

While much quantitative research anchors the effectiveness of coaching in behaviour, a review of qualitative research highlights the importance of emotions too. Tünde Erdős shares her holistic model for working with a wider range of factors in coaching



Our ever-changing moods

Much current thinking on what constitutes good coaching practice assumes coaching is a simple, linear behavioural change intervention, even though in practice as coaches we know it's much more complex.

My systematic review of a wealth of qualitative research suggests not only that goal attainment is complicated but also that coaches often jeopardise the chances of effective outcomes by failing to anchor coaching effectiveness when working with emotions.

BEHAVIOUR/EMOTIONS

My review highlights that while there are numerous studies researching behaviour as a goal attainment measure, there is very little research exploring the relevance of emotion as a

key success factor of coaching outcomes. Behaviour is a dimension that is easily discernible. We see it when clients act differently. Measuring shifts in behaviour for goal attainment seems more straightforward than establishing links between emotion and effectiveness in coaching. However, there are links, just as there are links between emotion and effectiveness for leaders (Goleman *et al*, 2002).

Given my exploration, I believe we should attend to the emotional dimension first: placing clients' emotion in the moment at the centre of both our coaching practice and research agenda. Let's explore my findings.

CLIENT LEARNING IMPACT

We know as coaches that the process of clients' behaviour change is complex. After all, sometimes clients manage to successfully attain their goals;

sometimes they don't. What we don't know is what impacts clients' learning: how and why do clients achieve what they do in coaching?

Qualitative research is well placed to explore such questions about clients' experience of change. This systematic review seeks to build on the highly important existing quantitative approaches to coaching research and practice by helping us develop an awareness of the fullness of factors contributing to coaching outcomes.

Essentially, my review is a response to general limitations of quantitative approaches to understanding the role and contribution of client factors and contextual factors in coaching effectiveness. It answers calls of some scholars (Grant, 2017; de Haan, 2019) to emphasise the significance of reviewing client factors through the process-orientated lens of qualitative studies. ➔

THE LITERATURE

My systematic review of 95 peer-reviewed qualitative studies represents what I believe to be the first attempt to shed light on the possible relationship between goal attainment and the nuanced dynamics of the factors that emerge in coaching clients' change processes. It highlights that clients' internal processes as well as context sensitivity are key factors in how coaching works.

Specifically, this process view puts the focus on clients, the coach-client relationship and clients' more distant contexts as integral to coaching. It coincides with a recent shift in coaching science from 'How to coach' and 'Is coaching effective?' to 'What impacts clients' learning?' (Bachkirova, 2011). It recognises that coaching is a human activity with all the complexities of social interactions.

In this review, I argue for an understanding of coaching as a process that involves a constant integration of sub-outcomes as influenced by a) client factors and b) contextual factors. Without a contextual frame of reference as proposed in my review, coaches run the risk of being unable to adapt to ever-changing human complexity.

While quantitative studies have contributed to our understanding of the role and contribution of the client in coaching effectiveness, they are limited in at least three main aspects:

- The scope of client factors for a comprehensive understanding of goal striving and goal attainment remains fragmented
- We risk missing potential context-related factors as well as the interconnectivity of all factors potentially present in coaching as a socially constructed change process
- We lack insight into sub-outcomes (Horvath & Greenberg, 1986), that is, short-term shifts for clients or specific moments of unique learning and sense-making over time

EXPLORING DYNAMICS

My belief is that unless we understand the dynamic influences of clients' selves as well as their social and occupational worlds, we'll miss out on an important educational opportunity and chance to support our clients more fully to effect change and achieve their goals.

This review identifies success factors ranging from clients' emotional (ie, expressive of basic needs), cognitive (ie, manifestations of how clients see the

world) and behavioural (ie, competencies, inclinations and copying style) characteristics to contextual conditions (ie, external factors that affect when and how clients engage in coaching) that are suggested to have a bearing on coaching effectiveness. It seeks to conceptualise their nuanced dynamics as they emerge in clients' social contexts.

The aim is to build on prior understandings of coaching as a socially constructed change process. Scholars recognise that gaining a deeper understanding of the influence of these dynamics through the uniquely integrative lens of qualitative studies appears necessary to fully understand the coaching process. Specifically, some researchers (de Haan et al, 2016) claim that the process view provides deeper insight into how to facilitate the process of change and goal attainment as a key *raison d'être* and outcome of coaching.

THE RESEARCH

My review includes only empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals and integrates papers with a coaching-relevant focus on mentoring or both coaching and mentoring. To avoid discounting important studies for reasons of quality due to methodological weaknesses, I include soundly based findings even when other findings from the same study might be rejected (eg, the coaching paradigm as investigated by a mixed-method approach).

Sampling involves a constant dialectic process (aiming to discover truth through examining and interrogating competing ideas, perspectives or arguments) conducted concurrently with theory generation (developing ideas from previous ideas presented by scholars) through to the analysis phase. Personality process theory (Hampson, 2012; mechanisms that produce personality traits) is drawn on as an analytical lens to map

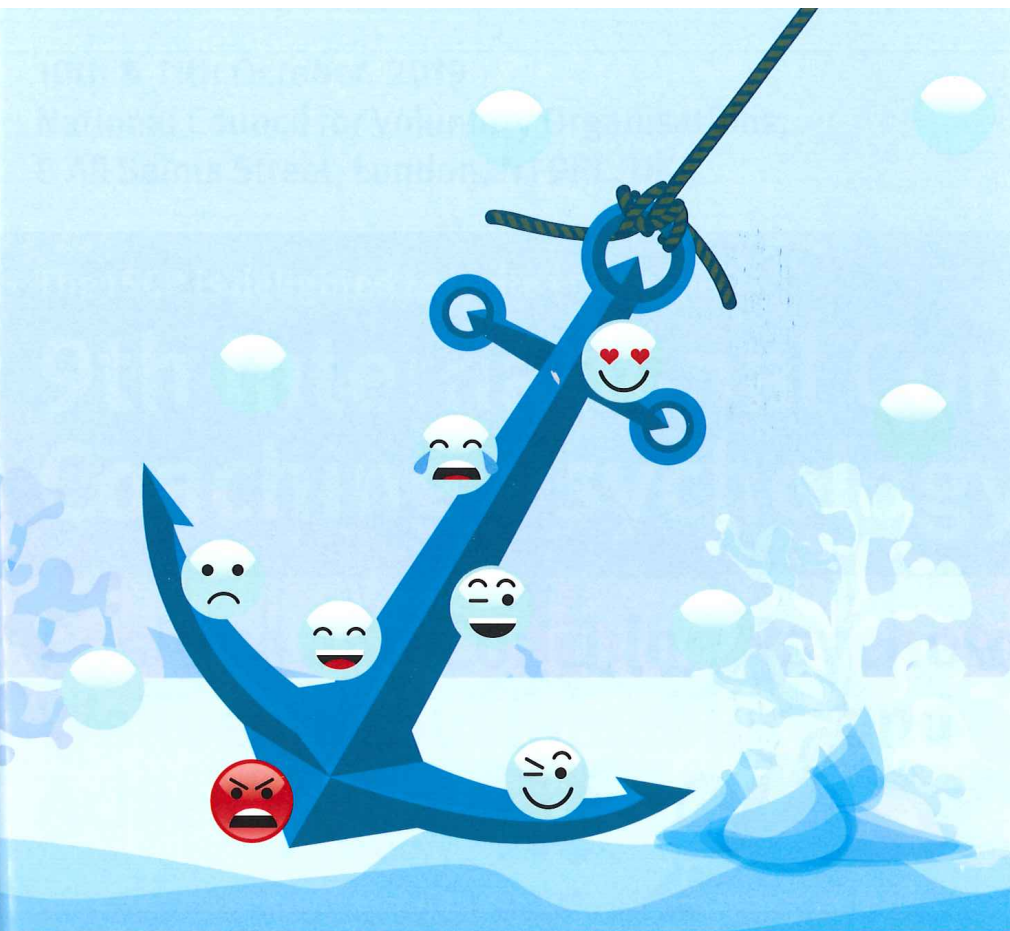
Key contributions of this review

● **COMPLETING THE PICTURE** While quantitative research outcomes are selective as a result of studies investigating a few client factors as variables only, the emerging qualitative findings consolidate the scope of client factors as potential active ingredients of effective goal attainment

● **CONTEXTUALISING CHANGE** While prior research increasingly investigated coaching from the perspective of 'how to coach', this review applies a process-orientated approach conceptualising how client factors interrelate in the immediacy of clients' social contexts. This provides perspectives of how clients may contribute to goal attainment. The result is the 3Cs of the coaching process:

Client – Context – Contextualised Change

● **CARVING OUT THE CORE** An integrative concept maps how clients engage in their learning. Contextualised change as the result of the dynamic interconnections of client factors and contextual factors indicates that 'emotion' explains why clients do what they do in coaching




context. To this end, the second step involves combining client factors and integrated contextual factors as reported in the qualitative articles to explore what's going on for clients in the coaching engagement and how contextual factors affect when and how clients engage in coaching. This approach deepens our understanding of the interconnectivity of these factors in the coaching process, and how coaching works.

Twelve dimensional dynamics unfolded in this step. For the purposes of this approach, dynamics refer to when two dimensions are described as associated (eg, clients' emotional state impacts their attitude to coaching) either with a positive or negative impact in the studies. Specifically, the review shows that seven dimensional dynamics explain a direct relationship (eg, emotion directly impacts attitude: 'becoming preoccupied' as a direct result of 'boredom, anxiety') while five dynamics show an indirect relationship (eg, clients' 'lack of confidence in and acceptance of coaching' indirectly trigger 'tension as doubt' in clients via 'coaches' calmness, openness and authenticity') between pairs (Figure 1) as reported in the studies.

Step 3: Acknowledging the central role of emotions – the model

This step involves the reconstruction of client and contextual factors as a 'new whole'. The Integrative Relationship Model (Figure 1) shows that Emotion is the only dimension reported to be indirectly influenced by the other three dimensions, as described in step two.

The systematic review shows that Emotion appears to play a weak role in the coaching process. However, this model also accepts that it is easy to overlook the fact that all the other dimensions are rooted in Emotion. In other words, Emotion is likely to explain why clients do what they do in coaching.

The review shows it is an anchoring 

client constructs with the aim of producing dynamic interconnections as sub-outcomes.

Unlike other widely recognised assessment models such as the Big Five (Goldberg *et al*, 1990) that describe client personality well, Hampson's theory lends itself to addressing the questions of why and how clients' characteristics might predict goal attainment. It allows for combining client factors and contextual factors, showing both the direct associations of these factors as they affect when and how clients engage in coaching and the indirect associations that work via a third factor.

THE INTEGRATIVE RELATIONSHIP MODEL

This model assumes there are links between emotion and effectiveness. It maps the interconnections between the dimensions of emotion, attitude and behaviour as they represent client and contextual factors additionally present in coaching engagements. It acknowledges that coaches need constantly to move back and forth, in a holistic way, between attending to the client as a whole person, the client's field, specific issues and behaviours.

Inevitably, integrating all these aspects makes coaching and coaching research a complex endeavour. At the same time, it also provides us with new areas to investigate. The Integrative Relationship Model (Figure 1, p44) is the product of a three-step review process:

Step 1: Descriptions alone won't help

First, client factors are conceptualised as coded dimensions. Behaviour is the dimension that's studied most extensively, followed by attitude. Emotion is the least studied dimension. While these three coded dimensions contribute to delineating client factors present in coaching, descriptions do not help us understand why a neurotic person erupts in anger to feedback offered by the coach, or when an impulsive client will, surprisingly, use constraint in the coaching engagement.

Step 2: Exploring why different clients display different emotions during coaching

To begin to establish why clients do what they do, it's necessary to view client factors in a broader theoretical


factor heavily under-researched and under-theorised in coaching. Findings in this review call for this model to be tested in outcome research for a clearer understanding of what impacts clients' learning and how coaching works.

Establishing empirical research that integrates both client and contextual factors will help us understand how coaching works and aid understanding of coaching effectiveness in the future. This will support coaching service providers in navigating the demands of increasingly competitive learning-based interventions in organisations.

REFLECTIONS

Given that the findings suggest Emotion explains why clients do what they do in coaching, I urge coach educators to 'teach more Emotion' in coaching so we can gain a deeper understanding of how coaching works. Additionally, the relevance of Emotion calls for deeper exploration in outcome research as the studies report Emotion to have a direct impact on behaviour (eg, fear and emotional excess leading to resistance). This implicates personality processes that have remained unexplored in quantitative research to date.

Paying attention to this dimension is necessary if we wish to establish a comprehensive understanding about the irregularities that coaches encounter when applying certain methods that prove effective with certain clients but not others.

The conceptualisation of an underlying interconnectivity between client and contextual factors begins to deepen our understanding of how these factors as a socially constructed change process translate into coaching effectiveness. Hence, this review serves as a conceptual resource to scholars wishing to measure client factors and clients' context both as success factors and outcome measures in coaching psychology or management research in an integrative manner. 

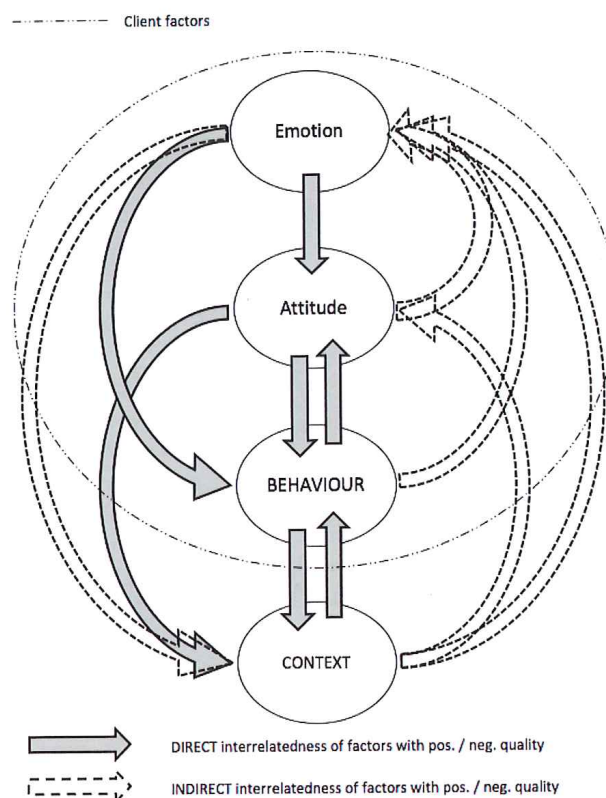


Figure 1: The Integrative Research Model

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