentially prejudices participants perceptions. Whilst the exact impact on participants' descriptions cannot be established or assumed, neither can it be assumed that there was no impact. In other words, potentially influencing participants by sharing individually based flow definitions beforehand cannot have helped establish true dyadic based descriptions for flow, as participants may have been influenced by these definitions. As a consequence, our knowledge may be limited about how coaches describe flow within the dyadic relationship in coaching conversations.

As coaching is by definition relationship-focussed and dependent on the quality of that relationship and the dialogue within it (Du Toit, 2014; Grant, 2017), it appears important to explore and understand the similarities with the prevailing individual flow knowledge and discover any important relational contextual differences. I argue that the voices of coaches need to be both heard and understood without influence if we wish to establish a true basis for that understanding. This highlights the need to establish a descriptive map of the experiences that coaches recognise as flow in coaching conversations, using their voices and language.

Figure 1: Summary of the references for flow against Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) characteristics of flow including additional specific relational characteristics

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) Flow Characteristic	Reference	Descriptive example
Concentration on the task at hand	McBride (2013); Grafanaki, Brennan, Holmes, Tang & Alvarez, (2007); Caouette (1995)	"So we're both fully present. I don't think I can enter flow with a coaching client unless we are both fully present." McBride (2013)
Merging action and awareness	Wesson (2010)	"I was using skills and ideas from different places and synthesising them to create a new technique… I was present with both head and intuition and it just seemed to work" Wesson (2010)
Sense of Control	McBride (2013); Wesson (2010)	"you have to have the experience, and confidence is a piece of it, in knowing that if you ask the wrong question, it will be okay." Wesson (2010)
Loss of self-consciousness	(clustered alongside focus and loss of self-consciousness; Wesson (2010); McBride (2013)	"I knew I was in the flow state [in this session] because I ceased to exist. McBride (2013)
Transformation of time	Grafanaki, Brennan, Holmes, Tang & Alvarez, (2007); Caouette (1995);	"It's like a continuation ... In fact in a way it is hard to ... because I have found it hard to say this is when the main event started." Grafanaki et al. (2007)
The autotelic experience	McBride (2013); Wesson (2010)	"I knew I had experience flow from just the sheer enjoyment of the conversation. There was pleasure in even the bumpy parts of the conversation" McBride (2013)
Emergent Specific Relational Characteristics		
Depth of relation/ bond/ engagement/ Oneness/ connectedness	Wilhelmsen (2013); McBride (2013); Wesson (2010); Grafanaki, Brennan, Holmes, Tang & Alvarez, (2007)	"There was a sense of being 'at one' with the client, in terms of thought processes". Wesson (2010)
Transcendence beyond normal	McBride (2013); Wesson (2010); Caouette (1995)	"It's just fun and rewarding. It's just such an honor to stand in the presence of someone else going through discovery. It's inspiring and it's humbling. On some level it's a truly spiritual and divine experience." McBride (2013)
Mirroring, pace	Wesson (2010)	

Methodology

Whilst the concept of flow has validity across many work contexts (Nakamura et al., 2002; Bakker, 2005; 2008) and has some popular awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), no common conceptual understanding yet exists within the relational context of coaching. The generation of a conceptual map of flow and the rich descriptive language used to describe it help to fill an existing gap in our knowledge.

A pragmatic social constructivist research approach was taken (Bachkirova, Jackson, Gannon, Iordanou & Myers, 2017; Morgan, 2014) to understand what experiences coaches identify as flow within the coaching relationship and dialogue and how they map this phenomenon using Conceptual Encounter methodology (De Rivera, 1981).

I base my work on an ontology Morgan (2014) best describes as pragmatic where reality is born of experience and inquiry. Morgan (2014) argues that in pragmatism, the primacy of focus is against the inquiry's aim and objectives with an epistemological understanding that knowledge consists of

"warranted assertions" emanating from that inquiry. It is from taking action and experiencing that outcome, Morgan (2014) argues, that the warranted assertions create meaning from subjective experience. This is consistent with the phenomenological tradition from which this research approach is embedded, emphasising personal experience and people's capacity to create their own meaning from experience (Arnold and Randall, 2010; Spinelli, 1989). A constructivist approach recognises that individual perceptions of experience can form multiple knowledges, all of which are not necessarily right or wrong (Willig, 2013) but are capable of collaboratively creating meaning together through dialogue (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Taking a pragmatic constructivist approach acknowledges the ideal nature of a qualitative approach for under-researched areas of investigation (Willig, 2013). Furthermore, the approach heeds the call for more in-depth, qualitative understanding within new work contexts for flow research (Hefferon, Ashfield, Waters & Synard, 2017) and help guide future research.

Conceptual encounter appears well-suited to jointly construct the concept of flow in coaching conversations as a "map of our experience that enables us to share that experience with others" (De Rivera, 1981, p.1). This is important in two ways. First, it helps to raise our awareness of the structure of the experience and see the linkages between different aspects of the experience of which others may not have been conscious. This helps create what De Rivera called "looking rules" (p.2) that lead us to ask questions about other aspects of the experience. Secondly, "simply having a description helps us and others recognise the experience" (p.2). By taking each participant's view into consideration, in turn, the methodology encourages a collaborative conceptual evolution and understanding that culminates in a final shared map of the experience of flow. Importantly, it allowed the inclusion of me as practitioner-researcher and recognised the co-researcher coaches' experiences as valid and important (De Rivera, 1981).

Conceptual encounter as a methodological approach has been extensively used to explore and map the lived human experiences (De Rivera, 1981) of anger, anxiety and panic, and laughter and elation. Within the coaching context, Bachkirova (2015) utilised the methodology to explore self-deception in coaches, Scott (2017) mixed the methodology with Action Research to explore coaching for gravitas and Noon (2017) explored and mapped the concept of presence in coaching.

Choice of co-researchers

Choice of co-researchers usually follow from the needs of the methodology (Cresswell, 2013). Therefore, the needs of the research purpose, objectives and conceptual encounter methodology defined the purposive-sampling criteria against which co-researchers were recruited. They were identified as currently working executive coaches reflecting the specific leadership and organisational context of executive coaching (Passmore, 2015) in which I have experience and wished to develop. Additionally, they were experienced, meaning that they had at least 500 hours' coaching experience and were ICF or EMCC accredited executive coaches, motivated by their professional development, capable of reflexivity and sensitivity to explore and communicate psychological nuances in themselves and their development. Coaches were purposely sampled from both my own and ICF/EMCC networks. I recognise that my personal knowledge and judgement of that group and their eligibility played an active part in this recruitment. Evaluating recent research studies (Munro, 2012; Bachkirova, 2015; Scott, 2017; Noon, 2017), it was proposed that ten executive coaches would be sufficient. Based on the consistency of flow findings across culture, class, gender and activity (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021) other demographic criteria (e.g., gender, ethnicity etc.) were not considered important for the scope of this research and the achievement of its objective.

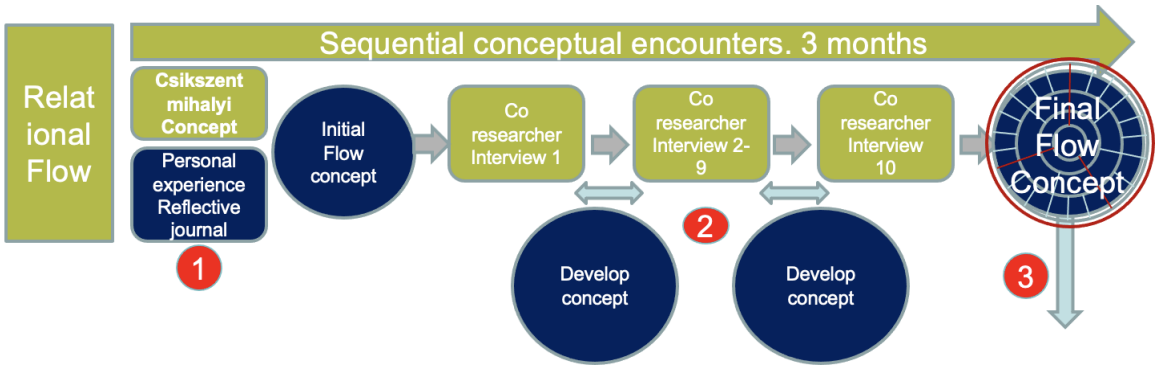
Conceptual Encounter Process

Cresswell (2013) argued that social constructivist researchers adopt an inductive, emergent approach to the process of data collection, immersing themselves into the worlds of their research

partners. I consciously decided to follow De Rivera's (1981) conceptual encounter process for both data capture and analysis as far as feasible. This benefitted me and the research, allowing me to be fully engaged within the research methodology whilst confidently maximising my creativity and intuition in the service of both understanding the research partners' experiences and achieving the research aim effectively.

The first step of the conceptual encounter process (shown in Figure 2) involved the development of an initial conceptual map of flow in coaching by amalgamating existing literature knowledge with my personal coaching experience as a coach. Step 2 of the process followed a series of sequential semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each co-researcher in turn. The questions asked were open in nature, designed to allow the co-researcher to recall situations and examples of flow in their coaching experience as fully as possible. Each encounter interview comprised two phases. In the first, the co-researcher coach was asked to describe their experience of flow in coaching as fully and deeply as possible. In the second, the researcher's conceptualisation of flow was introduced and 'encountered' the co-researcher experience. After each encounter, data was analysed and interpreted, leading to a modified concept which was then used in the next interview and so on until an overall concept of flow in coaching emerged iteratively as an outcome at step 3 of the process.

Figure 2: Conceptual Encounter Process (following De Rivera, 1981)



The largest challenge arose from expressing and jointly understanding the ephemeral subjective experiences of flow using language. The De Rivera (1981) process presented several advantages to help counter any potential bias or undue influence from misunderstanding, helping build further quality and credibility into the findings as a consequence. First, the two-phase nature of the interview meant that each co-researcher experience was captured and explored fully with open questions before any potential bias and influence from the 'encounter' could be introduced. Secondly, the sequential nature of the interviews meant that each expanded and evolved conceptual map necessitated clear communion, explanation and faithful representation to inform each subsequent evolutionary collaborative dialogue. As a further quality check, the finalised conceptual relational map of flow was re-introduced to each coach at the conclusion of the conceptual encounter process to ensure consistent interpretation, clarity of meaning and common understanding of flow.

Findings and Discussion

The principal finding in this study affirms both the existence of dyadic relational flow in coaching and describes and maps the relational experience using coach descriptive text for the first time. The importance of the coaching relationship is well established in coaching literature (Watts, Bor & Florence, 2021; De Haan & Gannon, 2017; Du Toit, 2014; De Haan et al., 2013), as is the importance of the self of the coach (O'Broin & Palmer, 2010) as being instrumental in that

relationship (Bachkirova, 2016). Dyadic flow appears to shape and influence this relationship in three ways (the relational connection; trust and safety in the connection; and flow's influence on the self in the connection), and sharing these findings contributes to the call to continue building coaching relational knowledge (De Haan et al., 2017).

Findings indicate the formation of a deep, human and transformative connection during relational flow that differentiates itself from individual flow. The relational connection finding is significant as coaches do not otherwise recognise or experience it when not in flow. The depth of human connection experienced with flow appears aligned with the process of integration and connection 'of ideas and entities' with others, beyond ideas of the self (Csikszentmihalyi's, 1990, p.41). Additionally, the interdependent holistic nature of the feeling of 'oneness' experienced between coach and client in flow aligns with Jowett, O'Broin and Palmer's (2010, p.20) relational definition of "two people's feelings, thoughts and behaviours being mutually and causally interdependent". As a further contribution to the coaching and relational flow literature, the findings indicate that the quality of the connection in flow meant that coaches consider it as one of the defining attributes not just of coaching success (Watts, et al., 2021) but also of a sense of fulfilment, purpose and success for the coach themselves.

Second, findings suggest that the depth, trust and safety in this important human connection in flow appear to have a positive influence on the coaching relationship. The importance and necessity of a human and personal level connection in coaching is well researched (e.g., Baron and Morin, 2009) in building coaching relationships of real trust in the eyes of the client (Bachkirova, 2021), an attribute widely recognised as a critical in the success of the coaching relationship (Cox, 2012; Watts et al., 2021). Findings suggest that in flow, coach and client felt at ease, able to engage in open, authentic coaching dialogue (Johnston, 2021). The atmosphere of 'oneness' found in flow helped to foster a depth of intimacy and trust during the coaching session that enabled coaches to build a safe space. In this space clients felt able to lower their guard, open themselves to be vulnerable, and think and explore at a deeper and more personal level, seen as key for transformative and developmental change (Johnston, 2021; Gyllensten and Palmer, 2007).

Last, the findings also recognise the impact of the self of the coach as being instrumental in the coaching relationship (Bachkirova, 2016). A personal connection involving high levels of trust in coaching relationships differentiates these from normal relationships by requiring more than an impersonal and distanced application of a coach's skills and knowledge (Bachkirova, 2016), requiring both the commitment of the client and the use of the self of the coach (O'Broin et al., 2010). Findings indicate that coaches perceive themselves at their best during this connection in flow, imbued with a sense of self-efficacy in their ability to handle whatever arises.

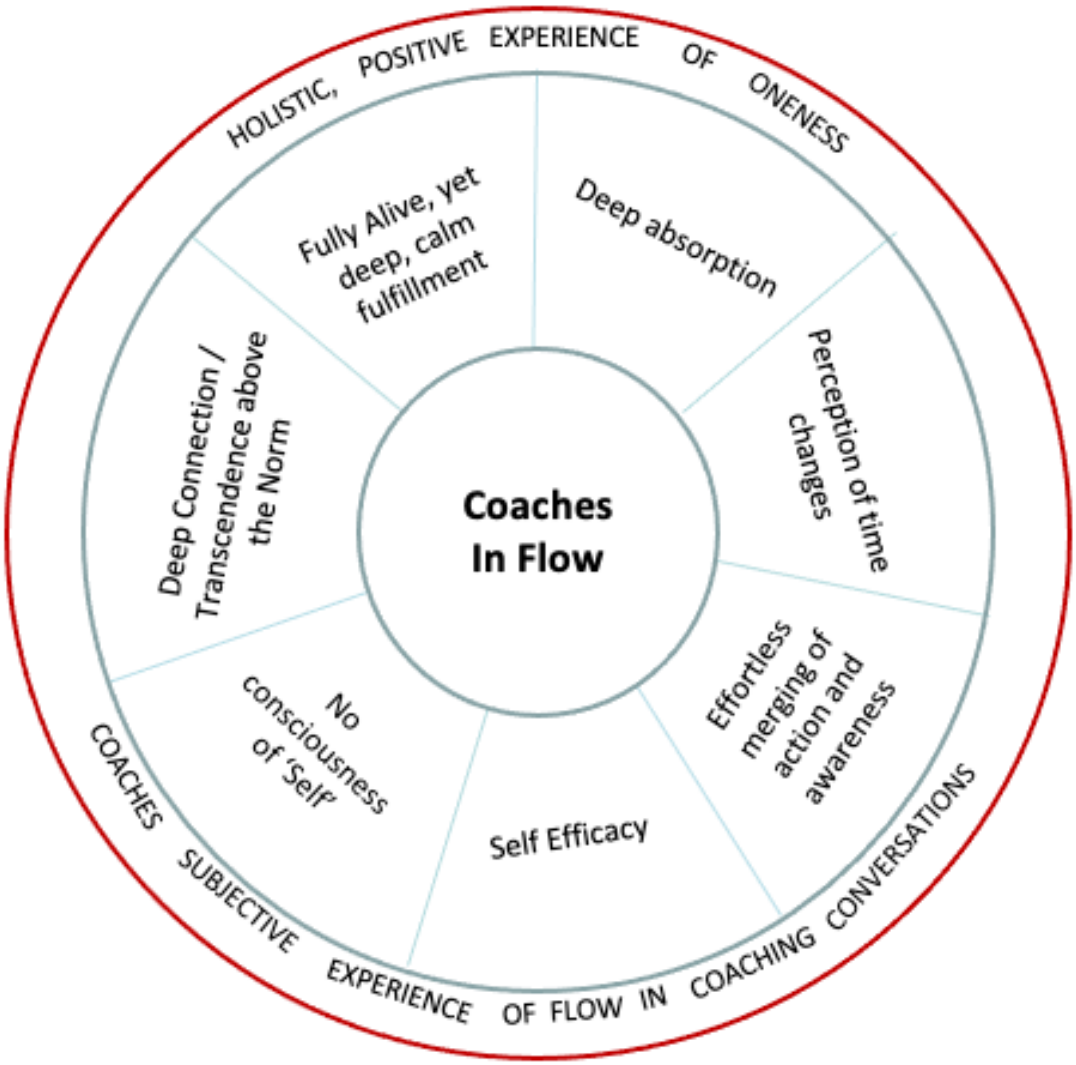
The dyadic relational flow circumplex

I believe that a relationally-specific description of flow is important when trying to recognise flow in coaching. This paper proposes three increasingly detailed descriptions to help coaches and researchers recognise and understand the dyadic flow experience in coaching. Based on coaches' lived experiences, I first offer a relationally-specific introductory text of dyadic relational flow to help augment Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) individualistic focus:

> "Once in flow the coaching experience seamlessly unfolds from one moment to another. I am in a subjective state of oneness; connected as one inside a bubble of energy with the other person, the activity and the situation; connecting with something bigger than ourselves. It goes beyond the idea of being. Within the bubble the process, the journey and the coaching unfold effortlessly, synergising as one into a positive holistic experience of flow flowing from one moment to the next; whilst outside, nothing else seems to matter."

The second description (Figure 3) captures the seven relationally-specific elements of coaching dyadic flow diagrammatically represented within the holistic circle of 'oneness'. Flow literature suggests that synchronisation of the elements increases the likelihood of flow (Engeser and Baumann, 2016), during which all elements are experienced simultaneously (Fullager et al., 2017). Whilst Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990) recognised that all elements are linked and dependent upon each other, findings in this study suggest the holistic experience of 'oneness' shared between coach and client as a defining feature of dyadic flow. These findings extend the importance of this connection into coaching literature. I believe that visually imbuing the seven elements with a sense of 'oneness' in a circle communicates a more accurate representation of the interdependent and simultaneous experience of each that is not conveyed by a list.

Figure 3: The holistic experience of 'oneness' in coaching in the moment of flow



Finally, a descriptive dyadic map of flow (See Figure 4), including more elaborate and detailed descriptions of each element of dyadic flow, may be helpful for more in-depth work. Flow, as a subjective experience, means individuals interpret and create meaning individually. Therefore, offering richer, more nuanced coaching-specific descriptions using language from coach testimonies may help others to better understand and recognise the experience for themselves. Using coaching specific descriptions in this way further highlight the specific relational differences with Csikszentmihalyi's (1975; 1990) individual flow.

Two examples of how relational experienced differed from Csikszentmihalyi's (1975; 1990) individualised flow are highlighted in figure 4 to emphasise the differences: deep absorption rather than focus and self-efficacy rather than control.

In the first example, Csikszentmihalyi (1975, p.40) defines focus as "a centring of attention on a limited stimulus field." He explains that the purpose of focus is to help people to concentrate on what they are doing so that distractions can be kept out of attention (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Coaches' lived experiences of flow challenged and clarified what coaches in flow are intensely focussed on. Rather than an overt, moment-to-moment concentration on the coaching task at hand presented by the client, coaches in flow instead report being deeply absorbed in being with the person. Using these co-researchers' verbatim experiences as a basis, I constructed a descriptive paragraph in an attempt to capture the essence and meaning of the findings for deep absorption:

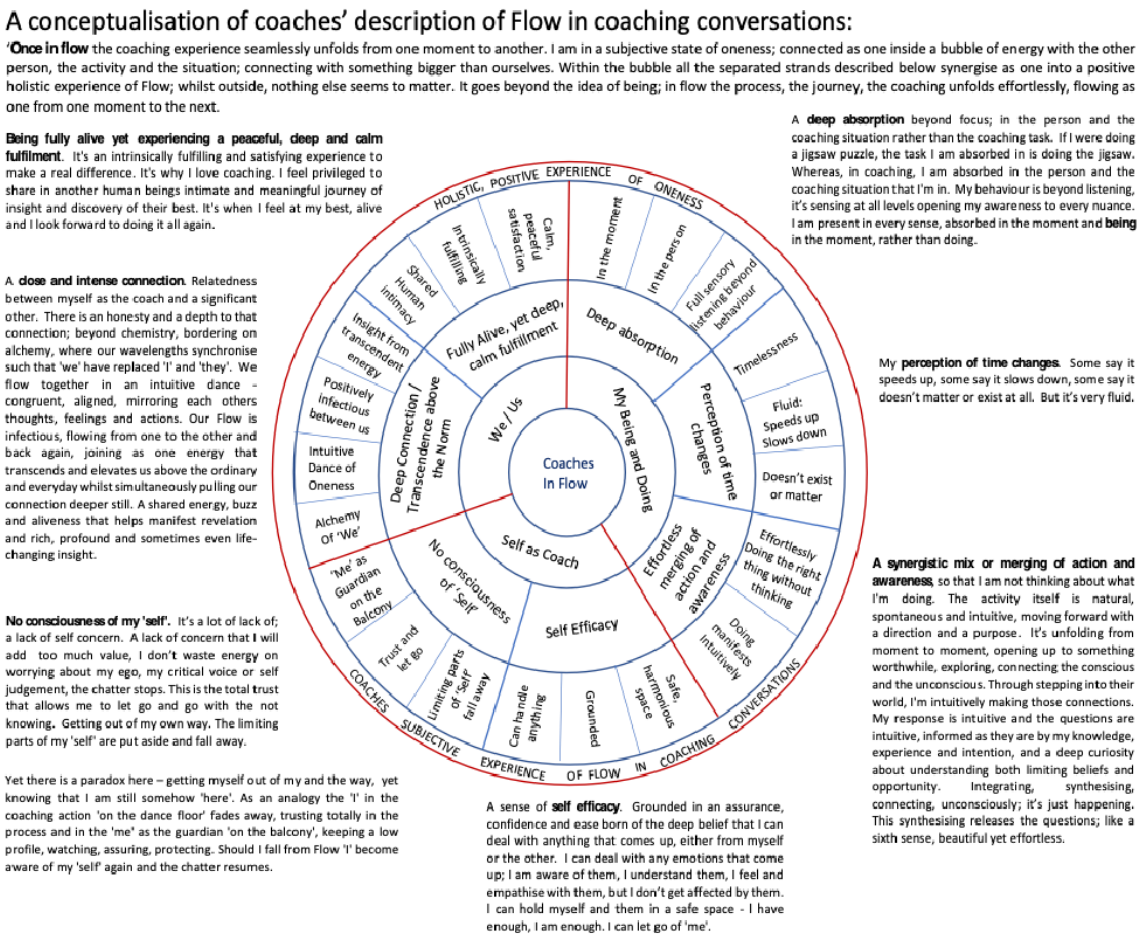
> A **deep absorption** beyond focus; in the person and the coaching situation rather than the coaching task. If I were doing a jigsaw puzzle, the task I am absorbed in is doing the jigsaw. Whereas, in coaching, I am absorbed in the person and the coaching situation that I'm in. My behaviour is beyond listening, it's sensing at all levels opening my awareness to every nuance. I am present in every sense, absorbed in the moment and **being** in the moment, rather than doing.

In the second example, when people fully apply their skills against stretching yet achievable challenges during flow, Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p.61) reported that they experienced a "sense of control." However, findings indicated that Csikszentmihalyi's term "sense of self-control" triggered either misunderstanding or resistance within the context of coaching. Coaches during the process consistently wanted to avoid somehow being perceived as 'controlling' the client in coaching. For instance, in the very first conceptual encounter interview Chris reacted against the term control, saying, "*you are not controlling, you are out of control of it*." His interpretation and response were in reaction to the idea of controlling the client or the conversation.

Findings evidenced a desire to move beyond self-control to encompass a wider sense of 'self-efficacy.' Perceived self-efficacy refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute courses of action [including the motivational and cognitive resources] required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p.3) and is "rooted in the core belief, that one has the power to effect changes by one's actions" (Bandura, 2001, p.8). This concept was well received by the coaches. They found that self-efficacy encapsulated not only their capacity for self-control but also their ability to: first, build a safe space; second, be grounded and self-assured enough to 'let go'; and third, believe in their own capacity and agency as coach to deal safely with anything that might happen within that space. Therefore, the following descriptive text of self-efficacy was constructed to enable coaches to recognise aspects of themselves as coaches and the boundaries of control they had within flow in coaching conversations:

> A sense of **self efficacy**. Grounded in an assurance, confidence and ease born of the deep belief that I can deal with anything that comes up, either from myself or the other. I can deal with any emotions that come up; I am aware of them, I understand them, I feel and empathise with them, but I don't get affected by them. I can hold myself and them in a safe space - I have enough, I am enough. I can let go of 'me'.

Figure 4: Circumplex of relational flow in coaching conversations



Conclusion

The study set out to identify and map the experiences that coaches identify as flow within coaching conversations – a relational perspective that was missing in the existing literature. In order to achieve this aim, a pragmatic social constructivist research approach was chosen, using the iterative and collaborative qualitative methodology of Conceptual Encounter (De Rivera, 1981) to understand the experience of flow. The research objective was met by establishing a map of relational flow in coaching, building on and differentiating with Csikszentmihalyi's (1975; 1990) six elements of individual flow. It may also be important to recognise the additional relationally-specific seventh flow element found in this study. Highlighting this additional relational connection could help others to understand and appreciate how co-researchers in flow experienced it as deep, transformational and above 'normal' life. This study has therefore helped to establish a new conceptual understanding of the flow experience in coaching and the coaching relationship.

The map extends the knowledge base in both flow and coaching literature and provides a basis for use by coaches, coaching associations, educators and supervisors in their practice. Whilst this study may only be definitive for relatively experienced coaches, its co-construction reflects the language and lived experiences of coaches, meaning that more coaches may be able to perceive and recognise the experience more readily for themselves. Including elements of flow described in this study in educators' professional developmental programmes or supervisors' practice, could help coaches become aware of what flow is and how to recognise it for themselves.

However, the implication of having a map of the flow experience in coaching is that it may be a useful alternative lens through which coaches, educators and supervisors can further recognise, understand, reflect and discuss the differences prompted by being in flow. Beginning with an overall summary understanding of the holistic experience itself before making use of the varying levels of rich descriptive text available in the map, it is hoped that the map can support deeper and progressively more nuanced discussion, understanding and self-reflective learning through the lens of relational flow in coaching.

Limitations and future research

This study represents a first attempt to map the coaches' experience of flow in coaching. It is important to recognise that the decision made to involve experienced coaches who were aware of flow may represent a limitation. Involving coaches with less experience may have yielded different findings. For example, less experienced coaches may have been more focussed on tools, techniques and process and may have identified different experiences of relational-flow. Further studies could explore the influence that levels of coach experience may have. For instance, it would be helpful to establish how less-experienced or newly-trained coaches may experience and describe flow and how that might develop the flow in coaching definition or alter the elemental structure or descriptive text of the map of flow.

Demographics such as gender, ethnicity, etc. were considered out of scope when selecting co-researchers for this research due to the consistency of flow experience reported by other researchers. As this study was situated within the relational context of coaching and given the criticality of the relationship to coaching effectiveness, this may be considered as a potential limitation. Future research could usefully focus on these areas.

Becoming aware of flow is arguably a pre-requisite for identifying and perceiving differences between being in or out of flow, it is inevitable that involving coaches who had experienced flow positively influenced the findings. It would be interesting to observe and understand the experience of coaches who were both aware of flow but had not experienced it in coaching or were unaware of flow and used the map to recognise flow.

The research was specifically focussed against coaches and their experiences of flow. Whilst this was by design and may not therefore be a limitation, it would be interesting to examine relational flow from the client perspective as Noon (2017) did with presence. As the experience is one of relational flow in dyads, this further work would help to discover the experiences clients see as flow, thereby establishing the similarities and differences between coach and client in that dyad.

Finally, future research could discover the changes perceived after experiences of flow, helping close an existing gap in both coaching and flow knowledge. The establishment of a relational flow map overcomes the challenge McBride (2013), Wilhelmsen (2013) and Wesson (2010) faced. It is now possible to use it as a basis for establishing a common platform of understanding and awareness of flow, from which any subsequential changes may be perceived.

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