Article

Empathetic or sympathetic: What do I want my coach to be?

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There appears to be widespread acceptance that a coach should be empathetic. However, there is considerable confusion over what empathy is, and how/if it differs from sympathy, and if empathy leads to better outcomes. The paper reviews the research evidence related to the development of empathy, sympathy, and pro-social and altruistic behaviour and concludes that notions of empathy in coaching are not evidence-based, are largely about marketing, and that one should want a sympathetic, rather than an empathetic coach.
Keywords: *coaching; empathy; sympathy; coaching psychology.*

MANY COACHES claim to be empathetic, and much coach training claims to develop empathetic coaches. 'Empathic' appears to be a common descriptor in the marketing of coaching. Empathy is also described as important in the Coaching Psychology literature. There is little discussion of sympathy in either the coaching psychology or coaching literature.

This paper challenges the poor use of terminology in Coaching and Coaching Psychology. Uncritical use probably affects how we think about coaching practice, undermines the evidence base and strengthens coaching folklore. Coaching psychology has a responsibility and opportunity to ensure that wider coaching practice is firmly based upon evidence-based scientific practice. This paper examines empathy and sympathy and the relevance of these constructs to coaching and coaching psychology.

Empathy and sympathy

Clarity of meaning is essential to understanding the role of 'empathy' or 'sympathy' in coaching. The discussion to be followed here dates to Adam Smith (1723–1790) and David Hume (1711–1776). Unfortunately, it has been confused since that time, with meanings changing and often being used without clear definition. Adam Smith (Fleischacker, 2020, sec. 2) describes sympathy as the feeling arising when one imagines how we were to feel if we were in the position of another. Smith suggests that we cannot really feel what another person does. However, our attempt to understand and share the feelings of others is a key driver in our lives and, according to Smith, a source of virtue. Hume describes sympathy as feeling what others actually feel (Morris & Brown, 2021, sec. 7.2). He places sympathy at the heart of the origins of moral behaviour; fully experiencing the feeling of another, whilst maintaining our sense of identity, results in the development of what he calls resemblances and moral sentiment. Both Smith and Hume describe sympathy as being in the position of the other, a position we would now commonly call empathy.

'Empathy' was introduced into English in 1909 (Stueber, 2019) and derives from the German 'einfulung' (feeling into). Empathy was thought to be based upon mirroring of another mind arising from observation of bodily activity and facial expression. It was considered essential to understanding that there were other minds. Unfortunately, and not surprisingly given their original meanings, many authors have continued

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to use the terms empathy and sympathy interchangeably, used the broader term 'empathy-related', or failed to define what they mean. This confusion of terms makes it difficult to determine what much of the literature is describing. Of particular interest to the coaching psychologist is understanding which stance towards another's pain might be associated with pro-social outcomes.

Eisenberg and colleagues (2014) have defined empathy as 'an affective response that is identical, or very similar, to what the other person is feeling or might be expected to feel given the context – a response stemming from an understanding of another's emotional state or condition' (p.184). Witnessing sadness in another generates sadness in the empathetic individual. On feeling sympathy, one feels concern for another on recognising their emotional state but does feel the same emotion. Sympathy may arise from empathy, but may also arise from memory or cognitive understanding and perspective (Malti & Ongley, 2014).

Empathy can lead to personal distress, the response ('I feel your pain') to another's emotion creating discomfort in the empathetic person. Indeed Eisenberg (2010), who has done extensive research on the development of pro-social behaviour in children, and others (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Trommsdorff et al., 2007), suggest that, since empathy may engender personal distress, avoidance behaviour, a less pro-social orientation may result. Gill and Calkins (2003) showed that amongst two-year-olds some aggressive children have overly high levels of empathy and were less able to regulate their responses, hence exposure to other's distress stimulated their own. Empathy may preclude attending to other's needs and 'only sympathy is expected to reliably engender concern for others' (Eisenberg et al., 2014, p.185).

In this account, empathy is, in moral terms, value-neutral; it is not systematically associated with a particular behaviour and describes an emotional state, not a moral position. Sympathy, where concern for another is essential, acts as an emotional component of moral behaviour and is likely to be associated with pro-social behaviour.

Coaching material often suggests that sympathy is superficial as compared to empathy. In fact the development of empathy-related responses in children suggests that sympathy may be a more developed response (see discussion in (Eisenberg et al., 2014)). Young infants differentiate poorly between themselves and others, and become distressed in response to other's distress. This 'global empathy' is exemplified by their crying in response to hearing another's cry. As children become aware of others, and those others have feelings, their responses become more attuned to other's feelings and perspectives. 'With increasing cognitive maturation, children are better able to respond with concern to others' distress' (Hoffman, 2001, p.87). In other words, children begin to respond sympathetically. Their ability to respond sympathetically continues to develop through childhood and is associated with the development of theory of mind and with their ability to exercise control over their emotions and attention (Decety, 2009).

Batson (2017) has proposed and, over 30 years, undertaken research that has supported the empathy-altruism hypothesis which suggests that empathic concern motivates altruistic behaviour. A cursory reading might conclude that this counters the evidence described above that sympathy, not empathy, underlies pro-social behaviour. However, Batson is careful to define empathic concern as 'an other orientated emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone' (Batson, 2010; Batson et al., 2002). He explicitly (2002) excludes from his definition seven closely related concepts which he differentiates from what he calls empathy or 'empathic emotion'. These include 'knowing another person's internal state, including thoughts and feelings'; 'coming to feel as another person feels'; 'intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation'; imagining how another is feeling'; 'being upset by another

person's suffering'; 'imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place' (Batson et al., 2002, p.488). Hence Batson excludes from his definition of empathy the notion of 'standing in another's shoes' and 'feeling their pain' that is so prevalent in the marketing of coaching. Indeed, Batson acknowledges that his definition of empathy is similar to that which Eisenberg calls sympathy (Batson et al., 2002, p.486; Hein & Singer, 2008, 2010). Batson also recognises that imagining one to be in the place of another in distress (feeling their pain) may stimulate empathic pro-social behaviour but may also result in personal distress and avoidance, or even aggression.

The discovery of 'mirror neurons' has supported the notion that we are predisposed to identify other minds and have inbuilt mechanisms for empathy (Baird et al., 2011). However, whilst the mirror neuron system may contribute to empathy the empirical evidence is mixed (Bekkali et al., 2021). This is an area of active research that may contribute to our understanding of how one individual recognises the emotions of another and places them within a social context. Current neuroscience does not help in determining the degree to which 'empathy' is a reflection of self-awareness with regard for another, or being in the place of another (Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). Neuro-imaging studies (such as Boyatzis & Jack, 2018, pp.19–21) show that empathy, as the 'sharing of the affective states of others' evokes similar brain activation to experiencing pain oneself, activating primitive brain areas. 'True empathy' (showing concern, related to pro-social behaviour, similar to what has been described as sympathy above) shows different patterns of brain activation.

In summary, the literature is consistent and coherent. Sympathy is associated with concern for others and hence the desire to reduce their distress and is likely to result in altruistically motivated behaviour, to shape moral reasoning and is associated with pro-social behaviour. Empathy is associated with personal distress. Motivation may therefore be to reduce one's distress and hence to remove oneself from exposure to the source: the distressed other. Alternatively, the distress can be relieved by helping the other person, but then the motivation is selfish, rather than the altruism of sympathy. Maintaining the distinction between self and other matters if one is to show sympathy. This is probably more cognitively demanding in a difficult situation than entering the other's world.

Coaching and coaching psychology

Coaching psychology is defined by the British Psychological Society Division of Coaching Psychology as being 'the scientific study and application of behaviour, cognition and emotion to deepen our understanding of individuals' and groups' performance, achievement and wellbeing, and to enhance practice within coaching' (Division of Coaching Psychology, BPS, n.d.). Therefore, coaching psychologists should care about rigour in the use of terminology across coaching as a whole, as well as within coaching psychology.

In a non-systematic, pragmatic investigation undertaken in December 2020, the terms 'sympathy', 'empathy' and 'coaching' were entered into the Google internet search engine. The first 30 coaching practices or coach training organisations websites were examined for their stance on sympathy or empathy. Fifteen were positive about empathy and said nothing or were neutral about sympathy. Seven were positive about empathy and negative towards sympathy. Eight gave a balanced commentary. Four sites, which were positive about empathy, also appeared confused about the difference between empathy and sympathy, and two sites associated sympathy with pity. It was common for sympathy to be described as superficial, whereas empathy was described as deeper, more complex and advanced. One coach announces 'looking for sympathy? you've come to the wrong place', and promotes their empathic approach; another, 'Stop it with the sympathy – there's a better way to support people'. The common theme was

how important it is for a coach to 'move beyond our own position to inhabit the experience of another, to know how the person feels, senses, perceives, and processes subjective and intersubjective experience moment by moment, frame by frame'.

It was rare to find any consideration of the evidence. Where evidence was mentioned, the approach was often superficial, concerned with marketing rather than science and largely drawn from pseudo-science and 'gurus'.

A similar result was sound searching 'sympathy', empathy' and 'coaching psychology'. Indeed one 'coaching psychology consultancy', extolling the value of chartership also claimed that 'empathy is much deeper and more complex than sympathy'. This search was not a formal study of the internet presence of coaching organisations, but does identify the common 'folklore' associated with empathy in coaching and coaching psychology. Indeed the Wikipedia page for coaching psychology states, in the section on Humanistic psychology, that coaches should show empathy ('Coaching Psychology,' 2021).

The coaching literature adds little to understanding empathy. Writing positively about empathy as part of 'principled non-directivity' Cox and Bachkirova (2020, p.184), also suggest empathy 'involves being in the client's place moment by moment and 'feeling as if' (p.185). However, the argument is not well underpinned and only supported by one personal, poorly evidenced, review of empathy (Cox & Bachkirova, 2020; Schmid, 2001). In 'Coaching with Empathy' (Brockbank & McGill, 2013) the key research on empathy is not addressed, and the characterisation of the empathy/sympathy discussion often seen on coaching websites is reiterated without comment.

The coaching psychology literature is similar with lack of rigour in the understanding of empathy. Empathy is described as a key component in building the relationship between the coach and client (O'Broin & Palmer, 2009). Unfortunately, there is no definition of empathy and the papers referenced, including a meta-analysis, have poor or absent discussions of what empathy is. O'Broin and Palmer (2009) recognise that the evidence for the role of empathy is poor, in part because of the lack of a universal definition. However, they do not address the literature on the development of empathy and sympathy and potentially add to the confusion by providing yet another meaning for 'empathy', describing an empathic stance, 'a sense of curiosity, good will and interest', and 'empathetic attunement, the perceptual skill of 'tuning in' to the coachee' (p.189). Investigating coaching dyads, Will (2016) reported a higher rating of a coach's empathy where there had been empathetic paraphrasing. However, there was little concordance between coach and client perception of the coach's expressed empathy and no analysis of what empathy was. A study of medical education and problem based learning which extolled the value of coaching psychology with its emphasis on empathy (Wang et al., 2016), had no discussion of what empathy was. In *The Handbook of Coaching Psychology: A Guide for Practitioners* (Palmer & Whybrow, 2018) there are multiple references to empathy and empathic understanding, but no formal consideration of what empathy is.

An interesting paper published after this paper was originally submitted adds to the evidence that empathy (of the 'I feel your pain' school) is not associated with better outcomes in coaching. Imagine-other empathy (imagining the other person in their situation) was more effective than imagine-self empathy (imagining oneself in the other's situation) in having a positive effect on coaching outcomes (Diller et al., 2021). Imagine-other was similar to sympathy in the sense used above whereas imagine-self relates to empathy (feeling their pain).

Conclusion

'Empathy' is a term used to describe several different emotional reactions. Its use often lacks clarity and covers a range of different responses to another in need. Unfortu-

nately, the term is often used without proper definition.

'Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy is a form of agreement. Empathy is not agreeing with someone; it is fully, deeply understanding that person, emotionally as well as intellectually' (Covey, 2013). Covey was right: empathy is not sympathy, but he drew the wrong conclusion and ignored the evidence in favour of a statement that coaches use to market their wares. It does not enhance the reputation of coaching (or Coaching Psychology) if pseudo-science and folklore guide training and dominate marketing.

The research is clear that sympathy, or 'empathic concern' as defined by Eisenberg and Batson is associated with the development of pro-social behaviour and altruistic behaviour. There is evidence that it leads to better coaching outcomes. 'Empathy' as commonly used in the coaching world ('feeling your pain') is poorly associated with pro-social behaviour, or altruism. The notion that sympathy is superficial or less developed is simply wrong.

The psychological literature is clear, whilst many coaches do not have the training to understand it, coaching psychologists do. Language matters, regrettably the coaching literature seems to be almost as careless in its use of the terms 'empathy' and 'sympathy' as do the coaching marketeers; coaching psychology does not appear to be doing much better. Coaching psychology claims to be 'a scientific study'. If it is, and if it is to 'enhance practice within coaching' it will need to be more rigorous in its use of language and interrogation of the evidence and act as a bridge into the literature for the wider coaching community.

One should want a coach that is sympathetic; not one that walks in your shoes (Diller et al., 2021), you are already in them and can feel your own pain. A coach can help you to find another perspective (Katsikis & Kostogiannis, 2016), not just reflect your current one back: sympathetic distance helps. Above all, one needs a coach who reads the evidence and is critical of folklore that has become a normative belief.

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