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Academic Paper

The Emotional Labour of the Coach - in and out of the coaching 'room'

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Abstract

Emotional labour is the activity of maintaining an appropriate outward demeanour at work. This study employed a phenomenological approach, using conceptual encounter, to explore the under-researched emotional labour of the coach. Coaches' experience of emotional labour has high commonality with research outcomes in other roles: impacts on authenticity, detachment, resource drain and 'burnout', and emotional labour was experienced both inside and outside the coaching space. These findings have implications for coaches, supervisors, educators, and professional associations for the preservation and well-being of the coach. In addition, what I have termed, commercial emotional labour has importance for coaches and organisations, and potentially beyond.

Keywords

Emotional labour, authenticity, well-being, use-of-self, conceptual encounter

Article history

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Introduction

The spark of interest for this research originated from a professional experience where I became acutely aware that I needed to actively manage myself in a coaching context and to adapt my behaviour. That perceived need to manage myself began a process of thinking about the nature of that management more generally: what was being managed, and what were the potential benefits and consequences of doing so? What were the norms with which I felt the need to comply, and whose norms were these?

In exploring the general theme of the self-management of the coach and seeking other professional contexts for inspiration, the work of Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) became prominent, specifically the idea of emotional labour. This is the labour we expend in attempting to adhere to, comply with, or demonstrate the expected outward display required by our work – typified by Hochschild's research with air hostesses at Delta Airlines in the 1980s, and the customary smile which was mandated by the employer.

In this article I explore the equivalent in the coaching role and whether coaches have an expected way of being, presenting and behaving – and whether they "labour" towards that expected display. If they do, then they too may be subject to some of the effects of emotional labour. These two tributaries of personal/professional interest in self-management as a coach, and Hochschild's ideas of emotional labour flowed together to inspire this research.

In the literature review I outline some key terms and concepts necessary to engage with emotional labour from a research perspective. I also briefly highlight some of the negative consequences of emotional labour as an important reason for this research, apart from the lack of empirical study of emotional labour in coaching.

Emotional Labour in the Literature

The prolific literature around the concept of emotional labour was stimulated by the American sociologist Hochschild and followed up by many subsequent researchers. It became a rich source of information and seemed highly relevant to coaching as others such as Bachkirova (2016), Cox (2016) and Bachkirova & Cox (2007) have noticed. Emotional labour was named when Hochschild wrote *The Managed Heart* in 1983 and she described it as something we do in the workplace for monetary return, to "induce or suppress feeling…" (p.7) in order to play our expected part within our job role.

There are several key ideas and terms in the literature derived from diverse sources such as service industries, healthcare, education, tourism, law, and sex and body work. Many of these sectors define emotional labour and its elements and are important to recognise for this research.

In an interview for *The Atlantic*, reported by Beck (2018), Hochschild refers to her 1983 work in order to define emotional labour:

> Emotional labor, as I introduced the term in *The Managed Heart*, is the work, for which you're paid, which centrally involves trying to feel the right feeling for the job. This involves evoking and suppressing feelings. Some jobs require a lot of it, some a little of it.

The purpose of this labour is to provoke "the proper state of mind in others" (1983, p.7) - which naturally varies by context.

The need to regulate outward demeanour through pretence is termed *surface acting* by Hochschild – akin to the actor who feigns the outward display of an emotion, without any attempt to connect with it – the actor's mask, one might say. Conversely an alternate strategy for emotional labourers is to engage in thought-modifying strategies - termed *deep acting* - as means to modify outward display. A 'third way' is the expression of naturally felt emotion, in which there is no emotional labour as defined – it may be 'emotional' in a sense, but it is distinct from emotional labour.

Surface acting and deep acting are largely associated with negative outcomes for labourers, and,whilst some controversy still exists, overall surface acting is seen as most associated with negative outcomes. Examples of authors discussing this idea are Liu, Prati and Perrewe (2008), Fineman (2000), Van Dijk, Smith and Cooper (2011), Wong and Wang, (2009), Constanti and Gibbs (2005), Van Dijk and Kirk (2007), Seymore (2000), Sharma and Black (2001), Toerien and Kitzinger (2007) and Cohen (2010), though deep acting has also been seen to lead to the same, possibly to a lesser extent (Delgado et al., 2017); Yang & Chang, 2008).

Critically, though, we must not lose sight of the *display rules* for the coaching profession. Whereas there are numerous studies of emotional labour spanning four decades, none of these attends to the emotional labour of the coach or considers emotional labour in coaching. Whilst it is the case that no empirical research exists on emotional labour from a coach perspective, there are other

important reasons to conduct this work other than the gap itself. The effects of emotional labour in other fields outside of coaching demonstrate some highly undesirable outcomes for role holders who labour in the inward and outward management of emotions towards an expected display resulting in inauthenticity, detachment, stress and burn-out as described by Hochschild (2018). To understand what display rules are for coaches will be critical to this study - as without them there is no emotional labour. The focus of this research is therefore the lived experiences of coaches and coach supervisors in relation to emotional labour.

Aims of the research

The research aims and objectives are to explore emotional labour in the coaching context with coaches and supervisors of coaching. To develop a conceptual framework of how coaches experience emotional labour and finally, in doing so, to contribute to the discipline by providing insight into how the emotional labour of the coach may be managed and supported.

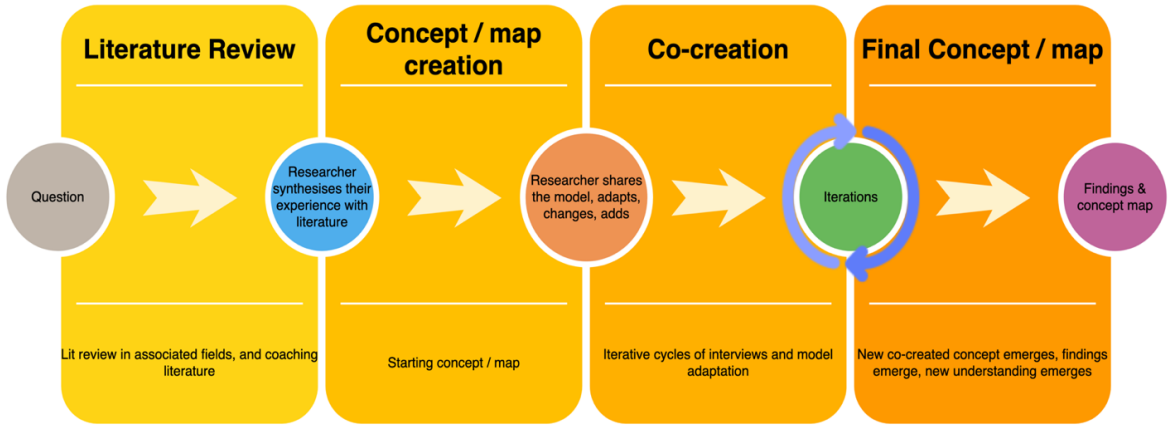
Methodology

In this section, I first outline my methodological choice, and then describe the process of research and the methods employed.

The origin of this research was born from a personal experience of professional coaching, and also to answer some questions of importance and meaning to me – as well as potentially having relevance to the coaching profession at large. Whilst there were several approaches to the research to choose from, naturally quantitative methodologies could not answer the research question in the manner that it had been posed 'What is Emotional Labour for coaches?'. I therefore chose Conceptual Encounter (de Rivera & Kreilkamp, 1981) because of my positionality in the research question, and the opportunities that Conceptual Encounter afforded in relation to that: I am close to the research, and part of the research. Conceptual Encounter puts the researcher at the centre of the research, acknowledges the experience and potentially expert prior knowledge, and leverages that position to create rich encounters between the researcher and the research partners (as distinct from 'subjects'). This approach is co-creation yet requires a concept owner who can be close to the research, and also utilises a process to co-create – which I will describe. The methodology requires a high degree of awareness of the paradox of closeness and distance (which enables concept change), and the 'data' produced by the research process is similarly dependent on the quality of the interactions generated: "…the development and testing of the conceptualization is ultimately dependent on the nature of the encounter between investigator and research partners" (de Rivera & Kreilkamp, 1981, p8).

Whilst it would be quite possible to utilise another approach to research a similar research question, such as IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) or Heuristic Enquiry (Moustakas, 1990), Conceptual Encounter felt like a way to represent where I was in the research without the need to assume that I could 'bracket off' my experience to my question, which originated from my professional involvement in coaching. Conceptual Encounter offers a way of working which can be diagrammatically represented a shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The process of Conceptual Encounter



This process will now be described in more detail.

Literature Review

After formulating the research question (and gaining the appropriate approvals for research), I embarked on an extensive literature review for around six months. Using the term 'emotional labour' returns very large numbers of results from internet search engines, which makes focussing down on the most influential work in the field challenging. For this reason, I used the volume of citations for each work to understand the impacts or reverberations that academic publications have had on the field. I was able to isolate over 100 studies which had attracted the most attention within the research field. Once this had been achieved, I used both the Oxford Brookes Library Search tool, as well as accessing individual databases (such as PsychInfo) to ensure that important works had not been overlooked.

Using Google Scholar to search for 'The Managed Heart' naturally returns Hochschild herself as the dominant voice - but changing that term to 'emotional labour' returns a much wider field of interest and study work. Care was also taken to search with the American spelling of 'labor' as well as the anglicised 'labour', which does affect search returns. In addition to using citations as a way of identifying the most relevant literature, I also used less referenced works based on their relevance to the discussion; these papers and studies were uncovered by following the references, bibliographies, and sources from within the most cited works. When these sources had been identified, I read each of the studies, articles, or books and made notes on their content. These notes were then expanded over time and form the key areas of the literature review.

Finally, in addition to the original search strategy and tactics, I created an alert for all the key search terms on Google Scholar, so that new and emerging work would also be considered over the study period. This alert generated, on average, around four or five new publications per month. Some of these alerts were empirical work, some articles, and some full book publications - and based on relevance, some were included in the literature review.

During this extensive review the key themes and controversies within the emotional labour literature were highlighted and considered with particular attention to what that meant to this research question, and to coaching. Following this, I created the first concept map which I would further co-create with research partners. Having produced a number of models/maps of the concept, through supervision and consultation I was able to use a very simple, stripped back version to start the research. When engrossed in a subject, there is a tendency to try and represent all the complexity – and my Director of Studies keenly observed that I was 'doing a lot of the

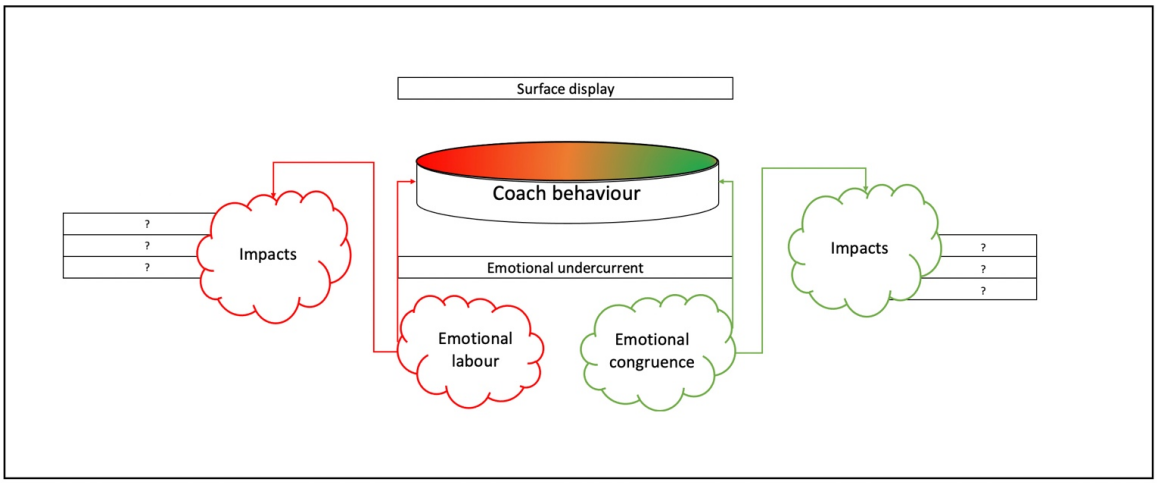
thinking' for my research partners. Responding to that, the starting model presented was simple, and was created to promote or encourage responses (Figure 2).

The Initial Concept Map/Model and Research Interviews

I partnered with 15 coaches (some of whom were also coach supervisors) in both 1:1 interviews and discussion groups. Firstly, I interviewed seven coaches, then conducted a group discussion with five different coaches, and subsequently three supervisors of coaching as a final step. All participants were experienced with at least five years of coaching practice, and some with well over 15 years of coaching and latterly supervision practice.

The structure or schedule of both 1:1 interviews and group discussion involved around half the time (one and a half to two hours) to discuss interesting areas in relation to emotional labour. This was prompted by the schedule questions which were asked of each person, and each group. In the remaining time the model was presented, discussed, adapted, changed and enhanced with each iteration. The speech from all these (online) interactions was recorded, transcribed and used to determine themes and elicit examples of emotional labour.

Figure 2: Initial Concept map / model and research interviews



Conceptual Encounter is iterative in nature and data comes in two forms: work on the model and verbal discussion during one-to-one interviews and group discussions. The model or map itself is data, and the process of working on, reviewing, adapting and reflecting on the model changes, the added words or images, and participants' responses to the model are all forms of data. Part of that process is co-created work, and part is my own work in the role of concept holder:

> … the formation of a good conceptualization is a continual making process as the researcher moves back and forth between interviews, observations, literature and reflection, gradually becoming more alert to the nuances and patterns of the phenomenon (de Rivera & Kreilkamp, 1981, p.7).

Whist the data collection process is both iterative, and somewhat intuitive, the process of analysis of the spoken word, and the audio I transcribed from recorded interviews, followed a more formal structure which involved coding themes from the text using NVivo (QSR International's qualitative data analysis software).

Coding and data analysis

The process of transcribing, hearing and re-reading interviews enabled me to gain good familiarity with the contributions that participants had made. The next step in the data analysis process was to code each transcription to both themes from the model, and emergent themes. This coding was performed by reading the answers to each question, and each phase of participants' words, and assigning a relevant code to those words if relevant to the subject.

I chose to conduct the first pass coding, from first to last interview, in line with the chronology of model creation. The second pass was reversed, with the final group discussion viewed first as I had noticed a tendency for more detailed coding at the start of a pass through the data. So to ensure the same level of attention to each piece of text, I reversed the process. Finally, I re-ran through the interviews again, in the original sequence. As the coding progressed, themes were refined, and renamed, amalgamated, and split, in order to reflect the developing concepts and instances.

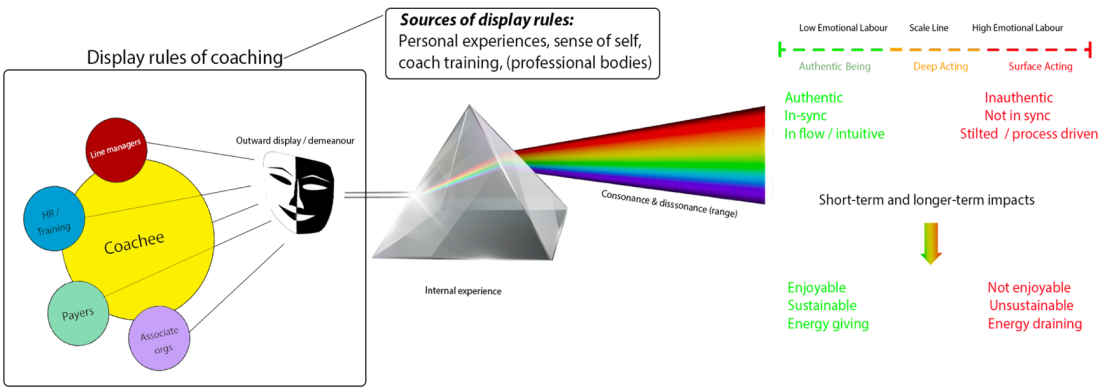
Castleberry and Nolen (2018) note some distinct phases of qualitative data analysis. Firstly, in relation to 'compiling' the data into a usable form and then in the process of 'disassembling' data and 'interpreting' the data. With the Conceptual Encounter process because of the model/map there is an extra layer of both complexity and richness. Firstly, from the literature review there are some key concepts which were highlighted in my starting model or concept, and towards which participants' attentions have been turned. This starting model brings forward the elements from the literature which I believe are justified based on the empirical work already done in the field, and the research question itself. Secondly the map, which is already an interpretation, has a place in this phase - along with the words spoken. My interpretation has been happening throughout the research process in Conceptual Encounter, and so a watchful eye and careful attention to detail were employed to look for data that was anomalous, or interesting for its variance from that which 'easily arises'.

Through these iterations with the data, themes were determined which contributed to the final findings, and the discussion around the meaning of the findings in the context of the research question.

Findings

First, I will present the developed model (Figure 3), with a short description, before turning to the key research findings and discussion.

Figure 3: Final model – What is emotional labour for coaches?



- On the left of the model, the coachee is represented as the most significant relationship for the coach, with stakeholders (Line managers, HR/Training, Payers), and associate organisations through which coaches may be working, circling around that central relationship. The size of the coachee circle emphasises the importance of that relationship for coaches in comparison with the other, smaller circles around the central relationship.
- The box which bounds the coaches' relationships highlights the *display rules* which 'exist' in and around coaching and describe the four areas which appear important in creating coaching display rules.
- Moving towards the right, the 'actor's mask', represents the outward display of the coach by employing the metaphor of 'acting'. In relation to emotional labour, the mask denotes both behaviour/demeanour and display rules (the expected behaviours for coaches).
- The prism represents the fractured internal experience of the coach (which in the original model was termed 'emotional undercurrent'). The prism encompasses the variety of internal experiences which coaches describe and is important because of the varied experiences of coaches in relation to their internal state and emotional labour.
- The refracted light from the prism represents the spectrum of experiences from consonance to dissonance, those which cause comfort and discomfort.
- The continuum of low emotional labour to high emotional labour depicts a range from Authentic Acting (being), through to Surface Acting, which is described as detrimental. In the centre of that continuum is Deep Acting, the space where coaches are working on themselves in order to feel, and in turn display, congruently.
- Finally, on the right, words are used to describe the effects of being at the extremes of the continuum.

The model presented as the final iteration is wholly different from the starting model, which demonstrates the shift and progression in thinking during research. Indeed several key areas emerged which were surprising and novel; in retrospect, these findings *make sense* – but they would not have emerged without the research process.

Key findings

After presenting four key findings of this research, I will then move to highlight some implications for those whom they impact upon – at a personal through to a professional level.

I started this research with a question to myself of professional norms, and where my need to adapt my display as a coach came from – what are the display rules for the profession? This question is critical to this work, as without any stated or perceived norms, there is nothing to adhere to or comply with. It was very interesting to understand how other coaches derive their display rules, which were from: personal experiences of coaching and being coached (both positive and negative), their own sense of self, their coach training (particularly in relation to particular theoretical underpinnings, or approaches), and to some degree from professional bodies (though this was the least influential in coaches' descriptions). Coaches derive their display roles from disparate, and often personal sources. Being so, the perceived 'rules' themselves are similarly disparate – for one coach what is undesirable for others in their stock-in-trade.

Secondly, many instances of emotional labour were surfaced through the research of the labour experienced in the room of coaching with the coachee. These ranged from feigning confidence where there was little, projecting an image, leaving things unsaid, and even holding derogatory thoughts about coachees – such as saying 'Idiot!' internally, or 'wanting to bang [a coachee's] head against the wall!'. Coaches also spoke about holding those things which they knew about the coachee (from say, a line manager) – whilst keeping that information unsaid. Numerous examples of coaches having internal thoughts, whilst portraying something different externally, came to light. Within this finding was an important differentiator between coaches; those who would seek to maintain an outward demeanour congruent with their perceptions of the display rules, and those who held a rule that the relationship should be 'porous' between coach and client. Those coaches

who identified with a Gestalt approach, or with 'use of self' in the coaching relationship (Bachkirova, 2016) externalised their inner world in service of the relationship. Coaches who operated in this porous way did not experience emotional labour in the room of coaching, as they were not seeking to project or present.

However, the third finding suggested that coaches who did not experience emotional labour within the room of coaching universally experienced emotional labour outside of the room – with stakeholders and contractors. This emotional labour was experienced by all coaches and centred around organisational views of and purposes for coaching, assignments where coachees were mandated to engage with a coach, organisational monitoring of coaching, and confidentiality. These dynamics led to one coach withdrawing completely from doing 'corporate work'. The display rules in this context were named by one coach as being in 'business owner' role – with all the associated imaginations of what that must look like for organisations. Coaches spoke of doing what was necessary (displaying / pretending) to align with corporate views of coaching in order to go and do the '*real work of coaching'*.

The potential for paid work and money to be a distorting influence on coaches was so evident from looking at organisational contracting from an emotional labour perspective that I named this emotional labour 'commercial emotional labour' – the labour associated with agreeing to work, whilst at odds with that work in some shape or form.

Finally, the fourth finding is the effect of emotional labour on coaches. Whilst very little has been published on negative outcomes in general for coaches, some exploratory work does exist (Schermuly, 2014; Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019). A great deal has been published on the negative outcomes of emotional labour in many other roles, though, and this research surfaced the effects for the coaches in this study. Where coaches do experience emotional labour, the effects are very similar to those described in the emotional labour literature at large: impacts on feelings of authenticity, stress and frustration, withdrawal and burnout. Each of these impacts was described in detail by my research partners, and at the extreme end of the spectrum coaches described withdrawing from certain contexts, and also almost stopping coaching all together.

The findings of disparate display rules for coaches, experiences of emotional labour in and out of the coaching room (including commercial emotional labour), and the potential for negative outcomes for coaches in experiencing emotional labour all have impact, at various levels from the personal to the profession of coaching itself.

Discussion

This discussion will summarise in four areas: emotional labour in coaching, emotional labour in relation to authenticity and the self of the coach, emotional labour effects in coaching, and what the notion of emotional labour means to the profession of coaching.

1. Emotional labour in coaching

The term emotional labour has low presence in coaching literature, and subsequently almost no existence in the language that anyone involved in coaching uses about coaching. This low presence, or recognition, and sometimes 'misuse' of the term emotional labour (as a 'catch-all' for emotion in coaching generally) limits the ability of coaches, supervisors, academics, trainers and professional bodies to understand the relational aspects of coaching more fully. Given the wealth of emotional labour research in other fields, and this research in coaching, it is incumbent on individuals and the profession to first notice emotional labour in this context, and then to work on representing the ideas at every level of coaching to recognise and mitigate the negative impacts of emotional labour on coaches.

2. Emotional labour and authenticity

The nature of emotional labour requires that acting is done, whether surface acting (feigning) or deep acting (feeling). Surface acting has the clearest potential to impact on the authenticity of the coach, and how they feel in connection with others; this is supported by both the general emotional labour literature and by what coaches reported in relation to surface acting. The extent to which coaches use acting tactics appears related to their coaching approach, and their way of being as coaches; this warrants further consideration. In addition, confidentiality within coaching almost mandates that some 'acting' is done – for instance to protect client confidentiality with the others who have an interest in the coaching. Coaches, supervisors of coaching, and coach training and qualification providers now have the opportunity to re-consider authenticity through the lens of emotional labour, as there are some fundamental challenges to using the words and concepts in and out of the coaching room. These need to be surfaced, understood, and considered if we are to properly define what 'authenticity' means for coaches and coaching. The commercial emotional labour dynamic should also be noticed in relation to authenticity – coach in 'business owner' role. As an illustration of what is happening here, imagine contracting plumbing services to fix a leaky tap, where the plumber accepted the work (and the pay and timescale) but decided that he or she could have most impact by working on the boiler. The plumber then worked diligently on the boiler and left without attending to the tap for which we had contracted them. Maybe the plumber had done useful work, but it was not the work for which the contract and payment were agreed. Is this what we do in coaching? Do we contract for one job, and do another? And in what way is that 'authentic'? There is some way to go to fully explore authenticity in coaching, and whilst the coaches (me, and my participants included) liked the idea of authenticity, we questioned whether we have fully held up the idea to any real scrutiny.

3. Effects

We understand from the literature in both the wider emotional labour field, and in coaching, that there are negative outcomes of both emotional labour and coaching. Whilst this research is undertaken in pursuit of what emotional labour is for coaches, and not fully focussed on its effects, nonetheless we have some concrete examples of the impacts of emotional labour. These include a feeling of a lack of fit, finding coaching work unenjoyable, feeling inauthentic, detachment, opting out, and in one case stopping coaching for a time. I am not suggesting that emotional labour is the only reason that coaches experience stress, exhaustion, depletion, and opting out – but I am suggesting that it is a reason. This view is unsurprising given the wealth of literature available which focusses on those areas; however, this is the first empirical work which explicitly presents the finding that coaches experience emotional labour, and that coaches feel deleterious effects from experiencing emotional labour. Certainly, further work needs to be done to understand the relationship between emotional labour and coach well-being more deeply, but the role of emotional labour in care for the instrument seems important for coaches, for supervisors of coaching, and for those who lead coaches and schemes of coaching. To ignore emotional labour in this context would be to turn away from the mass of evidence in other fields, the experiences of participants in this research, and the exploratory views of thought leaders in the coaching field. Coach welfare and well-being is often last on the list in what is important coaching – being in service of organisations, outcomes, and clients. As one coach put it: "Bugger this for a game of soldiers! What about self in service of self?"

4. The Profession

The lack of examination of behavioural norms in coaching is a curiosity given the efforts of professional bodies to define and place coaching within frameworks of competence. In the data captured from interviews and group discussions, it was very clear that coaches do not have a unified sense of the behavioural rules of the profession, if indeed coaching meets the criteria for a profession at all. The lack of meaningful governance, coupled with coaches' own perceptions of

coaching rules, certainly impacts on whether coaching might be seen as a profession. This was discussed at length by Schreyögg and Schmidt-Lellek, (2017), who stated that coaching is not a profession in the traditional or "classical" sense. Drake (2008), considering the profession of coaching, referred to evidence of physicians in the medical field adhering to guidelines only around half of the time, and suggested that the same might be true for coaching:

> "A critical need in this new era is to deepen our understanding of what happens the other half of the time." (Drake, 2008, p.21)

In answer to the question 'Who are we as a profession?' in the context of emotional labour, the only credible answer from the views represented in this research is: eclectic, diverse, largely undefined, largely unfettered, operating in a grey context of rules and governance, in an unclear and undesirable commercial exchange – but still labouring, in and out of the coaching room towards our personal perceptions of what 'good looks like' in coaching practice.

I am not advocating for a standard, unified, 'one way' to be as a coach, certainly not – but I am noticing that almost 'anything goes' (coaches themselves determine what the display rules are for them), which has inevitable consequences for views of coaching as a profession, and the reputation that it carries.

Conclusion

This research makes a contribution to the coaching literature, as a first step to see and recognise emotional labour - by asking what emotional labour is in coaching. The potential reverberations are high for the recognition and management of emotional labour at the micro level of the coach, the meso level of supervisors, trainers and contractors of coaching, and at the macro level of professional organisations for the understanding and representation of the coaching profession at large.

In addition, the introduction of the term commercial emotional labour potentially contributes to the emotional labour literature overall, where the context is somewhat different from well-researched. Organisations themselves might be keen to understand more about that dynamic when contracting for coaching, or other, work.

Finally, coach welfare, and coach care have not been as prominent in coaching and coaching literature overall as seems appropriate – and highlighting care for the instrument (Bachkirova, 2016) can aid in addressing that imbalance.

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