Coaching at relational depth: a case study
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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to describe how organisation coaches can work at relational depth with their clients by exploring the unconscious relational dynamics of the coaching relationship and their links to unconscious dynamics in the client’s organisation.
Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on relational psychoanalytic theory of the individual and system psychodynamic theories of organisations to argue that unconscious dynamics that emerge between the coach and client can be understood as: a complex unconscious interaction between how the client and coach organise their relationships; a repetition of how the client participates in unconscious organisation dynamics; and shaping the coach’s subjective experience in the work, including their emotional and embodied responses to the client. These propositions are explored through an in-depth qualitative case study of the author’s work with a client.
Findings – The case illustrates how unconscious organisation dynamics shaped the client’s experience of his role, evoking in him feelings of powerlessness and anger. The coach initially identified with these feelings because of his own relational past. As a result, the relationship became stuck in a repetitive dynamic which could be understood as an expression of the stuck dynamics in the organisation around the unconscious management of anxieties within its management structures. A shift in the coaching relationship was brought about through the coach’s disclosure of his own experience and naming of feelings and emotions that were previously implicit and out of awareness in the coaching relationship. The subsequent exploration of the dynamics of the coaching relationship helped the client to understand at a deeper level his struggle in the organisation and to take up a different position in the organisation dynamics. The case study highlights how the dynamics of the coaching relationship can be understood as a repetition of unconscious processes by the client in the organisation.
Practical implications – The paper highlights how coaches can understand and work with unconscious dynamics in the coaching relationship. This requires coaches not only to be self-aware, but also to possess the emotional maturity and confidence to work with difficult emotional material.
Originality/value – The paper demonstrates how psychoanalytic theory of individuals and organisations can be integrated into a relational approach to coaching which facilitates the exploration of the client’s experience of their work in an organisation context.

Keywords Management development, Coaching, Social interaction, Individual psychology, Organizational behaviour

Paper type Case study

Introduction
In this article, I outline how the relational paradigm shift in psychoanalysis, commonly referred to as “the relational turn” (Mitchell and Aron, 1999) can be integrated with psychodynamic perspectives on social systems to make a number of propositions about how coaches can work at relational depth with their clients. My central thesis is that the relationship that emerges between coach and client can be understood as an expression of how the client participates in unconscious dynamics in the organisation.
The coaching relationship is therefore the “pattern that connects” (Bateson, 1972) the coach, the client and the organisation.

**“The relational turn” in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy**

In the past couple of decades, the field of psychoanalysis[1] has experienced the emergence of a paradigm shift which has been referred to as the “relational turn”. This emerging paradigm argues that relatedness with other human beings is the central motive behind mental life (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983). Relationships (internal and external, real and imagined, past and present) are seen to be central to understanding the person in their context (Mitchell, 2000). Such theoretical arguments have their roots in object relations theory (for example Fairbairn, 1952; Klein, 1963), interpersonal theories (for example Sullivan, 1953), and self-psychology (Kohut and Wolf, 1978). This paradigm shift represents a movement from a “one person” psychology to a “two person” psychology which privileges intersubjectivity over understanding individuals as separate, independent entities that can be studied objectively. In the broader field of psychotherapy there has also been convergence on the centrality of the therapeutic relationship to the psychotherapy process (see for example Evans and Gilbert, 2005).

Relational theories argue that we internalise early relational experience with our care-givers (i.e. parents, etc.) and other authority figures to create internalised self/other representations that influence both our self-experience and our experience of others throughout our lives (Bowlby, 1977). These self-/other representations are affectively charged memories that guide our interactions with others. The importance of these early relationships is supported by neurobiological research (for example Shore, 1994) and child observation studies (for example Beebe and Lachmann, 1998) which demonstrate that early attachment relationships help a child to develop their self-esteem, learn to regulate their own affect and develop their capacity to relate to others.

From this theoretical position, people are conflicted because of how they organise and experience relationships. Conflict is seen, therefore, as being between different relational configurations that a person has internalised in their early life experience which are re-experienced in their relationships (Mitchell, 2000). The sources of conflict therefore derive from how the infant learns to negotiate and reconcile parental and cultural demands that are themselves in tension (rather than in traditional psychoanalysis where conflict is between drives, impulses and defences). According to the relational paradigm, we are all therefore struggling to find a satisfying position in relation to others. For instance, a manager may experience difficulties in influencing the board of his business because of his inner conflict in asserting himself with authority figures. He both has a desire to be recognised and taken seriously, but fears that if he asserts himself his ideas and opinions will be rejected or ridiculed. This pattern is a repetition of his childhood experience with his father who he experienced as not listening to or recognising his opinions.

Relational theorists argue that the therapist and client form an intersubjective, interactive system in which they influence each other in a reciprocal process (DeYoung, 2003; Orange et al., 1997). Therapeutic change is believed to occur when the client enacts their unresolved relational past in the therapeutic relationship; but instead of simply repeating what happened in the past, the therapist helps the client to understand how they are re-enacting it (Maroda, 1991). The process of psychotherapy
can therefore be understood as the working through of these entanglements and a struggle to help the client create something new in the relationship.

Historically, psychoanalysis has tended to see the therapist and client as independent actors in unconscious interactions, with the client’s contribution being known as “transference” and the therapist’s response to the client being known as “countertransference”. In contrast, relational and intersubjective perspectives argue that therapist and client co-create the dynamics that emerge between them[2] creating a relational unconscious (Greson, 2004). Both the client and therapist are considered to read and respond to each other’s unconscious, knowingly and unknowingly. A client may, for instance, relate to the therapist “as if” he were their critical, distant father and the therapist finds himself feeling judgmental of the client. This reflects the therapist’s own relational past with critical and distant authority figures, not just the client’s impact on the therapist. In this process, both client and therapist are active contributors to a relational process.

The practice of relational psychoanalysis is fundamentally a collaborative endeavour between the therapist and client, which is characterised by a relationship of mutuality (Aron, 1996). The therapist is not a distant, knowing observer but an active participant in dialogic processes of exploring the meaning of a client’s participation in social relations. The therapist’s dreams, fantasies, thoughts, feelings and physical reactions are considered to be informative of the shared relational unconscious with the client. This line of argument raises the question of whether the therapist’s disclosure of their self experience to the client is of therapeutic value. This is probably the most controversial of all the arguments put forward by the relational school[3] (Maroda, 1991). The emerging consensus amongst relational practitioners is that the therapist’s disclosures can offer therapeutic value when used cautiously by the therapist and only after a process of reflection, which endeavours to ensure that it is not an expression of the therapist’s unconscious needs or interests.

**Relational dynamics in organisations**

Psychoanalytic theories of social systems provide a framework for understanding unconscious dynamics in organisations. They provide a conceptual framework for understanding how people’s intrapsychic processes (i.e. the internal psychological processes of the individual) shape the relationships between people and groups in organisations (Hirschorn, 1990).

Unconscious dynamics in organisations can be understood as arising in a wider psychosocial context (Lewin, 1952), which is made up of the interplay of psychological, social, economic, power and political processes (Holti, 1997). This gives rise to ongoing conflicts between the interests of individuals and groups inside and outside of the organisation which evokes unconscious anxieties and powerful emotions. These conflicts are played out in social processes such as transition and change, loss and endings, competition and collaboration. This interplay shapes the emotional life of organisations and gives rise to dynamics between individuals and groups.

Psychodynamic perspectives argue that individuals and groups develop psychological and behavioural mechanisms, or social defences (including rituals, routines, working practices and behavioural patterns) to defend against the anxiety and painful emotions in their work (Menzies, 1960). Social defences operate unconsciously and function to keep feelings of anxiety, guilt and uncertainty out of conscious awareness. For instance, an
executive team embarks on a complex and detailed strategic planning process which involves detailed analysis of markets, competitors and customers to inform forecasts about future growth. On the face of it, the process is rigorous and logical; however its psychological purpose is to protect the leadership team from experiencing anxiety about the market uncertainties and emerging competition to the business.

Unconscious organisation dynamics can be understood as arising from a number of psychological processes, including projection[4], identification[5] and denial, operating at the individual, group and intergroup levels. They interact in such a way that individuals and groups can be left “holding” the threatening, difficult or painful emotions which belong to other groups or individuals. Different groups are therefore left to “carry” conflicting aspects of the pressures impinging upon the organisation (Neumann, 1999), so that they are each protected from facing its dilemmas and contradictions. Such processes result in groups blaming others for the hostile and threatening ideas that they represent. This is particularly the case if the work of the organisation evokes anxieties in its members or if the organisation is undergoing a period of change. So, for instance, in the above example, the strategy department may identify with the leadership team’s anxiety about the future of the business. They participate in a collusion to deny the uncertainty in the organisation and their feelings of powerlessness to control the markets by acting “as if” they can remove all uncertainty and risks confronting the organisation through detailed forecasting and planning. In implementing the strategic planning process, they find themselves in hostile conflict with the sales department, which experiences powerlessness and anger in response to their experience of changing customer requirements and their fears around the company’s falling market share. This leaves the sales department receptive to the projections of powerlessness and anger from other groups in the organisation. In practical terms, this is demonstrated by the strategy department’s unwillingness to “hear” the sales department’s concerns about how their industry is changing and the uncertainty in their markets. The sales department is therefore left “holding” the organisation’s feelings of powerlessness and anger allowing other parts of the organisation, such as the leadership team and the strategy department, to feel in control of the situation.

A person’s experience will, in some way, relate to the underlying emotional experiences of their organisation (Armstrong, 1979). First, how they participate in the emotional life of the organisation will be influenced by their relational past. People have a particular tendency to take up specific roles in group dynamics (Bion, 1961). This is often a reflection of the position that the person took up in their family configuration. Second, the exercising of leadership by a person, equally, needs to be understood from the perspective of what is happening between people in the organisation. Leaders are often subject to powerful projections from their followers which can result in them experiencing strong emotions, including excitement, fear, envy, guilt and anger. The exercising of authority will also evoke both leaders’ and followers’ unconscious conflicts around authority, inevitably a reflection of their early relationships with authority figures. For instance, a leader may be anxious about exercising their power or be overly authoritarian in their use of power.

Parallel process: the repetition of relational dynamics in a parallel system
The concept known as parallel process (Searles, 1965) has emerged as a fascinating phenomenon in helping relationships in different contexts. It describes how
unconscious relational dynamics in one context, or system, can be replicated in relationships in another system, especially where there are overlapping structural and dynamic similarities between the different relationships (Geidman and Wolkenfeld, 1980) such as between employee and employer, manager and team member. Coaches, and indeed supervisors of coaches, frequently report this phenomenon occurring in the consulting room.

Parallel process was first identified by Searles (1965, p.135) who observed that: “the processes at work currently in the relationship between patient and therapist are often reflected in the relationship between the therapist and supervisor”. Mothersole (1999) observes that parallel process seems to occur in situations that involve issues of authority. He believes it involves a communication of unconscious material, through a web of co-created relationships in a system, which establishes the participants in complementary or reciprocal roles to one another.

In organisation consulting and action research, a similar phenomenon has been reported as occurring between the consulting or research team and the client system (Alderfer, 1987; Sullivan, 2002) whereby the dynamics that exist within the system under study penetrate the boundaries of the consulting team and their relationship with their client so that their relations reflect or complement the system’s dynamics (Alderfer, 1987). Petreglieri and Wood (2003), for instance, describe a consulting case whereby the consultants noticed growing anxiety in themselves and realised that they were being invited to collude with the client systems’ processes for avoiding its anxieties about a problem confronting the organisation. They argue that careful examination of such dynamics can lead to a deeper understanding of the covert and unconscious elements of group and individual processes in organisations. Krantz and Gilmore (1990) equally present cases whereby the consultant is invited to unintentionally collude with their client system’s defences. They argue that this arises from the process of projective identification[6] which leaves the consultants holding feelings that belong to the client system.

In my experience, parallel processes arise in coaching relationships which both reflect interpersonal, group or inter-group level dynamics. It is equally possible that a dynamic could arise in the coach-client relationship which is a complex interaction between an interpersonal and a group level dynamic.

The importance of self-experience in understanding unconscious relational process

The coach’s subjective experience of the work, including their dreams, fantasies, thoughts, feelings and physical reactions can be significant insights into unconscious processes and how they might be participating in them. Clients will often project onto a consultant the feelings or emotions that they find unacceptable or are unable to manage for themselves (Krantz and Gilmore, 1990). Petreglieri and Wood (2003) argue that whenever we feel lost, confused, disappointed, guilty or ashamed, it is useful to pause and reflect, as this can lead to a deeper understanding of covert and unconscious processes in the organisation. The coach’s subjective experience, therefore, becomes a means of experiencing and interpreting the unconscious processes. Intense or unusual feelings, the experience of being manipulated, or bodily sensations can be used by the coach to help the client become aware of unconscious material. The coach’s disclosure of what is going on for them in the relationship may help to surface unconscious
emotions in the work. However, coaches need to be judicious in their use of disclosure, only using it when they are confident it is in the client’s interests.

Understanding unconscious relational processes in organisation coaching

In drawing together the above theoretical arguments and concepts, I have outlined three propositions, each of which provides a different perspective for understanding the relational dynamics that emerge during coaching:

1. The coaching relationship is a complex interaction between how the client and coach consciously and unconsciously organise their relationship. The coaching client will attempt to structure the coaching relationship in a manner that is consistent with their habitual patterns of relating. The coach’s own preference for relating to others will facilitate, inhibit and interrupt this process.

2. The relational dynamics that emerge between the coach and client can be a repetition of how the client unconscious participates in relational dynamics in their organisation. How clients participate in organisation dynamics will be a reflection of their preferences for organising their relationships with others and the role they perform in their organisation. The client’s emotional experience of their organisation will enter and shape the coaching relationship.

3. The coach’s subjective experience is influenced by the unconscious dynamics of the coaching relationship. The coach’s physical and embodied responses, emotional reactions, thoughts about their client and the organisation, are a reflection of how they organise their experience; however, they can often also be a response to the client’s unconscious emotions and feelings.

In working at relational depth, the coach’s role is to help the client understand how they participate in the relational dynamics within the organisation. This process challenges and questions the client’s habitual choice for organising their relationships requiring them to notice what they have previously failed to notice. This inevitably stirs up anxieties and strong emotions which the coach needs to “contain” for the client so that they feel safe enough to face their anxieties.

The case study

The case study method is the favoured methodology for understanding complex, psychodynamic processes in organisations (Neumann and Hirschhorn, 1999). This methodology enables the researcher to go beyond descriptions of patterns of behaviour and emotions, and formulate assertions or interpretations about an individual’s or group’s unconscious processes. Case studies seek to understand phenomena in all their complexities, wholeness and uniqueness.

In the case presented, I have endeavoured to provide a rich description of professional practice rather than a scientific test of the validity of the propositions I have made in this paper. It is therefore a case study in which the available evidence is used to achieve a plausible account of the process and outcome of the case, in a form that has pragmatic value in terms of informing practice (Fishman, 1999).

I have chosen this case because the client found himself encountering difficult and problematic dynamics in his organisation and these dynamics entered our relationship.
over the course of the work. I have disguised both the client’s and the organisation’s identity to protect their anonymity.

After each session with the client, I made detailed notes recording my observations of how the client presented himself in our sessions, the key themes from our conservation, any significant interventions that I made during the session, reflections on my subjective experience during and after the session and the client’s reports of whether and how he was changing as a result of our work. I have analysed the key themes that emerged from across our sessions looking for evidence of relational dynamics that were described by the client and that I experienced in our work.

Background to the client
The client was a middle-aged finance director, Jim, who worked in a rapidly growing international business. He was responsible for overseeing financial procedures and processes in one of the business’s four regional business units. He reported to the chief operating office for his regional business and had an indirect reporting relationship into the vice-president for finance in the company.

Jim had requested coaching, which was offered by his HR department. We had 12 sessions of two hours duration over a period of 18 months.

A description of the client’s aims for the work
In our opening exchanges, I quickly became aware of Jim’s frustrations with the organisation and its leadership. He oversaw and signed-off large and complex investments in his region of this business. He felt that confusion existed around the processes for making decisions around these investments and that people were taking “unnecessary” risks. He felt his boss was “dumping” responsibility on him for making sure processes were followed. He experienced high anxiety as a result, which was affecting both his psychological and physical health. He wanted help with understanding how he could manage the situation and cope with his self-doubts in what he felt was a “highly stressful situation”.

The organisation dynamics
Much of our work involved exploring how Jim’s difficulties in his role reflected how he was caught up in unconscious dynamics between different levels of the leadership hierarchy and professional groups in the organisation.

Jim was aware that the executive team of the business was under considerable pressure from shareholders to maintain the organisation’s growth. They, in turn, put pressure on the country managers in each region to achieve high growth. The nature of the business meant that growth required the expansion of operations through long-term investment in production assets. This necessitated decisions about investments in politically unstable countries in an industry characterised by potentially high returns but also high levels of market uncertainties. Managers experienced the risks and uncertainties as a threat, leaving them feeling exposed and vulnerable. These conditions appeared to have generated considerable unconscious anxiety.

Jim experienced the relationships at the top of the organisation to be characterised by “macho” competitive behaviour and aggressive power struggles. He described the CEO of the business as intimidating and aggressive. Managers were often “taken to
task” in meetings by their bosses and publicly criticised. As a result, he felt his colleagues heavily invested in protecting themselves from being attacked or criticised by their bosses. He felt they wanted to keep the CEO happy and would often hide information that might upset him or other members of the executive team. We identified that what seemed to be upsetting to the executive team was information that contradicted the image of continued growth and highlighted the presence of risks.

Jim experienced this context as “messy”. He was unclear about his authority and which decisions he could make. He believed the executive team, his own manager and the country managers were willing to overlook risks and rush through decisions. Whilst the organisation grew, a struggle for control and power was being played out between the regions and the central functions (including the finance group). Jim observed that the executive team wanted to be involved in making all significant decisions prompting the country managers to react angrily at what they experienced as interference with their decisions. Jim found himself caught in the middle of this struggle trying to respond to the demands from the vice-president of finance and the CEO for financial information, which led to the country managers aggressively attacking him in his role. He experienced the behaviour of the leadership of the organisation as dominated by “aggressive power plays” and felt “kicked” by both sides if he brought bad news.

In listening to Jim’s account of the organisation, I was left with the impression that the organisation’s dynamics reflected underlying feelings of paranoia and distrust. Individuals and groups would act towards others “as if” they represented a threat. Relationships were characterised by projections of anger and aggression, which undermined trust and further fuelled feelings of paranoia. An “anxiety chain” (Hirschhorn, 1990) existed whereby anxiety was communicated through the processes of projection and introjection. Leaders projected their vulnerabilities onto less powerful individuals who were then subject to attack. Power plays, domination and aggression were used to defend against feelings of vulnerability and fear. The behaviour of the leadership of the organisation could be understood as a defence against the anxiety they experienced in response to the risks of organisational growth. The finance organisation was left “holding” the anxieties and fears associated with the risks of the investment decisions and the business’s growth strategy, whilst the country managers were able to avoid experiencing anxieties associated with their decisions.

The client’s participation in the organisation dynamics
Jim expressed considerable self-doubt in his ability to cope with the pressures of his role. He desired control and felt anxious about uncertainty and risk. In his role of regional finance director, Jim acted “as if” his role was to ensure that all risks were removed from the decision making process.

He therefore identified with the projections of anxiety and fear onto him by the management of the organisation. He became very anxious about the risks the organisation was taking. This placed him on one side of a tension between excessive risk taking and elimination of risk that was being played out in the organisation.

He felt very responsible for ensuring people did the “right thing”. His conscientiousness and internalised moral standards meant that he placed great importance on things being done ethically and correctly. These very qualities meant that he felt responsibility for ensuring that undue risks were not taken. This left him
constantly struggling with a conflict around how to meet his internal standards and the social pressures upon him. When he did express his concerns he felt he was labelled as “the trouble maker”.

He felt he had no allies and was unsupported by his bosses. He felt trapped in his situation, powerless and unable to assert his authority. He experienced himself as being weak and vulnerable and felt dominated by the country managers and his bosses. This reflected his own internal world, which consisted of an aggressive critical part and a helpless and weak part of his personality. He was very angry with his manager and many of his colleagues. He was, however, deeply anxious about expressing his anger because he feared being attacked. This translated into a fear of criticising others or asserting himself when under pressure. His defence was to try “to keep everyone happy”. He projected his anger onto others and allowed them to dominate him. In exploring his past, he became aware that this pattern was a repetition of his experience with his father when he was young whom he felt would be critical of him and tell him what to do. This left him feeling angry and helpless.

The dynamics of the coaching relationship
In the early sessions of our work together, I felt confident and knowledgeable, but as the work progressed, I felt progressively pulled into a position of powerlessness in my role. The dynamic of our relationship became repetitive as Jim complained about the leadership of the organisation and I attempted to help him take a proactive stance to addressing his complaints. He blamed his boss and the country managers for his difficulties. In trying to understand these feelings I became aware that they were a response to Jim’s feelings of powerlessness and his desire for me to provide him with some form of salvation from his anxieties. At the same time I noticed I had started to form a critical view of the leadership team of the organisation. In these early sessions, I had therefore started to collude with Jim. I had accepted his view of the organisation. I found, however, that my efforts to help him to address his struggles would be met by his doubts further exacerbating his sense of helplessness. I noticed that I started to feel increasingly powerless and frustrated about the work. In the second session, I noticed that I felt both sympathy for Jim’s predicament and increasing frustration with him. Just like Jim I had become “stuck” and this left me feeling helpless and angry. I started to feel critical of him and myself.

We struggled with this dynamic for several sessions without making reference to our frustrations. I realised that my behaviour of not challenging him for fear of both my anger and his anger mirrored his own stance in the organisation. My denial of my anger and fear of expressing it contributed to my feelings of helplessness and the repetitive dynamic in our relationship. We can understand this dynamic as a parallel process reflecting the feelings of helplessness, frustration and anger within the organisation. We can imagine how the rapid growth of the organisation and the risks of large-scale investment decisions left senior managers with feelings of helpless, fear and angry.

At the start of our fifth session, Jim apologised for his complaining and asked me if I wanted to continue to work with him. I think at one level he had picked up my frustrations with him. I asked him what was behind his question. He shared that he imagined that I was frustrated with him and that we were not making much progress. I disclosed to him how helpless I understood he felt with the situation and that I too felt
helpless about his situation and uncertain about how to help him. I shared that I was feeling frustrated and wondered whether he too was feeling frustrated with people in the organisation and that maybe this reflected underlying feelings of helplessness and anger in the organisation. This interaction led to a shift in our relationship. In making this disclosure the un-discussed emotions in the work were named and could be discussed.

Jim shared how angry and frustrated he felt in his role. He acknowledged that the organisation was not going to change. My hypothesis that others in the organisation may also be angry resonated with him. We agreed that we would focus on helping him develop strategies to take up a different position in the decision-making processes and help him understand his anger and how he could make use of it.

The impact of the work on the client
As the work progressed, we developed a common understanding of how the dynamics in the organisation stemmed from feelings of powerlessness and anger. We explored how managers disowned their anxieties around risk to defend themselves against their anxiety. This helped Jim to be more understanding of his colleagues' behaviour and their anxieties. Jim developed an awareness of how he participated in these dynamics by projecting his anger onto others and “holding” others’ anxieties around risk. We explored ways that Jim could use his anger to assert the boundaries of his role, to manage the politics of the decision-making processes and develop strategies for helping managers to talk about the financial risks of their decisions without feeling overwhelmed or threatened. He was able to develop his sense of authority in his role by clarifying his responsibility with his immediate manager and the vice-president of finance. This helped both to reduce his feelings of anxiety about his role (albeit not relieving it completely) and to shift his manager’s behaviour to being more supportive and protective of him in managing his relationship with the country managers and the board.

Conclusion
The above case illustrates how the unconscious dynamics in the organisation shaped my client’s experience of his role, evoking in him feelings of powerlessness and anger. These feelings entered our relationship as I unconsciously identified with Jim’s feelings because of my own difficulties with expressing anger which has its roots in my relational past. We became stuck in a repetitive dynamic in our work which could be understood as an expression of the stuck dynamics in the organisation around the unconscious management of anxieties within its management structures. The dynamics of the coaching relationship can therefore be understood as a repetition of unconscious processes that the client participated in the organisation because of his relational past.

A shift in the coaching relationship was brought about through the naming and exploration of feelings and emotions that were previously implicit and out of awareness in the coaching relationship. My disclosure of my experience and emotions helped Jim to understand at a deeper level his struggle in the organisation. He became aware of and reflected on how his behaviour was shaped by his and others’ unconscious emotions and anxieties. The coaching supported Jim in accessing a different part of himself from which he could observe how he became caught up in the
dynamics of the organisation. As he understood his contribution to his struggles he was able to take up a different position in his relationships to others and their emotional processes. He started to understand their struggles in the context of the organisation’s challenges. The coaching had therefore helped Jim to develop his reflective capacity to envision mental states in himself and others (Fonagy et al., 2002).

This case offers a description of how unconscious dynamics present themselves in organisation coaching. I have described how these processes provide a window into the client’s and the organisation’s unconscious emotional experience. The re-enactment of a relational dynamic in the coaching relationship can therefore be considered to have value, if the coach is able notice their identification with the client’s unconscious material. Under these conditions, identification helps the coach to empathise and experience the client’s emotional reality in their organisation. Equally, if a coach does not notice or explore how they might be identified with or colluding with their client then unhelpful or perhaps destructive dynamics become repeated inside the coaching relationship.

Not all coaching assignments will require the coach to work at relational depth. However, the coach’s capacity to do so becomes increasingly important in contexts of high uncertainty, emotional intensity and anxiety. Such contexts require the coach to have an understanding of unconscious dynamics in organisations, relational dynamics in the coaching relationship and how to work with these dynamics in their practice. An understanding of these processes however is not sufficient in and of itself. Coaches need to be able to work with their self-experience in the work. This requires not only self-awareness, but also the emotional maturity and confidence to work with difficult emotional material.

Notes
1. Throughout this article I use the terms psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, psychoanalyst and psychotherapist rather loosely for the sake of brevity. I have tried to use the terms that the authors I have quoted have used to highlight the field with which they identify.
2. To some degree it is arguable that this difference represents a different emphasis in the theory rather the meaningful differences in practice (Mills, 2005).
3. Interested readers are referred to Maroda’s (1991) *The Power of Countertransference* for an overview of the main arguments for and against the therapist’s use of disclosure.
4. Projection is the unconscious transfer of one’s own or a group’s feelings to other persons or groups.
5. Identification involves a person or group assimilating an emotion, property or attribute of another person or group and being transformed as a result.
6. Projective identification involves the individual or group unconsciously identifying with the emotional material that is projected onto them.

References


Further reading

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