Understanding in Coaching: An Intersubjective Process

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Introduction and Case Study

Understanding is to be understood as an *intersubjective process*. An understanding of the other in their otherness and an understanding of oneself with one's conscious and unconscious resonances are interwoven in a complex way. Acknowledging this, however, can be complicated in coaching by the expectation of some clients that a coach can offer something like an objectively valid answer to their questions. But this increases the danger of misunderstandings or disappointments if a solution developed in coaching does not prove itself in practice.

An example from coaching practice: After his studies and several years of successful work in a construction company, Robert, a young engineer, was faced with the decision of whether to take over his father's company as managing director. He first joined the company as a department head and made the experience that his father was constantly trying to patronize him, with the motto: "Act autonomously, but only according to my instructions!" Since he could no longer endure this, he sought coaching to help him decide how to break away from his father's company and go his own way. However, he found himself in a conflict between loyalty to the family business and the desire for an autonomous professional orientation elsewhere. The coach now tended to support the latter perspective, especially since he himself, having grown up in an educated middle-class milieu, was only able to find his own way after breaking with the parental home; and he became somewhat impatient

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when his client kept bringing up new counter-arguments. It finally became clear that the value of continuing the family business was more important to him, especially since there was no other successor within the family. The coach was then able to support him to openly approach and resolve the conflict with his father—something he himself had not been able to do at the time. The result was an agreement that his father handed over the management to him and withdrew from the company.

The process of understanding in this case thus presupposed that the coach, on the basis of his biographical experience, was able to empathize well with the client's situation and to put his own solution pattern aside in order to open up to the client's different context and his path. On the other hand, through the response of the coach, the client learned to understand himself better by being able to recognize his desire for autonomy as legitimate and valuable, in addition to family loyalty, and then to associate it with loyalty. Even ill-considered clichés, such as autonomy as synonymous with the dissolution of ties, can stand in the way of understanding and agreement on appropriate solutions.

However, problems of understanding and misinterpretation are the order of the day in the private sphere, in organizations, and also in coaching. This raises the fundamental question: How is understanding and communication possible, and how can it be improved? While in radical constructivism (e.g., by Glasersfeld, 1985, 2003) the possibility of a genuine understanding is doubted at all, in the following we will present both general possibilities of understanding and a way of understanding tailored to the individual case. The former involves nomothetical theories and hypotheses that are empirically tested and claim validity for all people, i.e. a behavioral science approach. The latter is an "art concept of understanding" that provides indications for concrete procedures. We introduce the two perspectives and finally integrate them into methodological guidelines for coaching practice.

Biological and Psychological Perspectives: How Is It Possible for People to Understand Each Other?

This question may be surprising, but it has rightly been pointed out by constructivists that it is often very difficult for a speaker to put their experience and the associations associated with it into words, and a reader or listener must then reconstruct what has been said on the basis of their own experiences and associations (Hejl, 1985). We will show how and why this is possible.

Formally, understanding can be summarized with Laing et al. (1966) as a comparison between the meta-perspective of an understanding person A and the perspective of a person B to be understood $A[B(x)] = B(x)$, or what A believes B is thinking corresponds to what B actually thinks. For B to feel understood, however, this is not yet enough, because this is only possible in the meta-meta-perspective: What B suspects as A's opinion of his own opinion $B(x)$ determines the feeling of understanding: $B\{A[B(x)]\} = B(x)$. There are sources of error on each side, namely

A may not understand B correctly, and B may also mistakenly believe that A does not understand him correctly, or even mistakenly believe that A understands him while A does not. Such double misinterpretations are not uncommon, because B's opinion and B's feeling of understanding take place in the same brain and do not seem to need further verification by further inquiries. The method of paraphrasing in the sense of active listening can greatly reduce such misinterpretations. For more difficult topics, however, such inquiries are not sufficient, because the respective opinions must first be developed together in a discussion; that is the actual task in coaching.

Empirically, understanding is linked to the difference between denotative and connotative meaning. *Denotative* is the simple assignment of a word to a selected section of reality; something is made the object of observation and is cognitively designated, e.g. "my colleague." In contrast, the emotional classification of the designated object in a three-dimensional coordinate system is *connotative*, combined with an impulse for action, which is usually recognizable in the interaction in non-verbal expressions: (1) Valence, the emotional positive versus negative differentiation, includes an approach tendency to the positive or avoidance of the negative object, (2) Power, the emotional strong versus weak differentiation, includes coveting and grasping an opportunity if feeling strong or fear and inhibition if feeling weak, and (3) Activity, the emotional active versus passive differentiation, includes physical activation in a state of arousal or quiet waiting in a state of calm contemplation (Osgood et al., 1957, 1975). What a statement really means to the speaker is therefore only to a small extent determined by the denotative meaning; this is only enough to know what the other person is talking about. The connotative meaning includes feelings and potential impulses for action which enable us to empathize and feel how the other person feels about the designated object and to cooperate with her or him. For example, the designation of a person as a "colleague" suggests an expectation of unproblematic positive communication and interaction, while a feeling of inferiority arises toward a "superior" as well as the question of whether something unpleasant might come one's way.

The possibility of this cognitive-affective understanding is biologically based through the coupling of inner feeling and outer, non-verbal expression of the feeling, which can be perceived and felt by the other. It is therefore of central importance that feelings, their non-verbal expression, and their verbal descriptions have the same three socio-emotional dimensions (with examples): *Valence (satisfaction–dissatisfaction) can be signalled by nonverbal expressions like closeness (laughing–turning away) & by verbal evaluation (positive–negative). Feelings of strength (pride–despair) may be nonverbally expressed as dominance (firm–fragile voice) & verbally through words of power (strong–weak). Finally, the intensity of feelings, i.e. arousal (agitated–calm) is nonverbally expressed through reactivity (fast–slow movements) & verbally through words of activation (active–passive).* With the help of these three dimensions, the adequacy and the correctness of the understanding can be gauged relatively well (Scholl, 2013). The assessment of actions and personalities is also judged along these three dimensions, so that reports of one's own and other people's experiences can be emotionally understood on the same basis. These three

socio-emotional dimensions have obviously developed in an evolutionary way, oriented toward the central problems of human coordination (ibid.). It is particularly important that the emotions and movements observed in the other person automatically stimulate the same neurons in the facing observer and can therefore be emotionally and physically simulated like one's own emotions and movements (Semin & Cacioppo, 2008).

Understanding is further secured by a socio-emotional *consistency mechanism* which can be successfully simulated mathematically as discovered by Affect Control Theory (Heise, 1979, 2007): The description of an event in a language and culture is socio-emotionally consistent if the overall emotional impression of the event results from the constellation of the connotative meaning of the words used. This consistency mechanism goes beyond learning the emotional meaning of the individual words of a language, because the consistency mechanism involves the constant (unconscious) effort to create uniformly emotionally colored descriptions of reality in the culture over and over again. Those who disagree with a description must accordingly use different emotionally colored words and non-verbal expressions to make their dissent clear (Schröder & Scholl, 2009; Schröder et al., 2013). Negative experiences with a colleague, for instance, also change the verbal description. If you hear: "A colleague refuses to help another colleague" something seems to be wrong or at least an incomplete report because there is a *discrepancy* (mathematically a "deflection") to what would be expected from a "colleague." So you probably will ask: why he did this and what a kind of colleague he might be? And you will learn from an extended description that this colleague maybe was a "jealous colleague" or even a "careerist," and with this linguistic addition the felt (and palpable) meaning of the "colleague" changes and fits to the refused help. This socio-emotional basis of a culture's language, detected and confirmed by Affect Control Theory, creates coherent, culturally consistent descriptions of reality through the continuous understanding and agreement efforts of the language community, which ease the comprehensibility of utterances. All participants unconsciously try to design each description to others in such a way that both the individual words and the entire word constellation of the description confirm the cultural meanings.

Affect control theory thus makes the principles of social construction explicit (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Although every person has to (re)construct individually the perceived reality and the statements of other people with their own brain in the course of the socialization, the emotional significance of the observed aspects of reality is socially communicated via these three emotional dimensions and their non-verbal and verbal expressions. Thus, the individual constructions are socially conveyed, secured, and successively established by observations of behavior and its consequences (how positive? how strong? how active?) as social, generally understandable constructions together with their social references (Scholl, 2013; Heise et al., 2015).

Perspectives of Philosophical Hermeneutics: What Does Understanding Mean?

Hermeneutics is the philosophical term for "art of understanding," the discipline that deals with the possibilities, forms, and processes of understanding. It concerns first understanding of texts and, in its further development, also of persons. The term is derived from the Greek: *hermeneúein* means "to understand, translate, interpret". Hermeneutics was founded by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1838/1977) as the "Art of Understanding" and further elaborated by Wilhelm Dilthey (1900/1990). Dilthey used the distinction between "explaining" and "understanding": While the natural sciences seek to *explain* phenomena causally and derive them from general laws, the humanities seek to *understand* the historical individuality in phenomena. The interpretation of a text aims to understand the "particular" that its author expresses in it. Understanding, therefore, means "recreating" in oneself the experience of the author (ibid., p. 318). So while an author tries to express his experience in a written linguistic expression, the interpreting reader tries to return to a vivid experience via this expression.

Hans-Georg Gadamer is the most famous representative of philosophical hermeneutics in the twentieth century. In his major work "Truth and Method" (1960/1990) he describes understanding as the central activity of human existence. Understanding is not only a reconstruction of the respective subjective meaning of, for example, a historical or literary text, but it also means entering into a process of tradition in which past and present are conveyed (Gadamer, 1990, p. 300).

Gadamer particularly emphasized the "*hermeneutic circle,*" which consists in the fact that in processes of understanding one's own preconception or "prejudice" in its respective historicity always is involved. But it cannot be concluded that one has to eliminate such a preconception—according to the ideal originating from the Enlightenment (p. 276)—in order to arrive at a correct, unprejudiced understanding of what one encounters. Rather, there is now the challenge of becoming aware of the historically or biographically developed structures of preconception, i.e. through which "glasses" one tries to look at and understand the world. Therefore, the question arises whether there is nothing other than these "glasses," as radical constructivism suggests ("all knowledge is a construct"), or whether with these "glasses," constructs, perspectives, there is also a contact with the facts, classically expressed, an adequacy (lat. *adaequatio*) between the subject of knowledge and the object of knowledge. This means that understanding must prove itself in the practice of understanding (p. 272). Gadamer speaks here of a "fusion of horizons," which means that a true understanding of the other always has a retroactive effect on oneself, insofar as one learns to recognize and to question one's pre-comprehension. This "hermeneutical circle" cannot be avoided nor cut short: "Whoever wants to understand a text is [...] prepared to let it tell him something. Therefore, a hermeneutically trained awareness of the otherness of the text must be receptive from the outset. Such receptivity, however, requires neither factual 'neutrality' nor even self-extinction, but includes the detached appropriation of one's

own preconceptions and prejudices" (Gadamer, 1990, p. 273, own translation). If you replace the word "text" with "person" in this quote, this sentence can be directly applied to the encounter with the otherness and singularity of another person and thus to professional interaction in coaching.

There are some differences to be considered between understanding texts once they have been written and current conversational situations. The understanding of texts by one interpreter can be examined intersubjectively by other interpreters; this is how historical research proceeds, for example. In current coaching situations this possibility does not exist, but there are two other possibilities: On the one hand, initial preliminary interpretations can be supplemented, deepened, and corrected by paraphrasing and queries. On the other hand, the non-verbal parts of communication are also available, and thus the emotional meaning can be grasped much more directly and better than with pure texts (see above). With video analysis, both verbal and non-verbal utterances can be examined intersubjectively (Schermuly & Scholl, 2012).

The importance of the hermeneutic circle for understanding is also clear from recent empirical research. According to Grice (1975) understanding in a communication situation is only possible with a *cooperative attitude*, one has to get involved with the other person. According to Higgins (1981), in understanding a person A tries to envision theirselves the knowledge and opinions of the addressed person B, i.e. to take the meta-perspective. This leads to a so-called *tuning in,* a tuning into the world of thought of B. However, this alone makes A's thinking more similar to B's thinking, because A activates B's descriptive concepts cognitively and affectively. If this attempt at understanding is communicated from A to B, the *"saying is believing"* effect occurs, i.e. A changes—usually imperceptibly for themselves—their opinion of the object under consideration and approaches the opinion of B. In the course of communication, i.e. with the reciprocity of verbal and non-verbal expression and the attempts to understand the other, there is a mutual rapprochement and a more or less far-reaching *"shared reality"* (Echterhoff et al., 2009). This requires a cooperative attitude on both sides and constant checking of the extent to which one has really understood the other, as well as sufficient appreciation, without which the adoption of perspectives and empathy can be neither properly wanted nor properly pursued. In this sense, processes of understanding go hand in hand with an understanding of reality (Higgins & Pittman, 2008). Understanding and communication are apparently accompanied and/or influenced by unconscious synchronization of body movements and positive affects and thus can be felt (Tschacher et al., 2014).

Methodological Guidelines for Coaching Practice

What is the relevance of these statements in practice? First of all, the sequence of *experience–expression–impression–understanding* is fundamental for understanding: The experience of a person urges for an expression through which they can process themselves their experience of inner feelings and outer events and

may communicate them to an interested listener. It is thus a process of translation from experience into verbal and non-verbal expression. By letting the listener take in and interpret the resulting impressions, they can participate in the client's experience and thus create it anew within themselves. The perceived expression is translated back into experience and thereby associated with own patterns of experience. Understanding is therefore a creative act, because in addition to open oneself to the client's experience, it is always an interpretative resonance. If this resonance is in turn expressed and reflected, it can open changes in the client's own understanding of their experience—possibly even if there is a difference in the coach's non-verbal and verbal expression to that of the client. After all, it is the overarching goal for a client to arrive at a changed, more intensive, clearer understanding of him- or herself and thus to find new options for action.

It should also be borne in mind that our understanding always takes place in a specific temporal, spatial, and institutional context. Therefore, this *context* must also be included in understanding, as e.g. Argelander (1970) tried to do with his concept of "scenic understanding": Besides the "objective information," i.e. biographical facts, and the "subjective information," i.e. personal meanings, the "scenic information" is necessary for understanding a person within her context. The recognition and understanding of psychological, communicative, institutional, or organizational phenomena is therefore not only about language, but also about various modes of expression in which life processes are articulated. This requires appropriate methodological approaches for consulting practice. A few examples of this can be mentioned (for further details cf. Schmidt-Lellek, 2017b):

Body language: Direct communication between people contains both verbal and non-verbal components, the "body language," i.e. facial expressions, gestures, vocalization, speech rate, posture, body contact, autonomous body reactions (blushing, bleaching, sweating, etc.). These can comment, intensify, or even counteract the verbal statements. Communication in professional contexts requires a practitioner to be able to consciously perceive these non-verbal "messages" and also to react to them consciously in order to grasp the complexity of self-expression and to do justice to the counterpart with the broadest possible understanding (cf. Argyle, 1975; Schulz von Thun, 1981*; see Means of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication in Coaching, this vol.*).

Dream language: The language of dreams is a valuable source of information about the unconscious parts of a personality. The dream language often uses coded, sometimes drastic, frightening symbols and yet it is a significant expression of personality. For many people, it initially seems closed, a "foreign language" that requires "translation work," i.e. the interpretation of dreams. There are many different methodological approaches to this, which have been developed in psychotherapeutic schools. For coaching, Schmid presented a rather playful-associative approach to working with dreams, which follows a double cognitive interest by adding a "reality-shaping aspect" to an "understanding-processing aspect" (Schmid, 2005, p. 384).

Organizational culture: Institutions and companies not only function based on rationally planned formal aspects of the organization, but are also shaped by their

respective organizational culture, which includes non-formal—and usually unreflected—systemic phenomena. As a rule, the members of the organization are therefore not fully aware of them, but these systemic aspects are mostly taken for granted and underlie their actions. They thus serve as collective orientation patterns, how problems are to be understood and described, how the members of the organization deal with each other, etc. However, if, for example, in change processes or company mergers, accustomed cultural patterns have become conflictual or dysfunctional, they must be made conscious—and open to debate (see chapters on 'Organizational Culture and Coaching', 'The Organizational Context in Coaching', and 'Metaphors of "Organization" and their Meaning in Coaching', this vol.). The efforts of understanding can therefore also refer to such cultural expressions. As a rule, these non-linguistic expressions are first verbalized in order to be able to deal with them and, if necessary, to change them (cf. Schein, 1992).

Non-linguistic methodical approaches to understanding: These include material media (building blocks, figures), which may help to make relationship dynamics or organizational structures sensually visible (cf. Schreyögg, 2012, p. 315). Or one can stimulate an empathic understanding of another person and his or her problems by role-playing (ibid., p. 284). In experience-activating procedures such as psychodrama, complex problem constellations can be staged in a group setting, so that the experiences of a protagonist are reenacted by several role-players and thus become understandable through re-experience; then, corrective scenes are developed (cf. Buer, 1989). The method of understanding consists of a feedback giver (a group member or the counsellor) abandoning the position of the listener and entering the client's own means of expression: By identifying with their role or position in an organization, they can come closer to the client's experience in order to be able to reflect and interpret their own experience in this position. The client thus has the opportunity to view their experience from a distance and thus arrive at other meanings. Or they move themselves into another position with the method of *role reversal*, in order to distance themselves from their original experience in identifying with a counterpart and to observe their expression and the effects on the counterpart from a distance. Such an experience, however, needs to be verbalized in order to grasp overarching structural connections and, not least, to free oneself from a sometimes powerful role identification.

Conclusion

In *conclusion,* understanding has a dialogical structure, as Gadamer, on the one hand, and Higgins, on the other, clearly emphasize: In the active attempt to understand, a listener is induced to deal with their own pre-comprehension. This examination flows into the dialogical process of understanding and contributes to an *intersubjective understanding.* Especially in the professional setting of coaching when accurate understanding of another person in the context of their respective situation is at stake, it is necessary to know one's own patterns of understanding

well, and to question them in the encounter with the other person where appropriate. This challenge can be met, for example, by reflecting on transference and counter-transference dynamics (see chapter on Transference and Countertransference and their Significance for Coaching, this vol.). All this happens within the framework of a professional relationship with its tense paradoxes or polarities (Schmidt-Lellek, 2017a).

The goal of these intersubjective processes is a mutual understanding and agreement between the persons involved, which open the possibilities of cooperative action. Successful cooperation in working contexts requires that the goals, contents, and processes as well as the procedures of the members of an organization or company are sufficiently understood by those involved so that shared responsibility can be borne.

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