

An exploration of playfulness in coaching

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Objective: *In light of sparse direct empirical research on adult playfulness in coaching, the objective of this study was to explore playfulness and raise awareness of its presence, requirements, effects, barriers and risks in coaching.*

Design: *This exploratory, inductive qualitative study using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was based on primary data collection seeking sensitising concepts for exploring and understanding playfulness in coaching.*

Methods: *Semi-structured interviews with 14 coaches working predominantly with corporate clients to explore their reflections and experiences of playfulness in their work.*

Results: *A new working definition is proposed; strong themes were identified in the data of the key factors required for playfulness (relationship, authenticity and presence) and what it may bring to coaching (deepening of relationship, space and lightness). Barriers, risks and areas for future investigations were identified.*

Conclusions: *The data clearly indicates the emergence of playfulness in coaching; however, the study highlights a lack of specific reflection on playfulness. The study of playfulness in coaching has the potential to contribute to increasing our understanding of coaching effectiveness, therefore further investigation is merited.*

Keywords: *Playfulness, relationship, authenticity, attachment theory, exploration.*

THE therapeutic relationship is the one factor that is common to successful outcomes across all modalities and theoretical perspectives (Crenshaw & Kenney-Noziska, 2014) and it is believed that the same applies to coaching (Baron & Morin, 2009). The quality of that relationship is determined by the interrelations and interactions between the people concerned and the interdependence they experience (de Haan & Gannon, 2017). What coaches say and how they say it is therefore of vital importance for the coaching relationship and the developmental work being done (Grant, 2017).

The coaching process may be viewed through the lens of phenomenon-based learning, which sees growth facilitated by exploration and play (Piispanen & Meriläinen, 2015). It is founded on constructivism (Silander, 2015), which in its modern form is based on how people make sense of their experience (Taber, 2011). For example,

it is thought that when Albert Einstein developed the theory of relativity, he began with playful thoughts: ‘What if I could sit on a beam of light? What would I see? How about others?’ (Kauhanen, 2005 cited in Piispanen & Meriläinen, 2015).

While there appears to be some consensus on the potential benefits of adult playfulness, Lockwood and O’Connor (2017) note the lack of specific empirical research on playfulness in coaching. The research objective of this study was to explore playfulness within the coaching dynamic: what it is, the conditions necessary for effective playfulness, what it might bring and potential barriers and risks.

What is playfulness?

There is an absence of general consensus on the conceptualisation, definition, measurement, distinctiveness and specificity of adult playfulness (Proyer & Wagner, 2015). Very approximately, playfulness may be seen within the following paradigms: behav-

journal disposition (Lieberman, 1965, 1966, 1977; Glynn & Webster, 1992); personality, as a characteristic (Barnett, 2007) or trait (Proyer & Wagner, 2015); capacity (Sanderson, 2010; Heimann & Roepstorff, 2018); or cognitive attitude (Guitard et al., 2005). Applying the latter paradigm specifically to coaching, Lockwood and O'Connor (2017, p.58) propose a working definition: 'A cognitive attitude towards being intrinsically motivated and uninhibited, supported through a behavioural orientation towards fun-seeking and spontaneity'.

The author adopted the OLIW model (Proyer, 2017) of adult playfulness as a starting point to the exploration. Consisting of *Other-directed, Light-hearted, Intellectual* and *Whimsical* facets of playfulness, it is uniquely not a universal measure (cf. Proyer, 2012). It seeks to isolate playfulness and its potential consequences, avoiding previous narrow interpretations such as focusing on potential associations with fun and entertainment (Proyer & Brauer, 2018; cf. Proyer & Jehle, 2013).

At the heart of *Intellectual* playfulness is enjoyment of playing with thoughts and ideas, embracing complexity and taking different perspectives, all highly relevant to coaching. A further and relatively unexplored concept, serious playfulness, is represented by the German term 'Ernstheiterkeit' (Proyer & Rodden, 2013). Translated as 'serious cheerfulness', it represents holding joy with perspective and sadness/worries with lightness, contradicting commonly held perceptions of playfulness having as ultimate goal cheerfulness/joy. Proyer (2014a) asks whether serious playfulness is possibly associated with creative thinking, problem-solving or specific task/goal focus and Proyer and Rodden (2013) suggest that further research may determine whether specific beneficial effects of playfulness might be more prevalent in those who can access serious playfulness.

While the effects of positive emotions are the subject of research and have the potential to support coaching effectiveness, intellectual and serious playfulness which are independent of positive emotions appear

particularly relevant in the coaching context given their complexity and close connection with elements of the coaching process and as a result merit investigation.

Potential contributions

The benefits of play and playfulness, in particular for self- and other exploration, learning and development have been extensively studied in children with major implications including for education (Lieberman, 1977). Adult playfulness research and the literature on playfulness and humour in therapy suggest potential contributions of playfulness to coaching. While Guitard et al. (2005) assert that our understanding of playfulness is insufficient to establish its clinical usefulness, recent studies are moving in this direction (Brauer & Proyer, 2017; Versluys, 2017).

Benefits of playfulness

There is robust evidence that playfulness is important for the understanding of interpersonal processes (Proyer & Brauer, 2018) and can be used to enhance communication and cultivate relationships (Proyer, 2014b). Playfulness is associated with interpersonal strengths including social intelligence, fairness and leadership (Proyer & Ruch, 2011) and contributes to workplace creativity (West et al., 2017).

Playfulness facilitates the emergence of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001) which in turn 'create the urge to play, push the limits and be creative' (Fredrickson, 2004, p.1369). Though notably, Proyer and Brauer (2018) found that, contrary to their hypothesis, global playfulness and facets of playfulness were unrelated to the use of words conveying positive emotions, arguably supporting the notion of serious playfulness.

Relationship

Attachment theory (Winnicott, 1972) provides a useful framework for understanding how playfulness translates into positive relationships. 'Feeling felt', for example during a resonant coaching relationship,

is the basis of secure attachment (Siegel, 2013, p.218). Panksepp (1998, 2009; Panksepp & Biven, 2012) identified (in laboratory rats) circuitry dedicated specifically to play which is interwoven with other emotional systems, including that of attachment. Kestly's (2016) play therapy model incorporating the work of Porges (2011), Panksepp (1998, 2009) and Fredrickson (2009) suggests that the positive and empowering therapeutic relationship enables conditions for the necessary physiological feeling of safety to allow space for exploratory behaviour and playfulness and thereby development.

Different levels of self-reported playfulness are associated with specific types of attachment (Proyer, 2014c), with securely attached people demonstrating varied explorations including intellectual adventuring (Green & Campbell, 2000) and cognitive openness (Mikulincer & Arad, 1999).

Safety

A safe space allows playfulness to be used to try out new and untested behaviours (Winnicott, 1975; Shrage, 2000), potentially allowing expression and experience of previously suppressed emotions and personal conflicts (Pokorny et al., 2001, as cited in Berger et al., 2018, p.215). Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) suggest that in organisational life this space and time may be absent, thereby denying relief from the pressure of social validation and delegitimising exploration (Winnicott, 1975), whereas 'holding environments' (Winnicott, 1965) created by coaching (Guptan, 2011) enable clients to remain open to what may unfold within them, including the suspension of rationality and consistency and adopting a playful approach to possibilities. This is consistent with Heimann and Roepstorff's (2018, p.13) conceptualising of playfulness as an attitude of 'throwing off constraints, facilitating an explorative interaction with materials and others'.

Process

A recurring theme in the literature is that, through playfulness, the coaching process

(Hawkins & Smith, 2010) becomes more important than predetermined goals. For example, bringing a marked difference in the way the activity is conducted, rationality is suspended, allowing space for intuition, emotion and leaps of faith (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) and expression and creativity (Isen, 1999).

Barriers and risks

The absence of safety and insecure attachment may operate as barriers to playfulness in coaching. Others may include undiagnosed or unshared depression or anxiety (Versluys, 2017; Berger et al., 2018), supporting the importance of expanding the study of playfulness to maladaptive personality traits (Proyer & Brauer, 2018). It is also possible that the ability to (re)frame situations playfully may be reduced in clients with autism (Berger et al., 2018).

Spontaneity, a component of playfulness (Guitard et al., 2005), cannot be commanded and perhaps relevant by analogy, Franzini (2001) warns that forcing humour in therapy would be unwise and counter-productive. A coach should be continually aware of their reason for choosing an intervention (de Haan & graduates, 2016). By analogy, just as therapists should continually engage in self-monitoring to ensure a humorous intervention is employed for the patient's benefit (Franzini, 2001), arguably, coaches should be aware of their motives in the use of playfulness. An inappropriate or ill-timed playful coaching intervention could potentially damage the coaching relationship.

Methods

Research design

Given the sparsity of direct empirical research on playfulness in the coaching dynamic, the author sought to identify sensitising concepts for exploring and understanding (Flick, 2014) the construct and judged a flexible, open-ended, qualitative data collection method to be the most suitable for this

investigation. The author employed inductive thematic analysis, defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.86) as ‘the searching across a data set... to find repeated patterns of meaning’. Despite its widespread use, there are varying views about what thematic analysis is and how it should be undertaken (e.g. Attride-Stirling, 2001; Tuckett, 2005), and the author has followed the step-by-step model set out by Braun and Clarke (2013), which provides clear guidelines to conduct the analysis in a deliberate and rigorous way.

Participants and sampling strategy

A purposeful, convenience sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) was employed to select 14 participants. The investigation required participants who could identify playfulness in their work and the author invited coaches who appeared to have demonstrated playful tendencies for example, through spontaneity, creativity and humour.

The sample contained a mix of genders (6 women, 8 men) to avoid the possibility of gender bias. The participants work predominantly with corporate clients, one is a coaching psychologist and some are international speakers and/or teachers of coaching. The range of coaching philosophies held include Gestalt, systemic constellations, applied positive psychology, ontological and mindfulness, with nine specifically describing their coaching philosophy as eclectic. The range of experience was 6 to 20 plus years, with an average of 14 years.

For the reasons stated above, and the potential overlap of some facets of playfulness with other constructs such as humour, the investigator sought to focus the investigation on intellectual and serious playfulness. The initial communication with the participants explained this intention, distinguishing between playfulness, play and humour. The OLIW model (Proyer, 2017), intellectual and serious playfulness were outlined with the understanding that if the participants’ experience related primarily to different facets of playfulness, that would also be valuable data.

The data collection method was

semi-structured interviews of between 42 and 67 minutes. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Six interviews were conducted in person at various locations and eight by Skype due to geographical and time constraints. The benefits of the use of Skype outweighed the drawbacks (Sullivan, 2012) as both the investigator and the participants coach by Skype. Participants were randomly assigned a letter A–N.

Analysis

The interview transcripts were coded following the steps set out by the Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis model. The researcher used a semantic (Patton, 1990) and existentialist/realist approach (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995).

Initially, the researcher read the transcripts while listening to the recordings, then re-read the transcripts to actively engage in the data. The author then coded the interviews in random order, adding codes as appropriate and systematically revisiting the coded interviews to ensure that interviews were coded using the complete set of codes. The third step involved identifying themes which represent some level of pattern or meaning in relation to the research questions in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) while adopting Buetow’s (2010) saliency analysis, acknowledging that importance of information in the data was not necessarily linked to the frequency of occurrence. Fourthly, the author revisited the set of codes to reassess their relevance in light of the provisional themes and subthemes, developing a new set by merging, keeping or discarding the original codes. The main challenge of this stage was the acceptance that the research, as an exploration with restricted length, is seeking breadth over depth, meaning by necessity cutting and merging codes inevitably led to some loss of detail and nuance. Then, the researcher collated data extracts relevant to each theme and subtheme based on the second-generation codes, continually reviewing and checking if they worked

Table 1: What do coaches understand by playfulness? Themes and subthemes

Not fun-seeking	Relationship	Distinct from tools/ interventions
	Authenticity	
	Client readiness	

in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis. The author conducted ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells.

As the study formed the author’s dissertation for an MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change, there was a single researcher; however, the author discussed the identified codes, sub-themes and themes with her supervisor at intervals during the analysis to support credibility and counteract possible bias.

Results

The author sought to provide a rich description of the entire data set, rather than a detailed account of one aspect, along the themes and sub-themes identified using the thematic analysis model (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This approach was appropriate as an exploration and as participants’ views were not known prior to the investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis identified a number of strong recurrent themes.

What do coaches understand by playfulness?

Three themes were identified together with two sub-themes presented in Table 1. The three themes are: ‘not fun-seeking’, ‘relationship’ and ‘distinct from tools/interventions’.

Most of the participants initially strongly associated playfulness with fun-seeking, humour or play, reflecting the predominant emphasis in the literature. All but two, on learning of intellectual and serious playfulness, widened their reflection, noting how much playfulness is part of their coaching

approach, with some struggling to differentiate it from their coaching. Almost none had previously specifically reflected on playfulness in their coaching.

There was largely agreement that playfulness is rooted in authenticity and relationship:

There were times when I could see that some of my use of language was playful, some of the ways that I was working the group was playful – you know, bringing people in, relating to people’s ideas and challenging them that required more lightness. So I could afterwards identify playful moments... But I wasn’t trying to be anything; it was coming out of the work and relationships over a couple of days and we flowed (A).

A further dominant subtheme is the need to assess client readiness for playfulness, enabled by constant conscious and subconscious, paying attention to the relationship, including somatically and linguistically:

If they start using the language, I will use the language more. I’ll throw in another piece of language and if they start using it, I use it. If they don’t, then I will not’ (N).

While some of the participants use tools such as art materials or coaching exercises to facilitate playfulness, there was unanimous agreement that these do not give rise to playfulness in isolation, but instead amount to using ‘play as a coaching technique or intervention, which I think is a quite different thing’ (C).

Table 2: Key factors for effective playfulness: Themes and subthemes

Relationship	Authenticity	Presence
Non-judgment	Lightness	Trust
Compassion	Self-knowledge	Concentration on coaching process
	Self-acceptance	
	Self-belief	
	Fostering capacity for playfulness	

Key factors for effective playfulness

Three interwoven themes were identified, which together with nine sub-themes are presented in Table 2. The three themes are: ‘relationship’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘presence’.

Relationship

Most participants implicitly or explicitly agreed that playfulness is an ‘emergent quality of the relationship that has to do with the nature of our connectiveness’ (A). A strong subtheme of non-judgment of self and client is summarised by ‘Who am I to judge?... I think that’s where the heart of playfulness is’ (B), while recognising that ‘we can’t avoid judgment... but occupy that observing self’ (F), in order to build the relationship required for playfulness to emerge. There was strong support for the need for psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) in group coaching, with one participant extending this expressly to unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951) in one-to-one coaching. The importance of negating embarrassment, and in some cases shame, was considered by a few participants.

For some, non-judgement extended to compassion, both towards self and client: ‘There’s a kind of combination between playfulness and compassion’ (J), both in relation to the client, by seeing their resistance with lightness and compassion, and the coach him/herself, which is ‘connected very much with the development of the coach’ (C).

Authenticity

The second cornerstone of playfulness in coaching identified is authenticity, represented by two subthemes. Firstly, the coach’s availability and capacity to hold internal and external events lightly:

I’ve become more conscious of the kind of energetic freight of playfulness, particularly with clients who are having an intense experience and sometimes... some difficult truths which can make somebody gasp can also be held lightly. (A)

Secondly, their base of self-knowledge, self-acceptance and self-belief. There is a lack of self-consciousness and through assessing client readiness, being prepared to take what feel like playful risks in terms of how questions are worded and structured allowed by ‘self-belief and having a right to do those things’ (G) in the context of ongoing self-development of the coach. While not all the participants explicitly reflected that ‘it’s about taking a light-hearted approach to, not just the conversation that we’re having, but how they’re applying that coaching process’ (M); the participants said that playfulness was increasingly present in their coaching as they gained more experience and/or self-belief.

Authenticity also means that the coach never tries to be playful, otherwise ‘I often fall on my face or I misfire in the relationship’ (A). Nevertheless, it is a muscle which you

can train, ‘if we have a capacity for something then it can be transformed’ (C), as evidenced by some of the participants’ experience of both themselves and their clients becoming more playful through group exercises or by engaging in activities promoting playfulness in a non-work environment.

Presence

The third cornerstone identified is the coach’s presence, that is, the mindful presence of the coach in the moment with the client with self-awareness and without judgement (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Two subthemes to the need for presence are evident. Firstly, multifaceted trust with deep listening and attunement:

If those questions are the key to people being playful, then forming those questions... when I do it well, it’s because I have been listening fully. I have been in that moment with them. I have not cared what the answer is. I’ve just thought that feels like a good place to go next. (G)

Secondly, concentration is on coaching process rather than focusing on the end goal, ‘the foundation for the idea of playfulness is that it is a process’ (F). This does not mean that there is no goal: ‘It may well be that the goal is to make progress along the path towards something, but it’s just that we don’t know what that bit of the path is’ (N), or that there is no structure to the

coaching session: ‘there’s something about having rigour... can you have rigour-ish playfulness? ... playfully rigorous, playfully goal-oriented’ (K). Nevertheless, the emphasis is clearly on process: ‘The less I focus on trying to get a client somewhere, the more play emerges as a characteristic of our work together’ (A).

Presence allows for the perception of unbounded possibilities and a ‘sense of emergence and seeing what arises in the moment and through playfulness, you can be more open to that’ (M).

What might playfulness add to coaching?

Three interrelated themes were identified, together with eighteen sub-themes, presented in Table 3. The three themes were ‘relationship’, ‘space’ and ‘lightness’.

Relationship

Playfulness was experienced by almost all participants as deepening the coaching relationship. A progression of the type of playfulness emerging from the fledgling to the more developed coaching relationship as trust and safety builds was identified. Many of the participants spoke of a range of playfulness, from whimsical and light-hearted playfulness to build rapport ‘so we’ll have a laugh and a joke, just about getting them to relax... because that space for me is important’ (D) to a more intellectual or serious playfulness as the coaching relationship deepens and the work

Table 3: What might playfulness add to coaching? Themes and subthemes

Relationship	Space	Lightness
Trust	Exploration	Shifts in perspective
Safety	Openness and flexibility	Positive emotions
Range of playfulness	Non-judgmental curiosity	Balance
Non-judgment	Novelty	Irreverence
Compassion	Vulnerability	Different energies
	Trust	
	Flow	

is being done: 'Maybe that's just the gentle kind of introduction to playfulness, to enable you to go to that more expansive place of play further on in the session' (E). One of the participants spoke of setting the expectation for whimsical playfulness at the beginning of her group sessions, as this is where the greatest resistance is in the work environment, and once this safe space has been created the serious and intellectual playfulness 'flows' (H). Also identified was the implicit and explicit communication of safety/non-judgement required for playfulness (for some extended to compassion), which also deepened the coaching relationship.

Space

An overarching theme of the effect of playfulness emerging from the relationship is its support for the exploration process. The potent cocktail of presence and safety/trust within the relationship, together with the coach's authenticity, three cornerstones for playfulness, support 'genuine exploration' (N), which is built on and promotes curiosity and novelty, and provides space to explore differences with lightness while being supportive of vulnerability.

Space is generated through playfulness creating and supporting an openness and flexibility in thinking:

It might be... in terms of how I tune in and how I respond and what I notice and what I pick up on, but I don't have to prove anything. So, that allows me to be really exploratory and playful and free and not attached to an outcome, and that creates the space for the client to be. (E)

The participants spoke of how spaciousness allowed by playfulness is important to them in their role 'to allow me to be curious, to ask questions, to challenge the client, to not take their world and their views to be the truth' (C). Equally, as the clients 'begin to play with being curious to what arises for them when they are centred' (F), the development of greater self-awareness and acceptance is supported:

To be curious about this present moment without judgement, without a feeling it should be right or wrong ... there's a playfulness to my curiosity, rather than I shouldn't be feeling this way. (B)

The client then has space to experiment with difference by allowing lightness with novelty in trying out of different perspectives, possibilities and detachment from givens, taking clients:

Into novel experiences that have the possibility for rewiring their thinking and their relating to themselves and undoing fixed Gestalts, undoing old patterns of thinking... venturing into the unknown together and with support and challenge, that kind of novelty seems massively productive. (A)

The combination of space and connection, in turn supported by multifaceted trust considered above, appears to give rise to flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) supported by and supportive of playfulness:

Without boundaries... fully immersed... there's not a consciousness of right and wrong and where one should stop and what one should say or shouldn't say... absolutely raw in the moment... real flow. (E)

Lightness

Thirdly, playfulness creates lightness in the coaching conversation 'even when you may be discussing quite weighty subjects' (E) around the coaching process itself and the new perspective gained: 'They take their role more seriously and they take themselves less seriously' (N). It allows for fun, which 'helps motivate people... they're more likely to be up for it, try things out' (D) and makes the coaching more enjoyable for the coach.

Playful lightness supports 'gentle irreverence... that capacity to speak lightly of profound things' (C) allowing the coach 'to hold even this serious work that we do with a certain amount of irreverence' (C). For the client:

Irreverence is quite playful and I think takes away the corporate facade that I think everybody feels they have to live by and... how people are judged... allows you to speak as human beings. (N)

Lightness supports relaxation, even when ‘dealing with very, very serious subjects’ (N), energy, ‘it’s the lightness that can be brought which can help people shift perspective’ (J) and relief, with several of the participants stating that playfulness allows lightness which enables moments for the client and coach to breathe during very deep conversations.

The participants found that the lightness created by playfulness enabled them to bring balance to difficult conversations: ‘Being able to go to what they’ve [the client] perceived as being difficult, uncomfortable, scary places in their thoughts and feelings and being able to do that with a level of freedom’ (E). Also, allowing the coach not to get ‘caught by the coachee’s serious mood about whatever it is they’re speaking about’ (C), helping shifts in perspective and relief during difficult conversations, reflecting that playfulness ‘has to do with a sense of perspective that is present even in deep process’ (A).

Playfulness also supports joy in the coaching process, whether through positive emotions ‘unexpected moments of joy and amusement bubble up [which] often we suppress... in an office environment’ (I) or relief within ‘really profound moments that are deeply intense... it’s about coming up for air. It’s about joy’ (K) including joy as catharsis.

Potential barriers and risks

Given the nebulousness and range of interpretation of playfulness, each participant’s understanding of the construct is relevant. Those who saw playfulness closer to humour and whimsical, light-hearted or other-directed playfulness (Proyer, 2017) experienced greater barriers and risks both in number and perceived insurmountability.

Potential barriers suggested by the partic-

ipants (see Table 4) include the coach’s lack of self-confidence, particularly in context of senior clients ‘feeling confident enough to say something that might feel slightly ridiculous or challenging or playful’ (G), or fear of damaging credibility while the client is still constructing a ‘perception of your expertise’ (I) and personal constructs of the coach in group or one-to-one work.

Some barriers relate to self-perception as a serious person or introvert, ‘possibly [the client’s] discomfort of not recognising who they are... that side is never invited out’ (K). While neurodiversity such as autism may mean that the lack of structure invited by playfulness is too challenging or distracting and clients ‘just shut down’ (L). Alternatively, sometimes when ‘playfulness really hasn’t landed at all well... that’s a bit of a flag potentially towards... counselling or therapy’ (E).

Gender may also pose a barrier: ‘You have to be careful because in that intensely authentic arrangement, people can misconstrue playfulness as something else and that’s problematic’ (I). Also, in the context of the group identity, ‘there were six guys... [I] really, really struggled to break any barriers with them... they were so stuck in who they ought to be’ (H).

There were also reported cultural barriers: seriousness was ‘associated with the kind of state of mind that [the clients] needed to be in’ (M). Clients’ work persona may pose a barrier with fear that possessing too much levity is ‘to do with not being credible, not being competent, not being forthright, not fitting in... playful is associated with children and children don’t lead industry’ (I). The result is that inspiration and playfulness get blocked by ‘how I ought to behave, what I ought to say, what people are thinking of me, what do I think of myself’ (H). There may be broader cultural barriers, for example differing social norms in different countries, where ‘your scope for playfulness... is diminished significantly’ (L).

Some of the above barriers were seen as insurmountable (e.g. culture or neurodiver-

Table 4: Potential barriers: Themes and subthemes

Coach	Client	Both
Lack of confidence	Neurodiversity	Organisational culture
Fear (credibility)	Potential need for therapy	Broader cultural constraints
Personal constructs	Group identity	Gender (potential misinterpretation of intent)
		Perception of playfulness as trait

sity), occasionally resulting in the conclusion that the coach was not the right person for the client. Other barriers (e.g. the risk of misinterpretation) were accepted as fixed by some but capable of being overcome by others by going through ‘a loop which I wouldn’t have gone through with [a different client/circumstance]’ (A). There were mixed views on whether it is the coach’s role and sometimes the essence of playfulness to have a degree of irreverence to some of these barriers, treating resistance lightly as well as being playful with the coach’s internal boundaries.

Potential risks raised are the coach’s motives for playfulness (e.g. the avoidance of discomfort, deflection or seeking approval); the coach’s over-involvement by being lost in playfulness and the lack of self-awareness leading to overstepping the mark if client readiness is insufficiently gauged. For the client, a possible risk was the potential to feel inadequate if they are unable to engage playfully.

Discussion

In light of the results of this study and a literature review, the author proposes the following working definition:

Playfulness in coaching may be understood as a quality of thought and interaction unlimited by associations with fun which emerges from and deepens the coaching relationship, is rooted in authenticity and mindful presence and encompasses a cognitive attitude towards exploration, supporting shifts in perspective.

This proposed working definition moves towards serious and intellectual playfulness

(Proyer, 2014a, 2017), allowing a more complex, multifaceted consideration of the construct. Future playfulness research may have important implications for coaching, perhaps revealing different impacts on coaching effectiveness of the various facets of playfulness at different stages of the coaching relationship.

The suggested working definition views playfulness as a cognitive attitude adopted within the coaching dynamic. Notably, this investigation identifies authenticity as one of the cornerstones of effective playfulness in coaching. Inauthentic playfulness may damage the coaching relationship; robust research shows that incongruent emotional expression (mismatch between outward expression and inner experience) will make it more likely for others to perceive one as untrustworthy or inauthentic (Lynch, 2018). Future research may establish whether it is possible to increase a person’s ability to access different facets of playfulness. For example, playfulness, hope, mindfulness and compassion appear to be intertwined (e.g. Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Zhou et al., 2019) and future research may show whether interventions to increase a person’s compassion (Bluth & Neff, 2018) or mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005) also have an impact on the ability to access facets of playfulness. The likely unique psychological profiles of playfulness, mindfulness, hope and compassion are being researched in the coaching context (Passarelli, 2014) and may shed further light on this in the future.

Given the emphasis on the individual aspect of playfulness in the literature, whether as an ‘individual differences variable’ (Proyer,

2017, p.114) or ‘an attitude, mode or mental stance’ (Heimann & Roepstorff, 2018, p.13), the emphasis on relationship identified by this study appears significant. The data supports Winnicott’s (1972) view of playfulness as an interactional process in the context of attachment theory where the secure base provided by the coaching relationship fuels the client’s trust in the coach facilitating exploration and shifts in perspective.

Through the lens of attachment theory, Paris (2007, p.121) sees coaching as a gift for leaders as a sanctuary ‘where one can take off the armor, put down the defences’. Such disarming chimes with the authenticity which participants identified as necessary for playfulness to emerge in the coaching dynamic and which springs from the coach’s base of self-knowledge, self-acceptance and self-belief and their availability and capacity to hold internal and external events lightly. For the participants, non-judgment of self and client were essential for playfulness to emerge, consistent with the secure base required for defences to be lowered allowing exploration and integration of information. The third cornerstone of playfulness in coaching, presence in the moment without judgment and with self-awareness, is also consistent with secure attachment facilitated by ‘feeling felt’ (Siegel, 2013, p.218).

Different facets of playfulness were found to emerge at different stages of the coaching relationship, with progressively more secure attachment supporting intellectual and serious playfulness. The coach’s and client’s ability to access playfulness may depend on their attachment experiences, which may be significant given that insecure attachment is relatively common (Ainsworth et al., 2015). Future research into implications of attachment theory in coaching may therefore also have implications for playfulness in the coaching dynamic.

Some participants who interpreted playfulness as closer to fun, humour or play experienced greater barriers, perhaps unsurprisingly as they work predominantly in corporate settings. This merits further

exploration, in particular whether gentle irreverence to perceived boundaries may assist the coach to foster playfulness in the coaching dynamic, helping the client to experience challenge through authentic playfulness and potentially impacting the coaching effectiveness. No doubt there are barriers to playfulness which require respect (e.g. socially acceptable behaviour in different cultures); however, it would be informative to investigate whether fostering playfulness – for example, in leaders – despite initial resistance, has a positive impact on coaching effectiveness and perhaps wider impact on the leader’s corporate culture; of interest given the associations of playfulness with creativity (e.g. Proyer & Brauer, 2018) and innovation (Yu et al., 2007).

Much of existing research focuses on potential benefits of playfulness, and Proyer and Brauer (2018) point to the importance of expanding the study of playfulness to maladaptive personality traits. Future research in playfulness in coaching may look at the risks associated with playfulness emerging from the coaching dynamic beyond the potential for crossing social interaction barriers (Ruch & Proyer, 2009) and raise awareness of possible implications for the coach.

The author proposes that the results of this study support the hypothesis that greater awareness by coaches of complexities of playfulness would aid richer reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Hargreaves & Page, 2013). This is potentially significant in the context of coaching development and effectiveness meriting further investigation. Finally, this study has examined playfulness in coaching from the coach’s perspective; future research may investigate the experience from the client’s perspective and their perception of its impact on the coaching relationship and effectiveness.

Limitations of this research

While the investigation attempts to move from specific observations to more general theory (Rose et al., 2015), any attempts to generalise must be tentative (Blaikie, 2000,

p.104) as the use of interviews as a method of gathering data from a small group may limit the application of the findings to other coaches or coaching dynamics. Furthermore, other studies adopting a different interpretation of playfulness may yield different results.

Results from this exploratory study are not intended to provide definitive answers to the complex and evolving concept of playfulness in coaching. Neither the author nor the participants lay claim that the participants' views are representative or may be generalised to all coaches. Rather, this study is intended to convey real-world experiences of a sample of coaches to add to this under-researched area.

The participants are based in the UK (with the exception of one, based in Germany) and though a significant number work with international clients, the findings are predominantly Western based. In line with the uncertainty regarding crosscultural applications in applied playfulness research, the findings may not be applicable in different cultures.

Conclusion

While adult playfulness research is an evolving field with a lack of consensus on the fundamentals of the construct, there is some agreement that it gives rise to a myriad of benefits, many of which appear to be relevant to coaching. The aim of this study is to explore playfulness in the coaching dynamic, particularly serious and intellectual facets of playfulness (Proyer, 2014a, 2017), facilitating greater awareness by coaches of conditions for its presence, potential effects, barriers and risks. Strikingly, a common theme identified across the data was that the interviews touched on points on which the participants had not previously reflected, with the multifaceted OLIW model (Proyer, 2017) and concept of serious playfulness (Proyer, 2014a) facilitating reflection.

Three interrelated themes were identified by the study as cornerstones for playfulness in coaching: relationship, authenticity and presence, all interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The study found that playfulness

brings to coaching a lightness, often in deep conversation or when facing difficult emotions or challenges, together with unfettered exploration and a deepening of the coaching relationship. This may be partly why playfulness was difficult for some of the participants, all of whom were experienced coaches, to separate from the flow of coaching. The results of the study suggest that playfulness, applied contextually and wisely, may have the potential for a considerable contribution to coaching effectiveness.

Playfulness appears to sit within some of the core competencies expected of coaches (e.g. International Coach Federation (2019) Core Competencies, B4, 'Coaching Presence'). Perhaps if the conceptualisation of playfulness as a universal capacity gains acceptance and/or evidenced-based means of increasing playfulness are developed and it is shown to have a potentially positive impact on coaching effectiveness, it may in the future be considered more explicitly as an area for coaches' development and assessment.

Given the early stage of understanding of and direct empirical research on playfulness in coaching, the benefits it promises to bring to coaching together with potential risks suggest that it is a topic worthy of greater attention within the coaching world.

Acknowledgments

Sincere thanks to Mike Palmer of Henley Business School, University of Reading, the author's supervisor for the MSc dissertation forming the basis of this paper and the participants who gave their time to the study. Gratitude also to Dr Rebecca Jones and Professor Jonathan Passmore of Henley Business School for their encouragement to pursue my interest in this topic after completion of the MSc.

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