

The Limits and Possibilities of a Person-Centered Approach In Coaching Through the Lens of Adult Development Theories

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Abstract

The person-centred approach is one of the most recognised and respected theoretical positions amongst coaches because coaching shares a number of fundamental principles with this approach, such as the centrality of clients' experiences and the commitment to the idea that the client already is in possession of their own resources for growth. However, deviations from orthodox person-centred practices commonly occur even when it is being claimed as the primary theoretical approach. In this paper we offer a potential explanation for how such discrepancies between the rationale for practice and the practice itself occur from the perspective of adult development theories. Distinguishing person-centred 'philosophical attitude,' with its wide general appeal, from the unique and integrated approach to practice developed from the work of Carl Rogers, we suggest that the latter can further benefit and be enhanced by insights provided by adult development theories.

Keywords: person-centred approach, coaching, adult development theories, individual differences, philosophical pragmatism

Introduction

The person-centred approach (PCA) is well recognized as a basis for interventions not only in coaching but also in counselling, mentoring, social care, and teaching. The approach is grounded in a positive view of humanity that sees the person as innately striving towards becoming fully functioning. This 'actualizing tendency' (Rogers, 1951) can be blocked by a drive to act in ways that are consistent with a person's self-concept - the aspects of their personality which have been approved during the individual's development. However, if the practitioner provides an environment that is safe and nurturing the person can start to loosen their 'conditions of worth' and develop positive self-regard, self-trust and the ability to view the world more accurately. This

approach minimises directive techniques, such as interpretation, questioning and collecting history, whilst also maximizing active listening, reflection of feelings and clarification. Rogers (1951) emphasises the attitudes and personal characteristics of the practitioner and the quality of the relationship as the prime determinant of the outcomes. It is not surprising from this description that this approach appeals to many practitioners. After all this time, since first being proposed by Rogers (1951), it still speaks to the hearts of those whose genuine wish is for others to flourish.

From our experience of teaching different models to various coaching practitioners, we find that they often demonstrate a preference for person-centred theory as the one that resonates more than others. Firstly, it accords with the commonly held assumption that coaching clients are resourceful and capable (e.g. Rogers, 2012; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). Secondly, focusing on the experiences of the client and being led by the client's agenda is a central tenet of coaching practice (e.g. Stout Rostron, 2009; Wilson, 2007). Thirdly, the quality of the relationship between coach and client is considered the most important factor in the outcomes of coaching (e.g. De Haan & Gannon, 2017; Palmer and McDowall, 2010). It is hardly surprising, then, that novice coaches often comment on how the theoretical foundation of the person-centred approach is clear, convincing and elegant. For the same reasons, many highly experienced coaches tend also to describe themselves as primarily person-centred practitioners (Joseph, 2014; Palmer and Whybrow, 2006).

As promising as this picture may look, however, the reality in practical application is not so straightforward. Although many practitioners often say that the person-centred approach provides the fundamental attitude to their practice, when asked what they *do* it appears that their actual practice takes many different shapes and forms that would not be automatically recognisable as conforming to the established criteria and expectations of 'person-centeredness.' This perhaps stems from the potentially misleading presentation of PCA as a "way [that] allows for quick rapport and accurate assessment of the coaching situation" (Hedman, 2001, p. 76). In executive coaching, in particular, PCA is not generally presented as a robust 'standalone' theory – a place to begin, perhaps, but not to remain as the coaching relationship progresses, as it disregards too many other useful approaches and interventions (Peltier, 2001).

It appears, therefore, that although the principles of PCA in coaching are often readily assumed, the practice that then follows may deviate considerably from these principles. Joseph (2014) goes as far as to suggest that "as long as it is the coachee who is driving the session, the person-centred coach can draw on

and offer to the coachee various exercises or techniques that may be drawn from cognitive behavioural, multimodal, solution-focused and systems theory” (p. 69). Such a wide interpretation of the person-centred approach seems to be removing the uniqueness of principled non-directivity that is integral to it. It becomes descriptive of a general interpersonal attitude of the coach to their client (and, indeed, to people in general), with an appreciation of the quality of the supportive relationship – “a philosophical approach to human relationship not a set of techniques” (Joseph, 2014, p. 71). This attitude is naturally compatible with any type and style of practice and not a particularly controversial position to hold as nearly any approach could claim commitment to the agenda of the client and importance of the supportive relationship. It seems a useful but watered-down version of Rogers’ ideas in application for coaching practice. We believe that this distracts practitioners from understanding and utilising PCA as an integrated approach that combines an established theoretical framework with a well-tuned methodology for practice, failing to recognise that this integrated and fully-fledged PCA can be valuable for clients exactly because of the uniqueness of this approach.

The question remains, however, why practitioners deviate from the PCA as an integrated approach whilst continuing to subscribe to its principles and even feeling strongly committed to them. Some obvious explanations for this are that PCA as an integrated approach is too difficult for practitioners (Cooke, 2011), or that it does not work all the time (Peltier, 2001), or that there are some clients for whom it does not work at all (Corey, 2009). Although the first two reasons might have some merit, for the purposes of this paper we would like to concentrate on the third one. It is with appreciation of the range of individual differences that we wish to explore an extra dimension of these differences that might shed some new light on the most and least suitable clientele for PCA in coaching. Looking at it in this light may also have some practical application for other types of supportive relationships.

The dimension of individual differences that we wish to consider is not the one that is generally familiar to coaches and focuses on characteristics identified using various psychometric instruments. This less familiar dimension has been described by Cook-Greuter (2004) as ‘vertical’ in comparison to the commonly used ‘horizontal’ and is to be found in patterns described in adult development models by such theorists as Loevinger (1976) and Kegan (1982). Although the coaching community has embraced adult development theories more willingly than other supportive professional relationships, this approach continues to be somewhat marginalised in both academia and practice (Reams, 2016). However, we believe that adult

development theories have the potential to add new insights into where, when and why PCA is the most effective interpersonal strategy, and those occasions when its suitability might be compromised.

Theories of adult development

Theories concerning the psychological development of adults (e.g. Kohlberg 1969; Loevinger, 1987; Perry, 1970; Kegan, 1982; Cook-Greuter, 1999) interest us in relation to the above challenges to PCA because we believe these theories shed further light on our understanding of individual differences. Many of these theories are conceived in the tradition of developmental structuralism, looking for patterns that connect specific psychological phenomena. These patterns suggest that people differ not only from each other in terms of personality types, learning styles and personal preferences, for example, but also provide insight as to how an individual becomes significantly different from the way *they used to be* in terms of how they make meaning of their experiences, reason about their values and act in the world. In addition to identifying certain patterns in the above changes, common to all people, theories of adult development suggest that changes occur in sequential stages through which people progress. The pace of such development is highly individual occurring naturally as the result of engagement with life tasks but can also be influenced by appropriate support and challenge that arise from supportive relationships such as coaching or counselling (Bachkirova, 2014).

Table 1 describes a simple three-stage framework for adult development in relation to specific psychological aspects as the most characteristic for the majority of adults (Beck & Cowan, 1998; Wilber, 2000; Torbert, 1991) and arguably most typical for the clientele of coaches. The choice of aspects (e.g. cognitive style, ego development) is determined as being most descriptive according to Loevinger (1976, 1987). The main input for each of these aspects is drawn from the theories of Kegan (1982, 1994), Graves (1970), Torbert (1991), and Cook-Greuter (1999, 2004), with the use of another simplifying meta-perspective on these theories offered by McCauley et al. (2006). An additional aspect of 'engagement in action' is proposed by Bachkirova (2011, 2016a).

The overarching categories of the three groups described are named according to Bachkirova's (2011) distinction of unformed, formed and reformed ego. The term 'ego' is used to indicate the agency of the whole organism (its capacity to act in response to internal or external stimuli). A sign of a fully formed ego is the capacity of the organism to take ownership of past

actions, withstand anxiety about what the future holds, and to possess the ability to build relationships with others without losing the sense of who they are (Bachkirova, 2011).

Stages	Unformed ego	Formed ego	Reformed ego
Cognitive style (mostly Kegan 1982)	Socialised mind <i>Ability for abstract thinking and self-reflection</i>	Self-authoring mind <i>Can see multiplicity and patterns; critical and analytical</i>	Self-transforming mind <i>Systems view; tolerance of ambiguity; change from linear logic to holistic understanding</i>
Interpersonal style (Loevinger 1987; Cook-Greuter 1999)	Dependent Conformist/self-conscious <i>Need for belonging; socially expected behaviour in relationships; peacemakers/keepers</i>	Independent Conscientious/individualist <i>Separate but responsible for their own choices; communication and individual differences are valued</i>	Inter-independent Autonomous/Integrated <i>Take responsibility for relationship; respect autonomy of others; tolerance of conflicts; non-hostile humour</i>
Conscious preoccupations (Graves 1970)	Multiplistic <i>Social acceptance, reputation, moral 'shoulds and oughts'</i>	Relativistic/ Individualistic <i>Achievement of personal goals according to inner standards.</i>	Systemic/integrated Individuality; self-fulfillment; immediate present; <i>understanding conflicting needs</i>
Character development (Loevinger 1987; Cook-Greuter 1999; Kohlberg 1969)	Rule-bound <i>'Inappropriate' feelings are denied or repressed. Rules of important others are internalised and obeyed.</i>	Conscientious <i>Self-reliant, conscientious; follow self-evaluated rules; judge themselves and critical of others</i>	Self-regulated <i>Behaviour is an expression of own moral principles. Concerned with conflicting roles, duties, value systems.</i>
Engagement in action (Bachkirova 2011)	Unformed ego <i>Reduced sense of control over themselves and environment. Higher dependency on others for action.</i>	Formed ego <i>Capacity to take ownership of the past and act independently. 'Mind over body' control of action.</i>	Reformed ego <i>Harmony between mind and body in action. Appreciation of complexity in the relationship between self and environment.</i>

Table 1 A cumulative description of the three stages in adult psychological development with additions (Bachkirova, 2016a, p.302)

It is important to note at this point that there are many controversies and misunderstandings in relation to adult development theories and their ‘use’ in coaching practice, including:

- concerns about oversimplifying linearity and unjustified generalisation in conceptualising individual development (Adam & Fitch 1982; Westenberg & Gjerde 1999; Manners & Durkin 2001);
- implied judgment and over-categorising, particularly when the use of measurement instruments is involved (Bachkirova, 2011);
- overzealous calls for prescriptive assessment and matching of coaches and clients (Berger, 2006; Bachkirova & Cox, 2007).

(for extensive critiques of these, and other aspects, see Bachkirova & Cox, 2007; Bachkirova, 2014; Lawrence, 2017).

Our position is that adult development theories are not given sufficient attention as they fall into the ‘no man’s land’ between the dominant modernist and postmodernist camps, and from there are subjected to severe, but possibly inconsistent, critique. For example, from the modernist perspective, methodologies for measuring stages of development are not sufficiently precise (requiring too high-level interpretation) to be considered as scientifically sound (McCauley et al. 2006; Manners & Durkin 2001). As a consequence, the research based on these measures is seen as highly questionable (limited samples; lack of longitudinal studies; factors undermining quality of measurement, e.g. verbal fluency, educational and social background, level of IQ) (Adam & Fitch 1982; Westenberg & Gjerde 1999; Manners & Durkin 2001). From the postmodernist position, the above concerns are less relevant in comparison to the violation of the principle of aperspectivism (Fishman, 1999). With this commitment to the equality of perspectives, any apparent hierarchies that are implied by developmental stages and the seemingly teleological nature of these theories are too big a challenge (Paulson, 2007).

Without setting out to respond to all of these critiques in attempting to not ‘throw the baby out with the bath water,’ we will briefly indicate how ‘a third way’ of philosophical pragmatism enables the possible option of keeping the ideas of adult development theories relevant to helping practices whilst utilising them for the purpose of exploring PCA. We will sketch our position through four points which we believe justify the validity of adult development theories

in relation to helping practices, thereby hopefully addressing a number of concerns that may give rise to reservations about these theories.

1. All theories can be valid if they are useful according to the pragmatic principle of expediency (James, 2014). It can be argued that theories of adult development have passed the test of time so far. There is a growing body of research, both qualitative and quantitative, in support of these theories (e.g. Berger and Atkins, 2009; Manner et al., 2004; Reams, 2016). There are new ways of conceptualizing practice based on meaningful interpretation of psychological phenomena using the idea of adult development (Chandler & Kram, 2005; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Berger, 2006; Bachkirova, 2011). Practitioners make adjustments in engagements with clients when clients demonstrate a different way of thinking, for example (Berger and Fitzgerald, 2002; Berger, 2012; Reams & Reams, 2015; Lawrence & Allen, 2018).
2. According to John Dewey's pragmatic account of learning and growth (1916), we conceptualise individual development not in a controversial teleological sense with a predetermined end state, but as a socio-biological drive to learn, which does not stop in adulthood, and which also corresponds to an actualising tendency (Rogers, 1951). Psychological development is open-ended with infinite unfolding potential in the same way as any learning process (Dewey, 1916). Psychological development is a natural process that happens in the life of the individual in response to living in and acting on this world. It is influenced by many internal and external factors and thus happens at a different pace for different people. As development is a natural process, the amplifiers of this process, such as people and events, are also natural.
3. Although some patterns of changes in various aspects of individual development can be identified (e.g. Table 1), specific stages are not fixed, and sequences are not linear but are contingent upon context, the nature of each psychological aspect, and upon individual circumstances. Rather than the 'ladder' model of development, we see development according to the 'onion' model (Lawrence & Moore, 2018). This model implies a non-substantial nature of the self (Bazzano, 2014) or a modular nature (Bachkirova, 2011) according to which various functional mini-selves are assembled when called upon by the tasks of the internal or external environment. Although qualitatively different new ways of meaning making and acting, for example, develop as new layers of the onion, all layers can be represented in different situations

and contexts. Even if a more advanced level of meaning making is already available to the person, depending on the circumstances, a particular mini-self can act and become dominant from the earlier layer.

4. According to the above view on the self and development, we argue that although some sort of gauging of where an individual’s ‘centre of developmental gravity’ might be is theoretically possible, measurement and precision in this task is not only incredibly difficult but also not necessary. Bachkirova (2011) proposed that the actual issues that clients bring for coaching are already an indication of this centre. The practitioner, as in PCA, can be led by the client, and their specific expressed and emergent needs form the developmental theme that becomes the focus of coaching. Table 2 gives an indication of the developmental themes that clients bring for coaching according to the three stages described in Table 1. These themes indicate the types of difficulties that clients experience and wish to overcome. Such classificatory markers should be viewed only as additional material for reflection that the practitioner may utilise in preparation for sessions and in supervision.

Unformed ego	Formed ego	Reformed ego
Decision-making in difficult situations with a number of stake-holders	Coping with high amount of self-created work	Dissatisfaction with life in spite of achievements
Taking higher level of responsibility than they feel they can cope with	Achievement of recognition, promotion, etc.	Internal conflict
Work-life balance connected to inability to say ‘no’	Interpersonal conflicts	Not ‘fitting in’
Performance anxiety	Problem solving	Search for meaning
Issues of self-esteem	Learning to delegate	Overcoming life crisis
	Stress management	Initiating a significant life change
		Staying true to themselves in a complex situation

Table 2: Three groups of developmental themes (adapted from Bachkirova, 2013)

We hope that the above provides a brief framework for understanding adult development theories. We also believe that, in the context of philosophical pragmatism, adult development theories are not in conflict with

the basic tenets of person-centred theory and reflect the influence that John Dewey had on Rogers' ideas concerning the inherent nature of the actualizing tendency (Rogers, 1951). Making such a case in support of adult development theories provides us with a lens through which PCA can be explored in a coaching context. It is possible that other helping practices may benefit from any insights arrived at in this way.

Exploring the applicability of the Person-Centred Approach in light of theories of adult development

As we already identified above, there is a clear difference between having a person-centred attitude and utilizing fully integrated PCA in practice. In this section we explore the use of PCA as a full methodology when working with clients from the three different stages of adult development. It is possible that the main strength of this approach is to be realised when used in working with clients who are situated at a particular developmental stage – a stage we have identified as that of 'unformed ego'. We would also suggest that PCA may have some limitations and may be ultimately ineffective when working with clients who are at the 'formed ego' and 'reformed ego' stages.

Unformed ego

The most characteristic feature of an individual at the developmental stage of 'unformed ego' is that of someone who is very unsure of their abilities in certain areas of their life and consequently in need of more guidance and support. This leads to a higher dependency on others, which can result in a reduced sense of control over their environment. The issues of confidence and self-esteem often become an overarching developmental theme for coaching people with an unformed ego, because their wellbeing depends on how they are seen, valued, and validated by others (Bachkirova, 2011). Kegan (1982) even suggests that, strictly speaking, 'self-esteem' is not an applicable term for individuals at this stage, as their 'esteem' does not come from their sense of 'self,' but rather from the received and unexamined opinions of others. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954), self-esteem and belonging would be the corresponding stage for the unformed ego.

The value of PCA at this level of intervention comes with the provision of unconditional positive regard for these clients, irrespective of their actions, achievements, values or their stage of development. This is a most powerful supportive strategy for a client who is lacking in self-acceptance and, if it is offered together with other conditions typical to this approach, can allow the

client to reclaim self-respect and to gain a deeper sense of their own needs and potential strengths (Joseph & Bryant-Jefferies, 2007; Joseph, 2014).

It is noteworthy that, according to various researchers, this group of adults constitutes by far the most populated developmental stage in comparison to the other two (see Cook-Greuter, 2004). Even if the validity of these statistics can be challenged in terms of the proportion of a general population, anecdotal evidence from coaching practitioners and coaching supervisors tend to support this estimation in relation to coaching clients. However, coaches may not be confident enough, or misled by some literature (e.g. Peltier, 2001), to work with these clients using PCA as the sole methodology, 'uncontaminated' by other approaches. In our view they should be encouraged to do this without feeling obliged to bring any greater methodological diversity to their practice.

Formed ego

There is some anecdotal evidence arrived at from coaching supervisors that when PCA coaches work with clients who can be usefully identified as 'formed ego,' they may find themselves less equipped to deal with the client's needs. The need for acceptance by these clients is no longer an overriding concern. Clients at this stage are generally able to accept themselves and 'to stand on their own two feet.' They can differentiate themselves from their immediate contexts and express their individuality. They manage tasks that are important to them by relying on their own resources. They can reflect on their own qualities in a more detached way and may willingly face and even create challenges to test their ego.

These capabilities do not mean that these people are free from difficulty. Their choices may be constructive or destructive even if chosen according to their own criteria. The sense of control and self-ownership that they have developed may lead to an overestimation of what is possible and realistic for that individual. The sense of independence from other people may lead to conflicts in relationships or isolation. However, they will feel less like the victims of circumstance and some may even enjoy the emergent challenges. Therefore, they may experience the style of a PCA practitioner as insufficiently challenging. They may wish for a more open and intense engagement with the coach, not necessarily in a directive style but as being more actively involved in a dialogue with a greater degree of self-disclosure and even confrontation.

In coaching, and particularly in executive coaching, these clients do not constitute an unusual clientele even though this group is statistically smaller

than the unformed ego group (Cook-Greuter, 2004), which might go some way in explaining the concerns expressed in coaching literature about the limitations of PCA. Therefore, we suggest that when dealing with clients from this developmental category, although a person-centred attitude is perfectly appropriate, it is justified to move beyond a strict adherence to a person-centred methodology and to draw upon other resources. It might explain why, on encountering this type of client, practitioners who are committed solely to PCA may find that they are insufficiently equipped.

Reformed ego

In regard to the third developmental category, the ‘reformed ego,’ PCA may be an effective methodology when these clients have an explicit need to process their developmental themes in their own way with the main relational requirement being the presence of a supportive listener. Such individuals are quite capable of self-developing. They already accept themselves and working with them would need more freedom and creativity than perhaps PCA as a methodology can offer. It would also need the overall capacity of the practitioner to resonate with these clients’ meaning making system and therefore may require the practitioner themselves to be at a developmental stage that enables them to offer responses, where necessary, of sufficient depth.

The kinds of themes that reformed ego clients tend to want to address indicates that their capacity to act and reflect go beyond those of the two other groups. This capacity is determined by achieved ability to act efficiently, thus leaving more energy and attention available for the conscious awareness of the situations, the organism as a whole and the relationship between them (Bachkirova, 2011). This allows recognizing conflicts between their various sub-selves, nuances of contexts and limitations to the ways the situations are perceived and interpreted. These clients can be in control of the situation without the need to control everything, as they are better equipped to be able to tolerate the ambiguity of some needs and tasks. Instead of investing in being right and efficient, they become increasingly interested in being authentic and not engaging in self-deception. They can be insightful about their internal conflicts as well as being constructively critical about the state of affairs around them. As this group seems to be even smaller than that of the formed ego, they may suffer from a lack of understanding from and substantive connection with others.

Coaching relationships with these clients may come to a premature end when they recognise that a particular practitioner cannot offer more than these

clients can already do by themselves. If the engagement is to continue it might become more developmental for the practitioner than for the client. Alternative approaches to PCA that may be more productive, such as Gestalt and Existential, have been recommended as being more stretching for these clients (Bachkirova, 2011). These methodologies may be more efficacious in tapping into 'the client's growth edge' (Berger, 2012, p. 94). However, we would argue that more than the methodological approach itself, it is the self of the practitioner that makes the key difference at this level of engagement. This might also hold to be the case in supportive relationships other than coaching.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have been using a lens of adult development theories to explore the applicability of PCA for different clientele of coaching with a view to offering an explanation for some potential limitations of this approach. We have been suggesting the need to expand the use of PCA for clients of 'unformed ego' stage and to consider other coaching approaches as better options than PCA for clients who are at developmental stages beyond 'unformed ego,' e.g., Solution-Focused approach for formed ego stage, and Gestalt and Existential approaches for reformed ego clients (Bachkirova, 2011).

Although we, hopefully, have already addressed some of the reservations that PCA practitioners outside of coaching might have in relation to these theories, there is yet another reservation that is left to discuss: the concern that theories of psychological development imply a judgement being made about some status level of another person. This would seem to clash with a commitment of the person-centred practitioner to the idea of coaching relationships as being fundamentally non-judgemental. We believe however that similar judgements are made on an everyday basis by all of us. What matters is the purpose of the judgement (or assessment) and its validity. It is more than possible in person-centred practice to assess where the client is in terms of their meaning making or engagement in action, whilst at the same time displaying unconditional acceptance and positive regard. Making a developmental assessment does not entail providing a 'complete' understanding of the client, but it can help the practitioner to listen in a better way to clients' concerns and to be more present in their search for a better fit between the context in which an individual's difficulty arises and their capacity for dealing with it (Kegan, 1994; Berger, 2012).

We also believe that being more developmentally minded or having at least a curiosity about psychological development in adulthood can be

developmental for practitioners as it adds another dimension to the spectrum of psychological diversity they face in their work. It is important to emphasise yet again that the self of the practitioner, their attitude to change and human nature, their personal values and the way that they make meaning play very important roles in establishing the appropriate supportive relationship for the client in question. Theories of adult development have something important to say in this regard. Kegan (1994) argued that people feel ‘in over their heads’ in any work they do when the complexity of their job is greater than the capability of their meaning making system. In coaching practice this is also possible and probably most noticeable with approaches in which the practitioner cannot hide behind various techniques and interventions, PCA being one of these. Although we do not subscribe to the strong views of some coaching authors (e.g. Laske, 2006) who argue that the coach should know their stage and be at the same or higher stage of development as their client, we recognise the inherent complexity of the relationships showing a significant developmental mismatch between the coach and client.

This might require from the PCA practitioner a sensitivity and honesty in relation to the ‘in over their head’ phenomenon in relation to certain clients and further require them to consider referral to a colleague who might be more suitable for such a challenge. On the other hand, in recognising his or her own limitations the practitioner is provided with an incentive for continuing not only professional but also personal development (Bachkirova, 2016b). It has been argued (Cook-Greuter, 1999; Berger & Fitzgerald, 2002) that each stage enriches individual capacity for reflection and for effective interaction with others and with tasks. The capacity to understand others and to notice nuances and details of situations increases with a better opportunity to articulate and potentially change these situations – all-important for the coaching practitioner.

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