

# **The Influence of the Primary Dimension of the Race, Gender, Age & Language on the Coaching Relationship**

**Research**

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**The influence of the primary dimensions of race, gender, age and language on the coaching relationship**

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## Project Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore if the race, gender, language and age of the coach is important for establishing an effective coaching relationship.

The study hopes to shed light on the factors that are necessary for the all important 'connection' that is so necessary for successful coaching outcomes. It is envisaged that the data will be useful for the purposes of coach selection as well as product packaging. The study, which continues, is the first in this series of studies on connection and the coaching relationship.

The study, influenced by my psychodynamic leanings and cognitive-behavioural tinges, takes a broad look at what literature could explain or inform the concept of “connection” in different interpersonal endeavours, then looks at the practical research specifically about what people consider as important to have an effective coaching relationship.

In the literature review, the different approaches are explored on their views with regard to effective relationships. The *existential-phenomenological* explanations are explored at a very basic level, particularly the concept of “lived experience” and how it contributes or hinders effective relationship. This view assumes that the members in a relationship do not just come into a relationship as clean slates, they bring their “lived experience” into the relationship and an effective relationship is one that acknowledges this and works with it to effect therapeutic or coaching outcome.

The *Psychoanalytical/Psychodynamic* approaches on the other hand introduce concepts of projections, transference, and counter-transference etc. which all impact on the effectiveness of a therapeutic relationship. The object-relations theory, which has evolved from the psychoanalytic approaches, posits that people have object representations of others as a way of dealing with their internal reality- this could take any form or shape, and is likely to include the primary dimensions that are explored in this study. This implies that there are expectations already by the people as they get into a coaching relationship, which can facilitate or hinder effectiveness of the intervention. The defence mechanisms can also come into play in this way since for some people a coaching session can be an anxiety-inducing situation.

*Theories of inter-personal communication* as proposed by Jordaan & Jordaan (1996) are also brought into play, where it is posited that an interpersonal relationship, such as what a coaching relationship could be, is a process of symbolic interpersonal communication aimed at exchanging meaning between two or more people. If there are no shared symbols, there will be no shared meaning. Also their assumption is that communication does not necessarily start when people (in this instance the coach and the coachee) start talking, it is always happening. Therefore the coach's race, age, gender or language is already communicating something to the coachee about the coach.

A scan of writings on relationships and attraction within both popular psychology and areas of social psychology and sociology indicate that physical features (which include one's race and gender, even age) are important to create that connection. But there's also overwhelming research that indicate shared values, interests, etc. are also an important. Would this apply to coaching? I hypothesise that they would to some extent, given that coaching is an interpersonal relationship like any other.

The modern authors have taken a *construct/behavioural approach* to what behavioural constructs might be useful for effective coaching relationship. Flaherty (1999) offers that *Mutual trust, mutual respect* as well as *mutual freedom of expression*, constructs that he resists to define to any level of exactitude, leaving the interpretation to the parties to the relationship.

Renshaw & Alexander (2005) seem to support this view but become a little more specific- moving from a construct level to a behaviour level, where they highlight specific behaviours that facilitate connection, e.g., *openness, honesty, commitment, etc.*

Corey (2001) emphasises way of being, as an important ingredient in a coaching relationship, saying that the [coaches]<sup>1</sup> serve as role models for the clients and as such should be the behaviour they want the client wants to become.

It is my contention that all the above are different sides to the same die, each adding specific depth to the understanding of the concept of "connection" and what may facilitate it. The primary dimensions of race, age, gender and language present one level, perhaps a primary level, from which the rest of the connecting behaviours as highlighted by the literature research output are interpreted.

The practical research, a survey questionnaire that was distributed to coaches and their coaches, indicates that these elements are considered by the respondents as important to varying degrees, in facilitating "connection". In short- the highlighted outcomes from the research are the following:

- A high percentage of respondents indicated that the age and the race of the coach are unimportant in the selection of the coach. A small percentage still believe that these factors are important, which may suggest that there are situations or people where these dimensions are important
- Gender appears to be an unimportant issue for just over half of the respondents, with the other group indicating that it's important to have a coach of the same or different gender from them.

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<sup>1</sup> Corey refers to therapists in this instant. It has been paraphrased here to accommodate applicability to coaching

- Close to two-thirds of the respondents indicated that language is an important consideration in selecting a coach.
- Other emergent secondary criteria are also indicated- Almost every respondent indicated rapport elements like "*chemistry*"/"*connection*", etc as important, followed closely by academic training of sorts (50%)

While the above may seem cut and dried on the surface, it raises a number of interesting questions about "the rules" that people use to select a coach. Some of these are highlighted in the results section of this report. Given the small sample on which the research results were based, it is recommended that the survey be undertaken with a bigger sample to validate the outcome and perform deeper analysis into the outcome. Plans for this are already underway.

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

Perhaps the first context I need to create for this work is that as a black South African male, I'm obsessed with the dynamics of race relations in the country and the implications these have on day-to-day organisational activities. It is for me a context that I have known all my life and I have been through a whole lot of reflection about this and what it means in my work and life. I am aware of the kinds of limitations it may have in my life, it is however something I cannot ignore.

The second context that I need to create to this research is that as an Organisational development specialist, I have had to facilitate and consult with organisations and groups and this exposed me to different dynamics around groups and their interaction. I have therefore a specific interest in human relationships and what it takes to sustain them.

While I have been exposed to different types of training as an underpinning to the work that I do, I have developed a kinship to psychodynamic<sup>2</sup> theories of human behaviour as espoused by people like *Carl Jung* and later *Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion*, that go beyond the surface manifestation of behaviour (as typified by the behaviourist approaches) as well as structured theories around the cognition that result in these manifested behaviours (as outlined in cognitive behavioural theories).

This orientation means that I tend to look at phenomena with a psychodynamic eye and then only proceed to some of the other ways of looking at human dynamics.

With this background, I found myself quickly wondering how the dynamics of race would play themselves out in a coaching relationship. On an introspective as well as experiential level, I started gathering data for this. The more I thought the more it made sense that perhaps a systematic study of this is necessary – first to get a view on what has been done so far and what insights others have been able to gather but also thinking already on how much value I can add to this topic.

From a politico-social perspective in South Africa the significance comes from recognising that: the advent of black economic empowerment and employment equity has meant that organisations had to implement infrastructure that will introduce, develop and retain black people and females within the predominantly

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<sup>2</sup> The conceptual origins of the systems psychodynamic perspective stems from the classic psychoanalytic theory of personality, psychoanalytic object relations theory, psychoanalytic theory of regressive group processes, and open systems theory to organisational leadership (De Board, 1995; Hirschorn & Barnett, 1999; Kernberg, 1998; Miller, 1989; Miller & Rice, 1967; Neuman et al., 1997; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994; Rice, 1999; Stapley, 1996).

white male organisations. Coaching has been identified as one of those mechanisms that can be used with some success towards creating capacity for these designated groups of people to succeed in organisations<sup>3</sup>. However, it has been my experience that some people receive coaching with a pinch of salt, while some immediately reject it and see it as condescending and a waste of time (I once had a chat with a colleague who was the head of HR for one of the businesses in my organisation, who expressed scornful indignation when he was offered coaching services by his direct line manager – he regarded it as an insult!). On a more general level, *Appendices 2 & 3* show the general consciousness about race and the experiences of some of the black professionals. These are articles that came up in popular media at exactly the time that I was performing this study. It serves to indicate the national consciousness about race, gender and age within the modern professionals. These are the people that also get subjected to or seek coaching at some point, how would this consciousness play itself out in a coaching situation?

That formed the background to this study. In this last few years of doing and studying coaching I have had a number of observed incidents which re-enforced the need to study this and determine if it's more than just an incidental phenomena.

The more I thought about it however, the more questions I got which went beyond just race. I started wondering about the gender impact for example. *Does it matter that the coach is male and the client is female or vice versa? What about age? Does it have any significant influence on the coaching relationship and what happens therein?*

I have since added a dimension to the primary dimensions of age, race and gender to include language. Although my first assessment will be on the three primary dimensions, I am interested to see on a secondary level if it is not perhaps language rather than race that is important (assuming the two are mutually exclusive)

The subsequent pages highlight a bit of detail on this research and my approach to it as well as the timeframes within which it should be completed.

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<sup>3</sup> I have a fantasy that this would apply to other countries as well, but that would require a validation of people in those countries who are more familiar with those places

## **Chapter 2 Background to study and terms of reference**

A number of research studies point to the fact that a positive coaching relationship is the highest contributing factor to successful coaching outcomes<sup>4</sup>. If the relationship were so important, would elements of age, gender, race and language contribute to this positive relationship? Do these factors have any impact in the creation of this connection?

The key question for this research is: *Is race, gender, age and language important to the coach and the client for a coaching relationship to develop.*

The following questions were the secondary questions that would help answer the primary research question indicated above:

- Is the race of the coach important for the client to be able to connect?<sup>5</sup>
- Is it important to the client that the coach is male or female?
- Is it important that the client is younger or older than them?
- Is the language with which coaching is going to be conducted important?
- Do these dimensions affect the coaching relationship to any significant level?
- Do these dimensions affect the outcomes of coaching to any significant level?

I believe the key issue here is, if these things are so important to clients, what does it mean for promoting diversity amongst coaches? Will a coaching organisation called into an organisation have a sufficient diversity of coaches to be able to satisfy the needs of the clients?

The **first phase** of the work will be around researching the first four questions and then the next phase will be about going deeper into what does this mean for coaching – for the relationship, for the coaching outcomes as well as the significance thereof for the coaching community.

While a number of books on coaching also support the premise that the relationship is the most important element, not many go into what exactly goes into the “making” of this relationship.

The analysis start first with some an introspective analysis on the topic and how it developed followed by a short literature study on the concept of relationship and what emerges as trends on what makes the relationship work. The concept of relationship connection is explored not just from a coaching perspective, but also from other life activities e.g. romantic relationships as well as group relations.

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<sup>4</sup> Most significantly Assay and Lambert (1999), Hay (2003), Hall (1999), Flaherty: (1999; 10)

<sup>5</sup> The question was posed as “Is it important to the client that they have a black coach or a white coach?” However in the South African context, the “black/white” duality is still more prevalent than the grey areas between races. It is only in intra-racial interactions do people start exploring the different shades of blackness or whiteness as the case may be. This question will have to be explored further to test for global applicability.

Themes from these areas are then extrapolated into a coaching context, asking a question “what does it mean for coaching”.

Then the feedback from the on-line survey is explored and the data is integrated into some form of meaningful conclusion.

As they read this, the reader should bear in mind that this is really an exploratory study into this phenomenon and it’s aimed at exploring the hypothesis as well as stimulating more questions around this area.

## **Introspective Analysis – Evidence from self-reflection & Practice**

Consider the following statements

- 1) “You are so young to be coaching...I wouldn’t do coaching because who would listen to me, I am too young” said a young white female intern psychologist on meeting me for the first time.
- 2) “I chose you because you are black and you seem to have a lot of experience in this area” said an older white female manager, when I enquired on why she chose me from a panel of 10 coaches assigned to her organisation.
- 3) The only two black managers in an organisation chose to be coached by white coaches instead of me in a coaching selection when I had predicted they would both choose me from a panel of coaches. What could have led to that decision? And what made me believe they will/should choose me?
- 4) “Why do they want me to get coached, I have over 5 years experience in management” said one black executive to me when his boss suggested he needs coaching.

The above are but a few examples of statements made in life that led me to explore how important issues of race, gender, age as well as language in a coaching relationship.

The issue has shown up frequently in work-life as well.

What are the assumptions behind a statement by a team of executives that coaching should be done by an older person (and wiser)? What assumptions lie behind the statement that there are few African people in executive positions because organisations don’t provide coaching?

Is the recommendation that organisations should provide coaching so that these people can grow into competent executives done as a true concern for their welfare or as a condescending gesture?

What lies behind the argument that the women bring a difference into the boardroom because they have a different, more reflective leadership style as compared to their male counterparts?

All the above imply that a person that comes into any relationship brings something with them into that relationship by simply being that person. So there are assumptions around a woman coaching a man and vice versa, a black male coaching a white man and vice versa, an older person coaching a younger person and vice versa.

I can trace the true curiosity of this phenomenon to a coaching exercise I got into where I was supposed to coach a colleague, who was older and white and male. What the coachee projected was that he had been around for a long time and knew a lot about coaching. He was an imposing figure – tall and very vocal.

When the time came for me to coach this gentleman I was terrified by my feelings of insecurity and incompetence. Needless to say after 10 minutes into the session, I called a time-out. The pressure was unbearable and the effort too exhausting. With a feeble explanation, I got out of that coaching duty.

While I clocked up the experience to incompetence at the time, on reflecting on this experience I realised that maybe it was not just about my incompetence to coach, but also the assumptions I brought into the coaching relationship that affected my performance. The knowledge that he had worked with some of the top executives in the country, the fact that he was older, more experienced and white (which re-enforced even my projections of competence on the coachee). All the above thoughts were noise in my head, which made it very difficult for me to focus on the process of coaching.

Following that I have reflected on a number of coaching relationships where similar incidents may have happened, and explored how was I feeling about myself, what assumptions I was making about the client and myself- and I found that in most of those issues was where I had to coach an older white gentlemen that I was the least confident, hence the least effective.

## **Literature review**

The literature review on this subject has led me to explore other areas of relationship that I have hitherto shied away from. I was especially drawn to the existential-phenomenological theories as expounded by Husserl, Spinelli & Yalom. More and more the concept of a “lived experience” has preoccupied my mind. The review has looked also at different theoretical approaches to the concept of forming relationships- from romantic relationships to therapeutic relationships and exploring if these concepts apply to coaching.

## Perspectives from Existential-Phenomenological psychology

Proponents of Existential-Phenomenological psychology maintain that humans should be studied holistically and not just components- not just their cognition or their behaviour, etc. They maintain that the whole “lived experience” of humans is relevant.

Phenomenology takes the view that the experience is not an internal, intra-psyche process. Rather than being “inside our heads”, experience is always concerned with, and an expression of, inter-relation. Experience is already out-in-the world (Spinelli 2006).

Perhaps more centrally than any other approach, existential psychotherapy places a big emphasis on the relationship between the therapist and the client. The therapist is therefore very much part of this experience and in fact the therapeutic relationship could by itself already be the intervention for the client’s presenting issue.

There’s obviously a whole lot more to it than this, but at the basic level of it raises the question around what does it mean for coaching? Would the same principles apply?

If that’s the case then it has important implications for coach selection. It implies for one that the coach and the client bring with them their world into the coaching situation – when the door closes behind the coach and the client, it’s not just them and their exclusive & special world unfettered by reality- it’s also the years of experience that these people bring and other inter-relationships that they have “out-there”.

Spinelli re-enforces Farber’s (1967, 590) view that the existential therapeutic relationship brings with it inter-relatedness as well as a ‘...“world-conscious” moral dimension to the arena of psychotherapy...’(Spinelli, 2006).

I propose that the same principles apply to a coaching relationship – and if my assumptions hold true, it also then means this “world-conscious” moral dimension plays a role, at least at an unconscious level, as far as coach selection by the client is concerned.

I once had a white female client tell me they chose me because I was black and I seemed to know what I’m doing. I do not know if the fact that she was a homosexual woman had anything to do with the selection – I assume there was something in there about the unity of the persecuted (as a black man, I probably would understand better the persecution she is experiencing as a gay woman in her community. And perhaps I was more likely to be trusted with that kind of information than a white coach associated with the organisation would).

## **The perspectives from psychoanalytic theory**

The psychoanalytical theories have contributed the concept of the *unconscious* to the field of psychology, thus opening new possibilities and explanations about why people connect and eventually what people come to expect in others.

A central goal of psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious conscious, revealing the drive for feelings and actions. The unconscious contains instructions about the fantasies, rules, ways of behaving and symbolic pictures of what to expect of people, a script we learn from family at a young age and carry this into adulthood.

Part of the script contains instruction about how to deal with anxiety – e.g. relating to someone similar to us is easier than relating to somebody different who could present a challenge to our long-held beliefs and assumptions. This could influence the kind of coach the coachee chooses to work with. Therefore it does not exclude race, gender, age and language- which are the primary identifying dimensions of relating.

Psychoanalysis also introduced the concept of projection as a defence mechanism against anxiety. Projection is essentially an attempt to keep unconscious psychic material unconscious by subjectively “changing” the focus towards the drives or wishes of other people (Meyer et al., 1997). By understanding the concept of projection and other defence mechanisms it becomes easier to explain why some people stay in a relationship than others. People may choose a coach because they are an easy target for their projections and thus helps them “not to deal” with the internal anxieties.

The counterpart of projection is projective identification, which can be described simplistically as the phenomenon of acting to the projections. According to Bion (1962a, as cited by Gomez, 1998) and Roenfeld (1964, as cited by Gomez, 1998) projective identification has an unparalleled value in psychotherapeutic work, since the client may transmit directly to the therapist the actual experience that he/she cannot manage.

*Object-relations theory* is one of the theories that have evolved from psychoanalytical theories. This point of view emphasizes that people use each other to stabilize their own internal world, by developing internal representations of people or things with which to “connect”(Peltier, 2001). These representations or “objects” become the way in which people relate to.

In coaching this implies that the coach could be objectified from the moment they come into contact with the coachee- and whether or not the coachee and the coach connect, will depend upon the what the coach represents to the coachee and vice versa.

## **What do we learn from the area of romantic relationships on what makes relationships work?**

Perhaps not an area expected that one would go into, but I was curious as to what popular psychology as well as some validated data on intimate relationships would offer. Could there be something in there to inform the analysis?

Mark Griffiths (2005), a psychologist at Nottingham Trent University is quoted as saying “first of all you have to click with someone physically...” on being asked what makes relationships work. He mentions however that this is not enough by itself. But it is important. He highlights shared values (core beliefs that can come from having similar backgrounds), trust and continuous communication as important elements to making the relationship work. He goes on to mention age gap as one of the fundamental issues that could derail a relationship “...because people in different generations usually don’t have enough in common”.

The area of sociology and social psychology teems with research on attraction and what creates the connection. Goffman’s Matching Theory (1952) suggests that people are likely to have longer lasting relationship if their partner is as attractive as themselves. Walster & Walster (1969) validated this study and even later by Murstein (1972). Later authors still maintain that the matching theory holds however it raised other questions e.g. does the perception of this person’s attractiveness cause the observer to attribute positive traits to this person?

Feingold (1992), using a meta-analysis of 200 studies, found that physically attractive people were perceived as more sociable, dominant, sexually warm, mentally healthy, intelligent, and socially skilled than physically non-attractive people. Would this apply in a coaching situation – would it be possible that the coachee attributes positive attributes like trust, competence, etc. to a coach because the coach is similar to them? What this research and similar others seem to suggest is that physical characteristics play a role to some extent in “connecting” to the individual. While the application of research is in the area of intimate relationships, I propose that similar conditions prevail in coach selection and ultimately a successful coaching relationship.

Other researchers in this space do not emphasise the physicality so much, but still suggest it. They instead focus on social constructs that suggest shared values and commonality of sorts as well as communication. Kuriansky (2001) is one of the proponents of this approach. She states compatibility (how much each has in common with the other), co-operation, communication and commitment as important factors.

A study conducted by Newcomb (1943, 1967) on college dorm roommates suggested that individuals with shared background, majors, attitudes, values, and political views became friends. This study is generally

regarded as a landmark study in political socialization and seems to be supporting most of the other assertions about shared characteristics and “connection”.

Albert Ellis, founder of Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (REBT- a form of cognitive behaviour therapy) takes a cognitive behavioural approach to the whole thing. He suggests that individuals have “shoulds” and “musts” that they use, first to find a mate and then bring these into the relationship, a kind of “self-talk” of how a relationship should and can be. A successful relationship comes from being aware of these and managing them.

His views are supported by Don Miguel Ruiz (2002), who states as part of his toltec teachings that “...when we meet other people, we classify them right away, and assign them a role in our lives.”

There are many other theories, ranging from simplistic to the obsessively scientific. In all these a few patterns arise- communication is an important element in the success of the relationship- facilitated by other factors like shared values and other compatibility issues. Since coaching is a one-on-one relationship and just as intimate- perhaps differing only in its purpose to a romantic relationship, it does not seem too far fetched that the same principles may apply.

## **Contemporary Authors on coaching and Psychology**

Flaherty (1999) attributes the effective coaching relationship to three elements *mutual respect, mutual trust* and *mutual freedom of expression*. Although he resists the temptation to define rigorously what each of this means, professing instead that this means different things to different people, he still gives generic clues of how one would see this when it happens. I find this a useful framework to open conversations on whether the relationship is effective.

The classification seems to suggest that it’s not a one-way expectation model. That through a process of negotiation and exchange, the coach and the client get to create their own assessment “checklist” of what these concepts mean and how they will see them when they happen within the coaching relationship.

There are patterns that seem to support these elements. Alexander & Renshaw (2005) highlight trust as the bedrock that allows coachees to reveal that they would never otherwise share with anyone. They suggest that demonstrating *commitment, integrity, scrupulous confidentiality and openness* goes a long way towards creating a relationship for the client to relax enough to allow themselves to surrender to the coaching agenda.

Very close to the subject of trust is the issue of *respect*, which they describe as the practical demonstration of trust. While I personally agree with this assertion to a point, I believe respect goes beyond just the demonstration of trust, but also the demonstration of competence as well as other elements defined in the client's sphere as "worthy of respect". The other elements that are important are *openness*, *honesty* as well as *support* and *challenge*.

While the above could be said to represent the "what" of an effective coaching relationship, there is also those that take the "how" view i.e. that the effective relationship is as a function of the "how" and not so much the understanding of the "what". Corey (2001, 15) stresses the role of realness as a prerequisite for an effective relationship. He suggests that the practitioner serves, willingly or not, as a model for the client and as such influences how the client will act and relate to the practitioner. This is not very far from the humanistic/existential-phenomenological approaches mentioned earlier.

While his references relate primarily to the therapeutic realm, I see a direct application of this concept in the coaching realm as well. It somehow suggests that the client "Knows" somehow when the coach is being real or not (congruence).

The foregoing discussion already suggests that there are specific expectations as well as inherent characteristics that are "read" into a coaching relationship, both as coaches and clients.

Clients have a need to be respected as well as to respect the coach – while from a coaches perspective this respect could be seen in the way the coach interacts with the client (e.g. demonstrating unconditional positive regard), from the client's perspective it could be seen for example in the coach's qualifications, experience, age, etc. the elements worthy of respect are likely to have been written into the client's script as a result of their lived experience and expectations.

Clients also have a need to trust the coach before they can work with him or her. This brings about specific expectations, for example, will the coach respect the information I have and keep it confidential. They need to be able to relate to him in some way at a primary level. But there's also a secondary need to be valued as well as to know the person they are dealing with is competent.

Mutual communication is also very important in an interpersonal relationship. Jordaan & Jordaan (1996) define an interpersonal relationship as a process of intercommunication in which the participants construe meanings through symbolic interaction, this practically implies that interpersonal relationship pre-supposes interpersonal communication. If this is the case it then makes sense that there is an expectation of effective communication within the coaching relationship.

The definition above outlines then that communication is

- A *process* – so it's always taking place. This means when a coach comes into the room, the communication between the coachee and the coach is already happening.
- About *meanings*, which implies that words & pictures & actions are interpreted all together as part of the communication continuum. This is usually where the complexity of communication comes in because the meaning attached to these symbols
- A *Symbolic interaction*, which means that first of all, the coach and the coachee have to interact at some level and there has to already be a pre-existing meaning (the coaching agenda) or objective to the interaction. (I would go so far as to extend this interaction to the point where the coachee interacts with the organisation- e.g. reads the brochure, meets the coach on a non-coaching level)

The above seem to support and expand on Flaherty's third element- mutual freedom of expression. Being able to express one-self without being judged already assumes the client can communicate with the coach in some form of shared language- verbal and non-verbal.

In order to validate the above desktop research and perhaps add some more dimensions, a questionnaire was designed to test at a basic level what is important to clients as far as coaches are concerned. This is done in Chapter five.

## **Chapter 3 Research Methodology**

This research followed a non-experimental quantitative research (Christensen, 2001: 33). This approach does not try to ferret out cause-and-effect relationships. Instead it attempts to identify variables that exist in a given situation and at times to describe the relationship that exists between these variables”. The reason for selecting this approach was basically because of time constraints as well as the kind of data I was trying to collect.

It is hoped that at some point a correlation study will take place that looks at whether or not this selection as a result of the primary dimensions resulted in a “satisfactory” coaching relationship and whether or not it affected the coaching outcomes.

For this initial study, the *survey approach* was used to collect the data. An on-line questionnaire was designed and a link sent to a number of coaches within the coaching where the coaches and their clients to complete. To increase the size of the sample, the members of COMENSA, a coaching society in South Africa were canvassed to send the electronic link to their clients. See section on sampling below.

From the data it was hoped to first determine on a descriptive level whether or not the issues highlighted are indicated as important.

The next phase will be to do hypothesis testing on the data to determine the significance of the data, but that won't be in this stage of the research. It is sufficient for this purpose to receive descriptive data that suggests whether or not there's a relationship.

### **Survey Design**

Given the exploratory nature of the research, the questionnaire was designed to be as basic as possible. Another key consideration was to ensure that the questionnaire does not take the respondent too long to complete.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts- the first part aimed at collecting *biographical information* from the respondents, which was important identifier data of our sample. The second part elicited *information about the coaching experience*, specifically focusing on whether or not they have received coaching and how they experienced it. The third part asked straightforward opinion/*preference questions about the coach*.

The challenge with this kind of research is that there are a number of issues that relate to the *confidentiality of data* given that one is working with live human data and not some laboratory or simulated data, so whatever the data collection method should ensure and re-assure the respondents that the data so shared is confidential and/or may not be traced back to them.

In view of this, a statement re-assuring the respondent of the confidentiality of their information was included at the beginning of the survey. The respondents were also not required to give their names. The on-line approach ensured that there was no one-on-one interaction with the respondents; therefore their confidentiality was assured.

An attempt was made to limit the number of questions to make it easier for the clients to complete- the survey was designed to take 3 to 5 minutes to complete. The questions are mostly closed-ended but have allowed some level of freedom so that some other factors can be considered if they come up. See Appendix 1 for the sample survey questionnaire.

The open-ended questions mostly serve to elicit data about what else is important in the selection of a coach by the coachee and vice versa for the coaches. The questionnaire is designed to elicit three types of data – *Biographical data, data on the indication of preference as well as data on perception of the coaching experience.*

I have also tried to limit a number of confusing/ambiguous constructs.

## **Sampling**

Given that a large component of the first phase is quantitative, the subject of sample sizes plays a role. The challenge was to ensure that I get a representative sample of both coaches and coaching clients. The interesting consideration in this instance has been about answering the question of whether or not the sample of people I have access to are representative as a sample.

I finally settled on the following reasoning:

**Population:** all the people that have undergone or are in a coaching relationship (all the coaching relationships). Given the qualifier that the focus of the study is South African at this point, this will be the other limit. Given the emergence of coaching, it's very difficult to quantify how many people are being coached in the country. Given also the secrecy surrounding coaching (some people do not want it known that they are receiving coaching) as well as the definitions around coaching, the number of the population is at this point difficult to quantify. This affects the choice of the sample size. See note below about the chosen sample size.

**Sample:** From a sampling perspective, given the breadth of the population, I used the clients as can be provided by the coaching organisations I have access to in South Africa. COMENSA is a coaching and mentoring society in South Africa that was also used as a primary source for coaching data. They are spread across the country and have established themselves as a symbol of credibility to many coaches in the country. It might be, based on this reasoning that the population is perhaps all the coaches that coach under the auspices of COMENSA. I however do not feel it should be THAT narrow- since the study can be replicated using any other coaching foundations as they start knowing the outcome. Besides, while COMENSA may be my primary source, it will not be my only source (some of the coaches I have requested are not members of COMENSA).

## **Chapter 4 Project Activity**

As indicated, a survey questionnaire was designed using *survey monkey*<sup>6</sup> to collect the data on-line, with the link distributed to participating coaching organisations. The survey monkey tool is an on-line tool that enables the researcher to design the survey and distribute surveys electronically. It also allows the researcher to analyse the data using basic as well as advanced tools. The researcher is also able to export data to either excel or other application to perform off-line manipulation of data.

This therefore is supposed to make it easy (at least theoretically) to manage the data.

While the tool produced reports for most of the survey, the analysis of the open-ended question had to be done manually. The question required the respondent to name up to five criteria statements for selecting the coach.

After the survey closed a factor analysis was performed on these statements and 14 base clusters emerged. This was a conservative approach. A further clustering of the criteria could produce 8 criteria statements. But I resisted doing this, preferring to leave this for further study from people who prefer to perform competency analysis and design.

For the purpose of this research, it sufficed to highlight base level criteria that are important to the respondents in selecting a coach.

The context was created for the coaches that were approached to assist with the programme and they were requested to commit to do the survey. Again issue of confidentiality and time constraints prevented me from sitting there with them to do the questionnaires.

The main challenge in this research was getting the time from the coaches, who were the main distributing agent of the survey. There did not seem to be enough time. It was as if the participants required an inducement to undertake the survey.

One such inducement that I find will need to be considered in future researches is project sponsorship by someone that has clout. While I attempted to this with my interactions with COMENSA, it was not very effective. Mostly because I think, the head of the organisation had not met me and I had not had an opportunity to create a context of the work other than on e-mail.

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<sup>6</sup> [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) provides tools for collecting and analysing data on-line.

*Primary Subject: Coachees/Clients*  
*Secondary subject: Coaches*  
*Primary dimensions: Age, Race, and Gender, preferred language*  
*The subjects should have experienced coaching or in a coaching relationship.*  
*Length of relationship/contract*  
*Did they choose their own coaches? Yes, No*  
*If yes, what did they consider important in choosing a coach (in order of importance?)?*  
*If no, would they have preferred to choose their own coach? Yes & No*  
*If no, what would they consider important in choosing a coach? (In order of importance)*  
*How was their experience with the coaching: wonderful, ok (could have been better), terrible*  
*What do you believe contributed to this experience?*  
*It is important that my coach is: same age as me, younger than me, older than me*  
*It is important that my coach is: same race as me, different race as me*  
*It is important that my coach is: same gender as me, different gender from me*  
*It is important that my coach and I speak the same language. Yes or No*

**Figure 1** What kind of data did I need?

Another challenge was technology- doing on-line surveys is sometimes beset with bandwidth problems as well as access problems. So some of these issues contributed to the slow process of data collection. Time was spent troubleshooting some of the issues. They however did not exert a lot of influence on the process once people got though.

Some of the time was spent on following up and reminding respondents who committed to taking the survey to do so. The challenge with this that needs to be highlighted was that because the respondents were not tracked, there was no way of knowing who still had to undertake the survey except by seeing an increase in the numbers on-line.

The cost of the survey also played a role, the longer the survey was kept active the more it cost. So it was necessary to make a call on when to close the survey and perform an analysis. After two months, the survey was closed.

During the process it also became apparent that more questions were needed to complete the survey. The question that might still need asking, which will probably be included as part of the follow up research is to check what *the race, gender, age and language of the respondents' coach is.*

Due to time constraints, a literature study was done in parallel. Internet searches as well as library searches plus some of the books I have already on psychology gave me some resources to work with. At data analysis stage, the findings from the survey were compared to what has come out from the literature study and include the outcome as part of the report: both similarities and difference. This analysis can be found in Chapter five of this report.

## **Chapter 5 Project Findings**

Given the challenges stated above relating to data collection, a target of at least ten responses was set as meaningful for this exploratory study. It took two months to get to that ideal number- we eventually got 12 responses.

From this number it was possible to get a fair representation of different ages, gender and race. The full result data is attached as Appendix 1.

The age range of the respondents was from 26 to 55. The average age of the respondents was between the ages of 26 and 35. This is more the employment age range, so most of the people that responded to the survey are within the employment age. This already gives us valuable data about who receives coaching. This result seems to already align with the CIPD study (2004) indicating that it's mostly people in junior and middle management that receive coaching. It would be interesting to look at the CIPD data from the age perspective to validate the apparent overlaps.

There was also a 50/50 split in the race of the respondents, 50% of the respondents were Caucasian while the rest came from other races. The nature of the research is such that the opinions of the respondents might be informed by the exact reason that they are a specific race. So it was a "silent" wish that there's an equal spread between the "black<sup>7</sup>" and the white. So this spread was a stroke of good fortune in a way because that confounding variable has at least been handled.

67% of the respondents were female. This is important to note in that the opinion maybe regarded to be gender-biased. This implies that a validation study may have to be undertaken to note if there truly is a gender bias.

72% of the respondents were receiving coaching with the rest having had undergone coaching in the past. Most of the respondents had been receiving coaching for more than a month, which means they will have had at least one session. This is important in that they would at least have had the opportunity to assess their coach and the coaching experience.

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<sup>7</sup> In a South African context all the people who are not classified as Caucasian or white fall under the category black. If we had a Chinese respondent for example, they would not be classified as "white" but as black.

About 82% of the respondents chose their own coach: An important observation that could be speaking to common practice and therefore a foregone expectation. This result is even more important when looked together with the result that the same proportion of respondents believe it's important to them to select one's own coach (Item 9).

The interesting outcome is that almost all respondents (83%) of the respondents preferred English as a communication language, compared to any of the other South African language. I wonder if this has anything to do with the fact that the construct language of coaching is English (the language in which the coaching is taught and sold) or if it just relates to the business language preference (the question was not that specific, so this by itself is an interesting interpretation if the respondents read it in this way).

This result however revealed a gap around the home language of the respondent. It would have been interesting to get this data to compare with the language preference data. For example is the home language of the 41% of the black respondents English? Is the home language of the 41% of the Caucasian respondents English? I doubt that this is the case. This is something to be noted for the next phase of the research. See also the section language preference below.

The above data all together formed a biographical profile of the respondents. To complete the picture around the biography of the respondents, an item was added testing how they are experiencing (or have experienced) their coaching relationship. The intent here was to already get the baseline data on how the current respondents feel about coaching.

Close to 64% of the respondents indicated that their coaching relationship was "Great" and 27% as "OK, could do better". So most respondents were generally happy with their coaching relationship/experience. Which might also imply that they are getting what they want out of the relationship: They selected their own coach; their coach speaks the same language as them, etc. There was 1 respondent (9% of the respondents) who felt their coaching was terrible, further analysis revealed it is the same respondent who indicated that the coach was chosen for them. So this already highlights some correlation- but of course it's insufficient data to make that generalization.

## The primary dimensions of age, race and gender

We have already seen that the language is important to the coachee in selecting the coach. In this section the responses are not as simple to assess as in the previous section. This is because any score that's not a 100% yes or no will most likely be supporting the hypothesis that that primary dimension is important to coaching of the respondents to some degree.

### The age preference

The rest of the results show that the age of the coach seems to be un-important to almost 73% of the

12. It is important that my coach is:		Response Percent	Response Count
Same age group as me		9.1%	1
Younger than me		0.0%	0
older than me		18.2%	2
The age of my coach is not important to me at all		72.7%	8
<i>answered question</i>			11
<i>skipped question</i>			1

coachees, with the remainder preferring the coach to be either older (18%) or the same age (9%). This represents 3 people out of 12 who feel the age of the coach is important in one way or another. This result already suggests there's more work that needs to be done in this place. Especially if one refers back to the anecdotal comments highlighted in Chapter 2 about the lady who felt she was too young to be a coach.

## The Gender preference

The gender preference was almost split in the middle, with almost 55% of the respondents indicating that the gender of the coach is not important, while 36% preferred to work with the coach who is the same gender as they are, the rest preferring to work with the coach who is the opposite gender to them.

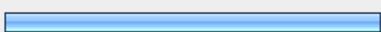
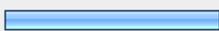
14. It is important to me that my coach is:			Response Percent	Response Count
The same Gender as me			36.4%	4
Different gender from me			9.1%	1
the gender of my coach is not important to me			54.5%	6
			<i>answered question</i>	<b>11</b>
			<i>skipped question</i>	<b>1</b>

This seems to be one of the most contentious and important criteria for respondents. A conversation with some of the respondents indicates a number of variations, with candidates making comments like “ I don’t mind being coached by a woman regardless of race but I will not be coached by a white male” or “I prefer to work with a male coach, preferably black”. The comments in the criteria also came up as “The coach has to be white so that he can understand my stakeholders” (maybe even white AND male based on the statement). This seems to be the item worth a lot more exploration on different levels. There seems to be a complexity of preferences in this instance, which could be a body of research on its own.

In summary though it seems while just over half of the respondents do not mind what the gender of their coach is, the remaining respondents feel it’s important.

## The language preference

The language preference is interesting on its own. If one cross-references the result relating to preferred language of communication (Item 4) to the results on whether or not the language of the coach is important (Item 15), one already sees the correlation. What this seems to suggest strongly is that it's important that the coach speak the same language as the coachee (64% of the respondents). Perhaps it's not so much about the language as it is about the communication and the communication being equated to language in some way. Whatever the reason, it cannot be implied from just the outcomes of this research.

15. I would prefer that my coach speaks the same language as me			Response Percent	Response Count
True			63.6%	7
False			36.4%	4
			<i>answered question</i>	<b>11</b>
			<i>skipped question</i>	<b>1</b>

Another interesting question that comes from this outcome is that: what makes the 36% say the coach does not have to speak the same language as them? At first I thought it had a lot to do with the race of the respondent i.e. that the assumption is that the coach is not “black”- however, a deeper analysis reveals there are variations within both Caucasian and “black”.

The 64/36 split says to me there are perhaps some rules of engagement that should be explored around when would it be appropriate for the coach to speak the same language as the coachee and when is it not important. So further research around this is indicated.

	Comment Text	Response Date
1.	Rapport confidentiality compassion professionalism	Tue, 4/17/07 6:39 AM
2.	Maturity Experience Qualification White Male (in order to understand my stakeholders)	Mon, 4/16/07 5:49 AM
3.	Credentials, race and gender (I cannot work with white males), profile-approach, methodology)	Mon, 4/2/07 2:09 AM
4.	Worldview Philosophy of life Coaching philosophy Coaching model / meta model and framework Experience History of success and failure	Mon, 3/26/07 11:24 AM
5.	Openness Knowledge Approachability Expertise	Mon, 3/26/07 3:22 AM
6.	Coaching expertise Coaching methodology use Specialisation area	Fri, 3/16/07 6:27 AM
7.	We need to be able to connect, build a relationship. The coaching approach of the coach must be able to align with my coaching needs. It must be flexible to accommodate my need and not a step-by-step process. The coach has to have credibility - recommended by others.	Tue, 3/13/07 6:54 AM
8.	Someone who is accomplished	Fri, 3/9/07 12:01 PM
9.	Experience Chemistry Different frame of reference	Wed, 3/7/07 2:30 AM
10.	Credibility Connection Coaches experience - both previous clients and years of exp Academic training	Mon, 3/5/07 11:50 PM
11.	Empathy Understanding Non-judgemental attitude	Mon, 3/5/07 1:14 AM

**Figure 2 What factors did/would the respondents consider in choosing a coach**

## The Race Preference

Almost every respondent believed that the race of the coach is not important for an effective coaching connection (91%). On the face of it this could be taken as a final word on that subject. However if one looks at the responses on Item 10 relating to criteria used by respondents to choose a coach, the race of the coach seems to be important to at least two respondents (see figure 2).

Language and race are almost inextricably intertwined, particular the issue of home language or default language.

What the results of this study seem to suggest is that there's definitely some preference shown by the respondents for one or other of the primary dimension. Specifically gender and language seems to be a very strong consideration, particularly for this sample of respondents.

While age seems to be an important consideration for some, it doesn't seem to be important for most of the respondents.

13. It is important that my coach is:			
		Response Percent	Response Count
The same race group as me		0.0%	0
Different race from me		9.1%	1
The race of my coach is not important to me at all		90.9%	10
<i>answered question</i>			<b>11</b>
<i>skipped question</i>			<b>1</b>

Race seems to be un-important, at least on the surface, however there are still indications that it could be important in certain circumstances.

A non-linear analysis shows that there is some cross-preference for gender and race- where some respondents find it important to have a specific combination of race and gender. This presents opportunities for further research in this area.

It is important to remember at this point that most of this data is the externally observable data that the client experiences long before they engage in any kind of conversation with the coach. As mentioned in Chapter 2, communication happens long before it happens and clients come with expectations about the coach as soon as they step through the door.

What this exploratory research suggests is that there are specific expectations that are based on the age, gender as well as language, and to some extent race. But other than the primary dimensions, are there other issues that impact coach selection?

### Other emergent Criteria

Item 10 explores the criteria that the coachee’s used to select a coach. This was an open-ended question, which was included to counteract all the other controlled variables. The intent was to see what else might come up from the coachees.

Figure 2 shows the raw data. A factor analysis of these statements yielded 14 first level clusters of criteria statements, ranging from “way of being” to “way of doing”. Almost every respondent indicated rapport elements like “*chemistry*”/“*connection*”, etc as important, followed closely by academic training of sorts (50%)

This figure could be as high as 70% if one further reduces the clusters into broader clusters of 8 criteria.

Figure 3 shows these clusters of criteria based on frequency of mention by the respondents.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Empathy</li> <li>2) Understanding/ compassion</li> <li>3) Non-judgemental attitude/openness</li> <li>4) Credibility</li> <li>5) Chemistry/connection/approachability/building a relationship/rapport</li> <li>6) Accomplished/ experienced/expertise</li> <li>7) Academic training/qualification/knowledge</li> <li>8) Frame of reference/philosophy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9) Coaching Model/approach/Framework/methodology</li> <li>10) Flexibility</li> <li>11) Maturity</li> <li>12) Race &amp; Gender/white</li> <li>13) Confidentiality</li> <li>14) Professionalism</li> </ul>
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**Figure 3 Criteria Statements for selecting a coach**

This outcome seem to align very closely to the skills and competency matrix highlighted within the CIPD study (2004; 50,56). This data is however focused on the inherent characteristics of the coach.

Personal attributes like empathy, understanding and a non-judgemental attitude seem to be the most important secondary elements of selection. While “knowledge” elements like academics, coaching model and experience are of secondary importance to these.

In summary, the study seems to indicate that age, gender, race and language as well as competence are important considerations for the client in establishing a coaching relationship.

Given that this was an exploratory study, the most important outcome is that there definitely is cause to look deeper into these issues, perhaps even find some model towards coach selection and the influence of the primary dimensions on this.

A validation study for example is necessary to confirm the results, using a bigger sample and with a couple of adjustments to the questionnaire.

It is also necessary in phase 2 to do a hypothesis test of significance on items 11 to 15.

Finally, the gender preference element seems to indicate that some work needs to be done to determine the exact dynamic within that particular category.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion**

Based on the foregoing data, It is evident that Age, gender, language and to some extent race appears to be an important connecting factor for a coaching relationship.

But this is not to the exclusion of the credentials of the coach.

In the literature review it was highlighted that people bring into the initial coaching meeting specific expectations about the coach that they continue to assess throughout the interaction. *Mutual Trust, Mutual respect as well as mutual freedom of expression* were highlighted as the key broad expectations that contribute to an effective coaching relationship.

It was also indicated that people are brought up with a specific “script” that serve to define own behaviour and actions but is also used to assess the behaviour and actions of others. This script defines values, principles, role expectations and symbolic representations of “what people are like” and “what’s good and bad” in people.

It is also evident from the object-relations principles flowing from the psychodynamic approaches to human behaviour that people are “object-seeking” and develop internal representations of the self in relation to others. Specifically, people search for relationships that match the patterns established in their early life.

I propose that these representations and expectations impinge on the coaching relationship from the time that the coachee decides to engage in a coaching transaction.

The race, age, gender and language of the coach is a critical part of his/her being and whether we like to admit it or not, people come into the coaching relationship with specific expectation about what the coachee’s gender (or any of the other dimensions) might mean for “connection” (which has nothing to do with whether the coach is competent or not).

However there are “competence” elements as well, most importantly the coach’s academic credentials. Whether or not the two elements are intertwined is the subject of another study.

I recommend that these expectations underpin and inform the Mutual trust, mutual respect as well as mutual freedom of expression that is so important in establishing a coaching relationship.

## **But what does this research mean for the coaching fraternity**

In the research proposal, I had mentioned that initially this research felt a bit self-indulgent. So the question was that now that I have satisfied myself (I have gotten the outcome I was hoping for), so what? Does it have any meaning beyond that? I have identified at least four recommendations that are implied by this research for the coaching fraternity.

- Yes, the assumptions that we hold about people's age, gender, race and language could play themselves out in a coaching situation.
- For coaching organisations, it might do well to increase the diversity of the coaches on their database. It could well increase the success of the interventions within organisations.
- Coach selection is a complex process that requires a serious attention. Coaching organisations take it lightly at their peril. Sometimes an unsuccessful coaching intervention had nothing to do with the competence of the coach, but with the fact that the matching failed to tap into the "connection" factor.
- It's easy for an individual coach to beat themselves up about the difficult coaching situation – in assessing that, it perhaps advisable to also check the assumptions of the client about your gender, age, race or perhaps language (for example the preceding research showed that there were variations in language preference within the respondents of the same race! Does coaching in Zulu make sense if the African gentleman in your consulting room prefers to be addressed in English?)
- For coaching societies (e.g. COMENSA, EMCC), it raises the question on whether or not they are doing enough to increase the diversity of their membership as well as drive awareness and mobilise action in this regard. Is this issue taken into consideration in designing training standards for coaches?

I hope that more than the above; the coaching fraternity finds some other value in this exploratory work. Most importantly, that they find something working with and refining for the benefit of all of us.