Received: 15 September 2023 | Accepted: 3 June 2024

DOI: 10.1111/joop.12523

the british psychological society
promoting excellence in psychology

RESEARCH ARTICLE

It's a match! The role of coach–coachee fit for working alliance and effectiveness of coaching

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Abstract

The coaching literature emphasizes the role of the coach–coachee working alliance in obtaining positive coaching outcomes and proposes that a good match between coach and coachee promotes this working alliance. However, existing coaching research has some methodological shortcomings that limit drawing robust conclusions about the importance of coach–coachee fit and working alliance for coaching effectiveness. In this study, we investigate coach–coachee fit as an antecedent of the working alliance and its effects on coaching outcomes. Using a three-wave study design, 184 coachees participating in a workplace coaching program in healthcare answered online surveys before, halfway-through, and approximately one month after coaching. We measured both coachee-rated and coach-rated working alliance and, based on person-environment fit theories, we included three measures of coach–coachee fit, that is similarity-fit, general needs-supplies fit, and idiosyncratic needs-supplies fit. Multilevel path modelling revealed that only idiosyncratic needs-supplies fit, where the coach fulfils a coachee's unique needs, related positively to coaching satisfaction through coachee-rated working alliance and predicted improved goal attainment. Coachees' similarity-fit related positively to their assessment of the working alliance but, unexpectedly, predicted lower coaching satisfaction. Coach- and coachee-rated working alliance related to coaching satisfaction but not goal attainment. These findings make a unique contribution to current debates in the coaching and person-environment fit literatures and advance our understanding of the role of coach–coachee fit and working alliance for affective and behavioural coaching outcomes.

KEYWORDS
coach–coachee fit, coaching, effectiveness, goal attainment, process, satisfaction, similarity, working alliance

Practitioner points

- A high-quality working alliance promotes coachees' satisfaction with coaching but does not equate to goal attainment.
- A good match between the coach attributes that coachees prefer and those they actually experience during coaching is essential for a high-quality working alliance and coachee's satisfaction.
- For effective matching to take place, coachees should prioritize their needs and choose a coach accordingly.
- Commissioning coaching clients should allow coachees to choose their own coach from a selection provided.
- Coaches need to transparently convey their approach to coaching so that coachees can make informed decisions about potential matches.

INTRODUCTION

Coaching is a popular, custom-tailored workplace intervention aimed at professional and personal development. Guided by a professional coach, the coachee sets personally valued goals and explores pathways to achieve those (Grant, 2003, 2020). The effectiveness of coaching interventions is widely acknowledged by practitioners and scientists alike with multiple reviews indicating the benefits of coaching on numerous outcomes, including well-being and performance (Boet et al., 2023; De Haan & Nilsson, 2023; Jones et al., 2016; Theeboom et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2021). Yet, there is a limited understanding of how positive coaching outcomes are attained, and which factors help or thwart coaching success (Bachkirova et al., 2015; Bozer et al., 2022; Bozer & Jones, 2018, 2021).

The working alliance (i.e., mutual trust and liking, and consensus on goals and tasks between a coach and a coachee, Baron & Morin, 2009; Bordin, 1979) is the most prominently studied 'active ingredient' of coaching (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2020; Molyn et al., 2021) and is considered decisive for coaching success (for a meta-analysis, see Graßmann et al., 2020). Although the concept is rooted in Bordin's work on the therapeutic alliance, which argues that the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions is largely attributable to the alliance as vehicle of change (Bordin, 1979), we would like to point out that coaching and counselling are distinct helping interventions (Crowe, 2017; Passmore & Lai, 2019). While both interventions have similarities (e.g., emphasizing the role of the working alliance and promoting behavioural change through a structured process of listening and asking questions), they are also distinctively different. Coaching is about discussing common problems, while counselling focuses on eliminating dysfunctionality. Additionally, coaching is often solution rather than problem focused, and consequently more focused on future rather than past behaviours. Finally, coaching is aimed at achieving clearly delineated goals and typically ends when the goals are achieved. Therefore, coaching tends to be more short-term oriented than counselling (Passmore & Lai, 2019).

The concept of the working alliance has consequently been applied to helping relationships outside the therapeutic context, including coaching, mentoring and leadership (Eby & Robertson, 2020; Graßmann et al., 2020; Mena & Bailey, 2007). Establishing a trusting and open relationship between coach and coachee may, for example, help coachees to disclose personal information more willingly

and earlier on in the coaching process (Graßmann et al., 2020) which may benefit coaching outcomes. Indeed, the working alliance has been linked to several positive coaching outcomes including self-efficacy (Baron et al., 2011), satisfaction with coaching (Boyce et al., 2010), as well as goal attainment (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015), and perceived coaching effectiveness (Boyce et al., 2010; De Haan et al., 2013, 2016). Importantly, however, most studies measure the working alliance and coaching outcomes simultaneously (e.g., Baron & Morin, 2009; De Haan et al., 2013; Grant, 2014), making it difficult to determine the directionality of effects (Crits-Christoph et al., 2006).

While coaching success is a multi-dimensional construct (Graßmann et al., 2020; Theeboom et al., 2014), this study focuses on two proximal outcomes of coaching often used as quality indicators in coaching practice: namely goal attainment and coachees' satisfaction with coaching. The former is considered a core outcome of coaching. Despite coachees' goal attainment being the subject of much research, it has not been optimally measured to date. That is, researchers have predominantly used difference scores to measure change in goal attainment (see Graßmann et al., 2020), which can produce unreliable results (Cronbach & Furby, 1970; Tennant et al., 2022) and limits drawing robust conclusions about the importance of the working alliance for goal attainment. Furthermore, although both coachees and coaches desire a high-quality working alliance, we know currently little about the factors that can contribute to such a working alliance. Extant studies on antecedents of the working alliance tend to be fragmented, reporting incidental rather than robust findings and are limited by their (cross-sectional) design (for a review, see Graßmann & Schermuly, 2020). In sum, we believe more methodologically robust research is needed on both the antecedents and consequences of the working alliance.

In the present three-wave study, we examine coachee and coach assessment of their working alliance halfway through the coaching trajectory and how these assessments relate to two key coaching outcomes after coaching completion: coachees' reported goal attainment and satisfaction with the coaching. As in previous research (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015; Graßmann et al., 2020; Vermeiden et al., 2022), we hypothesize that the working alliance is positively related to these coaching outcomes. However, we extend and improve existing research by: (1) including the working alliance as assessed by both the coachee and the coach, (2) measuring working alliance and outcomes at different points in time (during and after coaching, respectively), rather than simultaneously, and (3) measuring coachees' goal attainment after coaching while controlling for their goal attainment as reported before coaching, that is, determining change in goal attainment without using difference scores.

In addition, we examine an antecedent of the working alliance that is deemed important for the quality of working relationships in general, namely the match or fit between the collaborative partners. Based on person–environment (P-E) fit theory (Edwards & Cable, 2009; Schneider, 1987; van Vianen, 2018) and using three different operationalizations of the fit between coachee and coach, we reason that a better fit will relate to a better quality of the working alliance and, therefore, to better coaching outcomes. There is only scarce coaching research to date that has investigated the relationship among coach–coachee fit, working alliance and outcomes. This research did not address the foundations of P-E fit theory, nor did it utilize the methods that have been applied in existing P-E fit research, leading to inconsistent fit results in the coaching context.

Our study contributes to the coaching literature in three ways. First, our study answers the call for a better understanding of the coaching process by addressing both antecedents and consequences of the working alliance and thus treating the working alliance as mediator between coach–coachee fit and coaching outcomes (i.e., satisfaction and goal attainment). Despite longitudinal research into coaching *effects* (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023), longitudinal designs in coaching *process* research are scarce, and to our best knowledge, none have yet addressed the role of fit for the working alliance and coaching outcomes in the context of real-life workplace coaching.

Addressing limitations from previous research, we use a longitudinal design to investigate the relationships among coach–coachee fit, the working alliance and coaching outcomes. Second, by including both coachee-rated and coach-rated evaluations of the working alliance, we can disentangle the unique contribution of both self- and other-rated working alliances to coaching outcomes. As such, we recognize coaching as an interactive and interpersonal, rather than a single-sided, process. Finally, by including three different

operationalizations of coach–coachee fit in one process model and testing these simultaneously, we can identify which type of fit contributes most to coaching success through the working alliance. By doing so, we obtain a more nuanced understanding of the role of fit in coaching success, and, thereby, we advance the coaching literature that relies on singular and questionable measures of fit.

Below, we first delineate the basics of P-E fit theory and address some of its methodological disputes. We then develop our hypotheses for the current study.

Fit theory and measurement

Person–environment (P-E) fit is generally defined as the compatibility between individuals (i.e., their preferences and characteristics) and their environment, with people tending to seek out environments that allow them to achieve such compatibility (van Vianen, 2018). P-E fit is a broad construct consisting of multiple types of fit (e.g., person–organization fit, person–team fit and person–supervisor fit) that are studied separately depending on the research question at hand. Here, we focus on person–person fit, that is, coach–coachee fit from the perspective of the coachee.[1]

The P-E fit literature distinguishes two forms of fit: supplementary fit and complementary fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Coach–coachee supplementary fit concerns the degree of similarity between coach and coachee regarding their attributes (e.g., values, goals, traits and background). As similarity is central to this type of fit, supplementary fit is also referred to as *similarity fit*. Coach–coachee complementary fit concerns the degree of complementarity between coach and coachee attributes, which is operationalized as the degree to which the attributes of the coach fulfil the preferences or needs of the coachee. As need fulfilment is central to this type of fit, complementary fit is referred to as *needs–supplies (N-S) fit* (e.g., Cable & Edwards, 2004; van Vianen, 2018).

Both similarity fit and N-S fit impact people's attitudes, well-being and behaviours, but each in its own way. Similarity fit is theoretically rooted in evolutionary and cognitive approaches to human behaviour which argue that humans are hardwired to assess their similarity with others (e.g., Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Krupp et al., 2008; Yu, 2013). People are attracted to others who are similar to them because similarity promotes mutual understanding, trust and predictability of others' behaviours, which facilitates social communication and collaboration. N-S fit is theoretically rooted in theories of psychological need fulfilment (Cable & Edwards, 2004) which argue that people acquire psychological needs through experiences and learning and that they seek fulfilment of these needs. People are more satisfied (in a specific context) to the extent that their needs are fulfilled (in this context). For example, employees who have a high need for autonomy at work will be more satisfied when they are granted enough control over how their work is done. Or, in a coaching context, coachees with a high need for emotional support will be more satisfied with the coaching when the coach offers understanding and emotional support.

While similarity fit and N-S fit differ in their theoretical origins, they share the decisions that must be made to measure fit. Fit researchers have to decide whether fit should be operationalized as an individual's overall perception of fit (perceived fit; Cable & DeRue, 2002) or as a calculated comparison between an individual's own attributes or needs and the attributes or provided need fulfilment of others (calculated fit). As people can base their fit assessment on a comparison between a wide range of attributes, researchers often use an overall measure of perceived fit, particularly when assessing similarity fit (e.g., van Vianen et al., 2016). However, when researchers know what specific attributes may be relevant in determining individuals' fit, they are more likely to use a calculated comparison of these attributes. In particular, researchers interested in the outcomes of N-S fit tend to use calculated fit measures (van Vianen, 2018). Calculated fit measures have, however, specific methodological and statistical shortcomings (e.g., Edwards, 1994; van Vianen, 2018). For example, discrepancy measures (i.e., the algebraic, absolute or quadratic difference of an individual's needs and received supplies) are unreliable and ambiguous (see for a comprehensive overview

[1]We acknowledge that a fit measure focusing on the coachees' perspectives only may only portray one side of the coin, however, the needs-supplies fit measures cannot be used for coach perspectives. Results including *coach-rated* similarity fit as predictor are displayed in the supplement.

Edwards, 1994). Another issue is that while researchers base their calculated fit measures on attributes and needs generally considered relevant, individuals do differ in the importance they attach to specific attributes. Therefore, it is recommended to use a more idiosyncratic approach to assessing fit (see van Vianen, 2018; van Vianen et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2016). That is, for each unique individual involved in a study, researchers should first identify what specific attributes or needs are important to them and then assess whether these specific attributes or needs are, respectively, recognized or fulfilled in the environment.

In the current study, we include a measure of coach–coachee similarity fit and two measures of N-S fit. Specifically, we operationalize similarity fit as coachees' perceived similarity with the coach. Additionally, we operationalize needs–supplies fit as (1) the extent to which coachees perceive attributes in their coach (supplies) they *generally* prefer in a coach (general needs), and (2) the extent to which coachees perceive attributes in their coach (supplies) they *uniquely* prefer in a coach (idiosyncratic needs).

Through this multi-measure approach, we contribute to person–environment fit theory and coaching practice by obtaining a more nuanced understanding of how (i.e., through which process) coach–coachee fit relates to coaching success. Our research is the first to show how different fit measures are associated with coach–coachee working alliance and coaching outcomes (goal attainment and satisfaction). In addition, by pinpointing which type of coach–coachee fit best improves the coaching process, our research will show how to help coachees choose a coach that fits their needs.

Similarity fit, working alliance and coaching outcomes

One way to achieve a match between coach and coachee is through similarity, which is the degree to which the coach and coachee share similar attributes (e.g., values, goals, traits and background). The similarity–attraction paradigm states that people feel attracted to others (perceived) similar to themselves, a phenomenon that has also been referred to as the similar-to-me hypothesis or similarity effect (Byrne, 1971; Schneider, 1987). Attraction occurs because people expect to be better understood by similar others, get validation of their opinions and be better able to predict others' behaviours. The similarity effect has been evidenced across different populations and contexts, including work and personal relationships (Buunk & Bosman, 1986; Gonzaga et al., 2007; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Strauss et al., 2001) and in organizational and therapeutic contexts (e.g., Edwards & Cable, 2009; Pérez-Rojas et al., 2021), and for various similarity indicators, such as demographics (e.g., gender, age), traits, attitudes and values (Montoya et al., 2008).

Coaching researchers (Boyce et al., 2010; Bozer et al., 2015; Wycherley & Cox, 2008) have considered similarity of coach and coachee important for a high-quality coach–coachee relationship and, consequently, for attaining positive coaching outcomes (e.g., De Haan et al., 2013). The similarity between coach and coachee has been studied by comparing their demographics, (self-reported) traits and managerial style (Boyce et al., 2010; Bozer et al., 2015; De Haan et al., 2016). Because these studies used different criteria for matching coaches and coachees and showed inconsistent results, Bozer & Jones (2018) propose to investigate whether actual or perceived similarities predict the coach–coachee relationship and coaching outcomes. Indeed, while similarity effects have been found for both actual (i.e., measured) and perceived similarity in other domains than the coaching context, perceived similarity predicted attraction and also other outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, commitment and collaboration) most consistently (e.g., Montoya et al., 2008; Zheng et al., 2021).

To the best of our knowledge, there is no research on the relationship between coachees' overall perception of similarity with the coach (i.e., coachees' general impression that they share similarities with the coach) and the working alliance. Moreover, research investigating the relationship between perceived similarity and coaching outcomes is sparse. This research showed that, in an executive coaching context, coachees' perceived similarity with the coach (e.g., 'The coach and I see things in much the same way') was unrelated to coaching outcomes (Bozer et al., 2015). In contrast, studies examining protégé–mentor relationships, a context close to coaching, found that perceived similarity was related to positive mentoring outcomes (e.g., Turban et al., 2002; Wanberg et al., 2006; Zheng et al., 2021). While

workplace coaching and mentoring share similarities in that both interventions aim to foster personal and professional growth of the coachee or mentee through goal-directed action, there are also important differences. Unlike a coach, a mentor is usually a person with more experience within the same line of work, with the goal of supporting the development of the mentee's career (Eby et al., 2013). A mentor can, for example, be a peer or supervisor within the same organization (Passmore & Lai, 2019). While coaching typically lasts for several months, mentoring can last for years (Passmore & Lai, 2019). Despite these differences, the goals and processes of mentoring and coaching can overlap.

Based on similarity–attraction theory and the promising findings of previous research examining perceived similarity in mentoring and in other contexts in which collaborative and supervisory relationships are at stake (e.g., Cai et al., 2021; Parent-Rocheleau et al., 2020; Shaw & Mao, 2021), we propose that coachees' perceived similarity with the coach will relate to positive coaching outcomes (coachees' goal attainment and satisfaction) because of its positive effect on the working alliance. Generally, similarity fosters constructive working relationships as it promotes perspective taking, communication and trust among the collaborative partners (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Edwards & Cable, 2009; Yu, 2013). A positive coach–coachee relationship, in turn, is regarded essential for coaching success, including goal attainment and coaching satisfaction (for a review, see Graßmann et al., 2020). In this study, we measure the working alliance as reported by both the coachee and the coach.

We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Coachees' *similarity fit* is positively related to their satisfaction through (a) coachee-rated and (b) coach-rated working alliance.

Hypothesis 2. Coachees' *similarity fit* is positively related to their goal attainment through (a) coachee-rated and (b) coach-rated working alliance.

Needs–supplies fit, working alliance and coaching outcomes

Another way to achieve a match between coach and coachees is when the coach provides the coachees with what they need, a type of fit known as needs–supplies (N-S) fit (Cable & Edwards, 2004). Based on theories of psychological need fulfilment (e.g., Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory), this stream of the fit literature regards fit as the outcome of a cognitive comparison of how much of a resource a person wants (i.e., a psychological need) and how much of this resource is provided by the environment (i.e., environmental supply) (Cable & Edwards, 2004). It follows that people are satisfied when what they need matches with what they get, and conversely, people become dissatisfied when their environment falls short of what they need. Studies focusing on person–job fit (i.e., fit between a person's characteristics and those of the job or tasks of the job) have indeed shown that N-S misfit causes psychological strain (Hecht & Allen, 2005). Since leadership behaviour is crucial to employee need fulfilment, N-S fit has also been studied in the context of leadership (i.e., the fit between employees' needs and leaders' supplies), showing that N-S fit influences employee trust in the leader, their work satisfaction and their commitment to the organization (Lambert et al., 2012).

Remarkably, N-S fit has hardly been studied in the context of mentoring and coaching. However, it has been suggested that fit between protégé's needs and mentor's supplies may determine the quality of the mentoring relationship and coaching outcomes (Bozeman & Feeney, 2008; Deng et al., 2022). In a coaching context, Boyce et al. (2010) operationalized N-S fit as credibility ('a coach possessing the necessary credentials to meet client needs', p. 917) and found that credibility supported the development of client–coach relationships.

Few studies have conceptualized N-S fit in light of regulatory fit, such as whether coaching satisfies a coachee's orientation towards promotion versus prevention in the pursuit of goals

(Mühlberger et al., 2023; Sue-Chan et al., 2012). The concept of regulatory fit is based on the notion that people are driven by different motivational orientations (i.e., promotion and prevention focus) in their pursuit of goals. While promotion-oriented individuals are motivated to achieve positive outcomes and growth, prevention-oriented individuals are motivated to avoid negative outcomes to maintain safety and circumvent losses (Higgins, 1997). Achieving (regulatory) fit between one's motivational orientation and the way in which one engages in activity towards goal pursuit 'makes people feel right about both their positive responses to things and their negative responses to things' (Higgins, 2005; p. 212). In line with this idea, Mühlberger et al. (2023) recently showed that regulatory fits (i.e., coach–coachee fit regarding the focus of coaching as being prevention versus promotion-oriented and coach–coachee similarity in their personal regulatory focus) were related to coaching effectiveness.

Viewing coaching as social process where both coach and coachee influence one another, coachees' satisfaction with coaching may depend on the success of that interaction. Specifically, such success may hinge on whether the coach can help the coachee to fulfil basic psychological needs (Schiemann et al., 2018; Vermeiden et al., 2022). Indeed, studies on basic needs satisfaction showed that coachees' perceived fulfilment of basic needs (i.e., autonomy, competence and relatedness) was related to the working alliance (Vermeiden et al., 2022) and coaching effectiveness (Diller et al., 2021). None of these studies, however, have tested these relationships in a process model where N-S fit affects the working alliance that, in turn, affects coaching outcomes.

Based on N-S fit theory and sparse coaching research, we expect that coachees' N-S fit will relate to the working alliance and, in turn, to coaching outcomes. For example, a coachee may experience a misfit with a coach, when instead of being warm and empathetic (i.e., the need), the coach is cold and emotionally distant (i.e., the supply). This misfit may undermine the working alliance and consequently coachees' satisfaction and goal attainment.

In this study, we differentiate two measures of N-S fit. The first measure includes coach attributes (supplies) that the coachees in this study generally find relevant (needs) when choosing a coach. We refer to this measure as *general N-S fit*. This general type of N-S-fit measure is typically employed in studies where N-S-fit researchers use a set of pre-selected, supposedly relevant, attributes to determine study participants' N-S fit (Baer et al., 2021; Krumm et al., 2013). The second N-S-fit measure concerns coach attributes that individual coachees find particularly relevant and meaningful for themselves. We refer to this measure as *idiosyncratic N-S fit* as individuals are unique and differ in their needs (Figure 1). For example, one coachee may wish a coach who is creative, whereas another coachee may wish a coach who is down to earth. N-S-fit research has shown that outcomes are optimal when individuals experience fit on attributes (needs) they find highly important (van Vianen, 2018).

Based on theories on need fulfilment and N-S fit research in organizational contexts showing N-S fit effects, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. General N-S fit is positively related to satisfaction through (a) coachee-rated and (b) coach-rated working alliance.

Hypothesis 4. General N-S fit is positively related to goal attainment through (a) coachee-rated and (b) coach-rated working alliance.

Hypothesis 5. Idiosyncratic N-S fit is positively related to satisfaction through (a) coachee-rated and (b) coach-rated working alliance.

Hypothesis 6. Idiosyncratic N-S fit is positively related to goal attainment through (a) coachee-rated and (b) coach-rated working alliance.

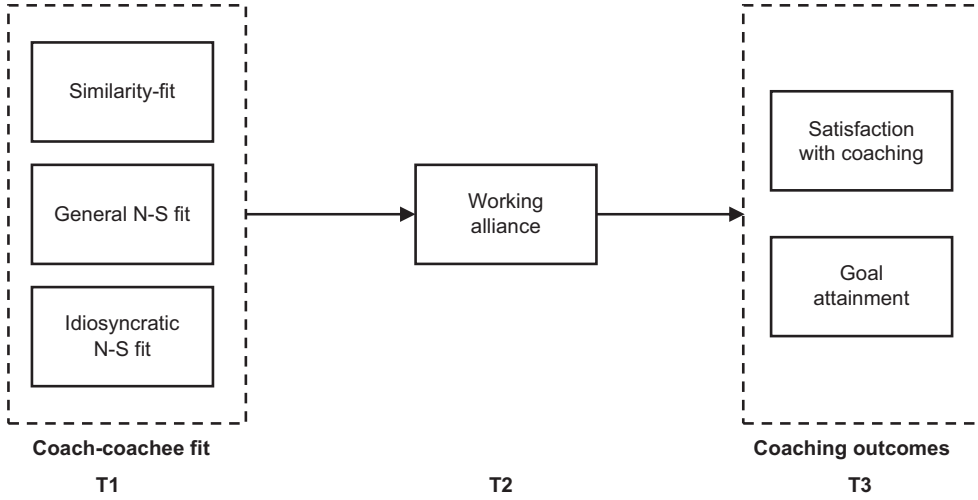

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model of coach–coachee fit.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Procedure, intervention and sample

We received ethical approval from the institutional review board (IRB no. 2019-WOP-11566). We tested our hypotheses using a three-wave survey design. Coachees were physicians (in training) from several hospitals in the Netherlands who had signed up for a voluntary coaching programme consisting of six coaching sessions. The coaching programme was planned to last a maximum of 10 months. In practice, however, the coaching period could be shorter or somewhat longer depending on the speed of trajectories and external circumstances, such as coachees' leave (e.g., due to sickness or maternity leave). The coaching programme was regulated only with regard to the number of sessions and the total duration. The time between sessions was not recorded and depended on preference and availability of coach and coachee. Coaching sessions generally took place face to face at the coach's workspace, but physicians were free to schedule online sessions as well in consultation with their coaches. The latter became especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic when restrictions on physical meetings came into place. The number of coaching sessions ranged from four to eight sessions with an average of 5.89 coaching sessions ($SD = .45$). While the majority of participants did not have any of their sessions online halfway through coaching (at Time 2) ($n = 127$, 69%), those who did reported either one ($n = 29$, 15.8%), two ($n = 20$, 10.9%), three ($n = 6$, 3.3%) or four ($n = 1$, .5%) online sessions. The coaching programme was developmental and presented to potential participants as an opportunity to reflect, challenge oneself and grow (URL https://challengesupport.nu/en). While the coaching did not follow one particular theoretical orientation or coaching model, coaches described their own orientation to coaching as solution and goal focused and positive or engaged. There were no restrictions on coaches and participants regarding the topics to be discussed (i.e., the goals of coaching) and the methods to be used. Participant's primary goals spanned 12 categories, including career planning ($n = 46$; e.g., 'making career choices'), work–life balance ($n = 38$; e.g., 'improve work-life balance'), self-confidence and self-efficacy ($n = 17$; e.g., 'coping with uncertainties'), concrete behavioural goals ($n = 17$, e.g., 'reducing procrastination') and work pleasure ($n = 16$; e.g., 'maintain enjoyment at work'). Other goals related to reflection and insight ($n = 15$; e.g., 'better understanding of own strengths and limitations'), personal development in a broad sense ($n = 8$; e.g., 'personal growth'), vitality and well-being ($n = 7$; e.g., 'reaching retirement age in a vital way'), job demands ($n = 6$; e.g., 'better coping with academic environment'), team dynamics ($n = 6$; e.g., 'improve

connection with department'), assertiveness ($n = 5$; e.g., 'learn to say no') and leadership ($n = 3$; e.g., 'develop leadership skills'). While some goals were mentioned frequently, others were less common, indicating participants' diverse motivations for coaching. Coaches selected for the internal coach pool had a demonstrated history of coach education and training and in many cases were certified by a professional coaching association. Additionally, they had experience in coaching within health care settings. Coaches were not employed by the hospitals, but were hired and financially compensated. Other than the agreed upon six coaching sessions per coachee, the coaches performed no other work for the hospitals.

Before the start of the coaching programme, coachees and coaches were informed about the research and invited to participate. Informed consent was provided at the start of the study. The coachees filled out online surveys provided via the software Qualtrics at baseline (Time 1), after three coaching sessions (Time 2) and approximately 1 month after their coaching had finished (Time 3). The coaches filled out an online survey at Time 2, thus after three coaching sessions with a coachee. Coaches were invited for this survey if their coachee had given consent for this in their own survey at Time 2. Participation in all surveys was voluntary and required consent. Participants received several reminders from the researchers to complete their surveys.

Between 2019 and 2023, 628 physicians (459 women, 168 men and 1 non-disclosed) who started the coaching programme gave their consent to participate in the study and filled out the Time 1 survey. At Times 2 and 3, respectively, 359 and 371 coachees completed the survey. The final sample of coachees was $N = 184$,[2] resulting in a response rate of 29.30% of the baseline sample who completed all three surveys, and consisted of 140 (76.1%) women, 43.5% medical specialists, 53.8% medical residents and 2.7% indicated a different profile (e.g., resident and researcher).[3] Mean age of coachee participants was 37.45 years ($SD = 8.60$) and the majority indicated to work fulltime.

Of the 36 coaches involved, 33 provided demographical data at the start of the project. The majority of coaches was female ($n = 27$; 81.80%), and their mean age was 54.76 ($SD = 8.31$). Coaches had been working as coaches for an average of 15.78 years ($SD = 8.37$). The number of coachees per coach ranged from 1 to 25 with an average number of 5.11 coachees. We were able to match the Time 2 data (i.e., coach-rated working alliance) of 32 coaches to the data of their (in total) 143 coachees. Due to missing values for coach ratings, our sample resulted in 143 coach–coachee dyads where both the coach and the coachee provided answers to the survey. See the online supplement (Data S1) for a summary of the sample demographics.

Measures

At baseline (Time 1), we assessed coachees' preferred coach attributes and goal attainment. Coachees' perceptions of coach attributes and the working alliance were measured halfway through coaching (Time 2). Coach perceptions of the working alliance were also measured halfway through coaching (Time 2). Post-coaching (Time 3), we measured coachees' goal attainment and satisfaction.

Operationalizations of coach–coachee fit

Coachees' fit with the coach was operationalized in three ways: (1) coachees' similarity fit with the coach, (2) coachees' general N-S fit, using an index of profile fit, and (3) coachees' idiosyncratic N-S fit based on personally meaningful attributes (O'Reilly et al., 1991; van Vianen et al., 2008; Westerman & Cyr, 2004).

[2]We selected the sample based on the predictor variable with the largest number of missings (i.e., idiosyncratic N-S fit with 184 cases). This fit measure was not included in the Time 2 survey from April 2022 onwards.

[3]Importantly, the drop in participant numbers from baseline to Time 3 does not reflect actual drop-out from study participation. Instead, majority of coaching trajectories are ongoing at the time of manuscript preparation and therefore data could not be included in this study.

Similarity fit

Coachees' similarity fit[4] was assessed by measuring perceived similarity with their coach (Time 2) with three items used by Mitchell et al. (2015). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7). A sample item is as follows: 'My coach and I are different' (reverse coded; $a = .75$).

General N-S fit

Coachees' general N-S fit was based on the measures of coachees' *preferred* and *perceived* coach attributes. To measure coachees' preferred coach attributes at Time 1, coachees were presented with a list of 24 coach attributes[5] (e.g., sober, direct and challenging) and asked to indicate how important they thought it was for their coach to have these attributes (1 = very unimportant and 7 = very important). The 24 coach attributes were based on data from a preliminary intervention study where 57 physicians (47 women) could choose their own coach and were asked to describe the three attributes of their coach that had been decisive for their choice (see the Supplement (Data S1) for a complete list of coach attributes). To assess coachees' perceived coach attributes at Time 2, we used the same list of 24 coach attributes that participants had been rating at Time 1. We asked coachees to indicate the extent to which their coach meets each of the attributes (1 = not at all, 7 = absolutely). Coachees' general N-S fit was determined by calculating for each coachee a profile correlation index (see O'Reilly et al., 1991; van Vianen et al., 2008; Westerman & Cyr, 2004), that is, the correlation between the *preferred* coach attributes of this coachee at T1 and the *perceived* coach attributes of this coachee at T2, resulting in a unique profile correlation fit index for each coachee, which reflects congruence in profile shapes of coach preferences and perceptions.

Idiosyncratic N-S fit

To assess coachees' idiosyncratic N-S fit (i.e., fit on personally meaningful attributes), coachees were asked to describe three attributes of a coach they would choose, indicating their preferences in open text fields in the online survey at baseline (Time 1). For example, one participant wished for a coach who was 'honest', 'grounded and experienced' and 'clear', while another participant looked for a coach who was a 'medical specialist', 'constructive' and 'down to earth'. Halfway through coaching (Time 2), participants were presented with the three preferred attributes of a coach that they had described before coaching at Time 1. Having experienced several coaching sessions at this point, they were now asked to indicate the extent to which they perceived these attributes in their coach (1 = not at all, 7 = absolutely). The mean of these ratings was used as a measure of idiosyncratic N-S fit.

Coachee-rated working alliance (Time 2)

We used the 12 items from the short-form Working Alliance Inventory (WAI-S; Baron et al., 2011; Corbière et al., 2006), consisting of three four-item subscales: goal, task and bond. The WAI-S has been shown to have good construct validity (Corbière et al., 2006). Sample items are as follows: My coach and I '… are working toward goals that we have agreed on' (goal), '… agree on the steps to follow to improve my situation' (task) and '… have developed mutual trust' (bond). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7). Cronbach's alpha for the WAI-S was .86.

[4]Although the focus of this paper is on coachees' fit perceptions, we also measured coaches' similarity fit (see the online supplement Data S1).
[5]An original list of 25 attributes was displayed. One attribute was accidently displayed twice, and therefore deleted.

Coach-rated working alliance (Time 2)

We used the same 12 items from the short-form Working Alliance Inventory (WAI-S; Baron et al., 2011; Corbière et al., 2006) as described above, but this time items were adjusted to reflect the coach's perspective. For example, this client and I '…are working toward goals that we have agreed on'. Cronbach's alpha was .82.

Goal attainment (Time 1 and Time 3)

We assessed goal attainment based on the Goal Attainment Scale developed by Grant (2003). At Time 1, coachees were asked to describe three coaching goals in order of importance. Next, they were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 10 how far they were currently from achieving each goal (1 = very far, 10 = very close). Participants often reported goals related to their work–life balance, career planning and personal development. Exemplary goals of participants included: 'improve work-life balance', 'formulate goals for further medical career' and 'gain more insight into own preferences'. Time 1 goal attainment was calculated as the mean of these three achievement scores. For coachees who specified less than three goals, we calculated the mean of the number of achievement scores given. At Time 3, coachees were presented with the three goals that they had described before coaching. They were asked if these goals had remained the same during coaching (yes, no). If yes ($N = 222$, 87.4%), they were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 10 how far they were currently from achieving each of these goals (1 = very far, 10 = very close). If no ($N = 32$), they were asked to describe the three goals during coaching and, next, to indicate on a scale of 1 to 10 how far they were currently from achieving these goals (1 = very far, 10 = very close).

Satisfaction with coaching (Time 3)

We used three items to measure coachees' satisfaction with the coaching: 'I have benefited a lot from this coaching', 'this coaching has meant a lot to me' and 'this coaching has given me something'. These items were rated on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7). Cronbach's alpha was .92.

Control variables

Age, gender, job position, whether participants changed their coach during the trajectory ($n = 1$), whether they changed their initial goals during the trajectory ($n = 20$), the number of coaching sessions, the number of online coaching sessions halfway through coaching (at Time 2) and the time passed since the last coaching session were considered as potential control variables. The latter five coaching-specific variables are considered as they could potentially influence both the process of coaching (e.g., the working alliance) as well as its outcomes (e.g., satisfaction; Jones et al., 2016; Theeboom et al., 2014). Additionally, baseline goal attainment was included as a control variable in the path analyses. Ultimately, we only included number of coaching sessions, number of online coaching sessions and baseline goal attainment in the analyses (see Results section).

Data analysis

First, we conducted a CFA for coachee-rated satisfaction, working alliance and similarity fit and compared a one-factor solution to a three-factor solution. Based on modification indices, the residual variances of some items were allowed to covary. These items originated from the same

subscales (see the online supplement Data S1). Next, we tested the hypothesized relationships using path analyses in M*plus* version 8.8. (Muthén & Muthén, 2014). Given the hierarchical structure of our data where coachees are nested within coaches, we used the 'Type = Complex' command together with the coach as cluster variable to control for within-cluster non-independence (Lian et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2019). One overall path model was tested for the hypothesized relationships.[6] Due to missing data on one of the fit measures (i.e., idiosyncratic N-S fit)[7] and additional missing data for the goal attainment measure at Time 3 for participants who changed goals, the sample was reduced to 184 participants. To investigate whether the results hold if tested on a larger sample for some of the variables, in the online supplement, we repeat the path analyses based on the original sample of $N = 253$. The results were comparable.

We allowed covariation between the fit measures (i.e., among perceived similarity, general N-S fit and idiosyncratic N-S fit), as well as between coachee- and coach-rated working alliance. To avoid observations with missing values on one or more observed exogenous covariates being eliminated from the analysis, we included all covariates in the model by mentioning their variances in the MODEL command (L. Muthén, personal communication, 12 September 2023). Maximum likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR) was used as estimator, which is the default option for clustered data except for bootstrapping, where maximum likelihood (ML) was used.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides the means, standard variations and intercorrelations for all study variables. Reliability indices for key study variables are presented on the diagonal. Age ($r = -.17$, $p = .039$) and number of coaching sessions ($r = .28$, $p < .001$) were related to coach-rated working alliance, and were therefore included in the analyses, next to goal attainment at Time 1 which was related to goal attainment at Time 3 ($r = .30$, $p < .001$). Additionally, number of online sessions ($r = -.16$, $p = .029$) was related to satisfaction and therefore included in the analyses. We report standardized model estimates for all path results.

Path analysis results

See Figure 2 for a graphic representation of effects and Tables 2 and 3 for an overview of the path results and indirect effects.

Control model

As an initial step, we specified a path model where we regressed the potential control variables (i.e., goal attainment at Time 1, age, number of coaching sessions and number of online coaching sessions) on the outcome variables and the two mediators (i.e., coach- and coachee-rated working alliance, satisfaction with coaching and goal attainment at Time 3). The results showed that number of coaching sessions was positively related to coach-rated working alliance ($\beta = .26$, $SE = .09$, $p = .004$), number of online coaching sessions was negatively related to satisfaction ($\beta = -.17$, $SE = .08$, $p = .028$) and that goal attainment at Time 1 was positively related to goal attainment at Time 3 ($\beta = .30$, $SE = .10$, $p = .002$). Consequently, we included number of coaching sessions, number of online coaching sessions and goal attainment at Time 1 in the subsequent analyses (Becker et al., 2016; Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016).

[6] *M*plus warned that there are more free parameters than clusters. To check for robustness, we tested our hypotheses again using a larger sample. The results are reported in the supplement.

[7] This fit measure was not included in the Time 2 survey from April 2022 onwards.

TABLE 1 Means, standard variations and intercorrelations for study variables.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Age	37.45	8.60	—															
2. Gender	1.76	.43	−.16*	—														
3. Job position	1.96	1.04	.65***	−.02	—													
4. Changed coach	1.99	.07	.01	−.04	.07	—												
5. Changed goals	1.11	.31	−.03	−.01	−.09	.03	—											
6. Number of sessions	5.89	.45	.01	.11	−.06	.15*	.01	—										
7. Number of online sessions	.50	.86	−.13	.10	−.13	.04	−.06	−.02	—									
8. Time last session	6.01	2.82	−.06	.08	−.00	−.03	−.01	−.06	.02	—								
9. Goal attainment Time 1	5.50	1.17	−.04	−.07	−.13	−.05	−.00	.04	.02	.08	—							
10. Similarity fit	4.17	.94	−.01	−.01	.09	.01	−.02	.03	−.09	−.06	.19*	**.75**						
11. Idiosyncratic N-S fit	6.13	.76	.09	−.02	.08	.08	.05	−.02	.04	.08	.04	.16*	—					
12. General N-S fit	.32	.28	.01	.07	.06	.07	−.03	.07	.02	.01	−.04	.19*	.19*	—				
13. Working alliance (coachee)	5.74	.61	.04	−.01	.04	−.07	−.05	.05	.01	.04	.04	.25***	.41***	.13	**.85**			
14. Working alliance (coach)	6.06	.55	−.17*	.07	−.05	−.03	.03	.28***	−.08	−.01	−.00	.13	.08	.16	.27***	**.87**		
15. Satisfaction with coaching	5.92	.92	−.02	−.01	−.02	−.09	.14	−.04	−.16*	−.14	.00	.03	.23**	.06	.50***	.25**	**.92**	
16. Goal attainment Time 3	7.34	.95	−.02	−.06	−.09	−.14	—	.05	−.10	.08	.30***	.04	.19*	−.15	.13	.10	.28***	—

Note: *N* varies from 143 (for the coach-rated working alliance) to 184. Cronbach's alphas are displayed on the diagonal in bold.

Number of sessions refers to the total number of sessions during the trajectory, while number of online sessions was assessed halfway through coaching at Time 2. Time (since) last session was measured on a scale with 1 referring to 'less than one week ago', 2 referring to '1 week ago' until 12 referring to 'longer than 10 weeks ago'. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

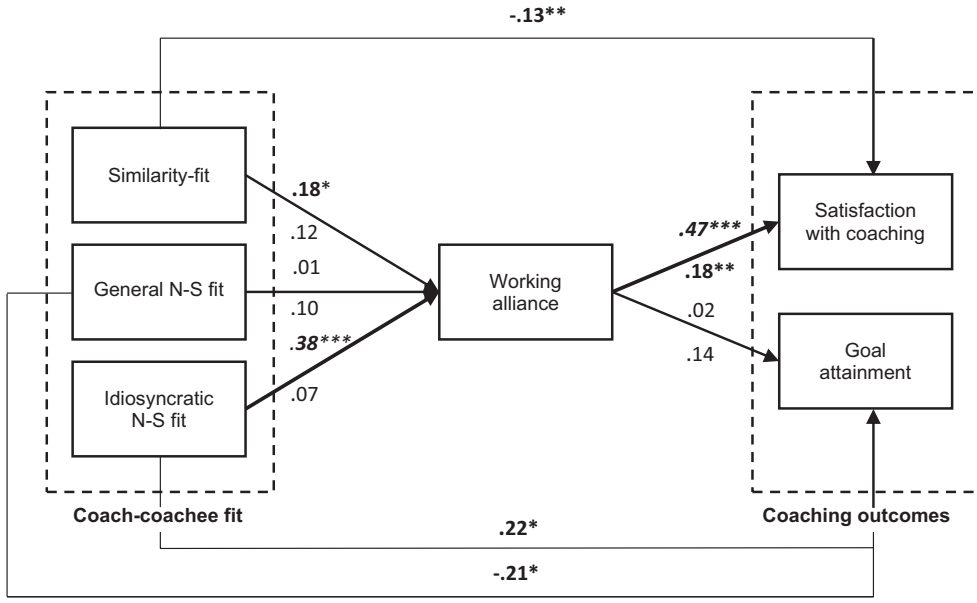

FIGURE 2 Path model results and standardized effects for coachee-rated (above the arrow) and coach-rated (below the arrow) working alliance. *Note*: *N* varies between 143 and 184. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. Paths that constitute an indirect significant effect are highlighted in bold arrows and italic estimates. The indirect effect of idiosyncratic N-S fit on satisfaction through coachee-rated working alliance was significant ($B_{indirect} = .18$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$) with the confidence interval excluding zero (95% CI: .098 to .271).

Hypotheses testing

Our specified path model resulted is a saturated model, CFI = 1, TLI = 1, RMSEA = .00 and SRMR = .00. Of the control variables, goal attainment at Time 1 was related to goal attainment at Time 3 ($\beta = .31$, $SE = .09$, $p = .001$), and the number of sessions was positively related to coach-rated working alliance ($\beta = .26$, $SE = .09$, $p = .002$), but negatively related to coachee-rated satisfaction ($\beta = -.11$, $SE = .06$, $p = .047$). Also, the number of online sessions was negatively related to satisfaction ($\beta = -.17$, $SE = .07$, $p = .012$).

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted that similarity fit was positively related to satisfaction (H1) and goal attainment (H2) through (a) coachee-rated and (b) coach-rated working alliance. Similarity fit was positively related to coachee-rated ($\beta = .18$, $SE = .08$, $p = .016$) but not coach-rated working alliance. Moreover, it was negatively related to satisfaction ($\beta = -.13$, $SE = .04$, $p = .003$) and unrelated to goal attainment. Coach-rated ($\beta = .18$, $SE = .06$, $p = .002$) and coachee-rated working alliance ($\beta = .47$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) were both positively related to satisfaction but not to goal attainment. The indirect effect of similarity fit on satisfaction through coachee-rated working alliance was significant ($B_{indirect} = .09$, $SE = .04$, $p = .029$) but the confidence interval included zero (95% CI: −.004 to .157), thus, the indirect effect cannot be confirmed. The remaining indirect effects were also non-significant. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were, therefore, not supported.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted that general N-S fit was positively related to satisfaction (H3) and goal attainment (H4) through (a) coachee-rated and (b) coach-rated working alliance. General N-S fit was not related to coachee-rated nor coach-rated working alliance, but it was found to be negatively related to goal attainment ($\beta = -.21$, $SE = .09$, $p = .022$) and unrelated to satisfaction. All indirect effects were non-significant. Hypotheses 3 and 4 were, therefore, not supported.

Hypotheses 5 and 6 predicted that idiosyncratic N-S fit was positively related to satisfaction (H5) and goal attainment (H6) through (a) coachee-rated and (b) coach-rated working alliance. Idiosyncratic N-S fit was positively related to coachee-rated ($\beta = .38$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$) but not coach-rated working

TABLE 2 Results of path analyses.

Criterion	Predictor	*β*	*SE*	*p*
Satisfaction	Goal attainment T1	.015	.061	.810
	Number of sessions	**−.112**	**.057**	**.047**
	Number of online sessions	**−.169**	**.067**	**.012**
	Similarity fit	**−.133**	**.044**	**.003**
	General N-S fit	−.003	.047	.943
	Idiosyncratic N-S fit	.041	.053	.438
	Working alliance coach	**.182**	**.059**	**.002**
	Working alliance coachee	**.474**	**.049**	**<.001**
Goal attainment T3	Goal attainment T1	**.309**	**.091**	**.001**
	Number of sessions	.007	.073	.919
	Number of online sessions	−.091	.062	.138
	Similarity-fit	−.074	.038	.051
	General N-S fit	**−.208**	**.091**	**.022**
	Idiosyncratic N-S fit	**.224**	**.104**	**.032**
	Working alliance coach	.136	.082	.096
	Working alliance coachee	.017	.131	.895
Working alliance coach	Goal attainment T1	−.023	.069	.743
	Number of sessions	**.262**	**.086**	**.002**
	Number of online sessions	−.054	.054	.319
	Similarity fit	.117	.118	.321
	General N-S fit	.104	.117	.373
	Idiosyncratic N-S fit	.074	.102	.468
Working alliance coachee	Goal attainment T1	−.014	.062	.824
	Number of sessions	.051	.067	.448
	Number of online sessions	.009	.062	.883
	Similarity-fit	**.184**	**.076**	**.016**
	General N-S fit	.014	.061	.824
	Idiosyncratic N-S fit	**.382**	**.079**	**<.001**

Note: *N* varies between 143 and 184 due to missing data on some variables. Significant parameter estimates are highlighted in bold ($p < .05$).
Abbreviations: T, time; Working alliance coach, coach-rated working alliance; Working alliance coachee, coachee-rated working alliance.

alliance. Moreover, it was positively related to goal attainment ($\beta = .22$, $SE = .10$, $p = .032$) but not satisfaction. The positive indirect effect of idiosyncratic N-S fit on satisfaction through coachee-rated working alliance was significant ($B_{\text{indirect}} = .18$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$) with the confidence interval excluding zero (95% CI: .098 to .271), thus confirming the indirect effect. The remaining indirect effects were non-significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 5a was supported while Hypotheses 5b and 6 were not supported.

Supplementary analyses

We repeated the path model with a larger sample where possible (A1 in the online supplement Data S1) and with *coach*-rated similarity as additional predictor variable (A2 in the online supplement Data S1) including the same control variables as in the original path model.

Our analyses based on the larger sample revealed largely identical model results, including both path estimates as well as indirect effect estimates. In other words: All path estimates and indirect effect

TABLE 3 Results of indirect effect analyses.

	Estimate	95% CI (lower)	95% CI (upper)
Similarity-fit → coachee-rated working alliance → satisfaction			
Indirect effect[a]	.087	−.004	.157
Direct effect	**−.133**	**−.231**	**−.034**
Total effect	−.025	−.211	.121
Similarity-fit → coach-rated working alliance → satisfaction			
Indirect effect	.021	−.024	.070
Direct effect	**−.133**	**−.231**	**−.034**
Total effect	−.025	−.211	.121
Similarity-fit → coachee-rated working alliance → goal attainment			
Indirect effect	.003	−.053	.055
Direct effect	−.074	−.169	.018
Total effect	−.055	−.150	.036
Similarity-fit → coach-rated working alliance → goal attainment			
Indirect effect	.016	−.007	.088
Direct effect	−.074	−.169	.018
Total effect	−.055	−.150	.036
General N-S fit → coachee-rated working alliance → satisfaction			
Indirect effect	.006	−.054	.062
Direct effect	−.003	−.111	.109
Total effect	.022	−.094	.175
General N-S fit → coach-rated working alliance → satisfaction			
Indirect effect	.019	−.018	.091
Direct effect	−.003	−.111	.109
Total effect	.022	−.094	.175
General N-S fit → coachee-rated working alliance → goal attainment			
Indirect effect	.000	−.026	.013
Direct effect	−.208	−.357	.042
Total effect	−.194	−.366	.059
General N-S fit → coach-rated working alliance → goal attainment			
Indirect effect	.014	−.021	.071
Direct effect	−.208	−.357	.042
Total effect	−.194	−.366	.059
Idiosyncratic N-S fit → coachee-rated working alliance → satisfaction			
Indirect effect	**.181**	**.098**	**.271**
Direct effect	.041	−.087	.154
Total effect	**.235**	**.067**	**.391**
Idiosyncratic N-S fit → coach-rated working alliance → satisfaction			
Indirect effect	.013	−.027	.066
Direct effect	.041	−.087	.154
Total effect	**.235**	**.067**	**.391**

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	Estimate	95% CI (lower)	95% CI (upper)
Idiosyncratic N-S fit → coachee-rated working alliance → goal attainment			
Indirect effect	.007	−.072	.147
Direct effect[b]	.224	−.022	.426
Total effect	**.241**	**.046**	**.394**
Idiosyncratic N-S fit → coach-rated working alliance → goal attainment			
Indirect effect	.010	−.017	.049
Direct effect[b]	.224	−.022	.426
Total effect	**.241**	**.046**	**.394**

Note: 10.000 bootstrap samples were used to derive confidence intervals. We report confidence intervals of the standardized indirect effects. Confidence intervals excluding zero are in bold letters.

Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

[a]The bias-corrected confidence interval did not contain zero.

[b]The bias-corrected confidence interval did not contain zero.

estimates that were non-significant remained non-significant and all that were significant remained significant and in the same direction.[8] Only general N-S fit which was previously significantly negatively related to goal attainment was now only marginally related. We can therefore conclude that the results of our main model are robust.

Our analyses including coach-rated similarity as fit indicator revealed that coach-rated similarity fit was positively related to coach-rated but not coachee-rated working alliance. It was furthermore positively related to satisfaction. Coachee-rated similarity fit was previously marginal and is now significantly negatively related to goal attainment. Remaining path estimates as well as indirect effect estimates remained largely identical, that is, all path estimates and indirect effect estimates that were non-significant, remained non-significant and all that were significant remained significant and in the same direction.[9]

DISCUSSION

Applying person–environment (P-E) fit theory to coaching, this study provides some much-called-for insights into the coaching process, and more specifically, into the role of coach–coachee fit for the working alliance and coaching outcomes. We expected that indicators of coach–coachee fit (i.e., perceived similarity, general and idiosyncratic N-S fit) would be related to coaching outcomes (i.e., satisfaction with coaching and goal attainment) and that this link would operate through the working alliance. Addressing limitations from previous research, and using a three-wave study design, our results showed that, two indicators of coach–coachee fit—coachees' similarity fit and idiosyncratic N-S fit—were related to coachee- but not coach-rated working alliance. Importantly, and in partial support of our hypotheses, idiosyncratic N-S fit was found to have beneficial effects on coaching outcomes. Specifically, and in line with hypothesis 5a, idiosyncratic N-S fit predicted higher coaching satisfaction, through coachee-rated working alliance and it was also found to increase goal attainment post-coaching, but, unlike for satisfaction, this effect was not found to operate through the working alliance. Similarity fit, on the other hand, actually predicted lower satisfaction despite being positively related to coachee-rated working alliance. Finally, general N-S fit was related to reduced goal attainment post-coaching. While

[8]The number of coaching sessions, one of our control variables, is now not related to coaching satisfaction anymore. In the main model this relationship was negative, and significant.

[9]Only the total effect of general N-S fit on goal attainment is now negative, and significant. The confidence interval, however, included zero. In the main model this effect was slightly weaker, and not significant.

both coach- and coachee-rated working alliances were related to coaching satisfaction, this was not the case for goal attainment, indicating that the working alliance appears essential for affective but less so for behavioural coaching outcomes.

Theoretical implications

This study makes several noteworthy contributions to the coaching literature. Despite the increasing interest in coaching as a profession and a science, more research is needed into the working ingredients of coaching. This study highlights both coach–coachee fit and the working alliance as possible contributors to two indicators of coaching success, namely satisfaction and goal attainment. Applying P-E fit theory, this study showed that the fit between coach and coachee, particularly a fit that is based on attributes of the coach that are *personally meaningful* to the coachee, promotes a high-quality working alliance, and in turn, leads to coaching satisfaction. Interestingly, it was only idiosyncratic N-S fit, rather than general N-S fit or similarity fit that contributed to indicators of coaching success. This finding is in line with recent findings identifying regulatory fit as a relevant predictor of coaching success (Mühlberger et al., 2023). Together these findings stress the importance of the unique needs and preferences of people in addition to basic or general needs as proposed by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In fact, perceived similarity and general N-S fit had a negative impact on satisfaction and goal attainment, respectively, stressing that a nuanced understanding of fit is essential for its application to coaching. This finding also mirrors some inconsistent findings of similarity fit in the coaching literature (Bozer et al., 2015; Bozer & Jones, 2018; De Haan et al., 2016). These inconsistencies may be due to differences between studies in the operationalization of the similarity-fit measure regarding its content (e.g., gender similarity or similarity of personality, attitudes, values and beliefs), the type of measurement (e.g., perceived or actual similarity, self- or other rating) and the heterogeneity of coaching outcomes studied. It may be that the relationship between coach–coachee similarity and coaching effectiveness is more complex and may alter over time (Bozer & Jones, 2018): while similarity might lead to interpersonal comfort in the initial phase of coaching—the positive relationship between similarity-fit and coachee-rated working alliance in our study supports such an idea—similarity might be hindering or detrimental to coaching outcomes in the longer run, an idea that is also supported by our finding that similarity had a negative effect on coaching satisfaction. In stages of the coaching engagement where coachees could benefit from different perspectives, and need to experiment with new and potentially challenging behaviours, a dissimilar coach might be better equipped to stimulate the coachee (Bozer & Jones, 2018).

Our finding that general N-S fit was not related to the working alliance quality is in line with recent conclusions from fit researchers that the effects of fit are particularly positive when fit is based on personally meaningful rather than more broad and general attributes (van Vianen, 2018). In sum, our findings suggest that matching between coaches and coachees should not be based on similarities or attributes that generally appear beneficial but rather should be based on coachees' unique preferences and needs.

The finding that both coach- and coachee-rated working alliance predicted coaching satisfaction is in line with the general understanding that the relationship between coach and coachee is an essential factor for positive coaching outcomes (for a review, see Graßmann et al., 2020). Similar to Graßmann et al. (2020) who saw a trend in their meta-analysis, we found that the strength of the link between working alliance and satisfaction was stronger when coachee perspectives were used, indicating that coach ratings may be less accurate than coachee ratings. Interestingly, and contrary to findings reported by Graßmann et al. (2020), but in line with previous findings from Boyce et al. (2010), coach- and coachee-rated working alliances were not related to coaching outcomes, which is goal attainment. This difference might be due to the correlational nature of the studies included in the meta-analysis, a limitation also acknowledged by the authors. Our findings suggest that—while the working alliance is essential in driving affective outcomes of coaching, such as satisfaction—the working alliance appears

less important in driving change outcomes of coaching, the ultimate goal of coaching. It is possible that a certain basic level of working alliance is necessary for effective coaching but that in the end what matters is 'what the coach does' (e.g., skilful questioning) that promotes client change. While this finding might be surprising given the relevance attributed to the working alliance in coaching (Graßmann et al., 2020, for a review) and helping relationships generally (Bordin, 1979), previous process research has lacked robust research designs and has measured the working alliance and outcomes usually at the same time. These limitations may have contributed to an overly simplistic view of the working alliance as key in coaching. Regardless of previous limitations, we believe it is crucial to replicate our findings to improve their validity. Finally, our finding that idiosyncratic N-S fit predicted goal attainment when controlling for baseline levels suggests that coach–coachee fit impacts coaching outcomes through processes other than the working alliance. In line with this idea, it is argued that the relationship between coach and coachee goes beyond the facets traditionally captured in working alliance assessments and includes additional aspects such as trust, empathy and need supportive behaviours (Diller et al., 2022). Furthermore, it is possible that coachees who perceive that their coach possesses the qualities they prefer in a coach, and thus have confidence in the coach's competencies and credibility, may be more likely to experiment with new behaviours suggested by the coach, and more likely to ultimately follow through on the change intentions they discussed with their coach. Understanding the underlying mechanisms of this process is an important future inquiry as it can help to shed light on factors associated with clients' change.

Practical implications

In the past, coach–coachee matching has often relied on matching based on similarity, such as gender similarity or personality characteristics (Bozer et al., 2015; De Haan et al., 2016), which has shown inconsistent findings. Our results suggest that matching based on similarity or broad, and potentially irrelevant attributes of the coach, could potentially harm coaching success. Stakeholders involved in matching coaches to clients should, therefore, not rely on such indicators of fit but rather identify the personal preferences of coachees, based on which coaches can be matched to coachees. This type of fit may not only increase the quality of the coach–coachee relationship, and consequently lead to coachees being satisfied with coaching, but also help to promote coachee change. Similarly, coachees looking for a coach should reflect on their personal needs and what kind of coach can best meet those needs. Consequently, coachees should inform themselves about the coaches they consider working with and book an intake session, to better gauge the potential fit, before committing to a coach. Such careful considerations will help coachees find a coach that matches their needs.

The finding that the working alliance is less important for driving actual change outcomes of coaching also has implications for coaching practice. While the idea of the working alliance being *the* most essential ingredient for coaching success was long unchallenged, the current study suggests that this might not be the case. Although our study does not provide insights into the mechanisms underlying coaching effectiveness besides working alliance, we believe it is reasonable to suggest that *what the coach does* rather than merely the relationship between a coach and a coachee contributes to coaching success (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999). In practice, coaches therefore might need to focus—beyond establishing rapport and trust—on helping coachees achieve their goals by triggering reflection and turning intentions into behaviour.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

While our study has several important strengths, such as the application of a three-wave design over a sizeable sample of coachees, measuring goal attainment at pre- and post-coaching to enable

us to examine its change over time and operationalizing three different types of coach–coachee fit, it is not without some limitations. First, despite using a longitudinal design, the fit measures were derived from measures partly assessed at the same time point that working alliance was measured. That is, in order for a coachee to be able to estimate how similar their coach was to themselves and to what extent their coach met their preferences, they needed to have met and interacted with their coach. Consequently, we measured coachees' perceptions of coach attributes and working alliance at the same point in time. In the future, studies should preferably measure coachees' perceptions of coach attributes (i.e., fit), working alliance and goal attainment repeatedly to allow insights into the temporal dynamics of process and outcome variables (Jansen & Shipp, 2019). Second, while our study allows for insights into the effects of both coachee- and coach-rated working alliance, outcomes of coaching reflect only perceptions of the coachee rather than the coach or other, potentially more objective outsiders. We also acknowledge that our outcomes only cover a limited spectrum of coaching effectiveness. Therefore, our study does not give insight into the effects of fit and working alliance for outcomes beyond goal attainment and satisfaction. Both outcomes, however, are theoretically and practically relevant given the focus of coaching on coachee goal attainment, and the easy-to-use application of goal attainment scaling and satisfaction ratings in coaching practice. To address these limitations, future studies could complement self- with other-ratings or use objective assessments of performance or alternative results and well-being outcomes (i.e., triangulation of data) to allow for a more holistic and objective analysis of the effects of the working alliance on coaching outcomes. Third, the measure used for general N-S fit is a profile correlation fit index that does not take into account the possibility that some attributes are more important to fit judgements than others (Edwards, 2008). While a profile correlation fit index has been used in previous fit research (e.g., O'Reilly et al., 1991), it only reflects similarity in the shapes of the two profiles (preferences and perceptions) but disregards the distance between the profiles. For example, it is possible that the shapes of the profiles are largely the same, suggesting high fit, whereas in fact, coachees rated their preferences overall higher than their perceptions of coach attributes, suggesting suboptimal fit. To overcome the methodological problems with fit indices, fit researchers have recommended to use polynomial regression and surface plot analyses (e.g., Edwards, 1994). However, these fit estimates can only be used when the number of attributes is much smaller (e.g., four to six) than the 24 general attributes included in the current study. All in all, the methodological problems with traditional fit measures show once again that researchers are well advised to use idiosyncratic fit measures in which study participants select only a few attributes that are relevant to them. This approach is also more in line with basic fit theory which argues that unique individuals need to fit unique environments (van Vianen, 2018). Fourth, this study took place within a sample of health care professionals in the Netherlands. Although the relevance of fit has been evidenced in diverse samples in contexts other than coaching, we believe it is important to replicate our findings in other professional groups and contexts to ensure generalizability beyond this specific context. It is also important to note that the majority of coaching sessions took place face to face, and that for those that conducted sessions online, doing so seemed to impede coaching satisfaction but not work alliance quality. While previous research has indicated that digital or blended coaching can be just as effective as face-to-face coaching (Michalik & Schermuly, 2023), and that relationship building can effectively happen in AI-supported coaching settings (Mai et al., 2022) digital or AI-supported coaching might lack features of real-life coaching (e.g., body language or facial cues) that may potentially impede coaching outcomes. Additionally, it is possible that blended formats, combining face-to-face with digital coaching, as was the case in our study, may lead to 'switching costs' (Michalik & Schermuly, 2023). Establishing the boundary conditions of successful digital, blended and AI-supported coaching, therefore, remains an important future inquiry. Finally, this study focused on the antecedents and consequences of the working alliance in coaching but did not provide insights into potential other process factors relevant to coaching effectiveness, such as coachee motivation, self-efficacy or actual coaching behaviours (for an overview, see Bozer & Jones, 2018) or the role of contextual factors (Bozer et al., 2022; Bozer & Delegach, 2019). Investigations into the coaching

process taking both coach and coachee, and contextual factors into account are a pressing future research inquiry to unravel the coaching process in its complexity.

CONCLUSION

By applying person–environment fit theory to coaching, our study has provided insights into both antecedents and consequences of the working alliance. As such, our study answers the call for a better understanding of the factors that constitute a high-quality working alliance (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2020). Our results indicate that coach–coachee fit based on attributes of the coach that are personally meaningful for the coachee is an essential ingredient for a high-quality working alliance as well as coaching outcomes. Rather than matching coaches with coachees based on similarity or general attributes believed to be relevant by external stakeholders, coachees should be able to choose a coach of their preference. At the same time, we caution coachees to critically review coaches' training and accreditation history, in order to make sure coaches not only meet individual preferences but also educational standards. Speaking to the academic debate about whether the working alliance is key in coaching, our results challenge this view by showing that while it does drive affective outcomes it does not seem to influence change outcomes (i.e., increased goal attainment) of coaching.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Lara Solms: Conceptualization; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; writing – review and editing; writing – original draft. **Annelies E. M. van Vianen:** Conceptualization; supervision; formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology. **Barbara Nevicka:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; writing – review and editing. **Jessie Koen:** Conceptualization; supervision. **Matthijs de Hoog:** Conceptualization; supervision; funding acquisition. **Anne P. J. de Pagter:** Conceptualization; supervision; funding acquisition.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Data S1.

How to cite this article: Solms, L., van Vianen, A. E. M., Nevicka, B., Koen, J., de Hoog, M., & de Pagter, A. P. J. (2024). It's a match! The role of coach–coachee fit for working alliance and effectiveness of coaching. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *00*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12523