Outdoor coaching: the role of Attention Restoration Theory as a framework for explaining the experience and benefit of eco-psychology coaching

Article

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Outdoor coaching: The role of Attention Restoration Theory as a framework for explaining the experience and benefit of eco-psychology coaching

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Abstract

There is little empirical research into the benefits and experiences of coaching specifically in the outdoors. Attention Restoration Theory (ART) identifies four facets that explain why nature enables the brain to restore directed attention, improve cognitive capabilities and relieve stress. It is proposed that ART is relevant to understanding the benefits of outdoor coaching because, according to ART, natural environments can help the brain to focus more efficiently, make decisions, think creatively and process information effectively by restoring directed attention and cognitive capacity - all of which are aspects of high-quality coaching conversations. The aim of the research is to identify the benefits of outdoor coaching experienced by the participants and analyse them using Attention Restoration Theory as a framework to explain these benefits. Data regarding the felt experiences of nine participants who are currently having, or recently had, outdoor coaching is analysed using Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and discussed. The key findings show six identified key themes linking the participants' felt experiences with the four facets of ART: Being side-by-side; movement and pace; the perceived benefits of outdoors vs indoors; thinking differently; openness and expanse; senses, emotions and feelings. We conclude that there are benefits to taking coaching conversations outside and that ART is a framework that can explain these benefits.

Keywords:

Coaching; Outdoor coaching; Eco-coaching; Nature; Attention Restoration Theory (ART); Stress Recovery Theory.

Introduction

Coaching has been a predominantly indoor activity since it emerged as a method for personal development and growth in the 1970s. More recently, outdoor coaching has appeared as a branch of coaching that takes coaching conversations outdoors. Many coaches offer outdoor or eco-coaching as part of their practice and claim wide ranging benefits to coaching outcomes, but there is little evidence which has been offer to support these claims (Burn & Watson, 2021). Outdoor coaching can take many formats, for example sitting, standing, walking or a combination, and utilise many different types of location, from urban based parks, to canal paths, and from short countryside walks to more technical mountain locations. Outdoor coaching also affords a range of durations to suit the coachee, location and format, from the typical hour-long coaching to full day or multi-day sessions. It can be one to one, or group based (Burn & Watson, 2021).

Whilst the benefits of contact with nature and natural environments are widely researched across many fields, such as mental health (Hegarty, 2010; Berman et al, 2012; Lovell, 2016), workplace psychology (Williams, 2017) and education (Lester & Maudsley, 2007; Ridgers et al, 2012; Owen, 2020), there is, however, currently almost no empirical research into the benefits specifically of *coaching* in natural environments.

Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (Kaplan, 1995) provides a framework that can be drawn on to better understand the parallels between the benefits of natural environments proposed by ART and the benefits of outdoor coaching reported anecdotally by coachees and coaches.

This research aimed to gather empirical evidence regarding the felt experiences of coachees who are currently having, or who have had, outdoor coaching sessions, and discover whether the research supports the anecdotal reports of the benefits of outdoor coaching. The aim is to gain a better under- standing of the benefits of outdoor coaching and its impact on coaching outcomes. This research does not look at the different types of coaching in the outdoors, and whether coaching technique or approach impacts the benefits felt by the coachees. It looks singularly and specifically at the aspect of being *outdoors* and what impact that has on the felt benefits of the coaching conversation. Further research could look at the type, technique and approach used in the outdoor coaching setting versus the indoor coaching setting.

This is a non-systemic, structured literature review of the research into the bene- fits of natural environments in general and specifically of any research into the benefits of outdoor coaching.

Outdoor coaching research

Most forms of business coaching that have emerged since the 1970s have taken place indoors (Wildflower, 2013), often with the coach and coachee sat across from each other, with a table or desk between them. Coaching qualifications and training for new coaches also lend themselves predominantly to the expectation of this indoor

environment for 'typical' coaching conversations. Whereas, outdoor coaching takes coaching conversations *outside*.

The practice of taking coaching conversations outdoor has, actually, been around for about 20 years, with coaches who practice it and coachees who have experienced it, extolling its benefits (Burn & Watson, 2021).

One study by Palmer & O'Riordan (2019) suggested a link specifically between the nature-based activity of walking and coaching. They conducted a two-part study and found that a short coaching conversation whilst walking along a London canal or a Welsh seafront increased self-reported wellbeing scores for the coachees, based on sample sizes of 45 and 20 participants in the respective studies, conducted immediately after the activity. They also found bad weather did not adversely impact the positive self-reported scores. Whilst this research used very short conversations, 15 and 20 minutes (respectively), and had no control group, it does provide support to the theory that coachees taking part in outdoor coaching can benefit from the additional advantages that being outdoors, around nature and adding the element of movement, can bring.

Research into the benefits of natural environments

The hypothesis that nature has a beneficial impact on both mental and physical health has been around for a long time. The Japanese extolled the healing benefits of 'Shinrin-Yoku' or Forest Bathing (Williams, 2017; Clifford, 2018).

Children spend increasingly more time indoors and this may be carried on into their adulthood. Louv's (2005) theory of Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD) has described the negative outcomes on our health and wellbeing that results from depriving ourselves of contact with nature, especially from a young age, and has been supported by other researchers (Tucker, 2006; Gladwell et al, 2013; Kuo, 2013; Warber et al, 2015; Owen 2020).

Empirical studies into the benefits of spending time in natural environments have shown clear links to improved cognitive functioning after connecting with nature (Berman et al, 2009; Kaplan & Berman, 2010; Berto, 2014; Bratman et al, 2015), improved concentration (Berto, 2005), greater levels of attention (Kuo, 2013) and improvements in mood and both mental and physical wellbeing (Korpela & Hartig, 1996; Louv, 2005; Barton & Petty, 2010; Hegarty, 2010; Kuo, 2013; Howell et al, 2011; Palmer, 2015; Franco et al, 2017; Suttie, 2019). Furthermore, research also shows that daylight is good for our mood (Knez, 2001; Selhub & Logan, 2012).

Ulrich et al (1991)'s Stress Recovery Theory (SRT) found people recovered more quickly from stressful events when exposed to natural environments. This has been corroborated by Berto (2014) who found natural environments had a greater calming effect than urban environments, reduced negative mood and enhanced positive emotion.

In addition, research into birdsong (Ratcliffe et al, 2013) found that it was the type of natural sound most commonly associated with stress recovery when out in nature. Berman et al (2012) found a significant increase in memory and mood was experienced by adults suffering from Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) following interactions with nature. The Happiness Project (Keltner et al, 2017) found watching programmes on nature and natural history increased feelings of joy, awe and contentedness. It also reduced anger, tiredness and stress. The '30 Days Wild' campaign discovered sustained increases in happiness, health and nature connectedness after participants engaged with nature daily for a month (Richardson et al., 2016). The improvement in happiness was a predictor for improvements in health.

More recently, White et al.'s (2019) research, with 20000 people, identified that two hours a week is the minimum amount of time that is needed to be spent in nature to report physical and mental wellbeing.

Many of these studies have been small scale, qualitative studies, so whilst they provide an insight into the benefits of nature, more research using larger sample sizes and both qualitative and quantitative research methods is needed.

Attention Restoration Theory (ART)

Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995), provides a conceptual framework which helps explain the benefits of outdoor coaching.

The Kaplans first proposed the concept of how nature is restorative in an article written in 1983 (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983) about the benefits of wilderness experiences, this was furthered developed in 1989 (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) and solidified into Attention Restoration Theory in 1995 (Kaplan, 1995).

ART proposes that being in contact with natural environments increases our ability to recover from mental fatigue and stress. Directed attention is a highly valued executive function of the brain and resource for human beings (Kaplan & Berman, 2010), as it enables us to process information, make decisions, solve problems and focus our attention (Kaplan, 1995). It can, however, become exhausted over time, affecting our cognitive capabilities such as attention, memory, mood and emotion, and our ability to adapt. According to ART, nature provides a restorative environment which can help us recover from this fatigue, thereby improving cognitive functioning and recovery from stressful situations (Herzog et al, 2003; Berto 2005; Berman et al, 2009; Berman et al, 2012; White et al, 2013; Berto, 2014; Bratman, 2015; Ohly et al, 2016).

ART proposes that the most restorative and stress relieving environments have four key facets (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Berman, 2010; Selhub & Logan, 2012)

1. Fascination

Everything holds a degree of hard or soft fascination for us, with natural environments providing large amounts of soft fascination. Soft fascination is the type that enables us to restore our mental capacity and recover from stress and fatigue, because it requires much less directed attention. It does capture our attention, but in an effortless way. Hard fascination are things we need to focus on, requiring purposeful and directed attention, using up this mental capacity and causing cognitive fatigue.

2. Compatibility

There is a high level of compatibility between us and natural environments - we are part of nature. The concept of Biophilia (Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Selhub & Logan, 2012; Wilson, 2017; Arvay, 2018) describes this as a human being's genetic predisposition to the natural world. This connection is being lost the more time we spend indoors. The more connection that is felt the higher restorative quality a natural environment has. The more compatible the outdoor setting is with an individual's purposes or intentions for that setting the more restorative it is (Herzog et al, 2003; Selhub & Logan, 2012). Natural environments provide a large range of compatibility possibilities for everyone depending on their preferences.

3. Being away

Being away from the everyday, from locations that are typical and common place. It does not have to be a great distance away but provide the feeling of 'getting away', or disconnecting from daily life.

4. Extent

Providing an awareness and experience of size or space. Unlike the indoors, the outdoors helps to generate the feeling of a wider connection to the expanse of nature. Natural environments provide an almost limitless opportunity to experience the depth and size of the world around us. Even urban environments designed to magnify the field of vision can provide this sense of extent (Selhub & Logan, 2012).

People come to coaching for many reasons, for example they might have a challenge they need to find a solution for, they might be finding it hard to adapt to a new situation, or to think creatively, or they may have beliefs and habits that are limiting them in some way. They may be suffering from mental fatigue and their directed attention capacity could be reduced as they are not giving them- selves time to restore and recover. Higher stress levels may result in people finding it harder to cope with change, to focus their attention on problem solving and thinking creatively, and this may impact on

cognitive functioning such as memory (Lovell, 2016). This mental fatigue also impacts mood, resulting in more intense feelings of frustration, anger, sadness, hopelessness and lethargy. Seligman (2007) argues the core role of coaching is to improve wellbeing by increasing positive emotions and creating positive environments. Providing a coaching environment and setting, the outdoors, that can help recovery from mental fatigue, improve directed attention and positively affect mood, could improve the coaching outcomes significantly.

ART and outdoor coaching

ART can, therefore, provide a framework to explain how natural environments can help with coaching conversations.

1. Fascination and outdoor coaching

The ART concept of soft fascination (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Berman, 2010) is applicable to taking coaching conversations outdoors. Nature provides unlimited soft *Fascination* and the human brain can attend to these things with relative ease and little effort. This enables the brain to recover from mental and attentional fatigue. Anecdotally, advocates of outdoor coaching describe it as enabling them to see things more clearly and having sudden ‘ah-ha’ moments. These moments of clarity and realisation can come after taking time to reflect on a specific coaching question or topic and allowing their minds to drift and be attracted to the effortless soft fascinations of the nature around them. Their directed attention and cognitive processing (executive function) is restored and free to focus on the coaching question or challenge at hand.

2. Compatibility and outdoor coaching

It would be plausible to suggest that coachees would feel a connection with nature and get inspiration from the outdoor environment during outdoor coaching sessions because all humans are part of nature. They may experience the benefits of awe when they see a rainbow (Rudd & Vohs, 2012; Anderson et al, 2018; Rudd et al, 2018; Suttie, 2019), or find a metaphor (Walsh, 2018) in the resilience of a small plant shoot appearing from

beneath snow. The weather could also provide this aspect of *Compatibility*, reflecting and mirroring someone's mood, whilst also providing perspective and context. Nature prevails and the cycle of life goes on - nature is ever changing, but we get a sense of comfort in the repetition of the yearly cycle of change (Walsh, 2018). Connecting with nature and using it as an analogy for the coaching conversation could be highly beneficial for the coachee. Natural environments also provide such an array of settings that there would be somewhere compatible with each individual's preference. So different coachees could experience very different types of outdoor coaching - if the setting is compatible it could be hugely restorative.

Howell et al (2011) conducted research which showed positive associations between nature connectedness, mental health and social wellbeing. Mindfulness was found to be a correlate of nature connectedness, meaning having an awareness of nature and its impact significantly, positively, impacts these associations.

3. Being away and outdoor coaching

Outdoor coaching provides an opportunity to have a coaching conversation in a different setting, to move away from 'classic', indoor, seated coaching conversations. Coachees that desire a change of scenery, to get outside, away from their office, away from their typical daily indoor environments, could experience the benefits of ART's (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Berman, 2010) concept of *Being Away*. The location does not need to be far away, it may simply be to the local park near where they work. Or it may be a hike up a mountain, or an extended trip over a number of days to a much more remote wilderness location (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Richardson et al, 2016). But the distinction between being outdoors, rather than indoors, appears to fit with the restorative effects of 'being away' suggested in ART.

A change of scenery provides the brain with the chance to look at things in a new way - and not just the change from indoors to outdoors, but the fact that the natural environment is ever changing. Every outdoor coaching session provides a different experience to the last, as the seasons change and nature responds. Indoor coaching

does not necessarily have the ability to provide this sense of being away, even if it takes places in a location away from the office.

4. Extent and outdoor coaching

The ART (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Berman, 2010) concept of *Extent* also finds parallels in the anecdotally reported benefits of outdoor coaching. Even in small parks, in urban areas, the sense of being out in the open, of the size of the world around us, helps to provide a restorative effect which enables the brain to recover from mental fatigue and improve cognitive function. Taking coaching conversations outdoors enables the coachee to see the height of the clouds in the sky, to stand at the top of a hill and see the expanse of nature around them, to walk alongside a lake or the sea - all these natural settings provide a sense of the size and the extent of the natural world around us. Herzog et al (2003) indicate that even environments that are, or feel like they are, smaller in scale can still have Extent if their content occupies the mind. So even wandering through wood- lands surrounded by tall trees, or in a small urban park, could provide a sense of extent and the restorative benefits that result.

Beyond ART

Over the past two decades the original ART model has been developed further. Korpela & Hartig's (1996) research found that perceived restoration in all four facets of ART was highest when respondents had been in their *favourite* outdoor places, versus locations they identified as unpleasant.

Research by White et al (2013) compared the perceived restoration effects of different types of outdoor environments, identifying that coastal (blue space) environments were the *most* restorative, with non-urban greens- pace environments coming second with a closely comparable result. Urban greens- paces, such as town parks, were the least restorative, although did still provide good levels of restoration potential.

This suggests the positive and beneficial outcomes of outdoor coaching could be enhanced further by the choice of location and setting of the session, based on the

preference of the coachee and their Compatibility. The research suggests that, where possible, locating outdoor coaching near water (Voelker & Kistemann, 2011) and wide-open greenspaces (Korpela & Hartig, 1996; Hartig et al, 2014) could maximise the restorative benefits of the natural environment.

Research into the benefits, cognitively and physically, of connecting with nature, therefore, demonstrates potential implications for our understanding of the benefits of outdoor coaching. These parallels suggest that the positive experiences and outcomes that have been anecdotally reported by coachees could be due to the restorative power of natural environments. The ART framework (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Berman, 2010) provides a good basis for investigating the benefits of outdoor coaching further.

Limitations of ART

Gatersleben & Andrews's (2013) research found that not all 'natural environments' were restorative or provided soft fascination. They found directed attention may be required, for example, to focus on not tripping over or getting lost and certain natural environments, such as dense woodland, could elicit a fear response. Their research indicated that environments with a clear field of vision (high prospect) and a low number of places to hide (refuge) were restorative, but those environments with low prospect and high refuge were low in perceived restoration.

Ratcliffe et al (2013) highlight that whilst birdsong is synonymous with most people's experience of being outdoors, to many people the sounds of particular birds is more irritating than restorative (such as pigeons and gulls) or could be scary (ravens, birds of prey). 'Not all birds may be perceived as restorative, and not all listeners may find them restorative' (Ratclffe et al., 2013, p.223)

Whilst some limitations and criticism of ART have been published (Ulrich et al, 1991; Joye & Dewitte, 2018) much of the critique focuses on the method used for researching the theory rather than on the theory itself. Systematic literature reviews by Ohly et al (2016) and Stevenson et al (2018) found mixed evidence, but noted the limitations of some research that used virtual environments as stimuli (videos or photographs), rather

than conducting the research in actual outdoor environments. Many studies have, however, found support for the theory (Korpela & Hartig, 1996; Berto, 2005; Berman et al, 2009; Berman et al, 2012; Ratcliffe et al, 2013; White et al, 2013; Bratman et al, 2015; Basu et al, 2019) using a variety of research methods and experiments, providing results consistent with the concept that natural environments provide Attention Restoration and improve both affect and cognitive abilities.

Methods

This research aimed to discover more about the *experiences* of coachees who are currently having, or have had, outdoor coaching sessions. In order to gather information about coachees' *actual* experiences of outdoor coaching sessions a qualitative methodology was chosen. This kind of research lends itself very clearly to a qualitative approach as it focuses on participants' *experiences*, and how they make sense of these experiences to generate *meaning*. Gathering descriptions of their experiences, accessing the richness of first-hand accounts of: what they did; how they felt; what it meant to them; what the impact was for them, is critical to this research.

Qualitative research deals predominantly with meaning (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), with non-numerical, word-based information and is concerned with gathering in-depth insight into phenomena in their more natural contexts (Rose et al, 2015). It is more often focused on individual cases, rather than variation from a norm. The design of qualitative research is also flexible, in that it seeks to gain insights into emerging themes. One challenge of qualitative research is the influence of the researcher on the participants involved and, therefore, the information gathered. This is due to the method used to gather findings - interviews or observations. It is widely acknowledged that the researcher will have some level of impact on the findings of qualitative research, including on the way in which the information is interpreted during analysis (Rose et al, 2015). 'Researchers need to develop reflexive aware- ness of their assumptions about what there is to know (ontology) and how they can come to know it (epistemology)' (Willig, 2019). The knowledge of this and an awareness of the researcher's own onto-

epistemological position, reflexivity and assumptions was maintained throughout the research.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as a method best suited to provide an insight into coachee reactions and emotional responses to outdoor coaching processes (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Smith et al 2012; Rose, et al. 2015)

In Creswell (2013) a phenomenological study 'describes the meaning of several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomena. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon' (p.57–58). This kind of research identifies a phenomena, collects data from people who have experienced it, and analyses *what* they experienced and *how* they experienced it.

IPA takes phenomenology further by adding the element of *interpretation* of these lived experiences - both by the participant themselves as they recount them and by the researcher when they analyse the findings (Smith & Osborn 2007; Smith et al, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Alase, 2017). Interpretation is critical as each participant needs to be able to interpret their experience, the meaning of it and be able to express that verbally to describe it to the researcher. The researcher needs to be able to then interpret what the participant has described and make meaning of it from the participant's perspective.

This research aims to better understand 'several individuals' common or shared experiences' (Creswell, 2013, p.60) of the phenomenon of outdoor coaching, and to gather insight, through interpretation, about the themes, such as the benefits, of this phenomenon. As such, IPA appears to be a well-suited methodology to use for this research.

The use of IPA does present some challenges, this approach requires the participants to be able to recall and understand the meaning of their experiences, and then be able to vocalise that in a comprehendible way for the researcher to interpret.

The key sampling criteria was the participants' experience of being coached outdoors. It was not possible to control for any other similarities and differences in other aspects of their background or demographics. Participants volunteered to take part following a request for volunteers and signed an informed consent document. All research data collection and storage meet confidentiality and privacy requirements.

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted, with six females and three males. Participants had received between two and over a hundred coaching sessions, and the length of each ranged from 55 minutes up to three hours. Four of the participants were currently still having outdoor coaching and the rest had experienced it within the last year.

The data was collected through one-to- one telephone interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes. Participants were asked to describe in as much detail as possible their *felt experiences* of their outdoor coaching sessions, and what those experiences *meant* to them.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and the IPA methodology used to conduct detailed analysis of the content.

Results

Analysing the content of the interviews, using the IPA methodology, resulted in over 50 emergent themes. Connections were then made between the emergent themes to identify which linked together, thus creating super-ordinate, or *clustered* themes. The participants' accounts clustered around six key themes.

The clustered themes were cross-referenced back to the explanatory comments to identify the relative importance of each for use in the analysis.

Theme 1 – Being side-by-side

'There was no eye to eye contact...so I could over- come those uncomfortable bits...if it was being sat in a room and he'd been looking at me directly I'd have felt a little more under pressure.' (P5, 207)

Participants reported that being side-by-side, or alongside the coach, felt liberating because it was less judgmental, compared to sitting opposite a coach, and less scrutinised, because there was no eye contact. It gave participants the confidence to talk about things that were more challenging as they felt more comfort- able not having to meet the coach's eye. It was easier to experience silence and not feel like they had to say something or answer a question because their coach was looking at them. It enabled them to experience the expanse and openness of the natural environment before them (without a table or a coach in front of them), think more openly and articulate what they wanted to say. They reported falling into sync easily with their coach, making the pace flow and it felt like walking with a friend - which they reported as beneficial to building the relationship with their coach, being on a *literal,* as well as metaphorical, journey together. These reported benefits of being alongside their coach were apparent when standing and sitting too.

Theme 2 – Movement and pace

'The pace reflected the exploration within the conversation. Internally digesting and making sense of things.' (P1, 65)

Participants reported movement and pace as beneficial aspects of outdoor coaching. Because being outdoors included an element of movement which they either already enjoyed or wanted to do more of. They described how the pace directly mimicked or reflected how they were feeling and enabled them to express their emotions. The change- ability of pace, being able to stop and start, also positively affected their ability

to reflect, was a mechanism for giving the brain time to think, and made pauses in conversation more natural. Being outdoors enabled more freedom of movement, of the whole body, as a way to release emotions and aid the thinking processes.

Theme 3 – the perceived benefits of the outdoors vs indoors

'Indoors you are contained...I'm quite sensitive to indoor light...being outdoors with the natural light...such a different experience.' (P2, 101)

The participants reported that being outdoors added value and power to the coaching session. All but one reported having an affinity to the outdoors from a young age, and this being one of the reasons for choosing outdoor, over indoor, coaching. They reported that a benefit of being outdoors is that it enabled them to get away from their indoor life, breathe fresh air, see different things, hear different things and feel different things by invigorating the mind, body and soul. Taking the coaching conversation outdoors also provided an added benefit of getting some exercise, enhancing their sense of achievement. The participants described the indoors quite negatively for example using words and phrases such as: confined; cooped up; constrained; trapped; suffering; not being able to see beyond the four walls. Conversely, they described being outdoors more positively using words and phrases such as: free; freedom; comfortable; calm; relaxed; energised; peaceful; exhilarating. They also described the horizon being limitless and finding benefit in the fact that things are always moving and changing, but nature itself is reassuringly constant. Participants described the benefits of being outdoors as enabling the conversation to flow and allowing them to think more clearly. A number of participants also described how being outdoors enabled them to deal better with difficult emotions as they could move away from them, rather than the emotions being stuck in a room with them.

Theme 4 – thinking differently

'I think fresh air coaching is more beneficial...you see different things, you hear different things and you feel different things.' (P7, 167)

Participants reported that being *outdoors* was a critical factor in enabling them to do things *differently*. Think differently, process information differently, experience different things, gain different perspective. They described this as leading to them being able to concentrate and focus better and zoom in and out from macro to micro level thinking. Helping them to make sense of how they felt and what they were experiencing. Having other things around them to focus on consciously, also gave the brain time to think and work subconsciously.

Theme 5 – openness and expanse

'It creates a sort of distance...something externalised for me. And then having that external device makes it more possible for me to internalise that.' (P6, 195)

Participants reported that being coached outdoors provided openness and space, positively impacting the way they made sense of the challenges they are facing or the topics they are discussing. This openness and expanse enabled them to describe and externalise their thoughts and feelings, which they described as making it easier to then internalise and reflect. Some participants described coaching outdoors as beneficial even when in relatively enclosed outdoor environments, such as wood- land, as they still felt the sense of openness. It was reported that this openness and space experienced in outdoor coaching lead to feelings of freedom, release and relief.

Theme 6 – senses, emotions and feelings

'The natural act of walking through grass or through green space, or looking up seems to be very grounding.' (P9, 97)

Participants linked the feelings and emotions they experienced to one or more of their senses. These experiences enabled the participants to recall specific and vivid memories of particular sights, sounds, smells or touches on their skin, often a long time after the coaching session. These connections between senses and emotions helped the participants to relive the coaching session and the benefits gained. A number of participants described the change of perspective experienced, for example, when at the

top of a hill and able to see the views, helping them to feel more confident, optimistic and able to create change. Participants also describe the sounds of nature and how these sounds increased their sense of peace and their ability to think more calmly and clearly. Participants reported that using their senses, and the feelings they evoked, created Mindful *connection* between them and the natural environment around them, enabling them to be present and non-judgemental. It helped with sense making by impacting their thoughts and how they processed them, leading to feelings of being grounded and anchored, and resulting in calmness and being better able to reflect. No unwanted, harmful or disruptive feelings or emotions were described by any participant.

Discussion

This research aimed to discover more about the felt *experiences* of coachees who are currently having, or have had, outdoor coaching sessions. To test ART's applicability to outdoor coaching as a framework where relational and environmental factors can affect the quality of these experiences, the coach conversation and the outcome. De Haan describes these *Critical Moments* in coaching as 'exciting, tense or significant moments from the time spent in the coaching conversation experienced by an Executive Coach and Client' (De Haan & Neiss, 2012, Pg.1)

As discussed, there is very scant research conducted to date on *any* aspect of outdoor coaching, but studies have provided some evidence at least of short-term benefit (Palmer & O'Riordan, 2019). In light of this, empirical research and frameworks created in other, but complimentary, fields were reviewed to help better understand the anecdotally reported benefits of outdoor coaching.

In reviewing the six key themes of this research, there appears to be some commonality between the themes which emerged and the ART framework.

ART - Fascination

A key aspect of ART is the concept of hard and soft fascination. ART proposes that *soft* fascination is very important because it enables the mind to recover from cognitive

fatigue and restore cognitive processing capabilities. The findings of this research appear to support the use of soft fascination by coachees in outdoor environments, and was a factor which coachees associated with the successful outcome of coaching conversations.

Being surrounded by nature provides many types of soft fascination and plenty of opportunity to recover from mental fatigue and restore directed attention capacity, meaning the coachees are able to then use their restored executive functioning to the fullest to solve their coaching challenges.

The participants described their experiences of using all but one (taste) of their senses (theme six) whilst outdoor coaching and took time to restore and reflect whilst looking at nature, listening to birdsong, or feeling the ground beneath their feet (theme six). These mindful behaviours link well with soft fascination. The participants found attending to nature *easy* and *calming*. Allowing their brain, the space and time it needed to be able to direct attention to things that required more focused cognitive processing - such as thinking differently, generating new and creative ideas and coming up with solutions (theme four).

In addition, removing the fact that there is someone sat opposite the coachee and opening up the visual plain in front of the coachee, naturally allows for capturing more soft fascination (theme one). This could explain the experience the participants had of being able to reflect and think more easily when they are side-by-side with their coach instead of their coach sat in front of them. Their field of vision is more open, their mind is freer to look around and take in the view ahead. These behaviours allow for the benefits of soft fascination to be felt, as the coachees are less likely to be trying to find the answers to the coaches' questions in a way they might do in response to feeling scrutinised when sat opposite them indoors. Instead, they can ponder and mull over the questions whilst enjoying the view or the sound of birdsong (theme three).

ART - Compatibility

An environment highly *compatible* with the coachee's intention for that environment would be highly restorative, creating the benefits of recovering from cognitive fatigue and freeing up directed attention capacity. The reported purpose of many of the participants in choosing outdoor coaching was their affinity with being outdoors and the appeal of walking and experiencing nature (theme three). It would be very difficult to achieve this purpose if the coach and coachee were sat inside.

Participants described their love for being in natural environments, wanting to spend more time outdoors, and having strong childhood experiences of growing up outdoors. They equated this to feelings of being free, grounded, calm and reflective. This was contrasted starkly with the participants' reported experiences of being indoors, which were commonly described with words such as trapped, constrained, confined (theme three). It is argued that these aspects of the participants' preferences align strongly with the ART facet of compatibility. Clearly, for the participants in this study, being outdoors was highly compatible with their preferences and purpose. The majority of them described a strong sense of yearning for connection with nature, similar to that described by Biophilia (Wilson, 1984) which is a complementary concept to ART. Even the dual benefit for many of combining a coaching session with exercise is an example of compatibility (theme two).

The benefits of this described in the findings is that the more compatible the type of coaching is to the preferences and purpose of the coachee, the more likely the coaching session is to be successful. Because, the coachee will find the situation restorative, rather than distracting or disturbing. And, based on ART theory, this will enable them not only to recover from mental fatigue but direct their attention towards thinking, reflecting and generating solutions for their coaching goals (theme four).

Outdoor coaching also affords the natural behaviour of walking or sitting side-by-side with the person you are talking to (theme one). Participants described this aspect as highly compatible with their purpose and intention for the coaching session, as they had openness in front of them, rather than a table and the coach. Providing the sense of expanse and removing limitations - both physically and mentally (theme five).

ART - Being away

The findings of the research provide evidence of the benefits of *being away* and a number of participants explicitly describe how they chose outdoor coaching because it got them away from their desk, or away from their indoor life (theme three). The participants' experiences ranged from travelling only a short distance from their homes or offices, for example a local park or a woodland at the back of their house, to driving up to two hours to get to their coaching location. But their experiences of being away from the everyday life were similar, regardless of distance they travelled to get away. This links closely with the Kaplans' view that it was the disconnecting from daily life that was important, not necessarily the *distance* of being away.

This facet of ART also links to the theme in the findings of the benefits of the outdoors vs indoors (theme three). For these participants, indoor coaching would not provide the benefits associated with *being away* precisely because indoor coaching locations are too similar, if not exactly the same, as the locations in which they spend much of their time - for example their place of work.

The benefits of *being away* and the link to outdoor coaching is further demonstrated by the theme of openness, space and expanse as these are features of the outdoors that are in direct contrast to the features of the everyday, indoor locations, that the participants find themselves in (theme five). This aspect of *being away* provides a great opportunity for restoration of mental fatigue and recovering directed attention because the *away* is so different from the *normal*.

Being away also enabled the participants to experience *different* types of environments, which lead to different ways of thinking, processing information and coming up with new ways of doing things.

ART - Extent

The *extent* facet of ART is described as helping to restore directed attention and reduce mental fatigue by providing an awareness of expanse. This awareness generates the feeling of connection with something bigger.

A clearly demonstrated link between the findings and the ART facet of *extent* is theme five - openness and expanse. Participants clearly described benefitting from the openness they experienced when being coached outdoors, leading to a sense of freedom. This openness and freedom enabled them to make sense of challenges they were facing by giving them the *space,* and sense of time, to think and reflect.

The *extent* of the outdoor locations themselves does not necessarily have to be large, according to ART theory. However, research into the most restorative types of outdoor coaching locations (White et al, 2013) would suggest those with greater *extent* (for example open countryside) offer more opportunity for the benefits of *extent* to be felt than smaller spaces (for example urban parks). Just being outside in the 'open air', however, regardless of the size of the location or whether the person is actually moving (they could be sat on a park bench) ensures some level of *extent* is felt and benefitted from. Participants in this study experienced outdoor coaching in a range of locations, from city parks to mountains in Scotland, but the impact of *extent* was felt and reported by all participants, in all types and sizes of location.

Linked to the aspect of being alongside the coach (theme one), both movement and pace were described, by the participants, as important factors in the benefits of outdoor coaching and could be linked to the *extent* facet of ART (theme two). Being able to move and vary the pace is made possible by the space and size of the outdoor environment. In a way that it is not possible to achieve easily in an indoor environment. Being able to 'walk and talk' enables the coachee to experience the true *extent* of the natural environment because they are not confined to one location. Each coaching session provides further *extent* because routes differ, even if the same actual route is walked the nature around is forever changing so the experience of the *extent* of the location can change too. One participant described a wooded area in summer as 'cocooning' due to the canopy of leaves. But in the winter the *extent* of the environment

around it or the sheer size of the wooded area itself was felt because the leafless trees enabled the participant to see further. So the *extent* will be felt differently depending on the season.

Extent also helps to explain why some participants reported feeling more connected and grounded in the outdoors. They described feeling part of something bigger, being anchored and connected with the natural environment. This is possible because of the sense of *extent* they felt being outdoors.

Being side-by-side, or alongside, the coach

Being side-by-side was a common experience described by nearly all the participants and would appear to be an aspect, and benefit, that is unique to *outdoor* coaching. Some- thing that is fairly hard to replicate indoors. It appears to have a significant impact for two reasons.

Firstly, the coach and coachee are (a) not always sat and (b) not opposite each other, they could be sat or stood next to each other outdoors but that did not appear to have the same negative connotations that being sat opposite each other indoors did. It is the combination of being sat, and being opposite, that results, for some people, in a negative indoor experience.

Secondly, the specific aspect of being *alongside*, as opposed to *opposite*, is key. Being opposite created feelings of judgement, scrutiny and confrontation, and resulted in participants reporting feelings of being uncomfortable, awkward and the need to fill silences rather than taking enough time to reflect. They described feeling as though they were being watched, or observed. By being alongside each other, however, and not having the element of oppositional eye contact, the participants described almost polar opposite feelings of being free, liberated, open, and the conversation being less intense. This created a more natural environment, like walking with a friend, and resulted in them being able to take time to think and reflect without scrutiny, and often ‘fall in synch’ with each other.

Limitations of the research

Due to the nature of the research and the methodology chosen, IPA, the number of participants in this research is relatively small. As a result, the findings cannot be generalisable to a wider population. Smith et al (2012) state that IPA studies are valid with as few as three participants. Further, a mixed methods approach could have been used to further explore impact over time of outdoor coaching compared with indoor coaching.

Conclusions

In conclusion, while there is limited empirical research into outdoor coaching, these findings provide a link to theoretical model, which can inform research in this area and recognises at coaching research is part of a wider psychological movement exploring the human experience, and that creating links between coaching psychology and this wider work can contribute to both areas of study.

The benefits of the ART concepts of *fascination, compatibility, being away* and *extent,* described in the findings, highlight this as a potentially useful framework for better understanding the experiences coachees have of outdoor coaching. Along with a deeper understanding of the role outdoor coaching might play, particularly in working with individuals or issues which are highly charged emotionally.

Further research into all aspects of outdoor coaching is needed to test these findings and measure the benefits of this emerging area of coaching practice.

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