

## You think you are an empathic coach? Maybe you should think again. The difference between perceptions of empathy vs. empathic behaviour after a persons-centered coaching training (Theresa Will, Sina Gessnitzer & Simone Kauffeld, 2016)

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### Aim of study

**Empathy** is considered to have a beneficial influence in coaching, but the process that can make it effective is under researched. This study focuses on how empathy might be differently perceived between coach and client and shows that when effectively conveyed, empathy generates an immediate positive reaction from the client. This research is based on the material collected from a group of 19 coaching dyads through questionnaires assessing coaches' **expressed cognitive empathy** (how coaches express their cognitive empathy), their empathic statements and subsequent clients' reactions.

### Background

#### Expressed cognitive empathy

Previous research has stated that the importance to build a strong connection with the client (Wasylyshin, 2003) is to be supported by expressed empathy as one of the main aspects of a coaching session (Kilburg, 1997). Nevertheless **cognitive empathy**, the ability of a coach to mentally represent the client's internal state and show understanding, hasn't been studied enough. While it's clear the strong impact that this ability creates, the point yet to be assessed is what the client considers empathic and what is the coach perception of his/her own empathic skills.

#### Empathy

While there are some differences among authors about the definition of empathy most agree (Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Gini, Albiello, Benelli & Altoè, 2007; Reniers, Corcoran, Drake, Shryane & Vollm, 2011) on a two-factor structure: **affective empathy**, as an emotional reaction to someone else's emotional response, and cognitive empathy, as understanding someone else emotion through a mental perspective. Studies show (Marjanovic, Struthers & Greenglass, 2012) that affective empathy has little influence in helping a person's behaviour, while cognitive empathy enables people to understand and facilitates conversations as well as social expertise (Smith, 2006). The distinction is important because according to the authors an affective empathy response "would not have an impact on the client's mind... or possibly damage the client's perception of the coach as an expert". Consequently, the study is based on the assumption that cognitive empathy is most important for a coach to demonstrate and build a professional relationship. A most typical way to show empathy is **paraphrasing**, as a form of empathic response, which effectiveness has been already demonstrated in therapy (Mercer & Reynolds, 2002; Antaki, Barnes & Leudar, 2007)

## Methodology

19 coaches from a German university who held a Bachelor degree in psychology with 200 hours coaching training and their randomly assigned volunteer clients were the sample for the study. A questionnaire was submitted to the participants based on three hypothesis: 1) there is no significant correlation between coaches/clients perception of expressed cognitive empathy; 2a) coaches paraphrasing correlates positively with the empathy the client ascribes to the coach; 2b) clients feelings addressed by the coach correlates positively with the empathy the client ascribes to the coach; 3) the client shows agreement with coach's paraphrasing and addressing of the client's feelings. In the questionnaire both coaches and clients had to respond to the same questions on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *totally agree* to 6 = *totally disagree*.

## Key Findings

<b>Hypotesis 1</b>	Coaches' and clients' perception of coaches' expressed (cognitive) empathy did not overlap; coaches and clients use different approaches to evaluate <i>empathic resonation</i> . That means coaches cannot entirely rely on their own perception to assess their empathic abilities.
<b>Hypotesis 2a</b>	The more a coach uses paraphrasing, the more the client rates the coach as empathic.
<b>Hypotesis 2b</b>	Clients don't declare any positive effect on the coaches' expressed empathy when coaches address their counterpart's feelings.
<b>Hypotesis 3</b>	Coaches' paraphrasing is often significantly followed by the client's agreement.

## Limitations/ Questions

- The study mainly focused on younger inexperienced coaches fresh of a special coach training, which could have influenced clients' empathic perception.
- The sample size of only 19 dyads was very small.
- The analysis was conducted on coaches and clients who met for the first time. Therefore the authors recognize that "the reflection of someone's feelings might require a more deeply established relationship and more trust to have a beneficial effect on the client's empathy rating".
- Although *paraphrasing* alone had a more established effect on the client's empathic perception than *addressing counterpart's feelings*, the authors suggest a "**fourth phase of the empathic circle**" when they observed a combination of coaches' *paraphrasing* and *addressing counterpart's feelings* which resulted in an immediate, positive and observable client's reaction. On this point, they suggest, further studies should be carried on.

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