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# Exploring the role of self-awareness in coach development: A grounded theory study

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## Abstract

Workplace coaching is a rapidly growing industry, and while there has been some research carried out to explore the effectiveness of coaching and to evaluate coaching outcomes, there has been very little research to underpin coach development and how coaches best develop coaching competence for workplace coaching. Self-awareness is perceived by many, including the professional coaching bodies, to be a core-competency for practising coaches. However, there is a lack of research evidence to underpin this perception and therefore this study, using an inductive grounded theory approach, explores the linkages between self-awareness and coach development. It finishes by presenting a conceptual framework to identify the linkages between self-awareness and coach development. The paper aims to make a theoretical contribution to the literature supporting workplace coaching and in particular coach development, by developing theoretical principles to underpin those providing coach development. The findings indicate that self-awareness is an important competency for coaches to develop as it provides the backbone to developing deep and meaningful connections both for the coach in terms of self-acceptance and confidence, and for the client in terms of the depth of the relationship, thereby creating an environment in which challenging work can be carried out.

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## INTRODUCTION

Workplace coaching is a rapidly growing industry (Forbes, 2017), with a reported increase in the numbers of practising coaches. In 2016, the ICF estimated there were 53,300 professional coach practitioners worldwide (Bozer & Jones, 2018). There are a plethora of coach training courses and while there has been research exploring the effectiveness of coaching and evaluation of coaching outcomes (e.g. Grant et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2016), coaching processes and the coaching relationship (Lai & McDowall, 2014), and the active ingredients in executive coaching (Pandolfi, 2020) there has been very little research undertaken to understand how coaches develop (Hullinger et al., 2019). While there has been a conceptual discussion of the capabilities and competencies (Bachkirova, 2015) that might be used in the assessment and accreditation of coaches, there is a lack of research to underpin coach training (Jordan et al., 2017; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011) and development for workplace coaches.

One of the core competencies perceived to be important for coaches is self-awareness (Bluckert, 2005). This is based on the premise that the coach has a key role in the coaching process (Lai & McDowall, 2014), and is the main ‘tool’ for the coaching (Bachkirova, 2016). Therefore, it has been proposed that it is essential that coaches develop the ‘self’ (Bachkirova, 2016; Laske, 1999), although interestingly, a recent systematic review (Pandolfi, 2020) did not identify self-awareness as an active ingredient in executive coaching. Yet others support the proposition that a core purpose of coaching is to elicit behavioural change through raising the self-awareness of the coachee (Bozer et al., 2014), and therefore argue that the development of coach self-awareness is important to consider when building an evidence-base for coach training (Laske, 1999). If coaches are responsible for raising self-awareness in others, and it is how the coach uses their ‘self’ that is crucial to the coaching relationship (Lai & McDowall, 2014), it is proposed that coaches themselves must be highly self-aware, since if the coach has not developed their own self-awareness, it is unlikely that they will work effectively with their clients (Laske, 1999). This is exacerbated by the fact that many coach training programmes tend to focus on technical coaching skills (e.g. powerful questions, active listening and coaching tools), rather than on the coach’s self-development (Jordan et al., 2017). In addition, while there have been conceptual papers exploring how coaches might develop their ‘self’ as a coach (Bachkirova, 2011; Laske, 1999) there is a lack of understanding in terms of how coaches develop self-awareness. This has obvious implications for those providing coach development and professional accreditation in terms of determining if and why self-awareness is important to coach development, and if it is important, how coaches can best develop it.

A lack of research evidence supporting how coaches develop (Jordan et al., 2017) and what competencies they should develop is problematic because this means there is an absence of research to underpin the design of training programmes (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011), the professional bodies competency frameworks and assessment processes, and ongoing coach development. We propose that to enhance the credibility of coaching, it is important that coach training programmes and coach development are based on research evidence (Blumberg, 2014). As coaching is an unregulated profession (Smither, 2011), it can be claimed that establishing research evidence to support coach training and development is likely to support the profession’s credibility and the move of coaching towards desired professionalization (Gray, 2011; Moore & Koning, 2016).

Therefore, currently there is a lack of evidence underpinning the claim that self-awareness is important for coaches, and an understanding as to how coaches develop self-awareness. With this in mind, we propose that a conceptual theory exploring the linkages between self-awareness and coach development would start to provide fresh insight into the relationship between the two

(Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017), in order to provide research evidence to support those governing the profession (such as the ICF and EMCC) and those designing training programmes. Therefore, we aim to explore the possible links between self-awareness and coach development using a grounded theory approach, focussing on workplace coaches. We develop a theoretical framework to demonstrate the role of self-awareness in coach development and coaching practice, and how best coaches can develop this competency. In the spirit of grounded theory, there is no attempt to ascertain the universality or proof of the conceptual framework generated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Larsson et al., 2005). Instead, we aim to make a theoretical contribution to the coach development literature, thereby underpinning coach training and development.

## **DEFINING COACHING**

The definition of coaching which is utilized for this study is that used by Bozer et al. (2014): ‘coaching is a one-to-one intervention between a professional coach and a client (the client). The purpose of this intervention is to enhance the client’s behavioural change through self-awareness and learning, and ultimately contribute to individual and organizational success’ (p. 883). This definition was adopted because it draws on the common components incorporated into discussions on how to define coaching which are: (a) it is a one-to-one relationship between a client and a coach, (b) is a relationship that follows a defined agreement with the organization (Pandolfi, 2020), (c) it involves a personal development process for the coachee and (d) equips the coachee with the tools, knowledge and opportunities he/she might need to develop themselves (Smither, 2011). This is perceived to be different from other workplace developmental interventions such as mentoring. Typically, a mentor would be presumed to hold expertise and/or experience in the coachee’s area of work, whereas a coach is not expected to have this experience or expertise, and the coaching relationship is guided by specific objectives rather than a longer term relationship (Jones et al., 2016).

## **IS SELF-AWARENESS IMPORTANT FOR COACHES?**

While recent research exploring the active ingredients in executive coaching (Pandolfi, 2020) did not identify coach self-awareness as essential, a key purpose of coaching is to enhance the client’s behavioural change through raising their self-awareness, as such a coach’s role is to raise the self-awareness of their clients (Bozer et al., 2014). If coaches are to raise self-awareness in others, it is argued that they themselves must be highly self-aware, as highlighted by Laske (1999), if the coach has not developed their own self-awareness, how might they then work effectively with their clients? Laske (1999) proposes that coaches can only develop others to the level they have developed themselves, and therefore this suggests that a coach’s level of self-awareness will dictate the amount of self-awareness he/she can develop in their clients. Taking this a step further and bearing in mind the definition of coaching outlined above, it is suggested that a coach’s personal level of self-awareness could therefore hinder or promote the behavioural change in the client. Furthermore, Gatling et al. (2013) argue that self-awareness underpins the ability of the coach to establish a relationship of unconditional trust with the client, which is seen as a core competency of effective coaching (De Haan et al., 2013). However, with a training focus on technical skills rather than on a coach’s self-awareness (Jordan et al., 2017), it is unclear how practising coaches view self-awareness and what value they place on it.

## HOW DO COACHES DEVELOP?

As highlighted in the introduction, there has been very little research to underpin coach development or to explore the possible linkages between self-awareness and coach development. However, Bachkirova (2016), Bachkirova and Cox (2008) and Laske (1999) have developed conceptual frameworks which look at the cognitive development of coaches. These frameworks are largely based on adult development theories, drawing predominantly on the work of Kegan (1982). Kegan's (1982) model of development focusses on how individuals make meaning of the experiences they are encountering, and how that meaning-making evolves over a lifetime, to develop the 'self'. Therefore, in line with previous research in this area (Bachkirova & Cox, 2008; Laske, 1999), it is proposed that Kegan's theory of adult development is a helpful framework to underpin this research in indicating that self-awareness and coaches can develop, because the theories of adult development explore how the 'self' and thereby self-awareness develops and evolves throughout an individual's lifespan. We propose that Kegan's model of adult development is linked to the development of self-awareness and coach development, as when the definition (provided below) of self-awareness is taken into account, it is self-awareness that provides the coach with awareness of the necessary 'lens' and 'filters' (Voronov & Yorks, 2015) to become more self-aware, which enables the coach to work at the same level as the client (Laske, 1999) and establish a relationship of unconditional trust (Gatling et al., 2013). While Kegan's (1982) model is an evolutionary model of development, proposing that we move through stages of development to reach a point at which a coach might achieve an ultimate stage of self-awareness, there is yet to be any research to support this. In addition, there is a lack of evidence as to how coaches move through the developmental levels, in terms of what enables this.

## DEFINING SELF-AWARENESS

The researchers acknowledge that the construct of self-awareness is complex and multi-layered, and has multiple definitions (Sutton, 2016; Williams, 2008). However, this has been explored at length in a recent systematic literature review exploring how self-awareness is defined within the context of adult development (Carden et al., 2021) which highlights this complexity. Therefore, this informed how self-awareness was conceptualized by the researchers for this research and the following definition was used:

'Self-awareness consists of a range of components, which can be developed through focus, evaluation and feedback, and provides an individual with an awareness of their internal state (emotions, cognitions, physiological responses), that drives their behaviours (beliefs, values and motivations) and an awareness of how this impacts and influences others' (Carden et al., 2021).

Self-awareness is perceived to be a competency because it is an aspect of an individual which can be developed and is an enabler to being competent (Young, 2005). Therefore, it is perceived to be a different and separate competency to self-reflection, as self-reflection is believed to be a route to improving self-awareness (Shaw & Glowacki-Dudka, 2019).

## Summary

In sum, it is proposed that it is essential for coaches to develop high levels of self-awareness (Bluckert, 2005; Leggett & James, 2016) to be effective as coaches, and to raise self-awareness in their clients,

yet there is a lack of research evidence from practising coaches to endorse this claim. It is also suggested that developing self-awareness is a facet of developing the self as an adult, and there is a linkage to development in line with Kegan's theory. However, there is a lack of understanding as to how coaches develop self-awareness and research evidence to underpin coach development programmes to guide the professional coaching bodies on whether self-awareness is a competency of coach development. Alongside this, without research evidence supporting the role of self-awareness in coach development, it is likely that there will be no consistency in developing a framework for evaluating the development of coaches, or the effectiveness of coach training programmes (Atad & Grant, 2020). Therefore, in this study we aim to explore the linkages between self-awareness and coach development through the following research question: *What is the role of self-awareness in the development of the coach?* Consequently, we aim to develop a conceptual theoretical framework to demonstrate the links between self-awareness and coach development.

## METHOD

Our research aims to explore the lived experiences of coaches in identifying the role self-awareness has played in their development (Birks & Mills, 2015) as a coach. Therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted. As the research aims to explore the linkages (if any) between self-awareness and coach development and understand what coaches do to develop self-awareness rather than assuming what might be going on because of learning and development theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and to avoid being limited by existing thinking on adult development and learning (Stern & Porr, 2011) a grounded theory methodology was utilized (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A grounded theory approach will enable new concepts and theory to be generated from making sense of the words and actions of those this research is seeking to inform (Kempster & Parry, 2011). In addition, a grounded theory approach will support the development of a new theoretical framework that emerges from the data (Oldridge, 2019; Suddaby, 2006), and aims to fit the area from which it has been derived (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### Data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews (Kempster, 2006) in the UK. All interviews and analysis were conducted by the first author, who is principally a coaching practitioner acting as a researcher. The second and third authors are academics specializing in coaching, including engaging in the practice of coaching. Consistent with the exploratory nature of grounded theory, initially open-ended questions were prepared in advance and used as a general guide (Oldridge, 2019), with later interviews being informed by the emerging concepts (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). The questions were aimed at exploring how coaches had developed, and to ensure that the researcher was not leading the participants, 'self-awareness' was only mentioned if the participant used the term in their answers. If this was the case, they were asked to define it, and then the researcher explored what aspects of their development led to developing self-awareness. The interviews started by asking the participants to describe their developmental journey as a coach, with follow-up questions exploring what aspects of the development had most impact on the coach themselves, and on their coaching practice. The interviews also explored the participant's perceptions of the impact of this development on their coachees, and how they knew this.

In accordance with ethical research practice, all participants were emailed a participant information sheet and were asked to email their consent to the research team, agreeing to take part in the research and having their interviews recorded. The research was ethically cleared by the university under which the research was carried out. Interviews were recorded and transcripts were then compiled for analysis purposes. In addition, the lead researcher kept notes during the interviews. All transcripts, notes and recordings were securely stored. To maintain confidentiality the interviews were coded as GT1, GT2, etc. and names were removed.

In line with a grounded theory methodology, theoretical sampling was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Stern & Porr, 2011). Therefore, as the research aimed to explore how coaches develop within the context of their coaching experience as a practising coach, it was decided that interviewing coaches who had been working as a coach over several years and therefore have potentially engaged in a variety of development interventions, as well as their initial coach training, was most likely to provide the opportunity to identify concepts and relationships between their development as a coach and self-awareness (Kempster & Parry, 2011). In addition, experienced coaches were chosen because it was felt that newly practising and novice coaches would not be able to identify which training and development activities are most impactful in terms of developing self-awareness. While it is acknowledged that coaching experience, in terms of hours, is not an indicator of coaching quality (Diller et al., 2020), we wanted to interview coaches who had been coaching for several years as we considered (based on our own experience) that they would have engaged in several forms of development, and as self-awareness develops over time (Carden et al., 2021), they would consequently have already started to develop their capacity to be self-aware. Therefore, the participants selected had undergone coach training and were experienced accredited coaches (EMCC Senior Practitioner or above, ICF Professional Certified Coach (PCC) or above, or an equivalent), or with over 500 h coaching experience if they had no accreditation from a professional coaching body. In addition, participants were coaches who had not previously trained as therapists, as this group of professionals will have been expected to have developed self-awareness as part of their therapeutic training (Atad & Grant, 2020) and a large proportion of practising coaches do not have a therapeutic background (Berglas, 2002).

While there is much debate in terms of how many interviews should be conducted when following a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007; Kempster, 2006), there are no published guidelines on the sample size needed to reach saturation (Morse, 1994). Therefore, interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Stern & Porr, 2011) (i.e. when no new data was emerging (Corbin & Strauss, 2008)). Saturation was reached after 17 interviews had been conducted.

The 17 participants comprised of 14 females and three males; ten were accredited with the ICF, four accredited with the EMCC, two had no accreditation, one was accredited with the Association for Coaching and one was accredited with two bodies. In terms of the nationality of the participants, 16 were British and one was French. The participants were principally practising across the world and one of the participants was based in the Middle East. All were operating as workplace coaches, using a variety of coaching approaches. Their coaching experience ranged from 250 to over 4000 h of coach practice, with nine participants having in excess of 2000 h of experience. Nine of the participants were also practising as coaching supervisors. All of the participants had undertaken a professional coaching qualification/programme, ranging from a ILM level 7 (Institute of Leadership and Management) to a professional certificate from a course accredited to one of the professional coaching bodies, to a post-graduate level diploma. Six had undertaken a master's degree in executive coaching or coaching psychology and one had



undertaken a professional doctorate. All had gained experience in either the corporate, public or education sectors before becoming a coach.

## Data analysis

In order to stay close to the data and ensure that the researcher's thinking emerged from the data, a strict coding approach was adopted. The first stage of coding was a process of open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whereby the transcripts were studied line-by-line and coded (Jones & Noble, 2007). By codes, we refer to the labels attached to the concepts derived from the participant's words (Miles & Huberman, 1994). There are always multiple interpretations of the data (Oldridge, 2019) and the codes used arose from the researcher's interaction with the data and were chosen to summarize and sort the data (Wertz et al., 2011). Immediately after each interview and throughout the analysis, the researcher used memos to capture thoughts about the data (Urquhart, 2013). It is acknowledged that prior knowledge and reading is likely to shape the labelling of the data (Suddaby, 2006), and therefore the researcher captured personal assumptions and beliefs at the start of the research and used memos to capture instant reactions to what had been heard, any thinking, biases and assumptions. These memos were then revisited when analysing the data from the transcripts to challenge the researcher's coding and thinking throughout the analysis. This helped to bracket the researcher's assumptions, prior knowledge and thoughts and maintain an ongoing reflexive process throughout the analysis (Urquhart, 2013). Following the first eight interviews, some themes started to emerge, and this led to subsequent interviews exploring these (Stern & Porr, 2011). After further interviews, the data were re-visited and through constant comparison and reflection (Stern & Porr, 2011), selective codes, as a means of sorting and synthesizing the open codes (Wertz et al., 2011), were generated by identifying what linked the stories of the participants together. This iterative process was used throughout the data gathering and analysis as theoretical saturation was sought (Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009). Further analysis identified key conceptual codes (Oldridge, 2019) and this led to identification of the 'core category' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of 'human connection' which linked the data together.

At this stage all the codes were re-visited to check links between codes, which enabled an integrative diagram to be developed to show how the conceptual and selective codes were related (Urquhart, 2013), and this was tested out in the final interviews to produce the diagram shown in Figure 1. This integrative figure shows the core category at the heart, and how the conceptual codes (in the larger boxes) link into this, and finally how the selective codes relate to the conceptual codes.

At this stage, it became evident that some of the open codes did not relate to the core category, so these were put to one side. The final four interviews were coded using the theoretical codes to ensure no new concepts arose (Baker & Edwards, 2018). After these final four interviews, no new codes or concepts emerged and, therefore, it was deemed that theoretical saturation had been reached.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents how the codes from the data analysis were sorted and synthesized into conceptual codes and which selective codes and open codes linked to each conceptual code (Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009). Each of the conceptual codes will be discussed in turn with the words of the participants shown in *italics* presented as the evidence from the interviews that has been

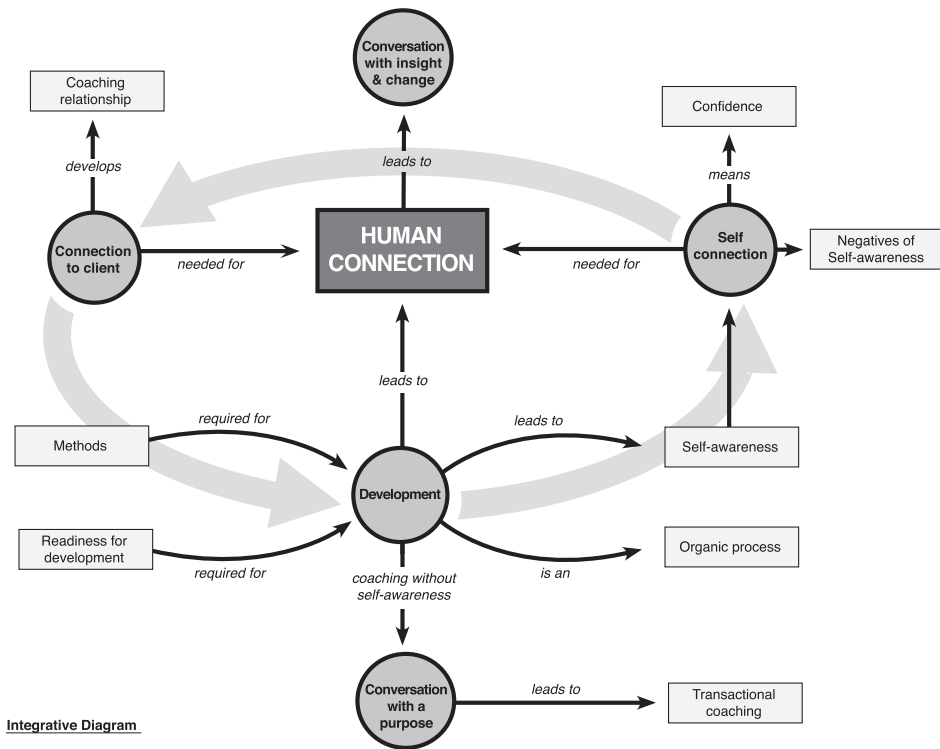


FIGURE 1 Integrative diagram

used to develop the conceptual categories (Stern & Porr, 2011). Figure 1 provides an overview of the relationships between these codes, and the sequencing of the discussion below is aimed to further illustrate this.

## Development

A re-occurring theme discussed by the participants centred on how developing themselves had the most significant impact on how they practised as a coach: *'I can only take my clients as deep as I have taken myself'*. As highlighted in the methodology section, the participants were only asked about self-awareness if they mentioned it, and only then did the researcher explore what the term meant to them. There were a variety of perceptions, for example:

*it is being thoughtful about the way I think, I feel, my input into situations and the response that comes back and how I respond. It's a combination of awareness of thinking, feeling, awareness that keeps those things in my consciousness, so you actively notice things rather than being at the whim of habit.*

The common themes in interpreting the construct of self-awareness centred on the interpersonal elements of how one might impact others, coupled with an understanding of what is going on for the coach internally (e.g. feelings and thoughts). The data suggest that some coaches are more 'prone' to develop self-awareness than others, partly due to natural preferences: *'my drive for developing myself'*. What became apparent through analysing the data

TABLE 1 Theoretical, selective and open codes

<b>Core category: Human connection</b>		
<b>Conceptual code</b>	<b>Selective code</b>	<b>Open codes</b>
Client connection	Coaching relationship	Avoiding collusion; getting out of the way; coaching relationship; human connection; what gets in way; coaching presence; connection
Self-connection	Confidence	Work on self; inner gremlins; doubting ability; performance anxiety; feeling liberated; confidence; own self-esteem; using awareness; benefits of developing self
	Negatives of self-awareness	Negatives of self-awareness
Conversation with deep insight and change	Impact	Impact; working with difficulty; importance; without awareness; benefits
Development	Methods	Methods; coach training; somatic work; webinars & conferences; most impact; CBT; therapy; journaling; reflection; supervision; mindfulness; reading; feedback; being coached; role models; inspired by trainer; experiential learning; training gateway
	Organic process	Life journey; organically developed; organic process; ongoing process; conscious development
	Developing	Developing; integration; natural preference; developing self-awareness; lightbulb moments; being challenged; coach development; double-loop
	Readiness for development	Readiness; readiness for development; mindset; starting point; conditions for development; inspiration
	Self-awareness	Levels; rigour & depth; route to mastery; benefits of self-awareness; self-awareness; coaching DNA
Conversation with a purpose	Transactional coaching	Superficial disillusionment; formulaic training; transactional coaching; core skills; previous skills

was that there has to be a *'readiness'*, *'willingness'* and a *'curiosity'* in order to develop one's self-awareness, as participants had highlighted how they had initially pushed away from developing this aspect of themselves.

When coach training was discussed either the participants reported that the training programmes had not explicitly included the requirement to develop greater self-awareness, or that it had provided a *'kick-start'* to its development. Where self-awareness was not explicitly included it resulted in them not developing self-awareness during the training programme: *'we were only working with models'* and *'the coach training didn't give me a route to find out about myself'*. In fact, for some coaches the development of self-awareness had happened entirely independently from their coach development, for example: *'15 years of yoga and meditation practice'*. However, for other participants they realized themselves during training

programmes that it would be beneficial to work on themselves: *'half way through the course I realised that if I wanted to develop as a coach, I've got to work on myself too'*. Where coach training programmes did incorporate the development of self-awareness as part of its offering this led to a *'kick-start'*, leading to understanding deeper aspects of self. Overall, it seems that if 'self-awareness' is included in training, it *'initiates the work on self'*. However, there is a need to do more work to develop and deepen the level of self-awareness after initial training as it is an ongoing process (this is discussed further below).

There was not one common method identified for developing self-awareness. Instead, a combination of formal interventions (e.g. mindfulness training, receiving coaching and/or therapy, somatic training, webinars), along with informal methods (e.g. lightbulb moments in life, reflection, and journaling) were noted by participants. A common theme that emerged as a benefit of being coached was as a gateway to developing self-awareness, with some strong views expressed on the fact that it should be a requirement for coach development: *'if you want to be a coach then you should have some coaching and its sort of slightly shocking if someone calls themselves a coach and they never have any'*.

What stood out in terms of what had the most impact in terms of developing self-awareness was reflection on and in practice; *'reflection has really helped me'* (develop an awareness of self), and there was a clear link to the role of reflection as a route and method to developing self-awareness, *'the more reflection I do, the more self-aware I become'*. This was emphasized as an ongoing process. This was a theme that was highly relevant to the development of self-awareness, as the development of self-awareness is a gradual process *'it's almost like instead of turning on a light switch you are turning the dial'*. This highlighted that it is unlikely that a coach's development of self-awareness will be complete after training and will need further work. Indeed, even if a coach has developed self-awareness there will be a requirement for ongoing effort: *'I have to maintain it, I have to do my housekeeping'*. The nature of the ongoing development of self-awareness was reinforced by the role of coaching supervision in encouraging reflection which can help develop self-awareness: *'the focus on self came through being supervised'*. However, it was identified that there is a risk to supervision because it is a process of self-reporting and therefore, we don't *"shine a light on our blind-spots"*.

With all the interventions and methods identified, they appear to be only helpful if the coach then spends some time integrating them into his or her practice because it is about *"whether we choose to consciously change"* (and become more self-aware).

## Human connection

In terms of answering the research question posed "what is the role of self-awareness in the development of the coach?" the core category identified was human connection, as it was deemed that this is what self-awareness provides the coach with. Human connection has two dimensions: 'connection to self' and 'connection to the client'.

### Connection to self

The impact of developing self-awareness for coaches was explored in all interviews and, in particular, how self-awareness enabled coaches to really understand their own preferences, habits, behaviours, thoughts and feelings. This led to an enhanced ability to being able to truly use

themselves as an instrument of and for the coaching and also facilitated their understanding of their own coaching identity. Having identified how one might use oneself as an instrument for coaching, self-awareness also provided means by which coaches could *'leave their ego behind, and bring their humanity'*, instead of in the early stages of development having to perhaps prove oneself.

There was also a sense that having developed self-awareness, it helped coaches develop their confidence, manage their own anxieties and thereby move towards self-acceptance. This happened on several levels, starting with being able to trust oneself in a coaching session, and dealing with performance anxiety. Ultimately this self-acceptance helped the participants connect with themselves and left them *'feeling liberated'*, and thereby able to connect with their clients.

In addition, greater self-connection provides the coach with greater flexibility because you are *'more likely to be able to adapt, whether or not you know models and techniques but more on an intuitive level you are more likely to be able to flex to choose something that will suit the client you are working with'*.

Some negative aspects to self-awareness were also identified. Firstly, self-observation and self-awareness might potentially be a distraction or detrimental to the coach accepting themselves. Secondly, it might lead to the coach moving away from working collaboratively with the client and becoming an 'expert', because through developing one's own self-awareness, there is a risk that *'you've got the answers, you can kind of want to short cut it and just tell people, and its recognising that your story isn't their story'*. Thirdly, there is a risk that coaches can tell their own story, which could be delusional. Lastly, it is about the intent with which one is developing self-awareness because *'I think that personal development for its own sake is a narcissistic endeavour'*, and therefore if the coach is so focussed on self and loses sight of how their greater self-awareness is enabling their practice.

## Connection to client

As highlighted above, developing one's self-awareness for one's own sake has little value or benefit to coaching unless the impact on the client is considered. Therefore, participants were asked about the impact of developing self-awareness on their clients. The common theme was that it enabled them to *'remove their own ego'* and *'get out of the way'* which enabled them to develop the coaching relationship, connect to their client and bring presence to the coaching conversation.

Having developed an awareness of one's own ego and then being able to *'get it out of the way'*, the coach was able to bring greater presence to the conversation, *'whereas it was previously more about showing that I was competent at a particular process, which was more about the way of doing things, it's now more about bringing a presence'*. This coaching presence was defined as being focussed on the client *'being free of other thoughts, other distractions, being really clear in your intention, being very much in service of the coachee'*. This was a theme that was identified by other participants who talked about how self-awareness had enabled them to bring a much more holistic self to the coaching which they could use with their client.

This level of connection then created a space to work at a deeper level and enabled coaches to work with difficulty: *'if I have experienced just a time when I feel that the coachee is showing a bit of discomfort but I'm able to let them ride with it rather than feeling I have to jump in and rescue and make everything okay, but they come out positively challenged at the end of it'*. Therefore, the client connection provides the environment where the coach can sit with the client when they are working with difficulty and it is uncomfortable, possibly because the level of connection

creates trust: *'unless you have that self-awareness, trust would be very difficult to establish and that trust is critical to any coaching'*.

## Conversation with insight and change

We propose that the impact of having human connection is that it leads to the coaching conversation being one of insight, because the conversation is now *'getting below the surface'*. This means that the client is now having *'to work harder and talk more'* and experiencing *'a bit more of a struggle'*. However, this struggle then enables the client to get to the core of what matters and potentially change. We propose that this level of work is more about working with the *'whole human being'* in front of you: *'Now as a coach I think my stance is much deeper, wider and I'm working much more whole human to whole human, system to system'*.

## Conversation with purpose

It became evident through the analysis that coaching might still be carried out effectively and attain results for clients, without the coach having self-awareness, for example *'I'm perfectly convinced that very good coaching can happen without all of that (self-awareness) being part of it and I've been on the receiving end of that'*. However, this was summarized as being *'transactional coaching'*, where a coaching goal could be worked on and the client might leave with some new thinking and actions, but would be unlikely to have tackled *'core'* matters and behaviours, which may hinder longer term behaviour change.

## DISCUSSION

While recent research (Pandolfi, 2020) did not identify coach self-awareness as an active ingredient in coaching, the findings from this study would suggest otherwise, in that coach self-awareness is perceived to be an active and essential competency for effective coaching. Therefore, in line with grounded theory (Stern & Porr, 2016) the findings will be discussed in relation to an emerging theoretical framework for the role of self-awareness in the development of the coach. This will be supported by a model as to how coaches might develop self-awareness.

Figure 1, provides an initial theoretical framework for the role of self-awareness in coach development and provides a visual representation of how the theoretical codes link together. The theoretical model presented in Figure 2 builds on this and demonstrates how coach self-awareness is related to coaching knowledge and skills (i.e. the how to coach), and the likely results (i.e. the impact of the coaching).

Figure 2 shows how both knowledge of coaching processes and tools, and coach self-awareness are required for impactful coaching that will initiate behavioural change in clients. This is important because coach training typically focusses on skills-based training (Jones, 2020) and where coach training is linked to accreditation with the professional bodies there is an emphasis on coaching skills and hours of coaching (Bachkirova, 2015). Therefore, Figure 2 presents a theoretical contribution which highlights the importance of coach self-awareness and why it is important to coaching practice.

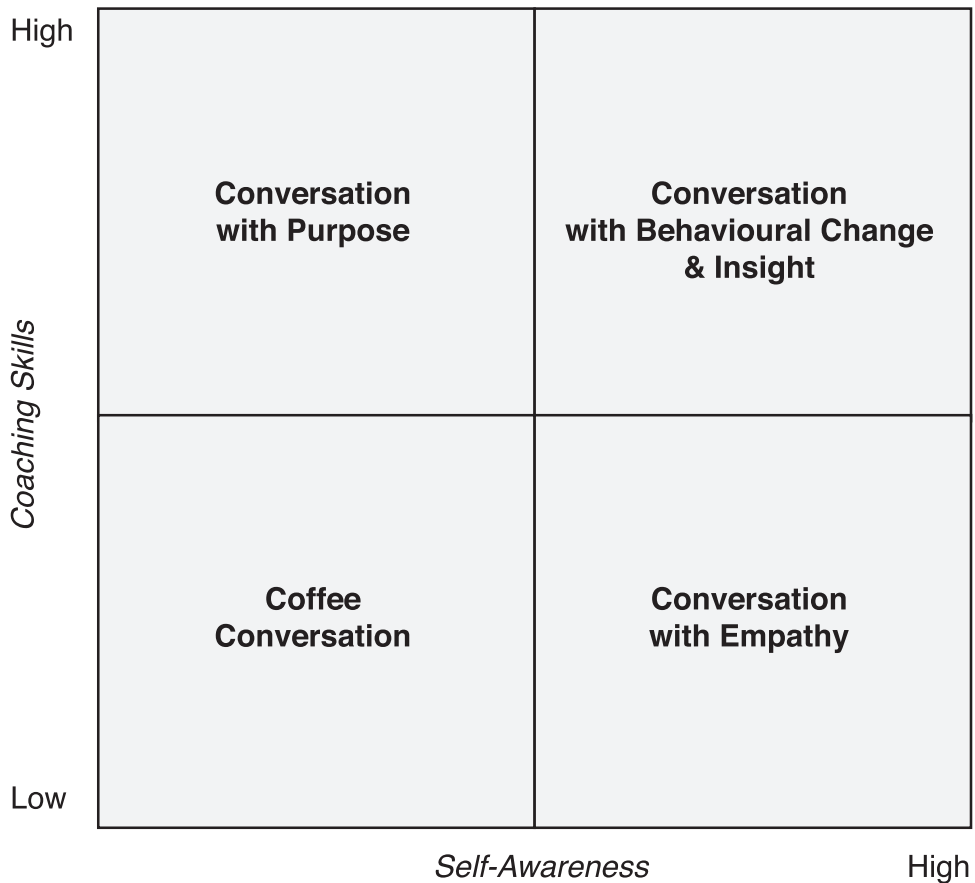


FIGURE 2 The role of self-awareness in the development of the coach—A conceptual framework

Exploring Figure 2; in the quadrant a ‘conversation with insight’ the coach will have greater flexibility of who they work with and how they work with those clients. Without coach self-awareness, meaningful and purposeful coaching can be done (i.e. a ‘conversation with purpose’); however, change and impact is more likely to be at surface level. In addition, the coach may tend to rely on one coaching model or framework and have less flexibility with regards to who they work with. Without the knowledge and skill of how to do coaching, yet with high self-awareness, the conversations will be conducted with high levels of empathy and human connection. However, this is unlikely to be classified as coaching and instead could be described as a ‘conversation with empathy’. In the event that the individual considers that they are coaching, yet they are operating in the quadrant of a conversation with empathy, there is the potential risk that the coach will be hooked into the conversation, and they may begin to collude with the client. Therefore, the conversation is likely to help the client feel better; however, it is likely to be a cathartic conversation rather than one of change or insight. Finally, a conversation without coaching skill and knowledge and self-awareness will be just that, a conversation, described in this model as a ‘coffee conversation’.

As the research question looked at the role of self-awareness in the development of the coach the nature of how it is developed was also explored and identified. Therefore, Figure 3 provides

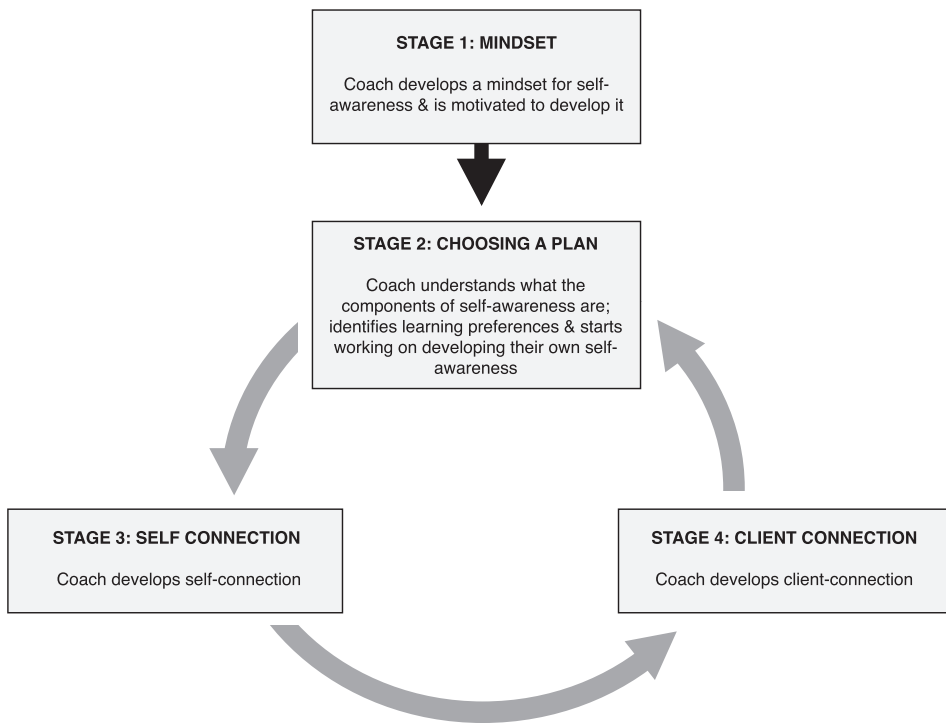


FIGURE 3 Stages of coach development to develop self-awareness

a model outlining the stages in developing self-awareness, and the implications for research section outline a proposal for how this concept might be tested.

This model has been developed from the themes arising from the findings and proposes four stages of coach development to self-awareness. Stage one highlights that the coach must have a readiness or motivation, and a mindset of self-questioning to develop self-awareness. This is supported by the literature (Laske, 2006; McCarthy & Garavan, 1999) which points out that one cannot develop self-awareness without first initiating some personal self-questioning. Therefore, we propose that there is a requirement for a mind-set of self-questioning and motivation as a starting point. To initiate this stage coaches must have an appreciation and understanding as to why self-awareness is important to their coaching practice. Therefore, coach training has a role here in terms of initiating the motivation to develop self-awareness, particularly in terms of self-questioning. Where coach training has not 'kick started' the motivation coaching supervisors might use the theoretical model in Figure 2 as a means to start the conversation. This stage can further be reinforced by the professional coaching bodies.

Stage two involves the coach understanding what it is that one is developing (i.e. what self-awareness is) and an appreciation of their learning preferences, to then develop self-awareness. As highlighted in the 'defining self-awareness' section self-awareness is a multi-layered and complex construct. Ideally, coach training would include an introduction to the construct and all its components so that coaches might understand what needs to be developed. In addition, coaches might use personal reflection, 360-degree feedback, outputs from psychometrics, feedback from clients and reflection with coaching supervisors to identify the components of self-awareness needing development. It is also recommended coaches identify their learning preferences, perhaps through an on-line questionnaire, or from a psychometric tool e.g. MBTI. In terms of what



might be included in a plan to develop self-awareness, coaches viewed reflection as a route to development, nevertheless there are some limitations with this identified in the literature, which were not evident in the findings from this research. For example, there are clear limitations to self-reflection as it does not provide the coach with access to their unconscious mental processes (Wilson & Dunn, 2004). In addition, individuals have a tendency to disagree with the perspectives of others when it comes to self-evaluation (Duval & Wicklund, 1972), and, therefore, individuals can potentially end up ‘story-telling’ (Hansen, 2009). The possibility that individuals may see themselves better and/or different to how they come across to others (Showry & Manasa, 2014), is likely to be a barrier to self-awareness, as individuals are ‘unintentionally guilty of self-deception’ (Caldwell, 2009, p. 393). Therefore, it is important that coaches are aware of these limitations to avoid self-delusion.

Having identified and initiated the development of self-awareness the coach moves towards developing self-connection (stage 3). In terms of how to develop the self-connection of stage three, the literature indicates a requirement for an element of self-evaluation (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Showry & Manasa, 2014) to develop self-awareness. This was not evident from our findings, although there was some suggestion that being observed and evaluated against a coach competence framework was helpful in ‘*shining a light*’ on areas requiring development. What stood out as having the most impact on the development of self-connection for coaches was the importance of reflection, either through journaling, mindfulness, being coached, receiving coaching supervision or a combination of these methods. This is supported in part by the literature which highlights the requirement to look inwards and outwards to develop self-awareness (Bachkirova, 2016; Diller et al., 2020; Showry & Manasa, 2014), and the findings suggest that self-reflection is a route that will provide the coach with the insight required to be effective. How coaches translate self-reflection into becoming more self-aware and then into their coaching practice was not evident from the literature; however, our findings suggest that this translation relies on the experiential element of coaching, supported by further coaching supervision. Only once this self-connection has been achieved can client connection be attained (stage 4).

The arrows in this model are representative of the ongoing and dynamic nature of developing self-awareness. Therefore, this theory proposes that a coach will be constantly moving between stages two, three and four. The ongoing nature of developing self-awareness is congruent with the concepts of adult development theory (Kegan, 1982; Laske, 1999), for example, Rasheed (2015) identifies that it is an ‘ongoing process which needs continuous self-evaluation and conscious effort’ (p. 214). Our model suggests that there is no ‘finite’ level of development, with a requirement for constant work. This differs to the work of Kegan, whose theory identifies that individuals evolve over one’s lifespan resulting in a final level. Therefore, a one-off intervention, such as a coaching skills training programme, is unlikely to develop self-awareness fully, and instead coaches must be prepared to work on this on an ongoing basis. Our findings also suggest that in addition to no finite level of development, individuals do not move through the stages of development sequentially, and instead it is a far more dynamic journey.

This model is partially supported by the literature; however, as a proportion of the literature on developing self-awareness focusses on counsellor/therapist and leadership development, our model provides a framework to support the development of self-awareness within the coach development process. Importantly, this model highlights that coach client-connection can only be achieved after self-connection. In addition, it provides a model which could be measured and tested as outlined below. In sum, the theoretical model at Figure 2 offers a new perspective on the role of coach self-awareness in coaching; and Figure 3 highlights the role self-awareness has in developing coach self-connection as a pre-requisite to client connection.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Our research contributes to the evidence base for the role of self-awareness in the development of the coach. Research exploring the attributes of effective coaching psychologists (Lai & McDowall, 2014) identified the necessity of establishing and maintaining a trusting relationship as a core element; this research has provided evidence as to the route to achieve this in terms of self-awareness, providing the coach with acceptance and self-connection, which is the antecedent to client connection. This is a potential area for further research, specifically, we suggest that the relationships outlined between the various stages of self-awareness development in Figure 3 could be tested. For example, our theory could be explored utilizing quantitative methods, where a baseline level of self-awareness (for example using the self-awareness outcomes questionnaire (Sutton, 2016)), an assessment of understanding of the components of self-awareness (via tailored cognitive assessment) (stage two), self-connection (via a measure for self-acceptance e.g. the Berger Scale of Expressed Acceptance of Self (Shephard, 1979)) (stage three), and client connection (through coded observations of coaching sessions and client feedback) (stage four). Next, measures of a coach's readiness for development (stage 1) could be measured using the scale of readiness for self-improvement (Zawadzka, 2014). Following coach training (with a focus on raising coach self-awareness), follow-up assessments would be completed immediately after coach training and at key time points (for example at 3 and 6 months post training). Data collected in this way would enable the theoretical model to be tested in relation to its predictive validity (i.e. do the various elements of the model predict an increase in coach self-awareness as proposed) and explanatory power (i.e. does the development of self-awareness follow the sequence proposed in the model).

We suggest that coach training programmes could be evaluated in terms of how they propose to teach and develop self-awareness. Laske (1999, 2006) described the development levels of coach development; however, he did not translate this into how coaches might be trained. Therefore, we recommend that this would be appropriately assessed with an experimental research design with a series of experimental conditions, utilizing different methods of coach training (for example coach training with no explicit exploration of self-awareness, coach training with a detailed exploration of self-awareness including the various components and how they contribute to coaching effectiveness, and coach training which briefly touches on self-awareness). The coach's self-awareness would be assessed before commencing coach training, at the end of coach training, and then at a series of time points over a number of years. The quantitative data might be further triangulated by the collection of qualitative data to explore the coach's perspective of greatest influence on their development as a coach. Recent research has highlighted the correlation of coach training to coaching quality (Diller et al., 2020), undertaking the research suggested above would add to this.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

A novel finding of our research was the emphasis on the importance for coaches to firstly build a self-connection before a client connection can be built. To aid this we recommend that coaches receive coaching and be coached for a period of time, as part of their coach training. The aim of this coaching should be to develop the coaches' own self-connection.

The findings indicate that it is necessary for coach training to spend a much longer period of time on the development of coach self-awareness. Therefore, it is recommended that

self-awareness is incorporated as a learning outcome in all coach training programmes. It is important that self-awareness is taught explicitly starting with the provision of a clear definition, followed by an exploration of the various components of self-awareness and how self-awareness can impact their coaching practice.

We also recommend that as self-awareness is pivotal to coach development and ultimately enables client connection and the coaching relationship to develop, then a greater emphasis on the importance of coach self-awareness should be reflected in the accreditation process of the professional coaching bodies.

Coaches must also understand the ongoing nature of development, and that further coach training is recommended throughout one's ongoing practice. Coaching supervisors have a key role in maintaining the ongoing focus on the continued development of self-awareness through reflective practice. The theoretical framework in Figure 2 could be utilized in coaching supervision as a means for exploring developmental areas and used for self-reflection, by encouraging the coach to reflect on where they were operating, and what evidence they have for this. The findings from our study emphasize the importance of paying attention to coach self-awareness in the supervisory process.

## LIMITATIONS

Our research is based solely on the views of the coach and we did not interview clients to gain their perspective on what they believe is the value of the coach having high self-awareness, and how they know the coach is self-aware. However, it may be the case that the degree of coach self-awareness is invisible to the client, and possibly something the client does not consider.

As the sample was drawn from self-selected volunteers who were willing to participate in the interviews, it is highly likely that they considered the topic of importance and value (Symon & Cassell, 2012) and this potentially introduced some sample and response bias into the findings (Brink, 1993; Saunders et al., 2016). We sought to minimize the impact of this sampling bias by only introducing the construct of self-awareness if it was mentioned by the participant and by having an outline discussion guide, as opposed to a rigid question framework that allowed the discussion to follow the concepts introduced by the participant (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

It is likely that the participants considered coach development, reflective practice and self-awareness as positive and this may explain why the negative aspects of self-awareness were not so obvious or identified as a major theme. Therefore, there is a potential for further research to be conducted to explore negative aspects of self-awareness on the coach and coaching interventions.

Due to the nature of the methodology utilized, there was not one consistent interpretation of self-awareness, and possibly by providing participants with one definition (Kempster, 2006) the results generated may have been different. While it was not the purpose of the research, this study does not provide conclusive evidence if self-awareness develops or can be developed in coach training; this is an area for further research.

## CONCLUSION

Earlier research work (Bluckert, 2005; Leggett & James, 2016) suggested that there is a requirement for coaches to develop high levels of self-awareness and the findings from this research

provide evidence that it is an essential competency, and that it has benefits for both the coach and the client. Based on our findings, we also propose that the development of self-awareness enhances coach effectiveness because it enables them to work at a deeper level with clients. In view of our findings, we recommend that coach training includes learning objectives based on developing self-awareness, initiates the development of self-awareness and establishes a framework whereby coaches see the requirement for ongoing development in this area. Our research has also questioned adult development theories by suggesting that there is no finite stage of development, and that it is not a linear process. Instead, the development of self-awareness is a more organic process with no finite end point. Overall, our research is offered as a theoretical contribution to the research supporting coach development. We have provided a theoretical model of the role of self-awareness in the development of the coach, suggested how coaches can develop this competency, and emphasized the importance of self-awareness, at a practical level, as a key building block for coach development.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. This paper has not been submitted to any other journals.

### ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research was ethically approved by Henley Business School.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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