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## Academic Paper

# An integral quadrants perspective of coaching presence: A qualitative study of professional coaches

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## Abstract

A multi-dimensional perspective emerged from this qualitative investigation of coaching presence pertaining to a coach's focus and behaviors during a coaching session. The qualitative methodology was informed by grounded theory and employed sensitising concepts derived from Wilber's quadrant framework. Data came from semi-structured interviews with 16 ICF certified coaches. Findings suggested six themes: (1) Mindful Awareness, (2) Authentic Connection, (3) Conscious Attunement, (4) Embodied Way, (5) Holding Outcomes, and (6) Structural Alignment. These themes appeared to reflect Wilber's observations about subjective, objective, intersubjective, and inter-objective ways of being and perceiving.

## Keywords

coaching presence, integral theory, grounded theory, mindfulness, coaching competency

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## Introduction

Coaching presence is considered an essential competency in fostering the coaching relationship (ICF, 2020). Given the centrality of presence to coaching practice (Virgili, 2013), it is not surprising that there are so many interpretations of what this competency is all about. It is variously defined as a capacity to stay “present and attentive” (Flaherty, 2010), a “quality of relating” (Topp, 2006), a “state of awareness” (Silsbee, 2010), “a feeling of being there” (Drake, 2015), or a way of being (Iliffe-Wood, 2014). While many definitions of presence represent unidimensional perspectives, such as that of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2018), the diversity of such unidimensional framings hints at the possibility that presence is more multidimensional in nature. To this point, Cox (2013) suggests that as coaches “our presence needs to be transformed into action, so that not only does

it encompass our mindfulness, but it also involves interaction with the client, the coaching alliance and the setting of the coaching” (p. 134).

## Background

It is useful to briefly review this construct’s background, along with research pertinent to its definition and relevance. Tracing coaching’s focus on presence to earlier traditions takes us back to the Eastern philosophical roots of Taoism and Buddhism. Though ancient Buddhist texts reference a “fully awakened” state of mindfulness (Wallis, 2004, p. 40), the concept of wu wei in the Taoist tradition offers a sense of mindful action representing more than a state of contemplation (Smith, 1991; Xing & Sims, 2011). Philosophical traditions also seem to have influenced current framing of this construct, with the works of Martin Buber (2004; Kohanski, 1975) and his contemporary, Martin Heidegger (1962), providing useful perspectives.

Not surprisingly, the field of psychology has long expressed interest in the construct of presence (Colisimo & Pos, 2015; Erskine, 2015; Hycner, 1993; Rogers, 1951; Wampold, 2015). In a definition by Schneider (2015), therapeutic presence was understood to be “a complex mix of appreciative openness, concerted engagement, support, and expressiveness” (p.304). It is relatively easy to see a multidimensional understanding of presence in this definition. Geller and Greenberg (Geller, 2001, 2013; Geller & Greenberg, 2002, 2012; Geller, Greenberg & Watson, 2010) have perhaps done the most in recent years to advance understanding of therapeutic presence, describing it as “the state of having one’s whole self in the encounter with a client by being completely in the moment on a multiplicity of levels – physically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually” (Geller & Greenberg, 2002, p. 7). These authors also identify three aspects of presence including an openness to the client, inward attentiveness, and an externalised connection with the client. Again, we might see multidimensionality in this perspective. A more thorough review of the presence construct reveals other threads relating to how presence is framed within professional coaching; these include concepts of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), presencing (Otto Scharmer, 2016; Senge et al., 2004), ‘self as instrument’ (Burke, 1982; Kennedy, 2013), and social presence (Biocca et al., 2003; Hayashi, 2021).

## Coaching research

Beyond the numerous coaching definitions of presence, there is a small body of research that can be divided into three categories: presence of the coach, presence of the client, and presence between coach and client. Our review suggests that the majority of research focuses on the presence of the client (Collard & Walsh, 2008; Drake, 2015; Linger, 2016; Spence et al., 2008; Thurlings et al., 2014; Topp, 2006). Only a few studies examined presence or related concepts from the perspective of coaches, while one (Noon, 2018) investigated both coaches’ and clients’ perspectives. Braham’s (2005) heuristic research explored mindfulness in coaching from the perspective of executive coaches, while McBride’s (2014) dissertation examined how coaches experience the flow state. Another dissertation by Kennedy (2013) focused on ways in which development impacts coaches’ use of ‘self as instrument.’ Noon’s (2018) research moved beyond a singular dimension of dimension of presence to a more multi-dimensional view emerging from the perspectives of both coaches and clients.

## Toward a multidimensional model

Given the different ways in which presence has been conceptualised and studied, it seems worthwhile to further explore presence as a multidimensional construct. To guide our thinking about multidimensionality, we chose integral theory as a way to appreciate what the dimensionality of presence might resemble (Wilber, 2006, 2016). According to Esbjörn-Hargens (2010), “one of the reasons that integral theory is so useful is that it embraces the complexity of reality in ways few

other frameworks or models do" (p. 37). Central to integral theory is the quadrant model, which influenced Kennedy's (2013) study of integral coaches' use of 'self as instrument,' and Noon's (2018) development of the C2 model of coaching presence. As well, Bachkirova, Cox and Clutterbuck (2018) relied on the quadrant model for the identification of their four dimensions of coaching.

Briefly, the quadrant model reflects two orthogonal dimensions, with one ranging from individual to collective perspectives and the other identifying subjective/interior or objective/exterior perspectives, and thus yielding four quadrants: The "I" (the inside of the individual) quadrant, the "IT" (the outside of the individual) quadrant, the "WE" (the inside of the collective) quadrant, and the "ITS" (the outside of the collective) quadrant (Wilber, 2000, 2006, 2016). Quadrants provide four foundational perspectives through which any given phenomenon can be viewed:

### **"I" Quadrant**

The focus of the "I" quadrant is internal experience and subjective interpretations of feelings, thoughts, and sensations (Divine, 2009; Wilber, 2006). This quadrant provides a lens examining the subjective experience of the coach.

### **"It" Quadrant**

The "IT" quadrant corresponds to behavioral phenomena (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2012; Wilber, 2006). According to Divine (2009), this quadrant emphasises observable parts of our bodies, behavioral actions, as well as concrete task accomplishments. The "IT" quadrant would be sensed in the body, behavior, and observable actions of coaches.

### **"WE" Quadrant**

This quadrant emphasises the relationship domain, mutual understandings, and shared meaning (Divine, 2009; Wilber, 2006). Coach and client interacting in a relational space during a coaching session pertains to a "WE" perspective of coaching presence.

### **"ITS" Quadrant**

This quadrant outlines social and systemic phenomena among individuals, including the physical environment, how people get things done, as well as systemic and structural components (Divine, 2009; Esbjörn-Hargens, 2012). How coach and client share objective relational space and navigate structural aspects during a coaching session seem relevant to an "ITS" perspective of coaching presence.

## **The Study**

A reasonable starting place for appreciating what coaching presence represents in the world of coaching practice was thought to be available in the perspectives of experienced practitioners. The exploratory nature of our question suggested a qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016) that was informed by grounded theory (GT) method (Rupšienė & Pranskuniene, 2010; Thornberg, 2012). As Thornberg (2012) comments, "In an informed GT approach, the researcher takes the advantage of pre-existing theories and research findings in the substantive field in a sensitive, creative, and flexible way" (p. 255). Literature is not used to force deductions, rather to serve as a guide through "a set of data sensitising principles" (p.255).

## Methodology

Applying a social constructionist lens (Charmaz, 2014) to this qualitative study, guiding questions were formed to surface understanding of coaching presence based on coaches' perspectives. The following research questions guided the study: How is coaching presence understood by experienced coaching practitioners? What are the key features of coaching presence during a coaching session? What is the experience of being present and not being present in a coaching session? In addition, integral theory (Divine, 2009; Wilber, 2006) sensitizers were invoked throughout the interviews to encourage coaches' multidimensional reflections pertaining to individual and collective subjective and objective experiences of presence.

## Participants

The research used theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) so as to identify and select participants with pertinent knowledge and experience related to coaching presence. Participants were selected using an iterative approach: An initial tranche of 9 participants was purposely selected, the data analyzed, and based on this analysis a second tranche of 7 participants was selected to include coaches who were thought to be able to reflect more of an integral perspective of coaching presence (e.g., graduates of the Integral Coaching Canada program).

Data from participants were gathered until the point of theoretical saturation. Applying a criterion of inclusion (Palinkas et al., 2013), eligible participants needed to have met a minimum requirement of having achieved at least the equivalent of the ICF's level of Professional Certified Coach (PCC).

All aspects of the research were reviewed and approved by Concordia University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited from the ICF's research member list, alumni of Integral Coaching Canada and Concordia University's coach certification programs, as well as coaching professionals whose websites had content related to coaching presence. Involvement required that participants engage in an individual interview of approximately 60 minutes as well as providing feedback on their interview transcript. Sixteen participants (13 female, 3 male) participated in the research.

## Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, over the phone or via Skype. The principal author conducted all interviews using an intensive interviewing strategy, described by Charmaz (2014) as a "gently-guided, one-sided conversation that explores research participants' perspective on their personal experience with the research topic" (p. 56). Transcripts of the audio recorded interviews were sent to interviewees so they could review, edit, and clarify it so desired. All requested changes to the transcript were accepted. By the sixteenth interview, a point of theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014) was deemed to have been achieved.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis adhered to Charmaz's (2014) methods of initial and focused coding, which draws upon foundational grounded theory data analysis procedures (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Urquhart, 2013). Only the final approved interview transcripts were used in data analysis. The principal author transcribed and coded the data, employing a qualitative data analysis software, HyperRESEARCH, throughout the process. Codes were developed inductively to allow for meaningful categories to emerge from the data with the understanding that the codes would change throughout the coding process.

### **Initial and Focused Coding**

Reflecting a qualitative study informed by grounded theory method (Thornberg, 2012; Urquhart, 2013), the researchers employed the procedure of line-by-line coding, which involved naming every line of written data (Glaser, 1978). The initial coding process produced 493 codes. Following initial coding, focused coding raised initial codes to categories. As a sensitising concept, Wilber's (2006) quadrants were applied as starting points to raise some codes to categories. As well, emergent conceptual categories were identified.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim to enhance reliability. The research also incorporated validation strategies to document accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2016), along with thick descriptions to help readers make decisions about transferability (Merriam, 1998) in the form of quotations from the interviews.

## **Findings**

Based on interview data, six themes emerged to reflect coaching presence during a coaching session. Below, each theme is defined and elucidated through key supportive findings. At variance with a grounded theory perspective, themes are ordered based on quantity of data (e.g., mindfulness awareness was discussed by all coaches in detail and is therefore described first), as well as importance (e.g., authentic connection was often described as "essential" for coaching presence). Each theme provides an understanding of an aspect of coaching presence, contextualised within a coaching session.

### **Theme One: Mindful Self-Awareness**

Mindful self-awareness is considered by nearly all coaches interviewed to be the inner foundation for coaching presence during a coaching session. It was defined as follows: *The coach being mindful and self-aware in the role of coach, while accessing inner spaciousness and knowing.* Supportive findings are described under four categories: Mindful realignment to presence, present to coach role, holistic self-awareness, and inner spaciousness and knowing.

#### **Mindful realignment to presence**

Participating coaches acknowledged there are moments during a coaching session when their attention wanders or they become distracted by internal noise. This alone was not considered problematic; as one participant stated, it is not "humanly achievable" to be present all the time. Summarising these distractions, a coach said, "A lack of coaching presence is ... getting lost in my own thoughts, perhaps being triggered by something the client said." Another mentioned that not being present happens when "there is something that I haven't been able to clear within myself."

Coaches suggested that when distractions occur, realignment back to presence is necessary; a form of "self-management," "self-correction," or "bringing back" is needed. As a coach explained, "It's all about bringing back ... We're going to have days that we're a bit off." Evident in this process is both an acceptance of the process of distraction and a commitment to realign to presence. Realignment to presence was described as a "self-management muscle" whereby, as one coach suggested, "I just need to bring myself back to center."

#### **Present to coach role**

Coaches discussed the importance of consciously showing up in a coach role, often highlighting how coaching is distinct from other helping professions. One coach spoke directly about problems

arising when coaches move “out of that coaching model” into such other roles as “teaching, consulting, expert, maybe therapy.” A perspective framed by one participant is as follows:

*If I'm a coach, I'm not listening to try and fix, or come up with my brilliant ideas. I'm listening in a way to bring greater curiosity to the situation, to help the person be more curious about their own thinking and their own way forward.*

Being unclear on the role of the coach was thought to impede coaching presence.

### **Holistic self-awareness**

Using various expressions, participants highlighted the importance of showing up to the coaching session with their “whole self,” as a “whole person,” or simply as a “human being.” This included an awareness of oneself, as well as being “open and aware of what’s arising in the moment . . . with myself.” One coach shared the importance of being present to one’s “head, heart, and body. What am I seeing? What am I feeling? What am I intuiting?”

Coaches identified a number of ways in which awareness can be constricted: “lack of self-awareness,” “lack of emotional intelligence,” “putting what the client says through my own filter,” “my history,” “my judgments,” “my emotional reactivity,” “my biases,” and “my belief systems.” One participant described the importance of “subtracting and clearing in order to experience a higher level of awareness and openness.”

### **Inner spaciousness and knowing**

Coaches remarked about being “calm and patient,” as well as offering a sense of “spaciousness,” “stillness,” and “allowing.” As expressed by one participant, “being in the present is indicated by spaciousness, being silent, being quiet, really allowing.” Spaciousness was distinguished from being internally agitated; coaches described challenges to presence with words such as “agitation,” “nervousness,” “lack of trust,” “fear,” and “stress. Another coach remarked that presence “is already there; it is simply obscured, dormant, interfered with, obstructed. Not leveraged or accessed optimally.”

It seems that inner spaciousness allows an inner knowing to appear. Moving past agitation, to a place of spaciousness was thought to allow for “insight,” “confidence,” and connection to one’s “essential nature.” One coach thought, “With experience you gain greater insight, that subconscious knowing.” Another coach suggested there is an “absence of the concern of being liked, or a need to be validated, or accepted, or to feel important or valued—absence of that kind of stuff.”

## **Theme Two: Authentic Connection**

Authentic Connection was defined as: *The coach offering empathic connection to the client, in an authentic, intuitive, and interconnected way.*

Supportive findings are sorted into three categories: Empathic connection, intuitive responsiveness, and interconnected presence.

### **Empathic connection**

A connected relationship between coach and client is at the heart of coaching presence from the perspective of the majority of coaches interviewed. As one participant stated it,

*If I had to put a definition to what is coaching presence, it's actually being with my client. So, it's not at a distance. I'm very, very, present and connected with them. The experience is happening*



*for both of us in this present time.*

Words such as the following helped frame this theme: “heartfelt connection,” “energy of connection,” “be with someone,” “assume relationship,” “empathy,” “authentic connection,” and “present to the interaction.” These relational characteristics seem to indicate an empathic connection between coach and client, both in the moment and over time.

Disconnection between coach and client relates to inauthenticity in the coaching relationship as suggested by the following remark:

*I'm very aware if there's a disconnect between me and my client. That authenticity, noticing what is happening in the moment, not just the words the client is saying, but what is actually the quality of the connection, is actually critical to presence.*

This kind of empathic connection seems to support clients' change. As one coach said, “there's a level of connection where they [coaching clients] just shift, even though nothing was said about the particular shift; they just shift.” In describing a client experience, a participant noted that, “Something internal shifted: moving from this image that he wanted to create, to his own sense of self.” Evidence from interview data illustrates that empathic connection both enhances the quality of the coaching relationship and helps foster transformation for the client.

### **Intuitive responsiveness**

During coaching, an intuitive sense may naturally arise within the coach. One coach remarked, “A lot of intuition comes through. I just sit there.” Another coach felt a sense of flow: “The questions flow when I'm present because it's just a natural outgrowth of how we're being with each other.” Accessing intuition seems connected to “trusting in the process.” According to one participant, “intuition shows itself. It comes through me and says what it says.” By contrast, reactivity was thought to “shut down intuition.”

The state of intuitive knowing can represent a vulnerable moment for the coach. As framed by one coach, “presence is taking risks...because, it's like oh my God, am I really saying that!” While risky at times, the intuitive offerings of the coach seem to allow insights to emerge.

### **Interconnected presence**

The experience of interconnected “oneness” in the collective space of the coaching relationship illustrates what some coaches consider to be the deeper levels of coaching presence. As one coach suggested, it is “real presence where a sort of non-duality happens.” Other coaches used such descriptors as: “connected to oneness,” “presence is being one,” and “it's a spiritual connection.” Coaches remarked that lacking awareness of interconnection can lead to a sense of separateness. As one coach said: “When one lives from the illusion of separateness, one sees the coach and client as two objects interacting.” Some coaches categorised coaching that overlooks a sense of deeper connection as “transactional coaching” which ignores relational matters. Another coach described a “low-level energetic connection” resulting from focusing on the topic as abstracted from the person.

Interconnection in the here and now was described by some coaches to be a collective experience of a shared present. Whether broadly or narrowly focused, the majority of coaches suggested that coaching presence involves, as much as possible, being fully in the present moment in the collective space with the client.

## Theme Three: Deep Attunement

Many coaches in the study believed that by being deeply attuned to the client, the coach can offer a consciously tailored experience. Supportive findings are sorted into two categories: focused and open attentiveness, and conscious and deep communication.

### Focused and open attentiveness

Attentiveness is considered essential by many coaches interviewed. Coaches used these expressions to capture the theme: “put my attention on them,” “keeping it focused on them,” or being “with” the client. One coach said it was about,

*dropping everything, literally dropping everything, and just being so focused. Dropping into a bubble, I'm not going to let anything distract me here. This person is the most important person in my life right now.*

Another coach thought of it as “an attentional muscle.” Other coaches highlighted the importance of the client being the center of the coaches’ awareness, as well as the importance of having a thoughtful and heart connection.

In contrast, coaches shared signs of a weak attention span: “attentional muscle is weak or thin,” “thin layer of attention,” “scattered,” “parroting back what the clients says,” “distracted,” and “not fully listening to the client.” According to one coach, surface level listening is when attention is “on yourself, on your own ideas, your thoughts, and your judgments. ... That’s clearly not coaching presence.”

Another component considered essential by many coaches is an open or spacious presence. Coaches described open attentiveness in a variety of ways: “spaciousness in every aspect of me,” “empty,” “absence of everything,” “momentarily tabula rasa,” “open space,” “opening to feel in receipt [of] whatever comes,” or “working from an open mind, open heart, and open will.”

A common element in these descriptions is that the coach provides an open and spacious container during the coaching session, while at the same time, listening to the “whole being” of the client. One coach shared an experience of being both empty and full: “Empty means no agenda, no prejudice, no judgment. But there will be quite a lot of understanding of the client through a variety of lenses.”

### Conscious and deep communication

Many coaches shared the importance of communicating with their clients in ways that are “conscious,” “aware,” or “thoughtful.” An essential component was seen as an awareness of the relational space between coach and client, or as one coach expressed it, “a conscious awareness of the space that we’re in together.”

The data revealed that communicating with a lack of coaching presence is mechanical, lacking spontaneity and deeper connection. In mechanical communication, coaching stays more at the surface level and, as one coach put it, “the relationship becomes more transactional.” Coaches functioning at a mechanical level were reported to “operate in a linear fashion,” use an “analytical kind of question,” and do “more personal interviewing than coaching.” As one coach emphasised, “It’s really about the relationship and everything that evolves courtesy of the coaching relationship. If it is honored and supported, it becomes richer, dynamic, and ultimately more productive.”

Conscious communication was underscored by one coach who said, “How I approach my client is done thoughtfully.” Another coach reflected,



*Am I aware, conscious, of my impact on my client? Based on my background, my cultural history, my beliefs about how I am to coach, they all influence my presence, and how I can be purely present to whom[ever] that person is that I'm coaching.*

In deeper level communication, one participant believed that the coach has “awareness of the key elements of effective coaching communication, such as: style of communication, depth of communication, using open-ended questions, tonality, sincerity, as well as trust.” According to many of the interviewees, conscious communication relies on the fundamentals of interpersonal relationships to create awareness and deep learning for the client.

## **Theme Four: Embodied Engagement**

Presence needs to be embodied according to a number of the coaches interviewed. In addition, some coaches described the value of fully engaging in the moment of coaching. Supportive findings are sorted into two categories: Somatic presence and engaged in the here-and-now.

### **Somatic presence**

Coaches describe somatic presence with such different terms as “non-verbal awareness,” “in my body,” “posture,” “hold myself and my body,” “well positioned,” and, of course, “somatic presence.” One coach described this experience as follows: “all of the tentacles are open, and all the open receptors are firing, everything is going at once.” Another identified her experience of somatic presence in this way:

*I'm quite relaxed and yet I have a very contained and upright posture so that my chest is open. My breath is not collapsed in my posture... It feels very ordinary, but there's a solid, not moving, heart wide open, eyes not boring through you, but filled with a sort of empathic 'tell me what you want to say, speak to me' kind of look.*

A diminished sense of somatic presence was seen as “no eye contact ... a lot of movement, whether it's a lot of fidgeting or with things on the table.” One coach identified problematic somatic indicators as a coach's face looking “all tied up in a knot, and they look worried about their client.”

### **Engaged in the here and now**

Referencing the theme of being fully in the here and now, coaches used such descriptors as “being in that present state,” “being in a coaching presence,” “being fully present,” “being there,” or “showing up.” One manner in which coaches disengage during a coaching session is by being overly “at a distance” or “withdrawing.” One coach commented that “coaches who multi-task during a coaching session cannot effectively listen, nor truly understand what the client is expressing.” Another said that “coaching presence is really being present in the moment to what is there, and what is arising.” One other participant remarked: “Presence is about the here and now, and everything that goes with that.”

A coach can disengage from the relationship by various sorts of distractions. A participant described her distractibility as a new coach as follow: “So shiny, new, wow! Let's go there, who's that, I need to know.” Other coaches reported that an overly future-oriented approach disengages the coach from the here and now with their client. Awareness of not being present arose for one participant in the following manner: “It may suddenly occur to me, because I have missed something that my client has said.” A participant using the phrase, “fickleness of presence,” referenced the idea that presence calls for ongoing engagement from moment to moment.

## **Theme Five: Holding Outcomes**

The capacity to hold the outcomes of the coaching session is recognised by many coaches as foundational to coaching. Supportive findings are sorted into three categories: emergent outcomes, intentional and adaptable space, and holding outcomes.

### **Emergent Outcomes**

Non-attachment to coaching outcomes was highlighted by a few coaches as an important part of coaching presence. As one coach noted that being “less attached to the results of the coaching” was rooted in her Buddhist practices. Another coach referenced an “absence of the egoic need that it feels like it has to control the outcome.” Being non-attached is a form of letting go of control of the outcome.

Some coaches identified attachment as a fixation on outcomes or feeling overly responsible for solving a client’s problem. A participant identified this as the coach’s need “to come up with a solution.” Another coach thought that coaches who approach coaching as a transaction focus on “strategy and tactics: What is the action? How do I solve the problem?” When fixated on outcomes, coaches try “too hard to get somewhere,” rather than paying attention to the client, said another coach. Fixating on outcomes can often result in an overly “anticipating,” “advice” giving, and “problem-solving” coaching approach. Describing a non-attachment to outcomes, a participant said, “I’m not as much focused on or attached to a particular outcome or a process. I’m really open and willing to welcome what emerges from the conversation.”

### **Intentional and adaptable approach**

Coaches variously identified intentionality in their coaching by “finding a promising path,” “getting to the outcomes that you have both agreed upon,” or “finding out what is their agenda . . . and holding that agenda.” Intentions to be in service of the client and to advance clients’ agendas were evident in many interviews. One coach described himself as “purposeful in my intent to be fully in service, in awareness, and appreciation of the other person, and what they’re saying in front of me.” Similarly, another coach believed that coaches should have “just one focus in mind: the best for your client.”

Imposing the coach’s agenda was seen as problematic. Coaches described this as “putting your own agenda into the client,” “being directive,” “push[ing] it,” and “a wish to teach the client.” Describing a directive coach, one participant saw it this way: “It’s my own agenda; it’s not respecting the client, it’s judging them. It’s imposing my rhythm. It’s like telling, directing. It’s not a dance.” Other indicators of a directive approach were thought to be over-sharing by the coach, leading the client, closed-ended questions, and having an “unconscious presence” whereby the coach believes that “my expertise, my knowledge is what the client needs.”

One participant referenced the “absolute uniqueness of each human being,” whereby each client is appreciated as having different needs, styles, topics, and ways of being. As such, the “flexibility” and “adaptability” of the coach are essential in order to meet “the needs of the client.” Another coach noticed how she might make a plan and “be able to set it aside with your eyes wide-open.” The ability “to adapt and adjust to what the clients’ needs are,” as one coach described it, reflects a flexible and uniquely tailored approach.

### **Holding space**

The idea of a “holding space” (Slochower, 2013; Winnicott, 1958) has been described in the psychological literature. In these interviews, coaches referenced a sense of responsibility for creating a holding space or “container” in their work. Coaches identified a number of key elements of this concept in remarks about “providing structure” and “resources,” offering a “process” and a “system,” understanding coaching “methodology,” as well as holding “spaciousness” during a

coaching session. Coaches reflected the container quality of coaching in their mentioning of specific processes, systems, and different coaching methodologies.

However, coaches also reported that rigid adherence to coaching structures can inhibit coaching presence. This was evident in one participant's argument against "a one-size-fits-all approach." It seemed to one participant that holding a rigid container prevents the coach from being able to adapt to "shifts in the energetic field" during the coaching session.

Conversely, when coaching lacks structure, that sense of a holding space may disappear. This was reflected in one coach's description of her rising anxiety when "the structure has gone awry." A lack of awareness of the coaching structure, or difficulty in holding the structure of the coaching session can lead to difficulty in trusting the process of coaching. A common element in how coaches described holding space was in finding a way to balance structure and flow in sessions.

## **Theme Six: Structural Alignment**

Some coaches emphasised that the Structural Alignment (theme 6) provided by the coach during the coaching session provides the supportive environment for effective coaching. Relevant findings were sorted into two categories: environmental alignment and mindful in context.

### **Environmental alignment**

The majority of coaches considered the environment—which includes physical and virtual space—essential for alignment in the field of the coaching relationship. Here is how one coach described it: "The client and I are in a field together. It's an energetic field. It shifts as things shift. Part of my work is to be able to hold the field as open as possible." Another coach remarked, "Each environment is a little different....Each one offers different opportunities for listening."

Coaches describing in person sessions highlighted the importance of the physical space, referencing the following: "consistency," "quiet environment," "ambiance," "comfortable," "closed space," and "conducive to fully listening." They shared how the physical space needs to be aligned to support the coaching relationship. Whether in virtual or in-person coaching, participants referenced the need to manage such distractive experiences as "someone coming at the door, phones going off" or when "your children are running in and out of the room, or someone is coming to talk to you."

### **Mindful in context**

There are multiple contexts for coaching, principally in person, by phone, or on web video. In discussing synchronous video communications, coaches mentioned such advantages as "the opportunity to notice body language and non-verbal expressions." One coach expressed how it is "essential to have straight lines in your camera, to be still, and have no distractions or noises in the background environment of the coach." Another coach expressed how she needed to be vigilant in video calls because "I am very visual. So, I can get overly reliant on the visual. I find it limiting to see someone. I'm not as aware of my body, I'm not as aware of other information that I'm getting."

Coaches who preferred phone communications mentioned the following: "they [phone conversations] can be very intimate," "more attuned to subtle changes in voice," easier to "sense into the phone," "hearing becomes acute," and "more accurate signals." One coach thought that coaching by phone is like "listening on a wave length." Noting her tendency to "cut to the chase quicker" on the phone, a coach reflected about needing to be mindful of her desire to create a deeply personal connection.

Many participating coaches seemed aware, as one participant put it, that each coaching environment is unique and "offers different opportunities for listening," and that, as a result, a

different kind of mastery is called for with each communication medium.

## Discussion

This research offers a unique exploration of coaching presence based on the coaches' perspectives. In its multi-dimensional examination, it appears to provide intriguing suggestions paralleling Wilber's (2006, 2016) quadrant approach that allow for a more comprehensive understanding of coaching presence.

The six themes that outline an emergent multi-dimensional perspective of coaching presence have been positioned within Wilber's (2006, 2016) quadrants (see Figure 1) according to our sense of their correlation with perspectives afforded by this model. In this respect, we imagine an understanding of coaching presence that is represented in quadrant perspectives, where each is distinct, but not necessarily separate from other quadrants as they might simultaneously arise throughout a coaching session.

**Figure 1. A quadrant perspective of coaching presence based on Wilber's quadrant model**

	INTERIOR	EXTERIOR
COACH	<p><b>"I"</b></p> <p>Mindful Awareness</p>	<p><b>"IT"</b></p> <p>Embodied Engagement</p>
COACHING	<p><b>"WE"</b></p> <p>Authentic Connection</p> <p>Conscious Attunement</p>	<p><b>"ITS"</b></p> <p>Holding Outcomes</p> <p>Structural Alignment</p>

### The "I" of Coaching Presence

The "I" perspective of coaching presence that emerged in this research seems represented in Mindful Awareness (theme one), defined by the coach's mindfulness and self-awareness in the role of coach, while accessing inner spaciousness and knowing. The literature on presence offers some overlapping perspectives with the "I" of coaching presence as reflected in this study.

For instance, it appears to share similarities with the Buddhist mindfulness tradition (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Thompson, & Rosch, 1993), as well as reflecting Silsbee's (2008, 2010) view of presence-based coaching, which is strongly anchored in the mindfulness tradition. Mindfulness is also identified by Braham (2005) as enhancing the coaches' capacity to be present. Further, self-awareness in the "I" of coaching presence definition seems related to emotional self-awareness (Goleman, 1997), which has been highlighted in the coaching literature as self-focused elements of presence (Cox, 2013) or internal awareness (Noon, 2018). Moreover, self-presence in psychotherapy (e.g., Geller & Greenberg, 2002; Geller et al., 2010; Welwood, 2000) is considered to be an important element of therapeutic presence.

## **The “It” of Coaching Presence**

We posit that the theme Embodied Engagement (theme four) relates well to an “IT” perspective of coaching presence. This theme seemed evident when coaches discussed acting with intentionality and fluidity, while being somatically grounded in the here and now. The intentionality and fluidity of the “IT” of coaching presence overlaps with the Zen traditions’ emphasis on spontaneous acts in everyday life expressed as a form of awareness in action (Dumoulin, 2005; Schloegl, 1976). In addition, a parallel appears between the “IT” of coaching presence and the notion of wu wei in Taoism, whereby wu wei is considered as a form of spontaneous action combined with deep relaxation (Robinet, 1997; Smith, 1991). As well, Topp’s (2006) theoretically driven presence-based coaching program drew from the open and spontaneous representations of wu wei in Taoism. This embodied dimension of the “IT” of coaching presence bears relationship to coaching literature that describes presence as embodied and visible in action (Cox, 2013; Iliffe-Wood, 2014; Strozzi-Heckler, 2014). Noon’s (2018) external dimension of coaching awareness also reflects an acuity of attention that more fully inform a coach’s actions.

## **The “We” of Coaching Presence**

Authentic Connection (theme two) and Conscious Attunement (theme three) are relationally-oriented dimensions of presence that suggest a “WE” perspective of coaching presence. This theme was described as the coach offering deep connection to the client in an authentic, intuitive, and interconnected way, while Conscious Attunement was framed as the coach attentively attuning to the client and communicating consciously.

Attunement in the “WE” of coaching presence speaks to notions of receptivity and attending in the therapeutic presence literature (Geller & Greenberg, 2002, 2012). The coaching presence literature also highlights the essentiality of connection in the coaching relationship (Cox, 2013; Flaherty, 2010; Iliffe-Wood, 2014; Silsbee, 2008). In particular, Noon (2018) speaks of the relational dimension of coaching presence as a mutuality of experience while centered in the self. Moreover, there also seems to be a connection between the intuitive and attuned nature of the “WE” of presence and the ‘presencing’ notion of speaking from “what is moving through” in Scharmer’s (2016) writings.

## **The “Its” of Coaching Presence**

Holding Outcomes (theme 5) and Structural Alignment (theme 6) seem related to an “ITS” perspective of coaching presence. Holding Outcomes describes the coach as holding a robust container during the coaching session, while allowing for emergent outcomes, while Structural Alignment is seen when the coach is providing alignment in the field of the coaching session, while skillfully navigating the coaching environment.

Relating our perspective to themes appearing in the presence literature, the notion of a holding space bears similarity to the notion of sunyata (which literally means “emptiness”) from Buddhist Madhyamika philosophy. The viewpoint of Sunyata is that all things (dharmas) are empty of their inherent existence, and therefore all things are interconnected (Varela et al., 1993; Williams, 1989). The sense is one of the coach holding all the interconnected parts of the coaching session. Recently, Scharmer and colleagues (Scharmer et al., 2021) articulated a concept of social fields, which seems highly related to the ITS quadrant. In their view, social fields “give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing, and organising, which in turn produce practical results” (p 632). According to Silsbee (2008), an essential component of presence is for the coach to see themselves as connected to one’s “environment and circumstances” (p. 20). As well, the notion of structural alignment during the coaching session seems to be represented in the literature on coaching presence where, for instance, Cox (2013) highlights presence as a dynamic interaction between coach, client, and environment within the larger field. Social presence theory (Biocca et al., 2003;

Hayashi, 2021; Short et al., 1976) and mediated communication within coaching (Drake, 2015) also reference technological alignment during coaching.

## Conclusion

This research arising from professional coaches' perspectives suggests a framework for further investigation of the complex nature of coaching presence. Though conforming in many respects to a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), our reliance on Wilber's (2006, 2016) quadrants as a sensitising concept constitutes a significant theoretical bias in this research (Thornberg, 2012). More research is needed to support and extend insights arising in this investigation. In similar explorations, Geller and colleagues (Geller, 2001; Geller et al., 2010) expanded their understanding of therapeutic presence by developing quantitative measures of therapeutic presence. From a completely different angle, we would be curious as well to understand what similar research would tell us about clients' perspectives about coaching presence (Noon, 2018; Topp, 2006).

In drawing to a close, it seems important to note that in the ICF's (2021) revision of its core coaching competencies, coaching presence remains central. Its definition of presence, especially in the detailing of elements, can be seen to reflect a multi-dimensional perspective. Hopefully this study can provide guidance for the field in building a more robust and comprehensive framing of what it means to be fully present as a coach.

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