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Reflections on video-mediated coaching and a research agenda for Coaching Psychology

Coaches have incorporated video-mediated coaching in their repertoire, and this has enabled coaching to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. Video-mediated coaching does indeed bring several benefits, which we discuss in this piece, yet we also want to take the time to pause and reflect on our lived experience of coaching via this platform. We suggest some possible developments in Coaching Psychology vis-à-vis supporting video-mediated coaching in the ‘new’ normal and beyond.

**Keywords**: video-mediated coaching, coaching online, virtual coaching, COVID-19.

**Introduction**

“The dyadic face-to-face meeting in real time is no longer the standard mode in which a coaching session takes place.”

*(Deniers, 2019, p.82)*

In 2012, the Sherpa Coaching Survey (2020) reported that only 4% of coaching was delivered using videoconferencing. In 2020, videoconferencing accounted for 36%, taking the lead from in-person meetings, which accounted for only 33%. Such increase in technology usage questions the constituent elements of personal interaction - can video-mediated and in-person coaching be used interchangeably (Deniers, 2019)? Some (e.g., Drake, 2015) define video-mediated encounters as in-person coaching while others (e.g., Berry et al., 2011) differ, stating that videoconferencing coaching is a distance method. Kanatouri (2020, p.47) goes as far as proposing that it is a “conceptually distinct form of coaching practice”. In January 2022, up to 36% of people...
worked remotely in the United Kingdom (ONS, 2021). The McKinsey Global Institute estimates that over 20% of the workforce (especially highly skilled knowledge workers, who are often the clientele for executive coaching) could continue to do so in the future (McKinsey, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic saw users of the platform Zoom jump from about 10 million users in December 2019 to more than 300 million users five months later (Iqbal, 2020), and ‘Zoom fatigue’ has now entered common parlance as a term to describe tiredness. Yet, it seems that videoconferencing is here to stay, and more and more coaching is expected to take place online (O’Riordan & Palmer, 2021). It is the purpose of this brief discussion paper to outline some of the relative merits and demerits of this medium in the light of extant evidence, but also from an autobiographical, experiential perspective. The coaching experiences are drawn from in-house psychodynamic coaching sessions led by the first author within an organisation. Sessions were one hour in length and clients were seen on a monthly basis. The majority of clients were new to coaching though some had experience with therapeutic relationships.

Cameras, mirrors, and shifts in ‘control’

There is scant literature on the benefits of video-mediated coaching though similarities can be drawn from potential benefits in psychotherapy where computer technology has been implemented and evaluated (Peñate, 2012, cited in Otte et al., 2014). I (first author) have been working as a coach in an organisation that moved to remote working in March 2020. The removal of geographic constraints has been significant (Otte et al., 2014). Videoconferencing has enabled coaching to continue, bringing flexibility in scheduling sessions with respect to time and place. Moving the session from a communal physical space to a virtual shared space has brought comfort and privacy to some clients (Deniers, 2019). Jarosz (2021) also found that coaching can be a useful tool to enhance the
wellbeing and performance of workers during the pandemic. Moreover, video-mediated coaching can bring accessibility to a broader group, not just in terms of geographical accessibility but also psychological (Ubben, 2005). For instance, individuals who might have felt uncomfortable or unable to reach out for in-person support might feel less inhibited and more empowered to connect via the safety and accessibility of online platforms. Video-mediated coaching could be an inclusive tool for neurodiverse clients and people with different abilities, and future research ought to explore these avenues. From my own experience, clients who were wary of in-person coaching noted how they were more open to video-mediated coaching due to the private space it provided. Some were uncomfortable with work colleagues knowing that they were having coaching, preferring to keep this private and others felt that the topics discussed were emotive and felt more relaxed and comfortable to discuss from their home. can provide clients who might have been wary of discounted in-person sessions with a safe space to work on their self-confidence. At the same time, video-mediated coaching creates other challenges, such as interruptions to manage deliveries and family commitments, as coaches and clients are forced to manage a collision of “personal and work spheres” (Carillo et al., 2021, p.11). The interface of Zoom “constantly beams faces to everyone, regardless of who is speaking” (Bailenson, 2021, p.2) but where is it beaming and who owns this space? Deniers (2019) points out that, prior to the pandemic, there was a clear ownership of space occupied during the session but, post-pandemic, a sense of equal communal space was rarely felt. Space and embodiment are therefore salient areas of further research in coaching psychology.

The camera and its position are especially pertinent points in video-mediated coaching. Bailenson (2021, p.4) calls it an “all day mirror” with effects ranging from enabling contact, a means of surveillance or creating a theatrical atmosphere (Deniers, 2019). More specifically, the camera impacts the self-image of the client, the coach’s perception,
and the coaching space by creating a sense of alternate reality. Seeing one's own feed during video-mediated communication also impacts task performance (Hassell & Cotton, 2017) and self-image can cause discomfort or distraction when participating in a videoconference if users are concerned about their appearance (Vasconcelos et al., 2009). None of my clients raised issues relating to the presence of the camera. However, upon reflection, I believe this should have been a topic for exploration during the coaching session, providing a space to see how clients felt towards the camera and of seeing their own image on screen. In hindsight, with remote working becoming “the ‘new normal,’ almost overnight” (Wang et al., 2020, p.17), my practice had insufficient time to investigate and reflect on the implications of video-mediated coaching (Carillo et al., 2021).

The limited range of view provided by the camera means users are reduced to a small restricted physical domain of “sitting down and staring straight ahead” (Bailenson, 2021, p.4) with the “‘talking heads’ configuration” being the default mode of video interaction (Licoppe and Morel, 2012, p.39) – a configuration which may have been seen as confrontational in a face-to-face setting. Can the physical restrictions and limited view imposed by the camera impact the coaching discussion and is the dialogue bounded as a result? This is yet another important area of enquiry for coaching psychology.

The balance between professional and personal time has often worsened for those forced to work remotely during COVID-19 where there are different challenges to teleworking carried out in a conventional setting (Carillo et al., 2021). Lockdown saw many people choose to turn off their video feed during meetings. Was this an attempt to minimise nonverbal overload, a potential cause of what news outlets termed ‘zoom fatigue’? (Bailenson, 2020, p.1). Despite offering freedom, the video-mediated coaching space is restricted as neither the coach nor client can move around if they are to remain in view of the camera. Further, we risk being disembodied by projecting ourselves as ‘talking heads’. How
exactly does coaching psychology need to evolve to help us make sense of our video-mediated practice? Both phenomenological and social constructionist approaches would be helpful in shedding light on this question. We propose that phenomenological research could add much of value here; for instance, studies applying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2021) could help us to better understand the online lived experiences of both coach and coachee. IPA studies could also illustrate the complex nuances of virtual embodiment and online physicality. Social constructionist research (e.g., Yu and Sun, 2012) could also extend the field, for instance, by questioning our language usage and analysing online narratives and metaphors and providing a lens through which to critique the inherent privileges of video-mediated coaching (and coaching more generally – see Burns (2021), for a critique on coaching as a tool for emancipation).

Although video-mediated coaching gives clients more space, choice, control and agency, the coach has a smaller presence compared with a face-to-face encounter (Deniers, 2019). The client’s control over the coach ranges from choosing how close to sit near the camera, deciding whether to see more or less of the coach and turning off the coach’s incoming video feed (Deniers, 2019). Suler (2004) noted that seeing the coach as a face on the screen rather than a person in a physical setting reduced the coach’s presence and authority, though it raises the question of what authority the coach had previously. Nevertheless, Jackson et al. (2017, p.88) urges the industry to “embrace this disruptive paradigm shift, which puts the client in charge”. Although there has been a perceived shift in control within the coaching dyad, I believe it is important for clients to have the agency to decide how to manage their video feed in accordance with their own mental well-being. As a coach, I rely on existing coaching skills such as listening and paying attention to language to support the lack of visual cues and physical proximity (Kanatouri, 2020) and on reflection, these skills had to be enhanced. These, I reflect, had to enhance as a
result. Let us now move to understand how the absence of face-to-face interaction impacts the coaching relationship.

The Coaching relationship in the ‘new normal’

The working alliance is often used when investigating therapeutic outcomes and consistently predicts a range of outcomes over and above other aspects such as the type of therapy. Consistent with previous research, de Haan et al., (2013) found that the quality of the coaching relationship is one of the strongest predictors of coaching outcomes and a range of meta-analyses and systematic review also stress its central importance (e.g., Lai & McDowall, 2014). Given a strong working relationship impacts the coaching outcomes, what is the impact of video-mediated coaching on the coaching relationship? Anecdotally, I did not observe any difference in the coaching relationship for clients forced to move from a physical setting to a videoconferencing medium. Furthermore, there was no perceived difference in the relationship when coaching new clients over Zoom, where no previous face-to-face relationship had been established. My observations are supported by Berry et al. (2011) who demonstrated no significant differences between in-person and distance coaching (including videoconferencing) in the working alliance, suggesting that distance coaching may be as effective as face-to-face coaching. Further research is necessary to assess the replicability of these findings in our new ‘normal’.

In the absence of sensory cues, the coach develops an “awareness for the clients’ tone of voice, speed of speaking, silent moments, choice of words” (Kanatouri, 2020, p.47). This is supported by Geissler et al. (2014), who found that coaches coaching over telephone noted how missed visual cues could be compensated by additional concentration on the dialogue and the conversation itself, complemented by my own findings when clients have turned off their cameras during the coaching session. In the absence of face-to-face encounters, I have
needed to adapt my own cues such as increased nodding to indicate active listening and extra checks with the client to elicit feedback, as well as being more attuned to how the client feels online. This is supported by Bailenson (2021), who claims that nonverbal behaviour needs to be consciously monitored and cues to others need to be intentionally sent in a video-mediated environment. Can a coach send intentional cues and still remain authentic? What is the effect of this additional attentive labouring on the coach and their wellbeing? These cues can add to cognitive overload, further contributing to ‘Zoom fatigue’ and potentially increasing the intensity of the sessions (Bailenson, 2021). The medium can also enforce additional demands (Deniers, 2019) such as excessive amounts of eye contact (Bailenson, 2021). Though mutual gaze is important in interpersonal communication, there are challenges in keeping and maintaining eye contact in a video-mediated medium where the camera is usually mounted over the screen forcing users to look head on at the front view of another’s face, with faces bigger over Zoom than they would be in a face-to-face situation (Bohannon et al., 2013). Further ergonomic research, potentially via eye-tracking techniques, is necessary to untangle the subtle differences that might emerge between looking at the person on the screen and broadcasting to the camera, which is usually placed above the video feed. We also encourage cross-cultural experiential research because a lack of eye contact in one culture can be as important as the presence of eye contact in another (Bohannon et al., 2013).

From a technical skills perspective, previous research has established a strong relationship between technology self-efficacy such as competence with basic computer and internet-based activities and beliefs that technology can enhance the coaching process (Otte et al., 2014). Although there already exists high levels of technological proficiency within some industries, I will still be mindful of the client’s comfort and competence towards computer use. Clients have raised a range of issues during lockdown, from wellbeing, mental health and lack of engagement resulting in coaching boundaries becoming more complex,
colliding with therapy, health, and counselling. With clients bringing a mix of coaching and therapeutic topics to the session, we ask whether coaches have adequate skills to hold and work with these topics. I also better understand the importance and value of supervision, particularly after bringing challenging experiences to supervision groups. These poignant discussions enabled me to consider the parallel process between the situation that my clients find themselves in and the situation globally. With no clear fuzzier boundaries of where the coaching role begins and ends due to the collision of the worlds of work and home and coaching taking place over video, it is confusing both for the client and me, and will be a consideration going forward, reminding me of my boundaries and ethical responsibilities towards client safety. How is ethical practice evolving in coaching psychology to cater for the prominence of video-mediated coaching?

I also reflect on the importance of my own self-care. As a coach with a dual role in an organisation, I often have meetings scheduled immediately after coaching sessions and the learnings from the supervision case discussion group has helped me further develop my practice in realising the importance of building in reflective time before and after coaching sessions. This too opens interesting avenues for Video-mediated coaching provides opportunities for further research regarding boundaries and the self, in particular, but not limited to, how our coaching practice has now entered our homes and, in some cases, our bedrooms – arguably, the most private and intimate room.

Although research shows that distance coaching is equally as effective as face-to-face coaching (Berry et al., 2011), the complex nature of the pandemic allows for current literature to be questioned (Wang et al., 2020) and studies are not yet available to help us understand the psychological impact of spending hours a day on a video-mediated platform (Bailenson, 2021). The role of technology adoption in coaching has been organic with no guidance or formal strategy (Pascal et al., 2019) and ethical issues around technology use also need to be
considered (Kanatouri, 2020). There are rich issues for future academic enquiry to help build an evidence base in coaching psychology to support coaches in current and future practice.

**Closing reflections**

In my coaching practice, the use of video-mediated platforms has provided many benefits but also brought certain challenges that I am overcoming by deeply reflecting on dynamics in the virtual room, refocusing on development of my interpersonal and listening skills, and generally attending more deeply to subtle cues. There is no longer an opportunity to walk into the room, engage in small talk, settle into the environment or place yourself in a different context with a moment for reflection, with online coaching sessions starting and ending with the touch of a button. There have been instances where it has been difficult to distinguish between a genuine silence and the video feed freezing due to connection problems and it has been hard to tell if a client is multitasking and checking emails or taking notes from the session itself. Experience has taught me to use separate video links for each client to prevent the next client joining their session early and unintentionally interrupting a session already taking place.

Upon reflection, my practice would benefit from examining the client’s perception of the camera either in the session or during the contracting phase. Contracting should be further expanded to discuss how internet connection issues, multitasking, technical competence, concerns related to video-mediated coaching and boundaries are managed and re-contracting should touch on these later in the coaching sessions. I sincerely hope that the academic community embraces the call for action to expand our evidence base in coaching psychology on the impact of coaching delivered via video. This not only necessary, but crucial, given
how recent examples of enforced geographical distancing have sign posted a renewed need for human connection.

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