

# You think you are an empathic coach? Maybe you should think again. The difference between perceptions of empathy vs. empathic behaviour after a person-centred coaching training

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## Aim of Study

Aim of the study is to examine cognitive empathy and expression by the coach, and its perception and reaction by the client. For the purpose of the study cognitive empathy is defined as *an ability through which a coach is able to imagine the internal state of the client and tries to understand the client's mind*. This ability strongly impacts behaviour in the course of interaction and quality of the relationship between the coach and the client. However, neither the coaches' own perception of their empathic skills nor their actual empathic behaviour on the client have been assessed in the coaching context. The perception of coaches' expressed (cognitive) empathy by questionnaires, observed and analysed the communication (interaction analysis) of coaches' empathic statements (paraphrasing and addressing counterpart's feelings) and the clients' reaction to these kinds of empathic behavior were assessed by examining the processes using a multi-method research design with 19 coaching partnerships.

The study helped to further understand how to build a strong professional relationship and examine the role of coach's and client's distinct perceptions of the coach's empathic skills in coaching, analyse empathic behaviour during coaching sessions, and identify which of the coach's behaviour patterns influence the client's behaviour.

## Background

There is consensus that empathy can be measured and can have an influence on behaviour patterns. However, there is still a controversy what empathy is and how it is to be defined. However, although the definition of empathy is not yet clear, most of the researchers call for a two-factor structure of empathy in cognitive and affective empathy. While affective empathy is often specified as an emotional reaction to someone else's emotional responses, (e.g. feeling sad when someone else cries), cognitive empathy on the other hand is characterised as mental perspective-taking (e.g. understanding why someone else is sad when they cry).

Some existing research pays more attention to cognitive empathy than to affective empathy. For example, in dealing with donors helping natural disaster victims, cognitive empathy correlates significantly positively with helping behaviour patterns. In this case affective empathy had little influence on the individual's helping behaviour. Cognitive empathy enables people to understand and facilitates conversations as well as social expertise. It is of huge concern for coaching. For example, a client might report being sad because the client's work life balance is not satisfactory. The coach needs to understand the incongruence within the client's actual life situation in order to be able to demonstrate his/her understanding through according behaviour.

As a consequence, because of the importance of cognitive empathy in coaching, the focus of this study is on cognitive empathy.

## Methodology

Study consisted of 19 coach–client dyads, all held a Bachelor degree in psychology and took part in the same career coaching training, consisting of 200 hours embedded in their Masters Degree curriculum. After, learning theoretical basic coaching knowledge, they held coaching sessions with clients, who were recruited via advertisement on university websites or via flyers posted on campus, whilst two experienced coaches accompanied and supervised all the coaches. Coaches and clients were randomly assigned to each other and gave their written permission to be videotaped and for the scientific use of video and questionnaire data filled in at the end of the session.

This research is based around the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Coaches' and client's perception of the coaches' expressed (cognitive) empathy do not show any significant correlation.

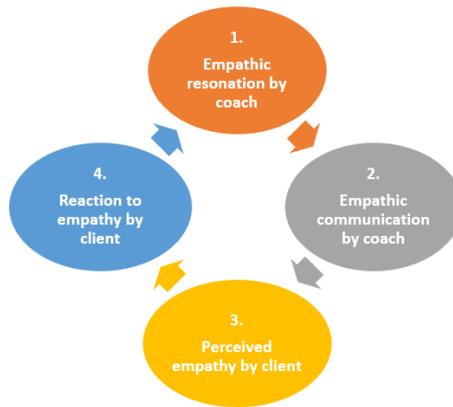
Hypothesis 2a: Paraphrasing from the coach correlates significantly positively with the empathy the client ascribes to the coach.

Hypothesis 2b: Addressing the client's feelings from the coach correlates significantly positively with the empathy the client ascribes to the coach.

Hypothesis 3: The client shows direct agreement with the coaches' sequences of paraphrasing and of addressing the client's feelings.

It uses the following 4 step empathy cycle adapted from an original 3 step version to add the fourth step, client reactions as shown in Diagram 1 below.

**Diagram 1**



Since the researchers found no instrument which combines questionnaire data and an interactional observation analysis to assess the coaches’ and clients’ perception of empathy, they generated a short scale composed of three items on cognitive empathy in identical versions adapted for (1) coach and (2) client using a six-point scale, ranging from 1= totally agree to 6= totally disagree.

To code the interaction the study applied an interaction analysis and code for the 19 coaching sessions by use of the coding scheme Advanced Interaction Analysis for Consulting. They used the codes for paraphrasing and addressing counterpart’s feelings (PARA), addressing counterpart’s feelings (ACF) of the coach, and client’s agreement with the coach (AGR). A working example is shown in table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Example of a typical coaching session.

| Speaker | Transcript   | Code |
|---------|--|------|
| Coach   | OK, so here I've understood one main aspect which is that you want to have a job. So, you said you have much options and you would like to ascertain which one is the best for you | PARA |
| Client  | Yes, right   | AGR  |
| Coach   | This means, were do you want to work in the future?  | PARA |
| Client  | Right  | AGR  |
| Coach   | So, do you feel joyful in this situation? ...  | ACF  |
| Client  | Yes, a lot   | AGR  |

Note: PARA, Paraphrasing: repetition of an interactional partners’ previous statement; AGR, Agreement: in accordance with partner’s previous statement; ACF, Addressing counterpart’s feelings: Verbalising partner’s (positive/negative) emotional frame of mind.

**Limitations**

The study mainly focused on younger unexperienced coaches after a special coaching training. These findings cannot be applied to every coaching setting. The coaching approach is one based on a person-centred approach implemented in a university setting. Future studies should consider the impact of the coach’s presence on the client’s behaviour because it might have an influence on the coaching process. Thus, a coach that is aware of his/her presence could treat the client more empathically compared to a coach who has not developed his/herself in this direction. Despite these limitations, our study is the first attempt to investigate coaches’ expressed (cognitive) empathy not only empirically, but with questionnaire as well as behavioural data.

**Conclusion**

The main goal of this study was the examination of expressed (cognitive) empathy during the coaching process. The study underscores the importance of young trained coaches expressing (cognitive) empathy during the coaching process and is thus not only useful for experienced coaches but should in influencing coaching training as well.

There is a need for observational data of coaches' actual emphatic behavior as its necessary to distinguish between perceptions of behaviour and actual behaviour. If coaches cannot rely on their self-perception regarding their empathic abilities, it is important to analyse which specific behaviour really influences the clients' perception of an emphatic coach. The more often a coach paraphrased statements of the client, the higher the clients' rated their coaches' empathy after the coaching process. Studies show that empathy develops more over time.

The empathic behaviour in the study, paraphrasing and addressing counterpart’s feelings, can be easily learned and applied as a basic technique to show empathy. Beyond that, the results highlight the importance of basic listening skills.

Further investigation should extend research to other stages of the coaching process and understand which behaviour is most beneficial to the clients' empathy.