

**Holding Environment in Psychodynamic Coaching:
What do we know and where do we go from here?**

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Abstract

Winnicott's concept of the 'holding environment' describes a therapeutic space in which the patient feels 'held' enough to give in to challenging and potentially overwhelming affects. This concept has become a central aspect of psychodynamic coaching. This paper argues that the translation of this concept from its original context, parental and psychotherapeutic relationships, into the coaching relationship has been done without investigating the differences in context and how this affects the concept itself. We explore the application of the concept of the 'holding environment' outside of its original context and identify important knowledge gaps. We conclude this paper by proposing a definition of the holding environment in the psychodynamic coaching relationship and offering suggestions for future research.

Outline

Since the mid-1980's executive coaching has experienced a strong expansion, particularly in North America and Europe. As a new professional field, executive coaching had to go through an accelerated development to gain legitimacy next to the well-developed clinical psychology. Zaleznik (1977) and Levinson (1964) are influential adopters of psychoanalytic concepts to the realm of leadership and coaching. Over the years, this adoption of psychoanalytic theories has turned into a new academic domain of the executive coaching literature (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2022; Diamond, 2013; Nagel, 2020; Sher & Lawlor, 2022).

Yet, as we propose in this paper, the accelerated development of the executive coaching field of studies also means that many of the borrowed concepts that are central to the executive coaching field, are under investigated and potentially misinterpreted. Suddaby (2010) notes that it is often a prerogative of the management scholarship to borrow concepts from other disciplines. One specific example, which is also the main concern of this paper, is the concept of 'holding environment' (Yip et al. 2020; Gilmore, 2021; Drake, 2021; Abravanel & Gavin, 2021) which initially came from the work of D. W. Winnicott. Winnicott refers to 'holding' as the physical act of the caregiver holding an infant, thereby providing security and successive psychological integration to the infant (Winnicott, 2006). To Winnicott, the parental (he speaks of maternal) act of holding provides the first step on the child's journey towards mental health as it precedes a differentiation between the physical and psychological realms for the child (Winnicott, 2018). He then translates the concept from the physical into the psychological which he calls the holding environment: This is a therapeutic space in which the patient feels 'held' enough to give in to challenging and potentially overwhelming affects. (APA, 2021).

Consequently, in this paper we argue that this 'borrowing' has indeed happened to the concept of the 'holding environment' as it is taken out of its initial, dual contexts: 1. The parent-child relationship and 2. The psychoanalytic therapist-patient relationship. It has then been applied, without amendment or change of scope, to the executive coaching space. We see the construct used and applied to executive coaching in many of the key handbooks and teaching papers widely used in the field, while authors regularly miss to identify the impact the difference of setting and relationship have on creating a holding environment. (Lee, 2018; Kets de Vries, 2008; Obholzer & Zagier Robert, 2019; Ambrose, 2018)

In this paper we will identify the exact conceptual application of the construct of holding environment and identify the limitations we are currently facing in our theoretical understanding and practical application of the holding environment in executive coaching.

Given the increasing popularity of professional coaching in general and executive coaching in particular, as well as the increasing professionalisation of the field, this work is timely and important as it will aid in strengthening the theoretical foundations executive coaching is based on.

This paper is formed of three distinct parts: Firstly, we will describe the origins of the construct of the holding environment and its history of theory and application in organisational behaviour studies. Secondly, we will clarify how the construct is understood and conceptualised in modern empirical work and put forward definition for the ‘holding environment’ in coaching. Lastly, we will identify the limitations of our current understanding and application and outline further avenues for research.

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