Article

Does coaching psychology have status anxiety?

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Coaching psychology (and coaching generally) perceives itself, and wishes to be seen as, an activity that is widely valued. To do so, it has mimicked many of the features of other activities perceived of as being highly valued: the traditional professions. A key influence in the development of coaching has been status anxiety. This paper considers how this might be influencing the development of coaching psychology.
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AS COACHING psychology and the wider field of coaching develops it has taken on many of the features of the traditional, established professions such as accreditation schemes, supervision and elaborate models of practice. The value of these features has entered the 'folklore' of coaching with insufficient testing or debate. These features could be interpreted as more for the benefit of the status and livelihood of the coach rather than the client. How others see us matters and we often find status hard to achieve and sustain; this status anxiety (Botton, 2005) can spur us on, or maybe cause us to behave in ways that are perverse and detrimental; it can apply to disciplines as well as to individuals . As a coach, were I talking with my client 'Coaching Psychology', we might want to test the formulation (Lane & Corrie, 2009) of 'status anxiety' as a driver of these behaviours.

In this paper I consider three areas where status anxiety may be impeding the development of coaching: the desire to see coaching as a 'profession', the grafting of supervision on to coaching and the overelaboration of simple process mnemonics as 'models'.

This will be the first of a series of articles designed to stimulate discussion and debate. A website, The Skeptical Coach (http://skepticalcoach.com/ – not owned or moderated by TCP or the BPS), has been set up where responses to this article can be posted and other issues raised. The author will challenge and will get things wrong, but the intention is to create a forum for constructive debate, a resource for thoughtfulness and a place to play with ideas.

Is coaching a profession?

The coaching literature is full of books and articles that assume coaching and coaching psychology are professions (Hawkins, 2008), or will soon become so (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Gray, 2011); though there has been some analysis of the appropriateness of coaching becoming a profession (Lane et al., 2010).

In their enthusiasm to claim a professional status, coaches lose sight of the fact that such a designation may be evidence more of perceived social value and reward than of public good. This paper proposes that coaching and coaching psychology have claimed territory which is not in the long-term interest of their client base: the public.

There is considerable confusion of terms: behaving professionally, or with professionalism, is about behaving with competence, skill and probity, and offering a standard of care commensurate with the skills and

knowledge expected of someone active in the area under consideration; it is not about a set of characteristics owned exclusively by those who work in the formal professions, nor does working that way make one a professional in anything but the loosest sense. We expect our builder, our electrician or our car mechanic to behave professionally. Unfortunately, the term 'profession' is used so loosely that it may sometimes merely be being used as a synonym for 'being paid'. A professional footballer is distinguished from an amateur one by the fact they are paid.

There has been a *'dilution of professions into a general category of expert occupations, many of which are poorly defined and poorly understood'* (Larson, 2018, p.51). Blurring professionalism with expertise has resulted in those with expertise believing that they should be acknowledged as professionals, otherwise their expertise will be doubted or undervalued. The aspiration of coaches to be treated as professionals may be evidence of insecurity rather than understanding what a professional is; or perhaps it is economically based upon the belief that 'professionals' can charge more. Being a professional means being associated with physicians, lawyers and architects; elites who work with their expertise and brains, rather than with the technical classes or, even worse, those that labour.

For the term 'profession' to be useful, it needs to have a more restrictive and clear meaning. There are many ways of describing and defining the professions (Burns, 2019). For the purposes of the argument here, the Neo-Weberian approach offered by Saks will be used (Saks, 2016; Saks & Adams, 2019). This centres the definition of professionalism upon the creation of state-sanctioned groups through *'social closure'* (Saks, 2016, p. 6). Professions occupy a position that has exclusionary legal privileges, and entry to the profession is limited. Limiting practice to those considered eligible may be considered an act to ensure quality, or it might be seen as market control. The state defined legal boundaries, requirements for training and expertise and control of access lead to status, power and income. This also means that there is a sanction, 'being struck off', for serious poor performance. This also results in public benefit, particularly where there is risk to the public from poorly performing practitioners. This approach clearly describes some activities as professions and others as not, therefore providing a definition that has some utility and avoiding conflating the notion of professional with expertise.

Other approaches to determining what is and is not what a profession (Saks, 2016), include the trait approach, which produces lists of characteristics such as formal training and an altruistic orientation to work, or functionalist approaches, which explain the value ascribed to the professions as being due to the benefits society accrues from their activity. The profession gains socio-economic privilege and self-regulation by operating in the interests of wider society, ensuring quality and avoiding exploitation of the vulnerable. Neither trait nor functionalist approaches deliver common agreement on set of traits or functions and tend toward over-inclusion.

Although many of the feature of the professions are present in descriptions of coaching, such as it being based upon deep knowledge and training exercised in the interest of the client, anything other than a cursory interrogation shows that coaching fails to reach the criteria to be considered a profession by almost all of the frameworks described, in particular the neo-Weberian. There is no social closure, no state regulation, no deep, exclusive body of knowledge and, in spite of the statements of various coaching organizations, it is difficult to discern self-regulation in the interest of wider society.

Further to this last point made, the requirements of some of the accreditation bodies are contrary to the interests of the wider public and are inconsistent with their own ethical statements. The Association of Coaching (AC) insists that no more than 25 per cent of the hours submitted for accreditation can be pro-bono (Association for Coaching, 2020, p.11); furthermore

under the 'Executive scheme' a minimum of 75 per cent of coaching hours have to be within an organisational setting. The AC is not the only coaching accreditation organisation that assumes that coaching is only of value if money changes hands. International Coach Federation accreditation demands that less than 12 per cent of eligible hours are pro-bono (ICF, n.d.).

These rules act against wider public interests and imply that a commercial relationship is paramount and that individuals who may not be able to pay (the young, those in not-for-profits, etc.) are of less value than well-paid company executives. This also puts barriers in the way of those who may wish to 'give back' by supporting those who may well need development and support but cannot afford it. The stance of the AC is in some ways the antithesis of the professional code. Or perhaps the cynical (and in my view unprofessional) coach believes that those that are not charged for a service do not value it.

The AC accreditation rubric, and that of several other coaching accreditations make it clear that the prime driver underlying coaching is commercial. This seems to go against the AC's own definition of coaching, which suggests it is orientated towards 'the personal growth of the coachee', though it is consistent with the AC privileging of a particular status group of 'Executive Coaches'. The deep inconsistencies at the heart of the accreditation bodies are unethical rather than professional.

Coaching Psychology describes itself as an *'expanding professional discipline'* (*Division of Coaching Psychology | BPS*, n.d.), and clearly shares many aspects of training and ethos with activities which are professions according to the criteria set out above. Those parts of psychology which are regulated by the HPC fulfil the criteria, however coaching psychology does not, and the author will argue that, having established that coaching is not a profession, it should not aspire to become one.

Why coaching should not be a profession

Coaching is a worthwhile pursuit. Even though it is not a profession it still has value and should be based on firm intellectual and ethical foundations. The anxiety of proving it is a profession and its commercial construct has hi-jacked many of the features of accreditation; accreditation that should make coaching more relevant and meaningful actually makes it exclusive.

There are many definitions of coaching. They all have much the same meaning: *'a development process that involves interactions … strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the coachee …'* (Bachkirova et al., 2014). It is about a coach using their knowledge and skills to help develop another person. It is about being good, helping someone. Of course, you may be able to make a living out of doing it. Physicians and priests can make a living as well as doing good (some/much of the time). However, there is no reason for there to be a commercial relationship between coach and client. Whilst a coach may have specific knowledge about learning or about psychological issues, they may not, and they may still be a highly effective coach. This does mean that there is no core knowledge set, though some core processes have become normalised without sufficient debate, such as being non-directive.

The professions are activities where practice of the profession carries significant risk to the client, hence the need for regulation. No-one wants an incompetent surgeon, lawyer or architect. The risk is intrinsic to the professional activity. Coaching is a very low risk activity. The major risk in coaching is if a coach fails to recognise that an individual is bringing issues to them that lie outside their area of competence. The risk is extrinsic to the professional activity, and little different to the risk anyone faces when they enter into conversation with another. From a public benefit point of view, everyone should have access to a coach and many of our relationships – such as at work or in education – would benefit

from a coaching element. This means lowering the barriers to access, not raising them by adding the costs of professionalisation. There is no public protection argument. Indeed, the pursuit of excellence can damage the benefit to the public. Elite sports (Engalycheva & Chappelet, n.d.; Grix & Carmichael, 2012), art (Ragsdale, 2009) and music (Lamont et al., 2003) may turn people into observers rather than participants. We should be taking a public health approach to coaching; not an elitist one.

Coaching is typically at present something that senior leaders get or is offered to rising middle management as part of their reward and development package. High-cost elite programmes aimed at elites, by elites; those that go through expensive training and accreditation programmes are faced with the need to recoup their investment, and therefore turn towards high-cost coaching, encouraged by the accreditation systems that have implicitly and explicitly cultivated an ethos where one's value as a coach is simply a function of what you can charge.

If one believes that this activity, coaching, is worthwhile, and is about 'desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the coachee …', then structuring the pseudo-profession so that pro-bono activity is discouraged is unethical. Indeed, one would wish to create an activity that encouraged as many people in as possible, drove the cost of training and supervision down, and made it widely accessible. Ideally coaching would be a component of every teaching, management and supervisory interaction. The pipeline of coaches should be widened, not throttled, and non-evidence based commercial practices which are about market capture and monopoly would be discouraged.

Developing quality focused groups that promote good practice and research, and even offer accreditation schemes in coaching, should be positive; however, they need to operate in the interest of the public, the client, rather than the coach. Unnecessary gilding of accreditation is merely an exercise in churn, developing income generation opportunities for trainers, supervisors, accreditors… Those that are coaches have an interest in keeping high barriers to entry, maintaining the cost of training and accreditation and the mystique of the professional coach.

Other areas of status anxiety

I shall touch upon two other areas of status anxiety which will be revisited in future papers.

Supervision

The need for supervision in coaching is unproven. Supervision is a process taken from areas, in particular counselling psychology, where it is probably important to protect vulnerable clients, and has been grafted on. As was pointed out above, coaching is a low risk activity. Of course, coaches should be engaged in the development of coaching and reflecting on their practice. However, it seems odd to bring a hierarchical model into a domain that is meant to be nonhierarchical and non-directive. Indeed some leaders in coaching seem to be embarrassed by the idea of supervision, and have invented a neologism 'Super-vision' (Hay, 2015), yet these people seem unable to go the logical step and really think about models for CPD, co-coaching support, peer groups or Balint groups. Unfortunately, several self-appointed accrediting agencies have spotted the commercial opportunities in developing coaching supervision accreditation.

Models in coaching

A model is a simplified representation of an object, person or system. In science, the purpose of a model is to aid understanding of a process or system whilst reducing complexity. The validity of a model relates to how effectively it represents the system/process of interest. A model should enable predictions to be made and tested and may

explain other phenomena. Models can also be used to support decision making and to aid communication (Schichl, 2004). A good model of coaching would be a simplified representation of the coaching process, allowing testable predictions to be made about the effectiveness of various coaching approaches and might illuminate some underlying mechanisms. 'Excellence in Coaching: The Industry Guide' (Passmore, 2010) has seven chapters, each dedicated to a different model of coaching, only one of which (GROW) is mentioned in Palmer's (2008) list (GROW, ACHIEVE, POSITIVE, PRACTICE, OSKAR, ABCDE, SPACE) of coaching models. Few of the models in either list appear to be consistent with the notion of a scientific model: they do not provide a structure which enables prediction, or an assessment of the model as a valid representation of reality, or even as a theoretically proposed reality. Some, based in CBT (such as SPACE) are dynamic models that can be used to model interventions (Edgerton & Palmer, 2022). GROW might better be described as a process map for a series of conversations, as are many of the other 'models'. These 'models' have more in common with marketing tools than scientific models. They are used to differentiate what coaches do, present their approach and add an often spurious patina of science to the coaching activity. The ability to develop an acronym (Libri, 2004) seems to be an essential skill for a coach.

The entities described as 'models' are better described as conceptual frameworks (Jabareen, 2009), which are differentiated from models primarily by not considering variables, but by describing key constructs, the relationships between them, and supporting ways of thinking about a complex problem (Bordage, 2009). They can also be thought of as *aides-memoires*, simple prompts to help guide individuals through complex processes which have been shown to be of value in clinical settings (Pearce et al., 2019). Mnemonic devices, rhymes, stories and acronyms have been shown to be powerful learning aids (Jurowski et al., 2015). Conceptual frameworks and mnemonics support the coach in remembering and navigating a complex process (the coaching journey), may simplify a process of engagement between coach and client and may help enhance communication between coach and client. They are communication tools, internally for the coach and externally within the coach/client relationship, rather than representations or models of an activity.

Faced with this 'pot-pourri' of 'models', frameworks and mnemonics, a coach needs to ask themselves what they need and what models should they adopt. Coaching can be complex. Having a framework or aide-memoire may be helpful. Believing that what one is using is a 'model' places the coach on spurious foundations. Coaches should be aware of the strength of the evidence upon which they practice, and the inappropriate use of concepts such as 'model' obscures awareness.

Conclusion

Coaching is not a profession and should not aspire to be a profession. It is a set of useful and important tools and processes as many people as possible should be encouraged to wield and to access. It is about being a good citizen and leader.

Accreditation and training as it operates now does not act in the public interest, and some aspects are unethical.

Coaching 'models' are not models, but mnemonics.

Supervision is an inappropriate graft from another domain and will merely raise the cost of, and reduce access to, coaching with no proven benefit to quality.

Status is an illusion. Stop worrying about whether something is coaching or mentoring or if it cannot be taken seriously without an accredited supervisor. The best measure of a coach is not how much they can charge per hour.

This analysis will no doubt upset many good coaches, but I hope that, in good

coaching style, it causes some reflection and consideration. I hope that I am wrong and have been misled by what I have seen, experienced and read. I want a world full of people coaching and coaches helping make each other better, perhaps by contributing to skepticalcoach.com

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