

The coaching space: A production of power relationships in organizational settings

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Abstract

Given the prevalence of instrumental and positivistic accounts on coaching, our article aims to contribute to a critical theory of coaching by articulating two under-researched topics in the field: power and space. We do so by building on the Lefebvrian political approach to space; more specifically, we show that depending on the coach's experience of the coaching space, three types of power relationships are produced within the coach–coachee–organization triad: independent, mediated, and parallel. Accordingly, the coaching space appears to be either a generator, supporter, or analyzer of power. Overall, by approaching coaching as a political space, we call for increased awareness of the conditions that facilitate the experience of the coaching space as empowering rather than limiting and controlling.

Keywords

Coaching space, Lefebvre, power relationships, triangular relationships

Executive coaching, a form of leadership development through a series of one-on-one conversations with a third party (De Haan et al., 2013), has increasingly been used worldwide (Bresser, 2013) to support change in organizations (Garvey, 2011; Mulvie, 2015). A multibillion dollar industry, it is gradually moving away from a mystical and anecdotal practice to an institutionalized Human Resources tool (Bresser, 2013; Gray et al., 2016). In this context of growth, practice seems

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far ahead of theory (Bachkirova, 2017; Korotov, 2017), justifying a call for a stronger ‘knowledge-based discipline’ (Bachkirova, 2017: 23) with a larger representation of critical scholarship (Gray et al., 2016; Shoukry, 2017). Indeed, with a dominant focus on the ‘micro-[technical] practices of coaching’ (Western, 2017: 42), the existing research and practice are mostly concerned with the mechanics and results of coaching (Mulvie, 2015). This is reflected in Meyer’s claim that ‘there are two “hot topics” in coaching research. The first is whether coaching works and the second is how coaching might work’ (Meyer, 2017: 589). This descriptive and instrumental focus neglects meta questions such as the wider social, theoretical, and organizational issues that shape the coaching discourse and practice (Shoukry, 2017; Western, 2012). Consequently, issues like power dynamics are underexplored (Carey et al., 2011; Korotov, 2017; Shoukry, 2017) even if they represent a topic often brought up by clients (Askew and Carnel, 2011).

Given this void, our research delves into the topic of power in coaching by connecting it to another underexamined topic in the field—space. We articulate power and space in coaching by building on the work of French philosopher and urban sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991) who portrays space as inherently political, that is, as both a product and producer of power dynamics. We thus intend to contribute to a critical theory on coaching through an analysis of power dynamics taking place in coaching, which we apprehend as a space. More specifically, our research question is, What types of power relationships are produced as a result of the coach’s experience of the coaching space, and what role does the coach play accordingly? We explore this question in the context of the traditional triad that composes most coaching interventions: the coach—a professional trained to support change; the employee—an executive who is the coachee; and the employer—the organization represented by the direct manager, the CEO, HR department, and so on. While most power relationships—in coaching and beyond—are conceived in terms of dyads, between a power agent and a power subject (Dahl, 1957; Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Wrong, 1988), our approach is distinct in that it embraces the three-party relationship of coaching.

We begin with a review of the literature and a discussion of the underrepresentation of critical approaches in coaching, especially related to power; we then present the rationale for alternative and critical approaches to the study of coaching; to conclude, we explore the concepts of space and power in organization theory and coaching. The second part is our research methodology section. Third come our findings, where we present how the coach’s experience of the coaching space, either as empowering or limiting, produces different forms of power relationships between the coach, the coachee, and the organization (i.e. independent, mediated, or parallel). The coaching space thus appears as a power generator (independent), supporter (mediated), or analyzer (parallel). Fourth, we discuss the political dimension of coaching and the conditions that either support the coach’s empowerment or limit the coach’s experience, with related educational implications. Overall, Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of space allows us to draw attention to the power relationships that are produced in coaching. This political and experience-based perspective thus calls for raising awareness beyond the dominant technical and positivistic focus in coaching practice and scholarship.

Literature review

Why critical approaches and the issue of power are underrepresented in coaching, and related consequences

Overall, the ‘warm reception’ (Shoukry, 2017: 177) encountered by coaching today probably has to do with the positivistic tone (Du Toit and Sim, 2010) of both its practitioners and scholars, resulting in an underrepresentation of critical approaches. Below, we delve into this underrepresentation of

critical approaches in coaching, and particularly the issue of power, by outlining arguments organized by their level of analysis: macro, meso, or micro.

At the macro level—that is, if we look into the social, economic, and political context of the emergence and development of coaching—the underrepresentation of critical approaches and the absence of the topic of power might have to do with the portrayal of coaching as a by-product of the 21st century, a solution made by and for the system. In other words, positioned as an ‘antidote’ to the challenges of the 21st century, coaching inherently serves rather than challenges the system. Several scholars (see, for example, Bachkirova, 2017; Fatien Diochon and Nizet, 2012; Nielsen and Nørreklit, 2009; Salman, 2014) indeed explain how coaching emerged in Western society to help individuals ‘make sense’ of (Du Toit, 2014) and cope with the pressing demands of modern life. Indeed, a conjunction of factors—such as the externalization of services taken care of within the household (Kaufmann, 2005) or an increasing managerial relationship to the self with the rise of ‘self-steering’ (Fogde, 2011: 78)—has helped legitimize the field of coaching, professionalizing a type of support once assured within the intimate circle as part of the social contract (Bachkirova, 2017). In addition to this adaptive nature, the implicit Western-centric agenda that coaching serves lends to its uncritical orientation, with associated assumptions about individuals, specifically as it applies to the belief that coachees are resourceful, responsible for themselves, and free to choose their future (Shoukry, 2016). This functionalist perspective might be misaligned with non-Western contexts, more dialectical perspectives (Amado et al., 1991), and/or contexts in which freedom is limited, such as oppressive contexts (Shoukry, 2016).

Second, at the meso level, if we now adopt an organizational framework, the underrepresentation of critical approaches can be understood by the functionalist performance-centrism (Mulvie, 2015) held by both the organizational clients of coaching and the ‘coaching body politic’ (Western, 2017: 57) (e.g. regulation bodies, professional associations, training schools). Indeed, likely due to the early stage of the practice, these actors are obsessed with establishing ‘coaching’s value proposition’ (Mulvie, 2015) and possible ‘return on investment’ (pp. 54, 74), embracing a consensual vision of individuals, organizations, and their relationships. This results in ‘goals’ being ‘a primary focus’ (Clutterbuck and Spence, 2017: 219) of theoretical, methodological, and empirical coaching, without contemplating the possible incompatibility of such goals in organizations. Coaches thus are under pressure to perform congruently with the expectations held by their clients and peers (Western, 2017).

Third, at the micro level of the exercise of coaching, the lack of critical perspectives can be connected to the hegemony of psychotherapeutic approaches in the field (Gray et al., 2016; Salman, 2014; Western, 2017) with an emphasis on fixing ‘a “problem person”’ (Tobias, 1996: 89) through ‘one-on-one types of interventions’ (Korotov, 2017: 141). This individual psychological focus is carried at the expense of the team or organization, and potentially acts as a ‘deflector for organizational tension’ (Shoukry, 2017: 180). It might lead to the exclusion of organizational responsibility (Amado et al., 1991; Arnaud, 2007), preventing the possibility of challenging the social beliefs and structures that might have created the problem in the first place (Du Toit, 2014).

Consequently, executive coaching is overly portrayed as a technical practice rather than a political one, where the emphasis lies for the coach on the acquisition and direct application of pre-determined skills and knowledge. The resulting simplistic account of coaching contributes to muting the complexities of the practice (De Haan and Gannon, 2017), thereby maintaining the veil on its backstage (Carey et al., 2011; Stec, 2012). As a result, ‘While much is known about the content of most of the [coaching] interventions, what happens inside coaching is much less known’ (Korotov, 2017: 144). These accounts accompany the portrayal of coaching as a neutral space (Fatien Diochon and Louis, 2015; Shoukry, 2017) with the assumption that the learner, content, and learning processes are ‘neutral’ (Shoukry, 2017: 178), denying the influence of the macro,

meso, and micro issues mentioned above. This is problematic insofar as coaches may be perpetuating specific rationales or ideologies without realizing it. Coaches should, therefore, no longer view themselves as ‘neutral technical expert[s]’ (Shoukry, 2017) but recognize that they are ‘active [political] agent[s]’ (p. 185). The following section explores how an alternative to the dominant technical approach can be developed.

Embracing the spatial nature of coaching

In highlighting the technical tone prevalent in the coaching field, and thus the dominant positivistic and functionalist orientation, several scholars call for an alternative epistemological attitude to the practice and study of coaching as a way to give justice to its inherent complexity. For instance, Bachkirova (2017) calls for a ‘postmodern’ epistemological attitude to coaching, likely to echo the ‘hermeneutic context’ of coaching: ‘a complex interpretative process [that], as such, falls outside of any methodological approaches that seek to limit it to linear-causal relationships’ (p. 31). In the same vein, Gray et al. (2016) urge scholars to go beyond the ‘prevalent rational and pragmatic’ approach to coaching, and to consider it through the angle of dialogic relationships (p. 169). They call for studies that depict the complexity of the change process in coaching, as well as the relational and being aspects of learning. Nevertheless, today both the relational and the spatial dimensions of coaching are largely overlooked. Indeed, while the coaching relationship ‘can be seen to sit center stage in the practice and research on coaching’, it is still ‘underresearched’ and primarily focused on the coach–coachee relationship, overlooking the organization’s place (De Haan and Gannon, 2017: 195). The same can be said about space in coaching, where any issue related to physicality, the body, or embodiment has been ‘largely absent’ (Jackson, 2017: 256) from the conversation.

Coaching scholars are thus encouraged to switch from the dominant ‘having’ orientation in executive coaching, concerned with ‘acquiring, possessing and consuming’, to a ‘being’ orientation, emphasizing ‘exploring, relating, and becoming’ (Carroll, 2015: 92) and considerate of the inherent ‘process, activity, and movement’ (Fromm, 1976: 25) that take place when individuals develop. This being orientation implicitly highlights the temporal, spatial, and relational dimensions of leadership development, which is first and foremost a *space* for development, that is, a site for a transitional journey that allows both unfolding and wrapping up (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013).

A few coaching scholars have started to articulate the link between coaching and space. For example, Western does so in his study of coaching discourses. He associates ‘space’ with a specific type of coaching discourse, what he calls the ‘Soul Guide discourse’ (Western, 2012: 124, 2017: 43), a discourse that ‘hold[s] a “mirror to the soul” creating a reflective, contemplative space that opens up the realm of wisdom [and] being’ (Western, 2012: 132). This ‘experiential space’ is about offering ‘a space for the soul/psyche to speak’ (Western, 2017: 45). It ‘opens a liminal space, pauses and hesitates, listening to the heartbeat of the conversation rather than only its content’ (Western, 2012: 155). Western (2017) also talks about a ‘potential space’ (p. 46) for more in-depth work with the authentic self rather than with the performative self. With a focus on wisdom, being, and authenticity, this ‘coaching discourse represents a challenge to the dogma of modernity [;] it celebrates the traditions of the pre-modern alongside the hybrid of the modern’ (Western, 2017: 45). Quite naturally, ‘such a discourse is rarely interested in achieving goals, aims and targets’ (Western, 2017: 45).

Like Western (2012, 2017), other scholars invite research to go beyond the content of coaching to explore the value of its processes and space. For example, in their typology of the reasons for using coaching, Fatien Diochon and Nizet (2012) distinguish between the ‘content’ and

‘arrangement’ of coaching. Their analysis emphasizes that access to the coaching space or ‘arrangement’ alone can ‘signal value’: the organization is ready to invest in the coachee (p. 89). Coaching is interpreted by the coachee, then, as an investment into his or her worth, consented to by the organization. Korotov (2017) also delves into the symbolic value of coaching by analyzing the role of leadership development through the prism of ‘transitional objects’ (Winnicott, 1953: 89), when coaching functions as a receptacle for anxieties and helps to move the coachee gradually from a state of dependency to independence. In fact, coaching appears as a socially accepted defense mechanism, equivalent to the teddy bear. This transitional function of coaching has also been explored by Amado (2009a) who differentiates between ‘spontaneous’ (p. 23) and ‘designated’ ‘potential spaces’ (p. 24), and by Dubouloy (2004) who identifies the coach as a possible ‘good enough mother’ (p. 477), whose role is to ‘maintain a safe and reassuring atmosphere for everyone’ (Kaës, 1979, cited by Dubouloy, 2004: 477). Building on Kaës’s (1979) work, Dubouloy (2004) describes the coach as a “‘container” facilitating change, functioning as a receptacle for the team’s projections and representations’ (p. 477).

If coaches can be identified as a container, they should certainly not be reduced to ‘neutral backdrops’ (Courpasson et al., 2017: 252), since contents cannot be detached from their container, as emphasized by Lefebvre (1991), whose work is increasingly influential in management (Wapshott and Mallett, 2011). For the French 20th-century philosopher and urban sociologist fighting against the idea of ‘empty “mediums”’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 87), there is nothing like ‘space “in itself” as space as such’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 90). A space should always be understood as a product: any ‘(social) space is a (social) product’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 26). This means that ‘every society—and hence every mode of production with all its subvariants ... produces a space, its own space’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 31). Developing his work in the context of 20th-century economic development, Lefebvre (1991) then explains how modern spaces and their accompanying geographies are the product of a specific economic system—here modern capitalism, and that this modern space will also *produce* certain types of social relationships, sustaining the capitalist mode of production. Lefebvre (1991) uses the example of the urban–rural divide, but the same could be said about many contemporary organizational phenomena, such as the open office versus closed spaces divide. Space ‘is [thus fundamentally] political’ (Lefebvre, 1973: 59), and Lefebvre’s perspective on space is dialectical, since any space is both a product and a producer: ‘product’ as it results from a political—and strategic intention—and ‘producer’ as it *generates* specific political relationships that space mediates. In this *mediation*, space stands as ‘a political stake in the sense that it is a medium, the instrument and object of struggles and conflicts’ (Busquet, 2012: 2). This mediation is sustained by agents of control since ‘all power must have its accomplices—and its police’ (Busquet, 2012: 33). Along these lines, space can be understood as an *analyzer* (Lourau, 1969), ‘a tool for the analysis of society’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 34) used to examine how social relationships are conceived at a certain time and place. In sum, we suggest retaining from Lefebvre that space *produces* power relationships and can potentially hold three key functions: *generator*, *mediator*, and *analyzer* of power.

Lefebvre’s political plan should not be underestimated, as his notion of space sustained a political (utopian) component—the possibility of another society. Indeed, by unraveling the produced spatial dimension—in particular, the socio-spatial processes of alienation—Lefebvre also aims at outlining conditions for subversion and emancipation (Busquet, 2012). In fact, space is both the place for *domination*—the imposition and reproduction of a constraining social order limiting the possibilities of change, and for *appropriation*—the opportunity to modify, and even divert space, ‘enabling the full and complete usage of these [...] places’ (Lefebvre, 1973: 146), sustaining empowerment through transformation of social relations and lifestyles. Again, a dialectic stands out between the dominating limiting *power of the space*, and the emancipatory empowering ‘*power over the space*’ (Busquet, 2012: 3). Here we suggest retaining the overall dimensions of space as

limiting, that is, constraining to application, reproduction, and/or conformation, versus *empowering*, that is, supporting appropriation toward (re)creation.

Coaching space and power relationships

Coaching and power. This aforementioned limiting versus empowering dialectic within space has been identified by the emerging critical coaching scholarship—in other terms though. For example, through the ‘coaching [power] continuum’, Fatien Diochon and Lovelace (2015) point out that coaching can be a practice of both empowerment and control, conditioned by the coachee’s creative resistance. In other words, coaching is an uncertain practice of discipline (Pezet, 2007). However, the critical coaching literature has dominantly focused on how coaching can be a practice of control, especially as stated by Fatien Diochon and Lovelace (2015: 3), a potential form of ‘socio-ideological’ control (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004) exerted through shaping work beliefs. When employees are coached to align their thinking and behavior to the company’s values and leadership frameworks, this can be viewed as a nuanced form of totalitarianism (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002) or ‘governmentality’ (Fogde, 2011: 67) through ‘psychic imprisonment’ (Amado, 2009b: 1). Indeed, employees can become so embedded in normative corporate culture that they fail to see their own capitulation and entrapment in the organization (Casey, 1995). Shoukry (2017: 177) describes these mechanisms as components of oppression when ‘socially prescribed roles become part of people’s identities’; and this embeddedness at the individual and psychic level of oppression makes resistance to oppression and domination more difficult. Today, oppression is experienced at a more deeply personal level, with collective political action becoming more challenging. In this vein, Fatien Diochon and Lovelace (2015: 308) depict coaching as a tool for the ‘individualization’ and ‘psychologicalization’ of issues. To avoid the ‘regression’ (Amado et al., 1991: 76) of turning structural problems into psychological ones, coaches should embrace the political dimension of their practice and presence in organizations. This awareness can allow coaches to embrace their power, encouraging their emancipation and authentic development. If not embraced, power dynamics can prove detrimental: ‘Coaches may end up imposing their own “liberating” ideas on their coachees, or—on the other extreme—withdrawing from playing their role in guiding the process, for fear of overusing their power’ (Shoukry, 2017: 185). Next, we detail our approach to power.

Power and power relations in organizations. In fact, our approach to power, aligned with Lefebvre’s articulation of space and power, implicitly conveys a conception of power that is (a) anchored in relationships and socially constructed; (b) connected and sustaining change; (c) dialectical, as power is both positive and negative; and (d) structural, anchored in organizational structure, thus beyond dyadic relationships. Next, we further expand on these characteristics of power by articulating them within the larger literature on power.

Dahl (1957), one of the early and influential theorists on power, states that ‘power is a relation, and that it is a relation among people’ (p. 203). Hawley (1963) extends this idea further by stating that ‘every social act is an exercise of power, every social relationship is a power equation, and every social group or system is an organization of power’ (p. 422). Similarly, according to Foucault (1980), power is intrinsic to all human relations, and individuals ‘are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power’ (p. 98). In the context of our study, we consider power to be inherent to the different relationships that can be formed between the individuals involved in the coaching process; accordingly, we will look at the types of power relationships.

If power relations are omnipresent, what do they imply, how do they work, and what do they result in? Power relationships imply that the individuals subjected to them do something that they

otherwise would not have done (Wrong, 1988). It can be defined in terms of influence and psychological change, which traditionally includes changes in behavior, opinions, attitudes, goals, needs, values, and so on (French and Raven, 1959). It also implies shaping capabilities, decisions, and change (Clegg and Kornberger, 2006), as well as the perceptions and cognitions of others, so that what they consider to be in their interest is radically transformed (Lukes, 1974), and what is coaching but a process of change and influence?

Within this process of change, people in organizations try to maintain or gain control over the political agenda (Bradshaw and Boonstra, 2008; Lukes, 1974), and they selectively use a legitimate criterion to favor their own relative positions (Pfeffer, 1992). Similarly, in coaching, different stakeholders try to use power in order to advance their own agenda (Louis, 2015).

Using power to advance one's agenda might have a negative connotation. In fact, power has often been associated with negative concepts such as manipulation, coercion, and domination. However, Clegg and Kornberger (2006) point out that power is not necessarily constraining and negative; it can also be productive, creative, and empowering. In the same vein, Foucault (1980) states that power 'produces things; it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression' (Foucault, 1980: 119). This is an aspect of power that is particularly relevant to our study, as we are also interested in looking at how the experience of space by the coach can be empowering, that is, alongside the Lefebvrian perspective discussed above (Busquet, 2012; Lefebvre, 1991), granting him greater power over his or her actions, enabling the full and complete usage by the coach of the coaching space, with potentially productive and creative outcomes (for the coachee, organization, and/or him).

Finally, while power has been mostly studied as a dyadic relationship between two agents (Dahl, 1957; French and Raven, 1959), we adopt a systemic view similar to Foucault's, who considers power relations to involve 'a system, a network of relations encompassing the whole society, rather than a relation between the oppressed and the oppressor' (as cited in Balan, 2010: 56). In these lines, we look at the power relationships in coaching beyond the coach-coachee relationship, and specifically focus on a triangular relationship between coach, coachee, and organization.

Methodology

In order to explore the under-researched topic of power and space in coaching, we chose a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive and constructivist philosophical position with a focus on 'how the complexities of the sociocultural world are experienced, interpreted, and understood in a particular context and at a particular point in time' (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008: 24).

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which elicited rich descriptions of the different situations and provided us with in-depth information pertaining to the coaches' experiences and viewpoints. Our interview guide included a critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) requiring the interviewee to focus on one or more 'incidents': in our study, coaches were asked to recall and discuss complex situations they experienced within a triangular relationship setting that included multiple stakeholders and agendas. This allowed us to investigate the power relations in this triangular relationship, specifically from the perspective of the interviewed coaches, 'taking into account cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements' (Chell, 1998: 56).

For our sample, we used a judgment sampling method, which is the deliberate seeking out of participants with particular characteristics (Morse, 2003). The first selection criterion was that the interviewees needed to have external executive coaching experience, meaning that the coach had been hired and paid by an organization (represented by a sponsor in the organization) with the aim of coaching an executive in the organization. The participants also needed to be certified, or have

a professional affiliation to a federation or association. The reason for this criterion was to ensure that the interviewed coaches had a minimum level of coaching education and experience, and they followed a certain professional and ethical code of conduct. The final criterion was the geographical location of the participants. We included in our sample executive coaches in the United States and the United Kingdom. The reason for this inclusion is that both countries present many similarities in terms of coaching practices and cultural dimensions (Bresser, 2013).

Our sample consisted of 20 executive coaches, 11 female and 9 male coaches, 12 from the United States and 8 from the United Kingdom. All were over the age of 40, with 11 of them over 50, meaning most of them had a previous career before becoming a coach. Nine had backgrounds as HR professionals and another 9 as executives or management consultants. All 20 interviewees were affiliated with a professional coaching association. They described 32 different cases in which they experienced power dynamics with the organization, either explicitly or implicitly.

While conducting the interviews, the researcher was alert to any signs of emotional distress, using encouraging feedback and expressions of empathy to alleviate any potential distress. If they felt the need, participants had the option to end the interview at any point. Finally, in the unfortunate case of distress, the researcher was prepared to recommend the professional services of a licensed psychiatrist and member of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA), who was also a professional acquaintance of the researcher. Fortunately, there was no need for this.

In order to analyze the raw data, which was transcribed verbatim for each participant, we used two different techniques. First, we used a data analysis grid, which incorporated pre-determined themes that were generated from the literature, such as the characteristics of the coaching space. Then, we applied our second approach, inspired by the Grounded Theory, as described by Bryant and Charmaz (2007). This approach consists of using open, axial, and selective coding, as well as constant comparisons to support emerging categories. It allowed us to identify new codes and themes not previously identified in the literature, such as those related to the characteristics of the coaching space, namely fractal or fragmented, and freeing or confining, as defined and described in the findings below.

Alongside the coding work, we used memoing or memo-writing, an activity we initiated during the data collection phase. Memos supported us in identifying categories, making comparisons explicit, and raising any assumptions in need of discussion. We also used constant comparison method to verify if the data supported emerging categories (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). The final phase was to integrate the analysis using the analytic memos developed around the various categories and concepts.

Findings: coaches' experiences of the coaching space and the associated impact on the power dynamics between coach, coachee, and organization

Below we present our key findings. First, we examine how two features of the coaching space (fractal/fragmented and freeing/confining) that emerged from our analysis influence the coach's experience as empowering or limiting. Then, we look at how this empowering or limiting experience produces specific power relationships within the coaching triad with associated roles for the coach.

Characteristics of the coaching space as experienced by the coach

As we looked into how coaches experience the coaching space, two key features emerged that we have organized around two continua (Figure 1).

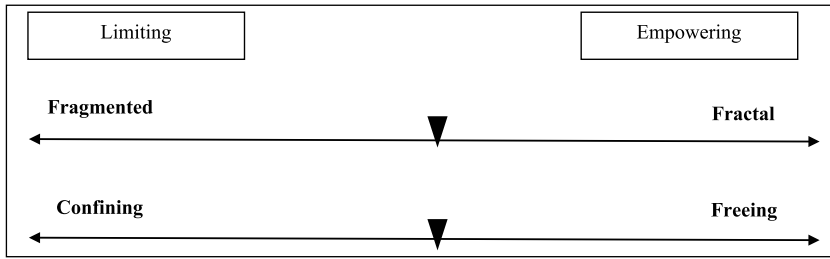


Figure 1. The characteristics of the coaching space as experienced by the coach.

The first continuum is related to the coach's perception of the coaching space as fragmented versus fractal, while the second focuses on the coach's perception of this space as confining versus freeing. Depending on where the coach was positioned relative to these continua, the coaching space was experienced by the coach as more or less limiting, that is, restricting his or her action, or more or less empowering, that is, enabling the coach to proactively act with a higher control and a critical understanding of the environment. This is what we detail below.

Fragmented/fractal space. The first continuum to characterize coaches' experiences of the coaching space relates to the access (or lack thereof) to the wider organization that is provided by the coaching space; it ranges along a fragmented–fractal continuum. As further presented below, 'fragmented' refers to the restrictive access to the organization—only to some isolated fragments allowed by the coaching space—that results in a limiting experience for the coach, while 'fractal' supports the empowerment that can come with the coaching space, when through this space the coach has access to a wider reality, which opens to an understanding of the organization as a whole system.

Thus, the coaching space appears 'fragmented' when it provides only partial access to the organization and its inner workings. As a result, the coach may be misled, focusing on an isolated issue, and blind to larger dysfunctions. The limiting effect of the 'fragmented' nature of the coaching space was well put by Coach 11: 'The risk is that you might have a narrow perspective and ... you do have to be able to see the whole picture to be able to see the context of it'. Coach 8 explains that she was the victim of this fragmentation when she did not realize that while she was coaching a COO, the CEO and the HR manager were planning her coachee's layoff. She had unsuccessfully tried to reach out to the CEO who remained very distant; having access to the organization before or during the coaching intervention is not always a given. In fact, 11 of our interviewed coaches mentioned that the access they had had to the organization prior to the start of a coaching intervention was often limited to a few meetings, typically one with the organization (HR, the coachee's line manager, etc.), one with the future coachee, and one with both parties. Sometimes, it is even less, as in the case of subcontracting, where the coach comes in after the coaching needs have been identified, and the agenda has been agreed upon by the subcontracting firm (Coaches 1 and 16). This experience of the coaching engagement appears narrow and limiting, as it leaves the coach reliant upon the narratives of the different stakeholders, not allowing room to delve deeper into issues, and to embrace and manage underlying power dynamics.

On the contrary, when the fragment of the organizational reality can be used by the coach to access a larger whole, it can be quite empowering. We have called this positive fragmentation 'fractal', referring to the ability of a small-scale component to reveal information of the larger system it is part of (Blakey and Day, 2012). Coach 2 described the empowering effect of the 'fractal' characteristic of the coaching space as 'an excellent opportunity to have a designated client [in

order] to get the system to answer some interesting questions. It gives a coach the opportunity to get the whole system to start thinking about how to function differently'. Here, we can see how partial access to the 'designated coachee' gives the coach the opportunity to address more systemic issues related to the whole organization. A similar process was highlighted by Coach 3 who said that by adopting a systemic approach—examining the whole system rather than focusing only on the coachee—to a performance-related issue such as communication skills, he was able to address wider issues like the organizational culture or context.

Now, we move on to the second continuum, the confining versus freeing nature of the coaching space as experienced by the coach.

Confining/freeing space. The second continuum that stands out from our data relates to the confining or freeing experience of this space. Indeed, depending on how coaches experience the coaching space, they will either feel constrained and limited in their action, or on the contrary, empowered to act.

First, we were able to identify some situations in which the coaches felt their freedom was limited or restricted. For example, while they were initially reluctant to take a contract because of certain conditions or requests, they finally accepted, or they had to comply with an externally imposed way of coaching and could not proceed as they normally would. These situations can be caused by lack of experience or awareness; For example, Coach 7 only realized late in the coaching intervention that he actually could say no: 'I didn't feel like I had a lot of power [at first]. But I realized [later] that I actually had influence and that I didn't make full use of that influence'. In the same vein, Coach 11 was '*very uncomfortable*' with what the organization was requesting, but accepted it because he '*had already committed*'. Another reason for experiencing lack of freedom relates to economic motives. Coach 6 explained, how, early in her career, she was '*hungry for business*' and ended up accepting any coaching request that came her way. A need to prove their competency can also lead coaches to a feeling of confinement, as expressed by Coach 7:

There is this issue or this potential threat that I am aware of, where I need to be viewed as competent and effective, at least in the eyes of the folks who hired me and that can of course sometimes seem to ... counter what I am working on with my coachee.

On the contrary, some coaches experience the coaching space as a freeing space: it provides coaches with the ability to exercise their freedom, even refusing a coaching contract or challenging its perimeters. It can also mean voicing concerns. This freedom often comes with being external to the organization, which allows coaches to say or do things that they would otherwise avoid if they were part of the organization. This is well illustrated by Coach 14 who said that not being within the boundaries of the organization gives coaches more '*freedom*' and power:

If I positioned myself as a member of the team ... then what they saw was that I would do everything they said. They needed to know that there were things I would not do. I'm an independent ... I needed that freedom to do and act in certain ways with the CEO, so that they didn't interfere with that.

This resonates with what Coach 10 expressed about the coaching space allowing him to resist and refuse what was asked of him by the organization: 'I was not one of them. I was not part of their organization ... and I was not going to tolerate this'. Coach 18 qualifies this exteriority as '*healthy*': 'That's the joy of an outside coach coming in. It is totally impersonal. I am not going to be there again. That is really healthy'. However, she also felt that when a coach has worked for many years and on several assignments with the same organization, there is the risk that this coaching space

will become blurry and hence reduce the coach's freedom: 'I have colleagues who will work with an organization for many, many years. They will be outsiders [at first] but [end up] often nurtur[ing] the managers and the trainers, and in fact do exactly as they say'.

As we see, the coaching space can thus be experienced in different ways by coaches, as a fragmented versus fractal space, and as a confining versus freeing space. These experiences of space result in limiting (for fragmented and confining) or empowering possibilities (for fractal and freeing). Now we will further delve into the types of power relationships that are *produced* as a result of the coach's experience of the coaching space and associated roles. In fact, we identified three possible scenarios, which we detail next.

Three types of power relationships produced

A first scenario is when independent dyadic power relationships are produced separately between the coach and the coachee, and between the coach and the organization. We will see further below how, depending on the coach's experience of the coaching space, the new power relationships can take different forms, the coach serving as either an 'isolator', limiting the relationship to the one-on-one coach-coachee dyad and focusing only on one fragment of the organizational reality, or an 'integrator', integrating the different organizational elements into a bigger picture.

In the second scenario, mediated power relationships are produced as the coach acts as an intermediary in the power relationship between the coachee and the organization. Here again, depending on how the coaching space is experienced, the coach can become either an 'instrument', used by the organization to advance its agenda, or a 'moderator' in the pre-existing power relationship between the coachee and the organization.

Finally, in the third scenario, parallel power relationships are produced as the coach experiences and mirrors back the power relationship between the coachee and the organization, and depending on the experienced characteristics of the coaching space, can become either a 'substitute', caught in the pre-existing power relationship between the coachee and the organization, or a 'revealer' of hidden agendas and power dynamics.

Table 1 summarizes the different scenarios and implications for coaches, taking into account the experienced characteristics of the coaching space.

1. *Independent power relationships in a limiting coaching space—the coach as an isolator:* In the newly created coaching space, new independent power relationships can emerge between the coach and the organization, or between the coach and the coachee. For example, in 7 out of 31 cases, the relationship between the coach and coachee evolved independently and regardless of the organization's needs and agenda. For instance, the coachee might try to influence the coach and push his own agenda to work with the coach on developing his career outside of the organization. In this scenario, the coach might accept or refuse the coachee's agenda. When the coach accepts, she could be described as an 'isolator', limiting the relationship to the one-on-one coach-coachee dyad and focusing only on one fragment of the organizational reality, the coachee's agenda. This proves to be limiting as, within the coaching space, the coach ignores the wider reality of the organization and settles for the agenda of one of the stakeholders (in this case, the coachee's) at the expense of another's (in this case, the organization's).
2. *Independent power relationships in an empowering coaching space—the coach as an integrator:* On the contrary, the newly formed power relationships can take a different turn in some circumstances. Coach 2 explains how she purposefully 'manipulated' the organization

Table 1. Power relationships produced in the coaching space and associated roles of the coach.

Triangular power relationship	Experience and resulting impact of the coaching space		No.	Role of the coach in the triangular power relationship
Independent power relationships <i>Coaching space as power generator</i>	Limiting	The coach develops an independent one-on-one power relationship with one of the stakeholders of the triad, at the expense of the other.	1	Isolator: opts for individual-focused coaching
	Empowering	The coach takes the initiative to develop independent relationships with some stakeholders in order to positively influence the system.	2	Integrator: opts for more systemic approach to coaching
Mediated power relationships <i>Coaching space as power supporter</i>	Limiting	The coach is instrumentalized within power relationships.	3	Instrument: used by the organization to advance its agenda
	Empowering	While being caught in the power relationships, the coach manages to transform them and get positive outcomes for the coachee and/or the organization.	4	Moderator: elevates power relationships
Parallel power relationships <i>Coaching space as power analyzer</i>	Limiting	The coach experiences power relationships similar to what is taking place between the coachee and the organization, almost in a psychodynamic sort of a way.	5	Substitute: gets caught in psychodynamic transference of power relationships
	Empowering	The coach builds on the experienced power relationships to reveal and challenge them, and/or send them back.	6	Revealer: plays with power dynamics, and is an actor of change

to meet her coaching objectives. She indeed explained that she withheld from the different stakeholders what she was doing:

The organization wants me to only focus on the designated coachee. That is for them a way of saying ‘the others are not concerned; it is not their problem’. Actually, I disagree totally with this view. My target is everybody in their organization. In my 10 hours of coaching within this organization, I am actually only going to see the designated coachee for two hours, spending most of my time with other stakeholders because I am going to work at the system level.

In this example, the coach is using the freedom she has in the coaching space and building on its fractal characteristic by adopting a systemic approach. We could say that the coach here is an ‘integrator’—integrating the different organizational elements into a bigger picture.

3. *Mediated power relationships in the limiting coaching space—the coach as an instrument.* Mediated power relationships take place within the coaching space when the coach is positioned in the middle of a power relationship between the coachee and the organization. This can result in a limiting experience and was a frequent scenario in our data; in 9 out of 31

cases, the coach was instrumentalized by the organization to advance its own agenda. To do so, in some instances, key stakeholders in the organization (the coachee's direct manager, HR, the CEO, etc.) exercised direct power over the coach, such as coercion. Coach 7 described a situation in which the organization, represented by the HR department, explicitly asked for evidence of certain gaps in the coachee's skillset in order to justify a layoff. Although the coach would not have done it otherwise, in this situation he let his *'arm get twisted'*. Here we clearly see that the coach did not experience enough freedom in this space to resist the power exercised on him and to refuse the organization's agenda. In other instances, the coach felt manipulated by the organization (Coach 10: *'They wanted me to be a puppet'*; Coach 18: *'I felt I was set up'*). In such cases, due to the fragmented nature of the coaching space, the coach fails to identify the organization's agenda, at least initially. In these cases, we can say that the coach becomes an 'instrument' or accessory used by the organization to advance its agenda.

4. *Mediated power relationships in an empowering coaching space—the coach as a moderator.* Mediated relationships can have other outcomes too. For example, in a scenario similar to the ones above, Coach 11 learned that the organization initially intended to let his coachee go; however, the coach managed to modify the organization's hidden agenda and attitude toward the coachee. As Coach 11 puts it, 'I got [the organization] to demonstrate and make some assurances. I needed to know that these conversations were taking place [with the coachee] and then I would get engaged with the client, [who] turned things around and was promoted'. In this example, the coach first used the fractal nature of the coaching space to identify the hidden agenda. Then, he used his power to act, modifying the organization's agenda and becoming a 'moderator' in the pre-existing power relationship between the coachee and the organization.
5. *Parallel power relationships in a limiting coaching space—the coach as a substitute.* In this context, similar power relationships take place between the two dyads. It often means that the coach becomes entrapped in the psychodynamics of the existing power relationship between the organization and the coachee, acting as a substitute for the coachee when dealing with the manager and vice versa. An example is when the coachee does not have a trusting relationship with the organization and transfers this lack of trust onto the coach, as illustrated by Coach 9:

There was an issue about the relationship between the commissioning manager and the coaching client ... [who] didn't have a good trusting relationship And similarly, I experienced a difficult relationship with the coachee; I did as much as I could at the time [but] there was too much resistance from the coachee.

Such a situation can be limiting to the coach, as the fragmented nature of the coaching space leaves him trapped in that psychodynamic power relationship, where he is restricted to being a substitute for the manager and is unable to break free from this position.

6. *Parallel power relationships in an empowering coaching space—the coach as a revealer.* The parallel power relationships can however be empowering. An example is provided by Coach 12 who challenges the HR manager on his combative attitude regarding the financial conditions of the coaching contract. Over time, the coach indeed came to the conclusion that this negative attitude was reflective of a larger aggressive organizational culture. He thus used his personal experience with the HR manager to mirror back the culture of the organization and provide feedback on ways of proceeding. Similarly, Coach 10 described feeling as if the president of the company was trying to manipulate her, as well as other

managers in the organization, by withholding key information. The coach sensed this manipulation and managed to reveal the reasons behind it, namely that the president wanted to sell the company and to influence the attitudes of the senior managers who were against the regime change. Here the coaching space was empowering, as the coach used the fractal characteristic of the coaching space by picking up on the manipulation in the boardroom and using her freedom to act, which allowed her to reveal the president's hidden agenda.

Discussion: increasing awareness of the political dimension of the coaching space

Our findings depict how the coach's experience of the coaching space produces certain types of power relationships within the coaching triad, with associated roles for the coach. The focus on the coach's experience demonstrates how power relations are not necessarily inscribed in advance in the coaching space, but rather result from the coach's experience of the space. That is why it seems essential to raise awareness on this connection between power and space so that coaches can adjust their actions, maneuvering toward an empowering experience for themselves and the stakeholders of the triad—and even beyond. Next, we discuss these findings in greater detail. First, we look at the political dimension of the coaching space; second, we explore some conditions supporting the empowering versus limiting experience of the coaching space by the coach.

Coaching space experienced as political (rather than technical)

Fragmented–fractal and confining–freeing space. Overall, our findings, building on Lefebvre's work (1973, 1991), show how a space can be empowering or limiting and that the coach's experience of the space can be captured by two additional continua: fragmented–fractal and confining–freeing (Figure 1).

First, in the fragmented versus fractal continuum, it stands out that the coach's experience of the coaching space can be limiting when they only have access to a fragment of the organization. This happened to Coach 17 who proved blind to *'the sub-context'*, unable to *'judge the coachee's situation properly'* as she *'was too trusting'* when she accepted the organization's coaching request. On the contrary, the fractal dimension of the space grants access to the worldviews, values, and norms held within the company. This was illustrated by Coaches 2, 6, and 11 who engaged in a discussion of the role of context and how it shaped expectations. It resulted in Coach 2 being able to provide feedback to the organization about concerns that arose through this analysis. This first continuum in Figure 1 relates to the specific position of the coaching space, neither totally inside nor outside the organization; it stands in-between. According to Dubouloy (2004), Western (2012), and Korotov (2017), coaching appears as a potential, liminal, and transitional space, somewhere in-between the front and back stage, at the boundary of two dominant spaces, not fully part of either (Shortt, 2015). This neither/nor condition should not be associated with nothingness, with a lack of being or mattering; on the contrary, the resulting in-between constitutes for Grolleau (2014) the foundation, from an architectural perspective, of development. For the coach, this in-between position—or *'outsider status'* (Sturdy et al., 2009: 629)—can be used as a resource. As Lefebvre (1991) further explains, while fragmentation in space certainly can have a negative connotation—often associated with separation, avoidance, and isolation—fragments still provide a *'very helpful result'* as their analyses *'disclose'*, informing us of social relationships and wider organizational functioning (Lefebvre, 1991: 88). Citing Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath (2001), Sturdy and colleagues explain how we can see *"marginality"* as the necessary contribution [consultants] bring to organizational

learning in terms of new knowledge—the “*strength of weak ties*” (Sturdy et al., 2009: 629). Indeed, they precisely derive their power from their boundary position: their ‘status as organizational outsiders, as “independent” of the organization is key’ (Sturdy et al., 2009: 630). As a space at the frontier of organizations, coaching also offers ‘a specific potential for subversion and transformation’ (Küpers, 2011: 46).

Second, in the confining–freeing dimension of space (as shown in Figure 1), while space can function as the context for exploitation through a confinement to existing situations and their reproduction, it can also support change, freeing people from oppression. Indeed, as Lefebvre (1991) suggests, through micro-practices of power that take place within spaces, change can occur. In our data, we saw how the freeing dimension of the space can allow the coachee to discuss with the coach larger structural issues. Then, with newfound clarity and distance, the coachee can consider whether he or she shares the same values as the organization.

The coaching space as a power generator, mediator, or analyzer. Building on Lefebvre’s work (1973, 1991), we portrayed how the coaching space produces power dynamics through three mechanisms: by being a power *generator* through the production of *independent* power relationships within the triad, by being a power *supporter* in producing *mediating* power relationships between the coachee and the organization, and by being an *analyzer* of power, producing *parallel* relationships that mirror each other. Coupled with the characteristics of the coaching space described above, we identified different roles for the coach (Table 1). For certain coaches, the power dynamics in the coaching space can lead to ethical dilemmas raised from a limited experience of this space, such as acting as an *isolator* who contributes to the individualization of issues (Tobias, 1996); an *instrument*, forced to collaborate with an organizational agenda (Fatien Diochon and Nizet, 2015); or a *substitute* to the collective (Amado, 2004). However, when the space is experienced as empowering, the coach becomes an *integrator* positively influencing the system, a *moderator* generating positive outcomes for the system, or a *revealer* of hidden agendas and power dynamics.

Overall, these three types of power relationships produced through the coaching space and related experiences of coaches demonstrate the myriad of power dynamics that take place within this space. Furthermore, what stands out from our results is that the coaching space is not the neutral territory as described by the technical-oriented literature on coaching. While this neutrality still seems prevalent in professional discourse, the study of coaches’ actions reveals the inherent power dynamics, confirming the argument that power and politics are an inseparable part of organizations (Pfeffer, 1992). Moreover, the political dimension of power does not always work against coaches; the empowering dimension that we emphasized demonstrates the positive consequences of power when the coach acts as an *integrator*, *moderator*, or *revealer*. Therefore, we explore next some conditions that influence the empowering versus limiting experience of the coach within the coaching space.

Conditions influencing the empowering versus limiting experience of the coach within the coaching space

Our findings encourage a discussion of the conditions that influence the experience of the coaching space as limiting or empowering, given its features as fractal/fragmented and freeing/confining.

We review them, as displayed in Table 2, according to a macro/meso/micro continuum.

At the macro level, increased social, cultural, and political awareness. At the macro level, the adaptive and functionalist nature of coaching is encouraged by context-free models prevalent in the field

Table 2. Summary of the reasons for the underrepresentation of critical issues in coaching, associated impacts on the coach's experience of the coaching space, and professional and educational implications.

Factors contributing to the underrepresentation of critical approaches and the topic of power in coaching		Coach's experience of the space		Professional and educational implications
		Limiting ←	→ Empowering	
Macro	<i>Adaptive and functionalist discourse</i> A focus on coaching as a solution made by and for a system, to help individuals meet the demands of modern Western life	A context-free space, neglecting issues of worldviews, assumptions, and norms	A context-sensitive space that discusses the factors shaping expectations and behaviors	Coaches should develop their social, cultural, and political awareness In education, integrate sociological classes (to discuss topics like theory relationships, language, culture and context, dominant discourse, power, morality, etc.) and introduce critical topics in psychology classes
Meso	<i>Performance-centric discourse</i> A focus on establishing the return on investment (ROI) of coaching	A space constrained by an externally imposed agenda on the coachee with narrowly defined goals	A participatory space for 'goal enlargement' to co-design collective and systemic objectives supported by a coaching culture beyond individual performance focused objectives	Coaches should include more systemic perspectives Educate to bring to light hidden agendas and power dynamics in coaching Educate to support the creation of a coaching culture
Micro	<i>Psychological discourse</i> A focus on individual issues, neglecting larger issues	A space restricted to an individual, psychological approach	A space open to a broad range of coaching approaches	Coaches should try to adopt a panoply of coaching approaches and frameworks beyond the psychological discourse Educate to develop multiple frames of reference with reflexivity and come up with own model of practice

(Gray et al., 2016). Moreover, the fragmented condition of coaching, that is, the narrow and restricted access to the organization, will further prevent the coach from understanding the organization's culture or operations. This can be mitigated if the coaching space gets more context-sensitive by allowing for a discussion of the factors that shape expectations and behavior. Shoukry (2017) encapsulates this as the 'social, cultural and political awareness' that allows 'coaches [to] become aware of how social structures and cultural norms affect the way they think and behave' (p. 186). Consequently, coaches need to 'learn about concepts like ideology and social roles, and about mechanisms like socialisation and power' (Shoukry, 2017: 186). The development and mastery of such political skills requires a shift from model-focused education and training programs to the integration of disciplines such as philosophy and sociology into coaching education (Gray et al., 2016; Louis and Fatien Diochon, 2014). The integration of these disciplines should allow the focus of coaching education to move away from the individual to the societal, opening the discussion to such topics as organizational theory relationships, language, culture and context, dominant discourse, power, morality, and so on. In addition, in psychology-oriented classes, a myriad of topics can be included, such as 'psychology of the oppressed' (Shoukry, 2017: 186). Indeed, Shoukry (2017) recommends that coaches understand how oppressive contexts shape people's experience and might limit their ability to change:

Because living in these [oppressive] environments affects people deeply, coaches need to use psychological models that incorporate the possible implications of oppression on processes like coachees' self and identity development, motivation, and learning. Coaches also need to consider how internalised oppression may act as an internal barrier to change. (Shoukry, 2017: 186)

Overall, this macro-level awareness takes place when coaches 'become critical' (Cox, 2013: 88) by developing questioning skills and encouraging their clients to do the same, and by engaging in what Gray et al. (2016), based on Jarvis's (1987) typology of learning, describe as the highest level of learning, contemplation, which includes reflective and experimental learning.

At the meso level, aim for enlarged goals. At the meso level, the limiting power of the coach is more likely to occur if the space is confining, that is, constrained by externally imposed agendas on the coachee with narrowly defined goals, mostly restricted to individual performance, as seen in the performance enhancement discourse prevalent in coaching (Mulvie, 2015; Western, 2012). Empowerment is then more likely to occur with what we refer to as 'goal enlargement', an expanded version of objectives in coaching designed in a participatory way, which means with the full involvement of the coachee and a systemic perspective in mind. In this process, the initial three-party contract (between organization, coach, and coachee) should be conceived of as a working alliance to ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the success of the coaching experience. Here the recognition of the fractal dimension of the space by the coach appears key as it provides access to all stakeholders. Also, the freedom of the space should allow the coach to question the relevance of the objectives. Thus, the coach should make sure that the three-party contract is reasonably clear, agreed to by all, and sufficiently open, with objectives and deadlines not too narrowly defined. These initial steps suggest that the coach should encourage the organization to develop a coaching culture (Meggison and Clutterbuck, 2006), an environment in which coaching is embedded into the organization as an HR tool, rather than a short-term solution, engaging people both formally and informally, with colleagues across functions and levels. As Megginson and Clutterbuck (2006) put it,

Coaching ... [should be] so seamlessly built into the structure of HR systems that [it occurs] automatically. The skills of learning dialogue are sufficiently widespread that people are able to raise difficult or

controversial issues, knowing that their motivations will be respected and that colleagues will see it as an opportunity to improve, either personally, or organisationally, or both. (p. 233)

From a pedagogical point of view, coaching educators should encourage students to critically diagnose the demand and develop systemic goal-setting skills; as Tobias (1996) insists, ‘Relevant others ... are usually directly or indirectly part of the problem’ (p. 89). This is why it is essential to educate the whole system (Amoureux, 2002). Without a systemic approach, the coach can contribute to the individualization of issues and the exclusion of collective and organizational responsibility (Fatien Diochon and Lovelace, 2015). Such a shift in coaching education would be a first step toward helping coaches understand how to support the organization to foster a coaching culture.

At the micro level, the development of an integrative model of practice. At the micro level, a limiting dimension is the restriction of the coaching practice to the direct application of psychology-oriented discourses that narrow the interpretation of use. It seems rather empowering to encourage coaches to open the panoply of approaches and frameworks beyond the psychological scope—for example, as derived from education, sociology, philosophy—and take distance from them through the development of reflexivity. A possibility, as practiced in most UK programs, according to Gray et al. (2016), is to require coaching students to develop their own model, an ‘integrative model of practice’, which should reflect their ability to understand, critically reflect, and integrate the different ideas they are exposed to (p. 37).

Conclusion

Given the dominant instrumental and positivistic approaches to coaching, our article aims to contribute to a critical theory of coaching by articulating two under-researched topics in the field: power and space. By approaching coaching as a space, as encapsulated in the ‘coaching space’ concept, we draw attention to the power relationships that develop in coaching as a result of the coach’s experience of this space. The reference to the Lefebvrian concept of space allowed us to conceptualize the inherently political dimension of coaching. More specifically, we showed that depending on the coach’s experience of the coaching space, three types of power relationships were produced within the coach–coachee–organization triad: independent, mediated, and parallel. Accordingly, the coaching space appeared to be a generator, supporter, or analyzer of power relationships. More specifically, we observed that depending on the coach’s experience of the space that we captured through two continua—fragmented/fractal and confining/freeing—the coach took on different roles. When coaches have a limiting experience of the coaching space, the coach tends to play the role of an ‘isolator’, serving the agenda of only one of the stakeholders; an ‘instrument’, used by the organization to advance its agenda; or a ‘substitute’, caught in the pre-existing power relationship between the coachee and the organization. However, when experienced as empowering, the coaching space allows the coach to become an ‘integrator’, positively influencing the system, a ‘moderator’, getting positive outcomes for the coachee and the organization, or a ‘revealer’ of hidden agendas and power dynamics.

Lefebvre’s underlying intention in increasing the visibility of space was to unmask processes of domination. Along the same lines, by approaching coaching as a space, we aim to increase awareness of the inherently political dimension of coaching. By drawing attention to coaching as an experienced space rather than a neutral and empty medium, we hope to increase awareness of the conditions that facilitate an empowering experience of the coaching space.

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