Paper

Back to basics II: How the research on attachment and reflective-self function is relevant for coaches and consultants today

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Purpose: *In this study the phenomenon of reflective-self function is explored in terms of its historical understanding – just as the phenomenon of transference was explored in terms of its historical understanding in an earlier instalment (De Haan, 2011). As will be shown, reflective-self function is not only demonstrably linked to secure attachment, it is increasingly held to be at the core of the process and outcome of helping conversations.*

Design/Methodology: *This contribution offers a historical summary of the main breakthroughs in attachment research, showing how (in-)secure attachment can be measured reliably and how it can be linked to reflective-self function – the capacity to mentalise. This capacity is further elucidated with the help of three examples from executive coaching and team coaching.*

Results: *It is shown how reflective-self function is related to secure attachment, and how mentalising can be used to co-create meaning, insight and understanding with clients.*

Conclusions: *Mentalising, as understood by reflective-self function, is a helpful way into awareness, insight and empathetic understanding. Coaches would do well to foster this function within themselves and their clients.*

Keywords: *Reflective-self function; mentalisation; insight; empathy; coaching outcome; consulting; history of psychoanalysis and attachment.*

Mentalisation as both active ingredient and outcome

EXECUTIVE COACHING appears established as an effective intervention (Grant et al., 2010; De Haan et al., 2012). Studies of coaching outcome are now less focused on demonstrating general effectiveness, as this is deemed to have been sufficiently demonstrated within the limitations of not being able to conduct large-scale randomised controlled trials. Instead, coaching effectiveness studies are now more focused on 'active ingredients', that is, on the aspects of the coaching contract which are most conducive to effectiveness (Stewart et al., 2008; Boyce, Jackson & Neal, 2010; De Haan, Curd & Culpin, 2011).

In order to understand the value of coaching interventions it is important not just to have indications of positive overall outcome, but also to know more about: (1) what coaching delivers; and (2) whom coaching delivers to:

1. Assuming the significance of coaching outcome, what is the nature of that outcome? It is often suggested that coaching helps with focus and with the right action (e.g. Whitmore, 1992). Similar to sports coaching, executive coaching would then enhance performance itself, or the quality of the effort, without affecting issues like preparation or motivation. Others, who place executive-coaching interventions more in the tradition of 'helping conversations', see coaching as a way to bring out hidden potential (e.g. O'Neill, 2000).

2. Which clients, with what challenges, roles and personalities, would benefit most from coaching? And perhaps more importantly: how can we help diverse clients with a broad range of objectives, personalities and motivation, to maximise the benefit they take from coaching conversations? This is the question of 'coachability' (De Meuse, Dai & Hallenbeck, 2010).

So what is it that we as coaches 'deliver' to our clients? What outcome do coaching clients particularly value about the coaching intervention? There is some evidence that coaching outcomes that clients most mention are around new insight and understanding, or in their own words, around new 'realisations' (De Haan et al., 2010). Different outcomes of coaching that have been proposed are (see Laske, 2004):

1. Support for reflection, producing new motivation and coping;
2. Support for sense making, producing new realisations, insight and understanding;
3. Support for new behaviour, producing new focus, energy and action orientation.

These three possible outcomes may very well overlap, may all be present at the same time and may all lead to enhanced performance in the leadership role.

The second one of these, new realisation and insight, has a very long tradition in helping conversations. At the very beginning of the tradition of helping conversations, Breuer and Freud (1885) emphasised understanding and insight. The founder of non-directive therapy, Carl Rogers (1961) did not fundamentally challenge Freud's hypothesis about the mutative power of understanding and insight. Rogers insisted that such new understanding should come from within, and can be fostered by empathic understanding. Cognitive and behavioural psychologists also recognise the importance of insight, albeit that they aim to correct distortions of reality based on erroneous premises by supplanting them with more realistic cognitions and insight (Beck, 1975). All three main schools of psychotherapy (psychoanalytic, person-centred and cognitive-behavioural) therefore agree on the importance of (mutative, realistic, actionable) *insight*. In newer approaches, such as mindfulness in coaching (Passmore & Marianetti, 2007), we see the same interest in awareness and insight as a potentially crucial ingredient.

This article gives an overview of the research into the 'reflective-self', an idea that has the power to integrate and refocus schools of thinking about insight and which holds the promise of:

1. Offering a hypothesis regarding 'coachability';
2. Providing the first empirical backing for the age-old hypothesis that under-standing and insight might be helpful; and
3. Anchoring these empirical results in well-researched attachment behaviour.

The idea of the reflective-self has immediate appeal for coaches and psychotherapists alike (see Grant, 2001; Van der Loo, 2007; Wallin, 2007; Drake, 2009). This might be because it not only gives a hypothesis regarding an important 'active ingredient' in helping conversations, but at the same time proposes a new formulation of 'good' outcome of helping conversations. The hypothesis of reflective-self function brings together attachment theory and psycho-analysis; neuroscience and cognitive psychology[1]; and also psychotherapist and patient,

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[1] It is worthwhile to compare the cognitive-psychology research on 'theory of mind' with the neuroscientific findings of so-called 'mirror neurons'. The former, theory of mind, has been defined by cognitive ethologists and psychologists as the ability to attribute mental states – beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc. – to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires and intentions that are different from one's own (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). The latter, mirror neurons, have provided support for the neural basis of theory of mind. Research by Gallese and Goldman (1998) has shown that some sensorimotor neurons, which are referred to as mirror neurons, first discovered in the premotor cortex of rhesus monkeys, can fire when a monkey performs an action but also when the monkey views another agent carrying out the same task.

or coach and client – suggesting a single, quantifiable ingredient that is wholesome for both. Wholesome in the sense that the client develops his or her security in relationships or attachment styles, whilst at the same time the executive coach develops his or her 'reflective-self' as a helpful way of holding the client in mind. On top of this, there is the appeal of quantitative research: the fact that this notion has come out of quantitative empirical research which can be and has been replicated. The rare appeal of this function of the mind is rarely touched on in coaching literature. Nevertheless, it is important to understand both the genesis of the concept and the claims that can be made regarding its role in the effectiveness of coaching.

Background: Empirical investigations in psychology

Psychology as the science of mind and behaviour is the study of the single most complex 'system' that we know – the human central nervous system – and how it interacts with its environment. We have very few definitive and demonstrated facts about the psyche. Clearly this science is still in its infancy and it is no surprise that most psychological texts occupy themselves with competing theories, models and perspectives on mind and behaviour. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the field of psychotherapy, which deals with the treatment of mental disorder by psychological means and therefore mostly with higher-order functions of the mind such as personality, mood, communication, meaning-making, adaptation and lifestyle. This state of affairs makes it all too easy to forget that there have indeed been many valuable and universally recognised contributions to making psychology a 'proper' empirical science.

Freud, as a neurologist, thought that ultimately psychology as an empirical science would base itself on our understanding of the inner workings of the central nervous system, that is, on neuroscience or 'brain
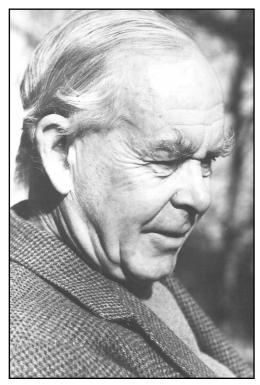
science' (Freud, 1915). He was less interested in another 19th century development, pioneered by Fechner (1860), Wundt (1862) and Von Helmholtz (1867), which focused on the study of 'psychophysical' evidence, evidence from the interaction between the mind and its environment(s). These internal and external, intra-psychic and interactional perspectives are still very much alive today, and both inform the field of executive coaching (see Rock & Page, 2009, for links between brain science and coaching, and Stober & Grant, 2006, or De Haan, 2008, for links between psychophysical experiments and coaching).

It should be noted that this distinction between the interpersonal and the intra-psychic is nowadays, to an extent, a difference in emphasis. Some modern psychophysical studies measure brain activity concurrently and modern brain research looks at the central nervous system *in vivo*, that is, whilst it interacts with its environment in the shape of 'controlled stimuli'. As in any living system, internal phenomena and external interaction patterns are intimately related and mutually dependent. Findings from both fields should eventually complement and support one another.

Empirical tools in attachment research

According to Bretherton (1985, p.14), John Bowlby made two distinct and important contributions to psychology. The first contribution is the hypothesis of *attachment* as a core, biologically based instinct, which informs behavioural and motivational drives. The second is that he theorised that individual differences in the functioning of this 'attachment system' are linked to individual *working models* of self and others (See also Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Both these ideas received much more support when they were operationalised in reliable psychophysical tests which led to further quantitative study. Here is a brief summary of these tests.

The first hypothesis was operationalised by Mary Ainsworth in 1978 with her design of the 'Strange Situation' experiment,

John Bowlby. Reproduced by kind permission of John Bowlby's son, Sir Richard Bowlby BT. © Sir Richard Bowlby BT.

a 20-minute experience for caregiver and child where the caregiver and a stranger enter and leave the room recreating the flow of familiar and unfamiliar presences in the child's life. The Strange Situation experiment has reliably demonstrated three different attachment behaviours (Ainsworth et al., 1978):

1. *Secure attachment.* The behaviour of the child during separation and upon reunion is characterised by confidence that the caregiver will be comforting.
2. *Avoidant attachment.* The behaviour of the child during separation and upon reunion is characterised by lack of confidence in the caregiver's availability, and thus by attempts to control or downplay emotional arousal and to show limited distress and disinterest.
3. *Ambivalent attachment.* The behaviour of the child during separation and upon

reunion is characterised by attempts to exaggerate or up-regulate affect in order to secure the caregiver's attention.

Later, Main and Solomon (1990), upon reviewing hundreds of hours of videotape of Strange Situations, were able to add a fourth attachment style, which may accompany any of the other three attachment behaviours, that is, an attachment behaviour which can be demonstrated in parallel to the other attachment behaviours:

4. *Disorganised attachment.* The behaviour of the child during separation and upon reunion is characterised by seeking proximity in strange and disoriented ways, such as backwards approach, freezing, staring and moving sideways.

Bowlby's second hypothesis above was supported in the work of Mary Main and collaborators, when they created the 'Adult Attachment Interview' (AAI; George, Kaplan & Main, 1984), which provided a reliable way to assess an adult's internal representation of attachment. The interview consists of a prompted narrative about childhood including sensitive issues such as separation and loss. The protocols are transcribed and classified according to a coding system that privileges narrative style over content. The dimension of *coherence* (comprising: substantiation of evidence, succinctness yet completeness, relevance to the topic at hand, clarity and orderliness) can be associated with

1. Attachment security (the *'Autonomous'* classification): high coherence about attachment.

Protocols with low coherence can be ordered in three patterns:

2. *'Dismissing'*: idealising or derogatory about attachment
3. *'Preoccupied'*: angry or passive about attachment
4. *'Unresolved'*: unresolved in relation to loss and abuse.

These four classifications map both conceptually and intuitively onto the four attachment categories arising from the Strange

Situation. Moreover, AAI classifications are stable over several months and independent of various IQ ratings, autobiographical memory, social desirability, interviewer effects and general discourse styles. In fact, both instruments have high validity and high (short-term) reliability, so experiments soon began to test empirically how well they predict each other. By 1995 it was established through an 18-sample meta-analysis that the caregiver's AAI narrative coding predicts the infant's Strange Situation response to a considerable extent (Van IJzendoorn, 1995). Moreover, Van IJzendoorn, Juffer and Duyvesteyn (1995) have shown that support interventions aimed at changing the mother's sensitivity or attachment representation have a significant positive effect on infant security as measured by the Strange Situation.

As Drake (2009) has pointed out, clients' narratives in coaching can also be appreciated in terms of their internal coherence, particularly as that will give a coach a 'window' into the wider narrative patterns in their work and life. Drake continues to suggest that 'the level of coherence in clients' stories – about the past, present and future – often reflects leaders' own attachment experience and the way in which they lead and interact with others at work'. It seems plausible that secure and autonomous leaders have more coherent life stories, and that insecure leaders are more at a loss for coherence in their storytelling. Part of a coach's job is to study coherence, to look out for gaps in storytelling and to inquire thoughtfully into the relationships between aspects of clients' narratives.

Both Ainsworth's Strange Situation and Main's Adult Attachment Interview made reliable empirical research possible in the field of attachment which will be discussed next, including Fonagy's discovery of the importance of reflective-self function.

Empirical findings of attachment research

Here is a short summary of findings from attachment research, limited to conclusions which are well-demonstrated and replicated through various studies.

The most impressive empirical contribution from attachment theory has to be confirmation that psychopathology is correlated from one generation to the next, or, in other words, that we have convincing evidence now that some psychopathology gets passed on between generations. There are clear, demonstrable correlations between the attachment patterns described by the mother during the AAI and the attachment patterns that can be found in the infant with the help of the Strange Situation experiment. The correlation can be demonstrated when the AAI is taken contemporaneously with the toddler's Strange Situation experiment (Van IJzendoorn, 1995; this has a combined effect size of d=1.06, a strong effect); when the AAI of each parent is collected and coded before the birth of the child and the infant's Strange-Situation classification is done at 12 and 18 months (Steele, Steele & Fonagy, 1996); and also when a parent's AAI coding is correlated with the child's security of attachment measured five years previously (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985). Hence, the strong concordance that is found (between 75 per cent and 80 per cent on each pair of attachment categories), persists in both directions and over at least a six-year time gap. These findings lend support to Freud's hypothesis (Freud, 1940) of the intergenerational spread of psychopathology.

Another notion of Freud that has been supported by attachment research is that of the 'repetition compulsion' (Freud, 1920), that is, the suggestion that those who do not actively remember and come to terms with their past are destined (or more likely) to repeat it. Fonagy et al. (1994) demonstrate with a group of relatively deprived mothers that they have a much higher chance of securely attached infants if their capacity to

reflect on mental states (mentalisation), operationalised by reflective-self function, is higher.

Interestingly, these findings can also be linked to other psychophysical findings, namely those coming from meta-analyses of psychotherapy outcome studies. These meta-analyses have demonstrated a surprisingly small contribution coming from the specific model or psychotherapeutic approach, and are much more supportive of so-called 'common factors' (factors common to all approaches, as suggested by Rosenzweig, 1936; see Wampold, 2001) as the 'active ingredients' in psychotherapeutic work. One of these common factors is the opportunity that all psychotherapy offers to reflect on and think through challenges, symptoms and complaints. Investigators have distinguished six broad 'areas of commonality' amongst the various approaches to psychotherapy: Relationship-related factors; Client-related factors; Therapist-related factors; Change-related factors; Structure-related factors; and External factors outside therapy (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990). Obviously, secure attachment, coherence and reflectivity are common factors in the empirical sense understood by general outcome research. Fonagy and Bateman (2006) even claim that this may be *the* core active ingredient of all psychotherapy: 'It is possible that psychotherapy in general is effective because it arouses the attachment system at the same time it applies interpersonal demands which require the patient to mentalise'.

'Secure attachment' is often linked with 'successful containment' (Bion, 1963) and is then taken by many as a measure of 'psychological health'. It is important to point out, as Fonagy (2001) does, that the evidence linking early secure attachment with a healthy or balanced life is not strong. One needs to be reminded that the demonstration of predictive power of any psychological context or relationship over the course of decades is extremely tenuous and rarely achieved.

Notions of 'the reflective-self' in attachment research

Joyce McDougal (1978) has said that in early childhood the 'mother functions as the baby's thinking system'. This notion of mothering as a containing, mirroring and reflective activity is prevalent throughout the psychoanalytical literature[2] and lies at the root of the idea of the *reflective-self*.

The reflective-self function is an operationalisation of the capacity to 'mentalise' (Brown, 1977) or the capacity for 'metacognition' (Main & Goldwyn, 1990) or 'psychological mindedness' (Appelbaum, 1973; Grant, 2001). The reflective-self function measures an *individual's quality of understanding of another's intentionality*, and is measured on a nine-point Likert scale (Fonagy et al., 1998). The measure confounds understanding of self and other, so it applies in equal measure to reflections on one's own and someone else's intentionality. The measure also confounds 'true' understanding and 'plausible' understanding, or in other words 'accurate' and 'habitual' modes of understanding, as no measure for 'objective' or 'shared' understanding is introduced (Fonagy et al., 1991).

Reflective-self function is not the same as empathy, although empathetic understanding will have to be based on this capacity. Reflective-self function is more fundamental and refers to the capacity to understand what goes on within oneself or

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[2] Fonagy (2001) points to the following precursors of the notion of the reflective-self: *Bindung*, the psychological capacity of linking (Freud, 1911); the *depressive position* as the recognition of hurt and suffering in another (Klein, 1945); the caregiver's *psychological understanding* of the infant in the emergence of the true self (Winnicott, 1962); *containment* as the capacity to transform internal events into tolerable and thinkable experiences (Bion, 1963); *mirroring* or mirror transference (Winnicott, 1967; Kohut, 1977); *psychological mindedness* (Appelbaum, 1973; Grant, 2001); and the idea of *mentalisation* as the function that links drive excitations with internal representations (Brown, 1977).

within another, whereas empathy refers to the understanding from within, the capacity to feel what another person feels, that is, to become sympathetic or 'in tune' with those feelings oneself.

Reflective-self function is also not the same as mindfulness, although mindfulness can be seen as a capacity that reflective-self function is based on or draws from. Mindfulness is a spiritual faculty in Buddhism which amounts to an attentive awareness of the reality of things and is therefore very close to being psychologically awake ('Buddha' literally means 'he that is awoken'). Mindfulness, therefore, extends from understanding psychological facts to natural phenomena and even spiritual experience. Nevertheless, mindfulness frequently refers to one's own bodily functions, sensations, feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and consciousness itself – in which case it would appear very akin to reflective-self function.

To summarise:

1. *Mindfulness* can be seen as attentive awareness of what is going on in the present moment;
2. *Reflective-self function*, within mindfulness, can be seen as being aware of what is going on in the minds of self and others, in the present moment;
3. *Empathy*, building on reflective-self function, can be seen as being aware of and sharing in states of mind as they occur to another person, in the present moment.

Peter Fonagy went on to explore cases of apparently diminished reflective-self function and described the slow and arduous growth of reflective-self function in psychotherapy, see, for example, Fonagy and Target, 1996 and 2000 (the first is a case-study with a 4-year-old girl described as resistant to the development of reflective-self function and the second with a severe borderline-personality-disorder patient in her mid-30s).

This work led to the development of 'mentalisation-based treatment' (MBT) as a treatment for borderline personality disorder. In MBT the aim of the psychotherapy becomes the development of reflective-self function (see, for example, Fonagy & Bateman, 2006). The therapist is encouraged to focus on the patient's current mental state with the aim of building up reflective-self function. The therapist is asked to avoid situations in which the patient talks of mental states that he or she cannot link to subjectively felt reality; and the inevitable enactments over the course of the treatment are not interpreted in terms of their unconscious meaning but in terms of the situation and affects immediately before the enactment (Fonagy & Bateman, 2006). In other words, the therapist uses mentalisation to further the patient's mentalisation, and the aim is not so much deep understanding as it is the recovery of mentalisation.

Another later development is the hypothesis that the biological need for secure attachment is precisely the development of reflective-self function as a 'representational system that has evolved, we may presume, to aid human survival' (Fonagy et al., 2004), which, therefore, claims that the prediction might be both ways: reflective-self function predicts secure attachment *and* secure attachment begets mentalisation.

These ideas around reflective-self function and mentalisation have been taken up in adult psychotherapy, where attachment styles are taken up as a metaphor for working-alliance patterns and therapy is conceptualised as a 'corrective emotional experience' that may help to develop and establish attachment security and reflective-self function (Wallin, 2007).

Applications in coaching practice

Attachment research seems to be particularly useful in coaching practice, as it helps us to model core relationships which are bound to enter into the coaching relationship. Firstly, through the phenomenon of transference (Freud, 1905; and see the companion article, De Haan, 2011), core formative relationships may enter the coaching setting. Secondly, the working

alliance as perceived by the client has long been shown to be an important ingredient for effectiveness (Horvath & Symonds, 1991). In other words, the coaching relationship has important precursors as well, which will enter the room through the phenomenon of positive transference, 'which is the true motive force of the patient's collaboration' (Freud, 1940). Thirdly, since the 1950s comparisons have been made between the presence of the helper in helping conversations and the presence of the first caregiver. In the concepts of a 'holding environment' (Winnicott, 1965) and of a 'container' with 'reverie' (Bion, 1963), we have very similar ideas that link the maternal environment (or relationship) to the coaching environment (or relationship). In other words, the helping relationship from a 'real' (non-transferential) perspective has also been intimately linked with the earliest core caring relationship. Fourthly, and not least of all, attachment relationships will invariably be the topic of coaching sessions, as clients will bring accounts, thoughts and concerns about both past and present intimate relationships. In summary, 'attachment' seems to figure at a multitude of levels in coaching, namely within: (1) transference patterns; (2) positive transference or working alliance; (3) the 'real' relationship; and (4) the content of the sessions.

One obvious area of application of attachment research is around what happens between client and coach as a result of beginnings, endings, breaks or alterations in the setting such as rescheduling, room changes, time changes or sponsor changes. In my experience some of the most emotionally charged moments have occurred around breaks and interruptions. Approaching termination, the definitive 'break' in coaching, raw emotions may recur. Many examples of what happens around breaks and ruptures in coaching have already been documented (Day et al., 2008), and it is clear from analysis that mentalising in the form of shared reflection about what is going on

makes a crucial difference to the outcome of those ruptures *(ibidem)*.

Drake (2009) has proposed five 'narrative strategies' for building a strong attachment relationship in coaching conversations:

1. Provide clients with a sense that the coaching sessions are like a safe haven and a secure base from which they can explore issues which affect them.
2. Use the rapport that is gained to help clients take a good look at how they currently relate to others and reflect on these relationships, and where they might be biased.
3. Use the coaching sessions as a laboratory for the study of clients' attachment-related behaviour and for the experimentation with new, more secure, relational patterns.
4. Help clients to reflect on how their working models and their subsequent interpersonal patterns are rooted in childhood experiences with primary attachment figures.
5. Position yourself as a coach as a 'good enough' and available caregiver to help clients experience new attachment orientations and behaviours.

Here are some examples from my own practice which show attachment styles and the reflective-self function at work. Identifying details have been disguised.

1st Case Example

An investment manager in a global retail and investment bank comes to coaching following a number of performance conversations where it was suggested to him that his readiness for promotion to the next level would be contingent on improving his work relationships and that executive coaching might help to prepare him further. At the first phone call a meeting was arranged and another four-way meeting with his boss and the HR Director followed. In the first weeks of this coaching contract the senior banker sent performance-related and multi-party-feedback documentation to his executive coach, and he rang his coach several times on his mobile phone. His motivation seemed high. Objectives were established around growing

his self-confidence and his clarity as to what type of behaviour his senior team was expecting from him. Session 5, however, was postponed and then cancelled. Despite time spent together and veritable openness in sharing sensitive material, the sessions still felt aloof and as if lacking in rapport. The formal contract of six sessions was not completed. A certain distance and formality was present in all the sessions. When the coach raised this (perceived) aspect of the relationship, the client appeared puzzled. In the notes from the fourth session the coach concludes that she only appeared to be 'telling' the client about their relationship and about other relationships, without there being much real dialogue between them.

Reflection: It was one of those assignments with a client who was 'sent' by others, doesn't really know what to expect of coaching, and finds it quickly irrelevant as he fails to see a clear link between the 'off-line' conversations and his personal objectives. Coachability proves low and this is partly due to a limited capacity to mentalise oneself and one's (working) relationships. Or perhaps there was a withdrawal from the reflective-self function for fear of something painful emerging. The only strategy remaining for the coach appears to be to focus on the client's reflective-self directly, however hard it may be to make a change at that level. In other words, and in retrospect, the coach could have confronted the client more in terms of his limited representations of his working relationships, including the one with his coach. In my experience, this state of affairs occurs regularly in coaching relationships: intentions are on the whole positive, pressure and willingness to change are high, but shared moments of psychological understanding are so few and far between that outcome remains poor.

2nd Case Example

Eamonn was a Dean in a university. He was very agitated during the first session. About a year ago he started working with Fiona as his faculty director. They shared the responsibility for managing the faculty between them. Their collaboration has been, in his words, non-existent. He thought he might be intimidating her, as an academic and sharp intellectual, but perhaps even more by being a conscientious planner, who turns up for meetings early and is very results-oriented. Fiona appeared to him tense most of the time. She cancelled most of their meetings or appearances together, and avoided anything that had a semblance of a 'one-to-one' with him. She had other 'dotted line' responsibilities that appeared more important to her than her collaboration with Eamonn.

Now Eamonn was extremely dissatisfied with all of this, especially in view of great changes that needed to be implemented. He talked about going back to Ireland, taking up a role in Dublin, where he thought there would be 'more respect' and a better salary. He seemed visibly agitated and eventually spoke about his profound doubts that anything could be done. 'Nobody can change the way Fiona works', 'nobody in our organisation seems to take real responsibility for the changes that need to happen', etc. The coach jotted down the objectives for the work and suggested a higher frequency than he would normally do: once every three weeks.

The second session had Eamonn much more relaxed. He related successes in convincing some lead researchers and services that they would have to change their reporting structures. He reflected on his tendency to 'see the grass greener' on the other side of the road – and in grassy green Ireland – but he avoided the topic of 'Fiona' altogether. When the coach raised the topic in the second hour he just said that nothing had changed and that Fiona had managed to completely avoid him these three weeks, and that he perhaps had been guilty of avoiding too. He then expressed surprise that the next session would be already in three weeks' time: unlikely that he would have anything to talk about…

During the third session Eamonn talked at length about how as a dean he tried to 'lead from the front' and how he was very good at taking on precisely those battles that he could win. Again, in the last half-hour, the coach asked him about Fiona. Eamonn said Fiona and he were 'probably' working well together. They headed the faculty 'like two ships that pass each other in the night'. They turned up at different places, barely had a meeting

together and if they had, Fiona was always happy that he took the lead and explained 'what had to be done'. He was better at that anyway. Then he mentioned he had always been good at this 'co-management' and that he could usually empower others, but somehow Fiona could not be reached. He felt intimidated by her behaviour: she always determined where she would be, and in what capacity. He did his best to work around that, and they never spoke about their relationship. He was very clear that she would not say anything sincere if he'd ask her about how they worked together, and that she would try to avoid the topic together.

The coach then asked if Eamonn had encountered any other 'Fiona's' in his career – who she reminded him of? Initially he said 'nobody' and there were long silences. Suddenly, he related how recently at a party he had met an old fiancée, Cleona, Irish like himself. He was there with his wife and children. Cleona beamed into their room, looking like the successful business woman she was, full of 'executive polish'. She still had this powerful influence on him, this mixture of intimidation and attraction. She had always seemed aggrieved about something, 'hurt' by social gestures, as if someone had invaded her space – when in fact it was usually the other way round. She controls conversations he said, just like Fiona, who had been described to the coach in quite different terms up until now. For a good ten minutes Eamonn continued associating around his partner choices and similarities between Fiona and Cleona.

Here was a source of Eamonn's confusion, an intimidation and attraction that he couldn't escape. Eamonn started to understand the real 'infatuation' the two co-managers were having with each other, despite their coldness and distance. Another element that he discovered for the first time was the 'controlling' nature of their relationship, how he wanted Fiona to be at places where she wasn't, and how Fiona controlled him by citing stresses and other obligations.

Reflection: Here is a client with a well-developed reflective-self function and with high 'coachability'. In fact he started the contract by naming two other positive experiences with a coach. He also felt quickly secure in the sessions. Nevertheless, it does take coach and client some three sessions to get to the nub (or 'a' nub) of an issue and to arrive at reflections that matter to the client. At that point the coach enhances reflective-self function by inquiring more deeply into intimate relationships, and asking for a parallel experience in the client's life. There appears to be a breakthrough when the client can begin to see this relationship in terms of others in his life, and in terms of other important relationships in his life. It then takes several sessions more to think about the consequences of this new insight and about how to improve or reflect differently on the particular working relationship.

3rd Case Example

This consulting assignment started off with the request for facilitation of a consulting firm's away day, which would include the eight partners and the head of the secretariat, to mark the transition to a new managing partner. As so often with such events, both the wish to be entertained, to have fun, to chill out, and great anxieties about the unspoken concerns in the firm and whether they will be voiced or even addressed, were palpable from the outset. The team of partners established the main formal goal of the away day to be to achieve that frankness and fearlessness that they prided themselves on with their clients, internally.

The facilitator asked the members of the group to bring something, an object, which speaks to their relationship to the company. They took their turns freely – however, in terms of group dynamics, the order turned out to be 'reverse seniority'. When finally, one before last, the old managing partner spoke, she read a poem, something like 'should I stay or should I go?' and said that she wasn't clear about her next steps. At that point the head of the secretariat burst into tears, almost wails, which prompted embarrassed looks and eyes fixed to the ground from the consultants. The outgoing managing partner seemed to be emboldened and she consoled her.

Their query had been 'how to be more frank with each other internally?' In the afternoon the facilitator felt moved to challenge the assumptions in that statement: 'Yes, frankness and fearlessness may be what clients really need from you, that is,

they want to trust you will speak out and tell them what you see, preferably in a way that they can hear it. However, internally, you are a 'polis', a citizenship, a political society, however small, and it is perhaps more important to be diplomatic than to be direct.' Then he showed concern, 'Directness may become the privilege of the more powerful in the group, the 'prima donnas' who can both get all the attention and give all the direct feedback, but are themselves exempt'. At that precise point, when the word prima donna was mentioned, a shiver seemed to go through the group. There was something electrical in the air and the facilitator knew he had said something profoundly 'wrong' – or perhaps profoundly 'right', which amounts to the same thing. There was a long silence and then people started to debate an earlier point, but just weakly and without much interest. Soon someone called tea break and nobody came back to what the facilitator thought had been a major incident. In fact, he still felt utterly rejected and excluded by the group.

During the tea break the facilitator felt tense, guilty, awkward, and disconnected from the group. This in spite of the fact that one of the partners approached him briefly to say that it was good that he had 'outed' the prima donnas. Coming back into the afternoon session he realised it was difficult for him to think and to reflect, and that he must try to hold the space as this might be true for others as well. He waited and asked how people were and after a while gathered his wits back together sufficiently to say 'I have the impression you do not want to talk about this so this is not easy to say. I noticed what happened when I mentioned the word 'prima donna'. There was possibly some significance in what I said and this was perhaps itself one of those frank things that you find hard to say to each other. I think this somehow links with your anxieties around the new leadership of the firm and the dilemmas of your old managing partner about where to go next.' Gradually and without exploring the concept of prima donna much further, the group now returned to thinking about the challenges ahead and people felt freer to speak about their hopes for the future and for each other.

Reflection: Here is an example of how mentalising can come under pressure in coaching and consulting assignments. We can identify such moments almost on a daily basis, for example, when we are anxious about arriving late, about meeting a new client, or about what is going on in the conversations at hand; when we don't know what the issues are or how to respond, when we feel we have said something wrong or too challenging, etc. To paraphrase Allen[3] (2003, p.105), 'Of course, we coaches must mentalise to foster mentalising in our clients. It is through our own mentalising that we engage our clients in the process of mentalising (and, conversely, through their mentalising that they engage us in the process). We are in the same boat with our clients. We, too, must rely on an intact social brain, a secure attachment history, and an optimal level of arousal. We bring to the session our development competence and our current state of mind (based on our feeling of security and level of arousal at the moment) which may or may not be conducive to mentalising performance. We, too, know the 'biology of being frazzled' as our prefrontal cortical functioning goes off-line, giving way to our limbic propensities to fight, flight or freeze responses.' Often competent consulting can be regained just by re-acquiring the space to think, by stepping back for a moment, and allowing our healthier and calmer reflections to touch on the issues at hand. Paradoxically, important new reflections can arise precisely from those moments where the reflective-self is incapacitated, because there would have to be something new and important for it to have the power to bring us off balance.

Reflective-self function in coaching

What these examples have in common is a sense of 'plasticity', a sense that attachment and mentalisation are gradually formed during coaching, and that it is possible to build up a secure sense in coaching even if

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[3] Changing only the words clinician, therapist and patient into coaching equivalents.

security and understanding were hard to come by in earlier attachment relationships. This must be encouraging as it shows that 'history' does not equal 'destiny'; in other words that clients can achieve new outcomes and can learn to build up both a more secure sense of relationship and the reflective-self function that goes along with secure attachment. In this regard it is perhaps encouraging that the intra-subject reliability or stability over longer time periods of the AAI is rather small (see Fonagy, 2001, Chapter 2).

We have to be wary, though, of attaching too much importance to the notion of reflective-self function, and that is because of its enormous appeal. As we have seen attachment relationships can be relevant on at least four basic levels in coaching (transference, working alliance, 'real' relationship and content of sessions). Secure attachment can in principle be linked with the reflective-self on any of these levels. This makes the reflective-self a highly relevant notion for the client on all levels and even for the coach in his or her approach to the client. Moreover, as has been argued by various authors cited above, the reflective-self is not just seen as a measure of good therapy, as in mentalisation-based psychotherapy, it can also be regarded as a measure of good outcome of helping conversations, as in the recovery or strengthening of mentalisation. This makes the reflective-self into a panacea and could lead to the false impression of 'snake oil', or perhaps in modern industrial terms, of 'lactic acid' (which is increasingly used to make food ingredients, conservatives, cleaning products and plastics that do no harm to the human body), a flexible agent of questionable curative value that is natural to the mind/body and sold as a cure for many ills, to be applied in the most generous of doses. Instead, I believe the main lesson to draw from the empirical results at this stage is the importance of investigating further the properties of reflective-self function or psychological mindedness and establishing empirically what contribution they have in coaching.

Conclusion

Mentalisation, or the idea that infants become independent subjects only if they are recognised as such, as beings with minds, intentions and feelings of their own, by their caregivers, an idea which has been operationalised by reflective-self function (Fonagy et al., 1991), is a very powerful notion precisely because it goes back to the root of helping conversations. It is first and foremost a new and empirically quantifiable way of expressing that a client might get better when listened to and understood by a thoughtful other who can help him or her make sense of memories, experiences and challenges, a phenomenon which is as old as psychotherapy itself (Breuer & Freud, 1885). This new operationalisation of a classic phenomenon is also distinct in that it emphasises the understanding of another's intentionality, which by definition includes self-understanding, the understanding of one's own intentions. There is a shift in emphasis and an increase in empirically reliable data concerning the understanding of self and others. It is fair to say that this development has afforded new importance to the idea of insight (or interpretation, or realisation) in psychotherapy and coaching.

The history of helping conversations started with recognition of the importance of self-understanding for healthy functioning, be it through recollection (*Erinnerung;* Breuer & Freud, 1885), interpretation (*Deutung;* Breuer & Freud, 1885) or insight (*Aufklärung;* Breuer & Freud, 1885). Now with the empirical research on reflective-self function providing some evidence for a link with a particular self- and other-understanding – a possible connection between mentalisation and psychological health, through a demonstrated correlation with secure attachment – this journey has come full circle.

We can see reflective-self function as the first operationalisation of the Freudian notion of 'insight', just like 'working alliance' (Greenson, 1965) was the first operationalisation of the Freudian notion of

'positive transference'. Both operationalisations led in the next decades to corroboration of the efficacy of the original idea: working alliance correlates with psychotherapy outcome (Horvath & Symonds, 1991), whilst reflective-self function correlates with secure attachment (Fonagy et al., 1991). However, as we have seen in this brief overview, the evidence for reflective-self function as an active ingredient of helping conversations is still limited. It is not at the same level as that for working alliance. Nevertheless, the psychophysical evidence-base of these and other original hunches of Freud has now grown to an encouraging degree.

In this way executive coaches are beginning to get an idea of the ingredients that are potentially effective in coaching conversations. Working alliance (De Haan, 2011), as the best predictor of coaching outcome, will come first. And reflective-self function, as a function that correlates with secure attachment, could come second. If nothing else, this evidence can help coaches to be more confident in attending as fully as they can to reflection within the coaching relationship.

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