Does coaching work and does anyone really care?

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I COME TO THIS as a bit of an outsider. I’m not a coach. I’ve never been a coach and don’t think I’m one of life’s natural coaches – if there is such a thing. So I can’t even quite imagine being a coach or being coached. Perhaps doing both would do me the world of good. Who knows? But that’s a different issue. I’m a coaching outsider but I do know people who do coaching. Plenty of them. And I mean plenty. At social events and conferences I’m pretty sure I’m usually never more than six feet away from a coach.

Some of these coaches have always wanted to do something like coaching as a vocation. Some are qualified counsellors or psychotherapists who’ve re-branded to meet the apparently huge demand for, as a friend calls it, stigma-free therapy. Others have little or no formal training in counselling or psychotherapy but are qualified occupational psychologists (OPs) who have also responded to this business opportunity by adding a coaching string to their professional bow. And yet others who, having done completely different things before, have gone into it because they feel their experience has given them something to offer others; they like the idea of helping people, and there are very low or indeed no barriers to entry. If you’re reading this, and you do some coaching, the chances are you’re an OP who has started to include coaching as one of the things you do. And it’s mostly this latter category I have in mind in while writing this.

So although I am a coaching outsider I do know something about some of the people who do it. And you certainly don’t need to be an insider to be aware of its rapid – almost explosive – growth and the uncontrolled nature of that growth. A really basic knowledge of the ethics of professional practice is enough to get some sense of the ethics around coaching. And anyone with access to academic journals and books can start to appreciate something about the evidence base for its effectiveness.

As you’ve probably already spotted, all this is a way of asking you, please, to not dismiss what follows simply because I’m not Dr Coach from CoachingVille (both exist by the way). I believe that being something of an outsider can help rather than hinder this sort of analysis. Probably. So how to proceed? Well. How about describing and discussing a few general and commonly made coaching observations?

Commonly made coaching observations Nos 1 & 2: Size and growth

The first two are straightforward. The coaching industry is pretty big and it’s grown very quickly. I don’t know exactly how big and some of the figures bandied about are no doubt exaggerated but it’s certainly now of a very significant size and generates income for a lot of people including quite a few OPs. Just how fast has coaching grown? While relationships that look a bit like coaching have probably been around for as long as there have been human groups and organisations, formal coaching appears to have emerged
around 30 years ago (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007) and it is only in the past decade that it has emerged as a ‘mainstream developmental activity in organisations worldwide’ (Grant et al., 2010, p.125). Coaching is a big and new.

**Commonly made coaching observation No 3:**

**Lack of regulation**

A third observation is that the coaching industry is somewhat unregulated. This does not mean there are no regulations. Far from it. There are numerous – and some argue too many – coaching qualifications and coaching regulatory bodies. Rather, it means there is an absence of agreed standards and even an agreed definition of what coaching means and entails. And there is no requirement to have any particular qualifications or indeed any qualifications at all to be a coach and do coaching. Indeed, even coaches themselves seem to believe that having specific qualifications is relatively unimportant. A recent survey of coaches asked them what companies should look for when identifying a coach (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). The two most important features, endorsed by more than 60 per cent of respondents, were that the coach should have relevant experience and a clear methodology. Less than 30 per cent thought that being formally qualified in a proven coaching method was something companies should view as important in choosing a coach.

The limited regulation of the coaching industry should concern us. Regulation doesn’t matter for industries whose interventions and activities don’t or aren’t claimed to do or change anything very much. However, the coaching industry, like the pharmaceutical industry, makes strong claims that the interventions it produces contain active ingredients which have positive effects and make telling and measurable differences to people’s lives. Any intervention which has active ingredients has the potential to have both positive and desired effects and harmful and unwanted side effects for some people in some ways in some circumstances.

Regulating such interventions by monitoring what they contain and who can do them helps protect people from such adverse side-effects. While this may be as obvious to you as it is to me it certainly isn’t as obvious to some of those involved in the coaching industry. It seems that many coaches and, to be fair, most of those who buy coaching services believe that coaching can only ever be A Good Thing and are less interested in formal regulation, qualifications and regularly tested expertise and knowledge than a FTSE 100 client list and a strong personal recommendation from someone impressive. From such a perspective, regulation or indeed evidence is not important. Of course, regulation in itself is no guarantee of anything. But it’s a necessary start.

It’s easy to say there needs to be regulation, but what should it look like? And who gets to decide? As mentioned, a spanner in the regulatory works is that the consumers of coaching don’t seem too bothered about regulation and the formal qualifications of the coaches they hire. What incentives do coaches have, therefore, to get serious about regulation? The dangers of poor regulation have been widely discussed, not only in the academic and professional coaching literatures but also in popular management practitioner publications. Even the generally uncritical and management fad-hungry *Harvard Business Review* published an article titled ‘The Wild West of Executive Coaching’ which described the ‘untamed terrain of executive coaching’ and noted how, ‘Like the Wild West of yesteryear, this frontier is chaotic, largely unexplored, and fraught with risk, yet immensely promising’ (Sherman & Freas, 2004, p.82) – a metaphor which ignores the fact that it wasn’t so promising for native Americans. And *Harvard Business Review* has continued to warn its readers about the dangers of executive coaching (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009, pp. 91–92):
The coaching field is filled with contradictions. Coaches themselves disagree over why they’re hired, what they do, and how to measure success… Coaching as a business tool continues to gain legitimacy, but the fundamentals of the industry are still in flux. In this market, as in so many others today, the old saw still applies: Buyer beware!

This may have got you wondering about the regulation of the many other techniques and interventions carried out, though not exclusively, by occupational psychologists such as management development, team-building, organisational development, attitude surveys, diversity management, performance management, and so on. Well, yes. Similar points probably apply though they are likely to vary at least a little across different areas. However, regulation seems particularly important in coaching as it is in counselling and psychotherapy. It’s a potentially powerful process which can help and harm conducted privately with few or no checks and balances before, during or after the process.

Commonly made coaching observation No 4: Limited evidence for its effectiveness

The fourth and final general and widely-made observation is the evidence, or rather lack of it, for the efficacy of coaching. Of course, there are numerous problems and challenges (some discussed below) with studying coaching as there are with studying any intervention with people. However, even the most basic question – does it work? – is not yet adequately answered. Given the nature of coaching as an intervention, that fundamental and essential question is probably best answered, as it is in psychotherapy research, through conducting randomised controlled trials (RCTs). Such trials would compare coaching with something else and the outcomes assessed would go beyond short-term self-reports. Other important questions about coaching, such as how coachee and coach characteristics affect relationship quality, are best answered using other methods and other types of data. However, it only makes sense to address these other and more frequently researched questions about how coaching works and its active ingredients and processes if we are reasonably confident that coaching, as an intervention, works. That it has meaningful and sustained effects on desired and claimed outcomes more than no intervention, similar interventions, or placebo interventions.

Table 1 provides some examples of ten years’ worth of concerns about the limited evidence for coaching and, in particular, the limited evidence for outcomes other than the short-term and self-reported variety. It is important to note that to my knowledge none of these authors or commentators is anti-coaching: quite the opposite in fact. Many do coaching, teach coaching and research coaching and seem to be in favour of and want to improve coaching. Even these insiders broadly agree (see also reviews listed in references) that:

- Quite a lot of coaching research has been done.
- Relatively little of it is good-quality research about coaching outcomes.
- We don’t really know with any degree of certainty or precision whether coaching as an intervention works in terms of producing longer term behavioural (not self-report) outcomes compared to other interventions (because there are almost no RCTs).
- More good quality outcome research of coaching interventions needs to be done for ethical, professional and scientific reasons.
- Without research that demonstrates its benefits, coaching as a profession and activity may wither and die (although we already have plenty of examples showing that organisations are happy to use coaching and many other interventions in the absence of good research evidence).
Whether or not [coaching] does what it proposes, however, remains largely unknown because of the lack of empirical studies. Some also question whether executive coaching is just another fad in the long list of fads that have occurred in consultation and business.

(Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001, p.205)

There are only a handful of extant studies that empirically examine the outcomes of coaching relationships ... the bias has been to use short-term affective reactions as outcomes most often, with client learning, behavioural changes, and organisational outcomes rarely used ... To improve our understanding of whether these professional coaching relationships really make a difference, though, much more rigorous research is needed.

(Feldman & Lankau, 2005, pp.842–843)

... we have found that the evidence base for coaching has not increased at the same rate as practice. Research into the efficacy of coaching has lagged behind and it has only started to develop seriously over the last five years.

(Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006, p.24)

... what is immediately vital is evidenced-based evaluation of coaching ... To exist ... as a branch of applied psychology it requires evidence-based research of the highest quality. Only then can one begin to make honest and accurate claims about what it can offer.

(Adrian Furnham – personal communication quoted in Grant & Cavanagh, 2007, p.242)

To me, the single most important thing for coaching (and positive psychology) to keep in mind is the necessity of collecting rigorous empirical evidence. This may be the only thing that separates the field from earlier humanistic psychology and from current non-validated self-help books, while also dealing with difficult scientific issues concerning demand effects, placebo effects, and just plain wishful thinking.

(Ken Sheldon – personal communication quoted in Grant & Cavanagh, 2007, p.242)

It is imperative that as psychologists we develop an evidence base to support and extend this work. We need to know what works, why, and for whom ... An evidence-based approach is the foundation on which our future success will be built, and the yardstick against which it will ultimately be measured: without this evidence base, we risk becoming pedlars of the latest self-help fashion, a situation that would serve neither us as professionals nor the people who we strive to serve.

(Alex Linley – personal communication quoted in Grant & Cavanagh, 2007, p.252)

Coaching is still at the stage of an emerging discipline, and the development of coaching-specific theory and evidence-based practice is a major challenge facing academics, researchers and practitioners.

(Grant & Cavanagh, 2007, p.241)

I’m aware of no research that has followed coached executives over long periods; most of the evidence around effectiveness remains anecdotal. (Ram Charan, quoted in Coutu & Kauffman, 2009)

The literature search failed to reveal any randomised controlled outcome studies which examined the impact of executive coaching conducted by professional executive coaches.

(Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009, p 396)

By 2021 (10 years from now) we hope that researchers across the globe will have completed 50 to a 100 large sample size studies (100-plus participants in each intervention group), using two or more interventions, a control group and a placebo interventions with random allocation of participants ... we would hope to see by 2015 a detailed meta-analysis of coaching as an intervention drawing on 40-100 RCT peer reviewed published studies.

(Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011, p 80).

Table 1: Examples of concerns about the limited evidence for the effectiveness of coaching
But don’t worry – more and better research is being done all the time.
At some point in the future we will have enough RCTs and coaching outcome studies to do a meta-analysis and move closer towards being more certain about whether coaching as an intervention produces important and sustained outcomes.
So it’s a little puzzling but also refreshing, particularly compared to many other OP-related areas, to see such a high degree of openness and consensus about the quantity and quality of evidence for coaching as an intervention.

Perhaps one reason why some coaching providers and consumers don’t seem too concerned about evidence from RCTs is that coaching has great plausibility. The very definitions and descriptions of coaching inspire confidence, imply effectiveness and describe successful outcomes such as this one from Grant et al. (2009, p.396):
‘…a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial or supervisory authority and responsibility in an organisation, and a coach who uses a range of cognitive and behavioural techniques in order to help the client achieve a mutually defined set of goals with the aim of improving his or her professional performance and well-being and the effectiveness of the organisation.’

Such definitions are attractive and dispel or rather don’t even allow for doubt. The subtext of such description of coaching seems to be ‘of course this is going to work’, ‘what can possibly go wrong?’, and ‘trust me, I’m a professional with not only cognitive but behavioural techniques too’. So what’s not to like?

The plausibility of coaching is dangerous as it makes us too relaxed about standards of evidence and almost oblivious to its possible downsides. And, of course, individual coaches ‘see’ it working from their experience. This too is dangerous for all the obvious reasons. All practitioners believe that what they do is effective, otherwise they wouldn’t do it. We also know that what practitioners do can also be at best useless and at worst damaging as, for example, any history of medicine demonstrates. Coaches’ experience is not good evidence for informing us whether coaching works in the longer term on non self-report outcomes compared to other, no or placebo interventions.

Given the lack of evidence, why is coaching so widely practiced? There are many and varied answers. One reason is that people can see the activities of the coaching industry and employ a ‘it must work because why otherwise…’ form of reasoning. This goes something like this. Of course coaching works because why otherwise:
- are coaches paid to do it?
- do business buy it?
- do individual clients pay for it?
- do individual clients come back for more?
- do they have coaching qualifications?
- are there conferences on coaching?
- are lots of books published about coaching?
- are so many people employed to do it?
- does it keep growing?
- are there so many coaching businesses?

This brief description of the nature of the evidence for the effectiveness of coaching is certainly not a systematic review and none yet exists. It is not therefore possible to say in any clear, explicit or precise way what is known and not known about coaching. However, as strongly suggested by the quotes in Table 1, many taken from reviews of the field, there is little evidence that tells us whether or not coaching is effective.
The science and ethics of occupational psychologists doing coaching

As mentioned earlier, I write this with the occupational psychologist who does a bit of coaching in mind. However, at least some of the discussion applies (and perhaps applies more) to those who do more than a bit of coaching. Given the limited evidence for coaching, some of the claims made by the coaching industry as a whole are fairly incredible. But what about the claims made by occupational psychologists? I’m not attempting a comparison but rather to identify examples of some of the claims made about coaching by some consultancies and businesses who make use of the title ‘Chartered occupational psychologist’. This was done simply by doing a Google search using the exact term ‘Chartered occupational psychologist’ and coach or coaching. These are some examples (and there are many more) of the claims made about coaching by Chartered occupational psychologists or by the businesses to which they belong:

- ‘Coaching involves improving performance at work.’
- ‘We help people [through coaching] … increase their leadership capacity.’
- ‘Coaching positively impacts the bottom line by retaining people and fulfilling their potential as growth happens.’
- ‘We are experienced coaches and have helped hundreds of people to … find more fulfilling work.’
- ‘Coaching can be an excellent way to improve performance at work.’
- ‘Coaching is … a proven, practical way to achieve your goals more quickly and effectively than you would otherwise do.’
- ‘[Coaching] … helped individuals and businesses achieve their goals at the highest levels.’

Some of these claims are fairly vague but others are quite precise and strong: increasing leadership capacity; positively impacting the bottom line; helping hundreds to find more fulfilling work; a proven way to achieve goals more effectively. I don’t know whether there is evidence for these claims – I could find none on the websites from where they came and the reviews of coaching research I’ve seen don’t contain a large quantity of good quality evidence that would support such claims.

Does it matter? Perhaps I’m taking these claims way too literally. Perhaps I’m not taking sufficient account of the ways OPs work. I also did a Google search on ‘Chartered occupational psychologist’ and a number of other terms and expressions describing various techniques and approaches and these are the results (with the number of hits in brackets): Belbin (674), Coaching (31,700), Evidence-based (5,610), Master NLP (2,902), MBTI (18,000), NLP (84,900), OPQ (3,040), Psychometric (16,600). The numbers produced by such searches are not reliable and cannot be taken too seriously. But it does to some extent support the earlier point that many OPs are adding many and varied strings to their professional bows, including coaching. Some of these strings are well supported by evidence and discussed in MSc training; others are not.

What are the ethics of providing a service, such as coaching, which is claimed (implicitly or explicitly) to really make a difference when there is not much evidence that it does? On the one hand it seems ridiculous to say OPs should only ever do interventions for which there are at least 85 RCTs and 17 meta-analyses. On the other, where do we draw the line? For coaching there are a couple of RCTs (more coming) and not yet enough data for a meaningful meta-analysis. So what to do?

Perhaps the Society’s own Code of Ethics and Conduct may help. Table 2 has some relevant excerpts. How do these play out in the context of coaching? What about
informed consent as described in Excerpt 1? This is tricky. First, what is the nature of coaching? Its nature is very diverse with many different theoretical underpinnings, approaches and techniques which are widely discussed and debated. Second, what is the purpose of coaching? A question widely debated in the coaching literature with no single clear answer. Third, what are the anticipated outcomes of coaching? These are not yet well established. For these reasons an OP may find it difficult to obtain informed consent from a prospective coachee.

Excerpt 1: Ensure that clients ... are given ample opportunity to understand the nature, purpose, and anticipated consequences of any professional services ... so that they may give informed consent...

Excerpt 2: Psychologists should ... (iii) Remain abreast of scientific, ethical, and legal innovations germane to their professional activities ...

Excerpt 3: Psychologists should: ... (i) Avoid harming clients ...

Excerpt 4: Psychologists should: Be honest and accurate in advertising their professional services and products, in order to avoid encouraging unrealistic expectations or otherwise misleading the public.

Table 2: Excerpts from the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct, 2009

Turning now to the Excerpt 2, I have no idea whether OPs remain abreast of, in this case, the science around coaching. A not-so-wild guess would be that they do, but some a lot more than others. There seems to be quite a lot of involvement of OPs in the Society's Special Group in Coaching Psychology, implying that there is at least some strong interest from OPs in the science and evidence around coaching.

For the idea of not doing harm (Excerpt 3) we run into similar problems found for informed consent. Do we have enough good quality evidence to know whether, when and how coaching might do harm? I suspect not. And what about not encouraging unrealistic expectations of professional services described in Excerpt 4? Some of the examples provided above describing what coaching can offer would seem to me to encourage unrealistic expectations or, to be more accurate, expectations for which there is insufficient evidence to judge how realistic or otherwise they are.

The challenges of trying to abide by ethical codes apply to all kind of psychologists, not just OPs, and to all kinds of psychological interventions, not just coaching. However, these same ethical issues play out in quite different and specific ways depending on many aspects of the context. Without unpacking the context it is difficult to see the interplay between science, evidence and ethics.

So what? Some conclusions and implications

What I’ve tried to do here, as a coaching outsider, is to present an analysis of some commonly made observations about coaching and to ask whether coaching works and if we care. I’ve aimed this at an OP audience and specifically at OPs who may do some coaching as one of many things they do. My purpose both is to communicate and contribute to an on-going and active debate taking place within the Special Group in Coaching Psychology about the role of evidence in coaching psychology.

The debate around coaching provides a specific example of a much more wider discussions taking place within the Division of Occupational Psychology and also in the
Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (see Briner & Rousseau, 2011) about evidence-based practice. While there is now much talk about evidence-based practice there is far less action. One of those actions is to ask and answer more precisely and much more frequently a series of difficult but essential questions such as:

- What is it exactly that OPs do? What range of products, services, interventions?
- What claims are made about each of these interventions and activities?
- What is the evidence for each of these interventions and activities?
- What does a critical appraisal of that evidence tell us about a particular intervention?
- Are OPs aware of this evidence?
- Do OPs use this evidence in their work?
- What facilitates and inhibits the use of evidence?
- What are the ethical and other implications of this evidence for the professional behaviour of OPs?

I’ve only started to answer some of these questions here for one practice, coaching. The challenge is to keep asking these questions for the whole range of services OPs now provide and, where the evidence does not exist or is not known, to find ways of getting new evidence or pulling together the existing evidence in ways that can help inform practice.

So, does coaching work or is it dodgy? I don’t think we yet have a clear answer to that question. But I do know what’s really dodgy. And that’s not to care.

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References


