

Self-deception in coaches: an issue in principle and a challenge for supervision

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Abstract

This article describes an exploratory study aimed at investigating factors contributing to the phenomenon of self-deception in coaches. Six experienced coaching supervisors were interviewed in accordance with the Conceptual Encounter research methodology. The results are presented in a model of self-deception in coaches. The model consists of three main sections, which include the nature of self-deception, contextual influences on self-deception and the focused influence on self-deception in coaching supervision. These themes are discussed in light of the structural analysis of the literature on self-deception performed from a pragmatic perspective. The paper concludes by considering how the results of the study add to current debates on the nature of self-deception and what implications the findings might have for coaches, coaching supervisors and other practitioners engaged in the development of individuals in organisations.

Practice points

- This article is relevant to all types of coaching and particularly to coaching supervision.
- The article addresses the issue of self-deception of coaches that highlights the role of the practitioner's self in the coaching process and the potential implications of this phenomenon on the quality of practice.
- The findings raise coaches' awareness of their self-deception and how to address it. Coaching supervisors and educators should be able to inform their practice using the proposed model.

Introduction

Coaching is about change, improvement and development; however, experienced coaches and coaching supervisors admit that self-deception can be an obstacle to this processes. Both of them also observe that self-deception is widespread not only among clients but also with coaches. Discussions about phenomena such as self-deception are usually challenging because discourses of coaching are strongly influenced by positive psychology and the term itself may seem judgmental to some people. However, concerns about the quality of the coaching process make this topic important for practice. The practitioners of this field are aware that their clients 'filter information for personal reasons' (this is one of the ways to describe self-deception) and act accordingly. For example, they may adopt false valuations of their actions and abilities in order to boost their self-esteem thus enhancing their sense of happiness and creating a desired impression on others. Coaches usually adopt various strategies to help their clients to improve their quality of perception in order for them to engage with their environment in the most effective way and fulfil their realistic expectations.

However, coaches themselves are not immune from self-deception and may be missing many signs of their own self-deception involved in self-evaluation and their actions in coaching practice. The consequences of self-deception of coaches might be costly for them and their clients; for example, if a client's situation is seen through the filter of the coach's own insecurities and other personal motives their capacity to fulfil the coaching task of expanding the client's awareness is limited. Coaches may see patterns in clients' behaviour and stories where there are none and base their logic of interventions on these patterns, which may lead nowhere. By colluding with an

individual client they might do a disservice to the organisation's interests. By deluding themselves about the quality of their work they might fail to develop the coaching engagement appropriately or refer a client on to another specialist when necessary.

It seems reasonable for coaches to wish to become more aware of their own self-deception in order to help their clients minimise it. Coaching supervision is one of the ways to engage with this difficult task as it aims to enhance the quality of coaching practice (Hawkins and Smith, 2013; Bachkirova, et al, 2011). However, the functions of supervision can also be affected by the self-deception of coaches. Self-deception may be an obstacle for reviewing practice in terms of quality and ethics – the relevant material may not reach supervision at all. For the developmental function of supervision, which is concerned with helping coaches to reflect on their practice and themselves as practitioners, self-deception may also be an obstacle if important aspects of these are filtered. Therefore, there is a clear interest in understanding how and why coaches deceive themselves and how the self-deception of coaches can be minimised in principle and through the use of supervision.

Although extensive, the literature on self-deception does not help for the above purposes. The concept of self-deception is still a subject of debate and the authors seem to be focused on the conceptual understanding of this phenomenon rather than on the implications of it for everyday life (von Hippel and Trivers, 2011; Clegg & Moissinac, 2005). In applied disciplines, however, very little attention has been paid to the manifestation of this phenomenon in spite of the obvious consequences of it on practice. There is no literature on self-deception in coaching that explores this phenomenon and very little has been published in the field of counselling/psychotherapy (Kirby, 2003; Cooper, 2005; Westland and Shinebourne, 2009). The research on self-deception is limited (e.g. Gur and Sackheim, 1979; Lee and Klein, 2002) and is exclusively concerned with exploring this phenomenon from the third person perspective – from the observer positions using purposefully designed questionnaires. There are only a few attempts to consider this phenomenon from the position of those who experience self-deception or help others exploring similar experiences (Westland and Shinebourne, 2009).

Therefore, the purpose of this research was exactly this: to explore self-deception from the position of those who are interested in self-deception for the pragmatic purpose of minimising this phenomenon in coaches. This exploratory study aims to identify how coaching supervisors conceptualise self-deception in coaches; how they identify self-deception in their practice; what they see as factors contributing to the self-deception of coaches in the state of coaching as a professional field and what their views are on the potential interventions that could affect self-deception in coaches.

Literature review

...one great thing that psychology has achieved is documenting the human propensity for self-deception, self-serving biases, cognitive dissonance, and defence mechanisms of the ego - the source of much of the complexity, and tragedy, of human life (S. Pinker, 2008, p. 184).

The extant literature on self-deception reveals the enormously rich field of very diverse types of explanations and theories of self-deception. Self-deception is studied in philosophy and psychoanalysis, neuroscience and cognitive psychology; evolutionary and social psychology (Rorty, 1994; Fingarette, 1998, 2000; Goleman, 1997; Mele, 2001; Vaillant, 2005; Festinger, 1957; Trivers, 2000; von Hippel

and Trivers, 2011). However, interdisciplinary reviews of this literature are extremely rare (Fingarette, 2000). The focus of the literature is still on understanding the main paradox: how the same person at the same time can both know and keep oneself from knowing the same thing. The complexity of this task is aggravated by the existence of many similar concepts, such as information-processing biases, defence mechanisms, faulty thinking, cognitive dissonance, and wishful thinking. Some terms from the more popular literature such as 'wishful blindness' also add to the confusion of practitioners interested in this phenomenon. It would require a separate paper to make a detailed differentiation of self-deception from all other phenomena. Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) for example, make a good case in arguing that self-deception is an umbrella term for all biased information processing and includes other types apparent at different stages of this process: biased information search strategies, biased interpretation and biased memory processes. Although self-deception as a term may cause a strong reaction, this paper is aimed at considering the self-deception of coaches rather than any other concepts for a number of reasons. First of all, this concept is widely discussed in the literature that stems from the previous century to the work of current commentators. Secondly, it received attention from a wider array of perspectives than any other concepts of similar nature. Thirdly, this concept is most inclusive as Van Hippel and Trivers (2011) show and there is an agreement on specific cases that are considered as classic cases of self-deception, which has not been made apparent in relation to other concepts. Finally, I believe that we as coaches should not shy away from this concept however unpleasant it might sound, if exploring it can help in improving the quality of our practice.

At the same time, suggesting a universal definition of self-deception is a tall order because of the variety of philosophical positions that can be taken on this concept. In order to provide a working definition of self-deception for this paper the following is a summary of what is considered by various authors (e.g. Fingarette, 2000; Rorty, 1994; Mele, 2001) as conditions for calling a phenomenon a self-deception: a) a person holds a belief that contradicts the information/knowledge that he/she possesses at the same time (Demos, 1960); b) this belief is persistent and the person motivated/has a reason to keep it (Gur & Sackeim, 1979; Fingarette, 2000); c) the person is acting in ways that keep him/her uninformed about unwanted information (Bandura, 2011); d) unacknowledged information is verifiable (Lewis, 1996). The latter condition is the most controversial leading to many debates in philosophy and psychology.

In spite of the variety of perspectives on self-deception it is possible to identify some agreements in the literature – they are mainly represented by two general themes. The first is that self-deception is not a simple misperception or cognitive error and that “people favour welcome over unwelcome information in a manner that reflects their goals or motivations” (Von Hippel and Trivers, 2011) - there is something to gain for self-deceivers in terms of things that matter to them (e.g. Rorty, 1994; Kurzban, 2010). An example of self-deception, even before perception or cognition are involved, would be when we stop gathering information, being happy with early return, thus preventing receiving new information (Ditto and Lopez, 1992). The second theme is about some obvious costs of self-deception such as the repetition of experiences, loss of information integrity and diminished self-understanding. The cost of self-deception may include situations when people are misled by self-deceivers as self-deception makes deception more convincing (e.g. Von Hippel and Trivers, 2011; Frost et al, 2001).

There are also themes that are much less explored in the literature. Amongst them is the theme of individual differences in self-deception. In some psychological studies the tendency for self-deception is measured as an individual characteristic (Sackheim, 1983; Jamner and Schwartz, 1986), however, as it is claimed to be a stable characteristic (Lee & Klein, 2002) it has little value for practitioners interested in helping people change. Another less developed theme in the literature is the potential approaches for influencing self-deception that can be useful for applied fields such as counselling, coaching and education (Kirby, 2003; Cooper, 2005; Westland and Shinebourne, 2009). Although there are rich and interesting explanations and theories of self-deception, very few of them lead to implications for practitioners working with individuals who wish to minimise self-deception.

As this paper approaches the topic of self-deception from the pragmatic position to understand self-deception for applied purposes, the literature review is summarised in a structured way to elicit the implication of each position for practice with my personal interpretation and in some cases, speculation and critique. The following table represents the most distinct theoretical positions on self-deception with a view to show how self-deception is conceptualised, if and how self-deception can be addressed/changed, how this process can be influenced, and finally what potential problems might be anticipated with each position. Although the brevity of such a form does not give justice to each position, it is designed to serve as a starting point for discussion that will follow the findings of this research.

Perspectives on self-deception (SD)	Concept of SD	How to minimise SD	How to help those who wish to minimise SD	Potential problems of this approach to helping
Existentialism (Sartre, 1956; Kierkegaard, 1959)	'Bad faith' – SD is a disavowal of responsibility for some projects of consciousness and consequent actions.	Self-deceivers must accept their lack of moral courage in order to act in good faith.	Pointing out SD when it is not seen. Direct appeal for integrity and intellectual growth.	The role of consciousness and intellect in changing behaviour is overestimated. Understanding does not guarantee overcoming. Appeals to integrity tend to strengthen SD as only a person who has integrity cares to self-deceive.
Psychoanalytic approach (Freud, 1930/1962, 1957)	SD is a defence mechanism – mental processes that operate unconsciously to reduce painful emotions.	Developing a strong ego that can withstand anxiety and cope with becoming conscious about painful events that were repressed.	Re-evaluation of threatening situations in the context of supportive compassionate relationship.	Defence mechanisms represent only one type of SD that is triggered by fear and serves as a protection from anxiety. SD can also be for a gain and therefore may need a different strategy.
Postmodernism (e.g. Gergen, 1985; Lewis, 1996)	SD is a special case of storytelling – immersions in one particular story that excludes some experiences.	Nothing could be done on the individual scale as meaning is created through processes that are largely unconscious.	SD is a cultural rather than a natural phenomenon and only can be affected in response to cultural changes.	This view does not explain how individuals who wish to see things as clear as possible, can recognise SD. There is evidence that the nature of SD can change on the individual level even when cultural situations remains largely the same.
The evolutionary approach (e.g. Von Hippel)	SD is offensive rather than defensive. It is	As SD seems to have adaptive value there is no	As natural selection doesn't care about the	It seems that that this position is relevant only for the reproductive stage of human

& Trivers, 2011)	used to better conceal deception about one's qualities and thus gain evolutionary advantage.	need to minimise it. Only a balance with veridical perception matters.	truth only about reproductive success, helping individuals may focus also only on balance.	life. However, with a longer life span conditions of engaging with others can be seen in a different light. Advocated balance also seems arbitrary (20/80).
Neuroscientists' position (e.g. Kenrick & White, 2011; Kurzban, 2010; Huang & Bargh, 2011; Gazzaniga, 1985, 1992)	There is no SD as there is no self to be deceived. It is only a division of labour between different mental modules.	As there is no deception - just selectivity, the only strategy is to observe one's behaviours and adapt to the way things are.	No suggestions are offered for influencing SD as all potential influences may be seen as moralistic devices.	Although an interesting explanation, it leaves too many questions unanswered, e.g. which mental modules have awareness of other mental modules when the person identifies SD? How can it happen? And many other questions.

Table 1 Self-deception literature from the pragmatic perspective

An overview of the theories of self-deception in Table 1 shows how different the perspectives on self-deception can be, making it difficult to inform practitioners' thinking and potential interventions. It also shows that these differences follow from the deeper ontological positions of the authors of these theories on what they mean by self, truth and reality. Very often these positions are not explicit. The presented perspectives are also theory driven rather than informed by the views of interested practitioners who might be engaged with this phenomenon and are in a position to influence the development and well-being of individuals.

Methodology

This exploratory study is aimed at in-depth investigation of the psychological phenomenon of self-deception in coaches, the factors that may contribute to it and the potential consequences. It is approached by engaging with reflections on the experiences and the meanings attributed to these by experienced coaching supervisors. The project is conceived from the hermeneutic perspective acknowledging the role of social construction in the perception and experience of self-deception. The specific methodological approach adopted for the study was the 'Conceptual Encounter' (De Rivera, 1981) that allows for the presence and influence of the researcher by explicitly exposing her assumptions to challenges and modifications by the research participants in the process of abstract conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

The methodology involves:

- Development of the initial model of self-deception in coaching by the researcher
- Interview of each participant about their encounters with self-deception
- Participant's contribution to the model of self-deception that is modified after each interview as the result of this process with a previous participant
- Analysis and interpretation of all data through themes and modification of the model
- Description of the cumulative model of self-deception that integrates experiences and views discussed throughout the process.

The challenge of the study was to illuminate the relationship between the construction of self-deception in the current social, cultural and professional context and the

phenomenon as experienced. It was important therefore to select research participants who were reflexive and experienced in observing psychological nuances of relevant behaviours in themselves and other people, but also sufficiently informed about the contextual issues involved in the phenomenon in question. To fulfil these requirements very experienced coaching supervisors were chosen as research participants. The job of coaching supervisors involves helping coaches to reflect on, make sense of and respond appropriately to various complex situations in their practice. Under the condition of the professional contract and developed trust in the relationship, supervisors help coaches to process many issues of engagement with their clients and attend to the developmental needs of coaches. This allows supervisors to have a unique 'insider' view of various coaching issues. At the same time, being experienced coaches themselves and caring about the health of the profession, supervisors are in a position to relate these issues to the wider context of coaching.

Six supervisors were invited to take part in the interview about their experiences and views on self-deception in coaching and in their supervision of other coaches. Four male and two female participants were all between 46 and 62 years old and had more than 20 years of experience as coaches and over 7 years as supervisors. All supervisors were based in the United Kingdom but worked as coaches and supervisors internationally.

The preliminary questions for the semi-structured interview were sent to participants prior to the interview in order to give further orientation to the structure of the process. In-depth interview with coaching supervisors was chosen as the method of data collection in order to make the best possible use of their capacity to take a wider reflective stance on coaching practice together with appreciating the individual experiences of coaches. Permission was sought to audio-record interviews for the accuracy of the analysis. During the one-to-one interviews (approximately 1 – 1.5 hours long) the supervisors were asked to describe experiences of what they considered to be examples of self-deception in themselves (when acting as coaches) and in the coaches they supervise. They were also involved in a discussion on how they saw the pertinence of this topic for the coaching field and eventually - their strategies for working with these issues in their supervision practice.

During the interview, participants were also invited to accept, reject or add to the elements of the conceptual model of self-deception in coaching, which was initially created by the researcher and then modified after the input was provided by each of the previous participants. This initial model of self-deception of coaches was created on the basis of the literature review together with the personal observations and views of the researcher – also an experienced supervisor. This model allowed my views on self-deception to be present but not to influence the process subconsciously. I was explicit about the model being a product of each consecutive participant and that I had no invested interest in any part of it. As a result the final model had very little resemblance to the initial one.

In working towards a model of self-deception, the intention of the analysis of data was not to develop a coherent understanding of the experiences and positions on self-deception of each participant but rather to refine the concepts involved in describing self-deception in coaching using their unique contributions. The analysis of data was conducted after each interview to integrate into the model new examples of self-deception and the actual suggestions for modification of the emerging model. When there was a discrepancy between the participants' positions I was looking to identify a higher order concept that would integrate these different positions. The

process of arriving at a model of self-deception in coaches included several iterations after each interview. Initially the model grew into a large detailed map that was divided at one stage into three different sub maps. Then it became one highly structured map that emphasised essential elements from this collaborative process, which was eventually transformed as a result of the final analysis into a model of self-deception in coaches described in Figure 1. According to the chosen methodology the involvement of new participants and consequent analysis stopped when no new themes were emerging from the consequent interviews and the model became clear and 'elegant' (De Rivera, 1981).

In the following section the themes that constitute the final model of self-deception in coaches are described supported by the actual words of the participants describing their experiences and thought processes in relation to the issue of self-deception.

Results

The final model (Fig. 1) consists of three main sections:

- The nature of self-deception
- Contextual influences on self-deception
- Focused influence on self-deception through coaching supervision.

Figure 1 here

The nature of self-deception

The participants did not hesitate to provide examples of self-deception in coaches they supervise and their own when acting as coaches. Even without asking for a definition it appeared that the concept made sense and was recognised *as part of being human*. The examples of behavioural manifestations of self-deception included overstepping the boundaries of coaching when clients wished to work on issues more appropriate for therapy; pushing the client too much for their own reasons; ignoring ethical dilemmas; colluding with powerful clients. Here is an example of self-deception recognised with hindsight by the participant in the role of coach who was overestimating his ability to work with an apparent value conflict:

...the client's value base was well outside of what I do, but hell, I'm a professional, I should be able to do that, to maintain the distance etc. ... What the effect of it was that actually the client was led to believe that the coach shared their views, because there was never any challenge of those views, because the coach was so busy protecting this notion that "I can work with it, it's ok". (John)

Some participants were explicit about the widespread nature of this phenomenon providing an explanation for this on the conceptual level:

If we take into consideration that conscious awareness is only a tiny portion of what the whole organism can register then self-deception could be taken as a description of a natural limitation of consciousness. Self-deception can be seen ...as a spectrum: at one end are those things that we could easily see if we chose to attend to them or if we made them more important or if we dealt with some of our own issues, through to the other end of something which would be profoundly difficult to see, because it's at an unconscious or even neurological level. (Nick)

The participants agreed that self-deception is often *driven by fear or gain*. These were discovered as roots of self-deception in the process of supervision. The most typical of gains recognised by the participants in this regard were the need to feel successful and the importance of keeping the contract:

I can deceive myself that I'm doing this because my client is not fulfilling their potential. Therefore I need to help them be more ambitious. ...actually it's my need to have a client that is more successful so that I can feel that my coaching is more worthwhile and I feel I can make a difference. (Paul)

...if I don't want to work with what they want to work with, it is against my interests and so I do accept that work. (Bill)

A typical example of fear at the root of self-deception was a fear of rejection by the client:

...from being a very strong powerful woman [she changed] ... to a sense that she was the helpful daughter, for whom the approval of the chief exec was very important. ...she would be talking about how important it was to get this right and so that would be the conscious part. The unconscious part was, I think, fear of rejection, because I think it is one of the things that all coaches have to face reasonably regularly. (Paul)

At the same time participants recognised that although self-deception is not unusual for all human beings it *can change as a result of development.*

Her self-awareness has really increased and her willingness to disclose her own vulnerability and acknowledge that it's ok to not know. (Linda)

Some participants speculated that self-deception might be associated with a developmental capacity that takes time to develop:

...if someone is looking at something from a later stage they will see things that it is unlikely that a second person operating at an earlier stage of development will see... It is less that they are actively deceiving themselves and more that they have yet to develop the ability to see these things. (Nick)

Influences on self-deception

Although self-deception was recognised by the participants as an individual phenomenon it has also been seen in relation to wider contexts. The influences on self-deception in coaches are described in the model in two sections: the influences from various contexts that tend to increase self-deception on the individual level and the active, focused influencing of self-deception in the process of coaching supervision when it is purposefully addressed.

Contextual influences

The first theme of this section of the model is not about specific contextual factors but about potential *blindness to organisational or personal context* that in itself can be seen as a factor that increases self-deception in coaches. The individual-focused nature of coaching may lead to coaches decontextualizing the client or not seeing themselves as part of the contextual field they explore. If the first can be rectified by paying attention to the context of the client, the second may not be easily available for correction. In the following example the supervisor describes how the coach was blind to her personal context that was affecting her work with the client:

When I challenged her and we explored it, she of course acknowledged it, but she didn't want to, because she had some historical stuff around organisations and actually had come out of organisational life not being comfortable. (Linda)

Without acknowledging one's own background contribution to the coaching process the coach may remain unaware of how contaminated her interpretations might be, as argued by another participant:

We say: an angry client came into the room. Well, it is you who brings that, the angry client doesn't come into the room, that's the interpretation that we brought in. A part of the process of undeceiving, uncovering is to understand it and see the contextual field of which you are part. (Paul)

However, the process of 'undeceiving' is complicated because we are also *influenced by coaching nature and discourses*. Participants provided many examples of external factors that contribute to self-deception in coaches. One of these factors is the actual nature of coaching that may be associated with a position of authority with respect to their clients.

It is then easy to think that, because the client may be being very appreciative about the coaching that you're doing, you're more than what you are in terms of your ability. It's in the nature of the coaching relationship that there is a pull towards becoming somewhat over-inflated and seeing oneself as more than you are. (Nick)

One of the consequences of such over-inflation is reluctance to subject your practice for supervision, to learn and to question oneself:

...some people going to coaching, because they have perhaps some natural ability, [then] they have a sort of resistance to actually going along the path of being a novice. I don't think that you get that in the same way in therapy training. ... something about the notion of coaching that ...makes it seem like it is something you get much quicker. (Louise)

Another feature of coaching that was indicated by the participants as an influencing factor in the self-deception in coaches was the significant role played by the Positive Psychology discourse (Freire, 2013). Participants expressed concern about strong claims that this approach is the most appropriate theoretical foundation of coaching. Accepting this view may impose unrealistic expectations on coaches which in turn may lead to self-deception if there are feelings or outcomes that do not fit with them.

There's a sort of line in coaching which is about 'you can do anything and you can achieve anything ... a way of looking at the world that is about avoiding and denying the unpleasant bits. ... something around not acknowledging the shadow.... (Linda)

There is also a great deal of wider influences (power balance, organisational culture, current state of society) that were named by the participants as factors that may contribute to self-deception in coaches. The examples provided include the culture of blame in organisations which prevent people acknowledging a lack of skills or knowledge:

You can't afford to say that you don't know. ... so the coach may find it difficult to say actually this isn't the right domain for me or I'm not the best person for that sector. (Linda)

A much wider context that can also contribute to self-deception was described as a collective denial. Although this is not directly related to self-deception in coaching it could be seen as a background for self-deception on a wider scale and so a normalisation of it.

We all know that there are major changes going on, say environmental changes that we need to deal with, but at the same time we are not behaving as if we know that. ...there is a national or maybe even global, but certainly a western denial of the unsustainability of our lives, for example. This permeates everything and creates a context of self-deception. And because almost everybody else is also deceiving themselves this somehow makes it more ok. (Nick)

Focused influence in supervision

Being practice-oriented, participants explored how self-deception in coaches could be approached in supervision. After considering the complex nature of self-deception and the spectrum of factors in the current state of coaching in wider society, the overall attitude towards this phenomenon is best described by one of them:

How do we explore our self-deception and our shadow needs in a way that is loving and forgiving? We do need both: kind of sharpness of being able to see through our hopes, fears and self-editing and also the compassion to say: well, that is part of us being human.

....Also something about not hunting it down because by hunting it down we'll make it a thing rather than something that we are swimming in.... (Paul)

The importance of supervision was generally acknowledged as the most suitable place to have a conversation about self-deception in coaches. On the one hand, it was seen as part of a normative function of supervision, which implies a necessity for the supervisor to point out self-deception that affects the quality of coaching. Bill, for example, said:

I think that it really underlines the importance of solid supervision because this is where there's a point that we need to be able to say as supervisors: I think you're deceiving yourself. And I think that's a pretty powerful thing to hear as well...

(Bill)

On the other hand, there was a view that it was the decision of the coach if they want the supervisor to be explicit about self-deception. For example, some participants thought the topic of self-deception should be discussed *as part of the contract* with a coach and whether or not it should be addressed in supervision.

If the contract allowed for the possibility of looking at these sorts of issues, by definition it must do that, if it doesn't require this then that may be not so important. (John)

A much more unanimous view was expressed on the developmental function of supervision which implied that coaches needed an *atmosphere of safety* in order to feel increasingly capable to disclose any aspect of their work and thus to develop greater awareness and self-understanding. It was suggested that supervision should be seen as a '*home for the shadow*' where the coach has permission to be imperfect and freely explore their self-deception.

It has to create this safety and trust that enables the supervisee to self-disclose, which lends itself to awareness where self-deception may be coming in. ... [This] will give them insight into anticipating and working with that with their clients ... to enable their clients to learn to reduce self-deception. (Linda)

In such an atmosphere, supervisor and coach are becoming partners in exploring this complex phenomenon which has more opportunities for seeing through self-deceptions. In this spirit of equality, the *change can be modelled by the supervisor*. One of the participants noticed that a well-known approach in the supervision of identifying 'parallel processes' is a perfect way of modelling how to deal with self-deception which is more powerful than 'catching them unaware':

...by, if you like, getting to the pattern with them and being able to comment on the fact that you notice that that and this has happened to you, you are modelling how to get it right through getting it wrong. (Paul)

Discussion

The analysis shows that findings are aligned with some theoretical perspectives more than with others. For example, the participants' immediate reactions and examples of self-deception in coaches indicate *a concern* about self-deception rather than the potential value of self-deception as implied in the evolutionary approach. No affinity can be noticed with a fairly neutral stand towards self-deception that could be discerned from the postmodernist and neuroscientists' perspectives. Although it is possible to argue that in some situations of coaching a degree of self-deception is beneficial, the participants' stance was clearly aligned with the need to minimise self-deception.

In relation to two other perspectives from the five analysed in the literature, it is possible to observe that participants' conceptualisation of self-deception is aligned with both the psychoanalytic and existential views. On the one hand they saw self-deception as an outcome of fear and as a threat to self-image, which is an explanation of self-deception aligned with psychoanalysis. Accordingly, they advocate the importance of an accepting atmosphere in which individuals can relax and feel no need for defences. That is why the theme of 'compassion' is very prominent in the findings. On the other hand, in some descriptions of participants' the need for a strong stand towards self-deception also comes through: 'it is important for a coach to hear that they deceive themselves'. Some examples show that self-deception is happening 'for a gain' and this could be challenged in supervision.

It is interesting that this apparent tension can be explained from a different perspective indicated by the participants but not present in the general debates about the nature of self-deception. This position is developmental and can be seen as influenced by a number of adult development theories (e.g. Loevinger, 1994; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Cook-Greuter, 1976). According to these theories there are patterns in the incremental development of various capacities of adults, such as cognitive, emotional, moral and many others. It could be argued that both approaches (psychoanalytic and existential) are appropriate as far as helping practices are concerned, but each works better for individuals at different stages of ego development (Loevinger, 1994; Cook-Greuter, 1999; Adams and Fitch, 1982; Bachkirova, 2011). For example, when ego is more fragile, a slower and more supportive psychoanalytic approach to addressing self-deception may be an appropriate choice, but when the ego is stronger, the existential, more challenging approach might be useful.

The findings also suggest that the postmodernist position on self-deception, although not resonating with the conceptualisation of the participants, has a certain value in emphasising the role of culture in what can be seen as self-deception on the individual level. Participants agreed that there are important contextual issues and associated discourses that apparently contribute to this phenomenon in individual coaches and need to be taken into consideration if a deeper understanding of self-deception in coaches is to be gained. Such understanding can contribute not only to the quality of the personal and professional development of coaches through education, continuing professional development and supervision, but could also enrich the professional debates and inform some important decisions about the ethics and boundaries of coaching with other subject areas and professional activities.

Another feature of this study, however exploratory, is indicating potential approaches to addressing self-deception in coaches. Although they are discussed in the context of coaching supervision the findings suggest useful ideas for other practitioners who might be interested in helping individuals to understand or minimise their self-deception. This is particularly important in the situation when little is written on this topic for applied purposes, apart from the literature in the

psychodynamic traditions. However, as the focus on self-deception in these traditions tends to be skewed towards pathology, the ideas from coaching supervisors can widen the spectrum of means to influence self-deception. In addition to important conditions that help to make this work possible, new propositions include consideration of a specific contract that increases collaboration in addressing self-deception and even specific interventions such as modelling the way of dealing with self-deception by the supervisor.

It is important to notice that participants, being experienced practitioners, did not underestimate the complexity of this phenomenon and no indication was given of unfounded hope for a huge success in eliminating self-deception even when there is an intention to minimise it. The tone of all contribution was quite sober with an appreciation that self-deception is a part of being human. However, as coaching and coaching supervision are developmental processes, a hint of cautious optimism was also present and well summarised by one of the participants: *“That is part of the maturity of the coach, the degree of... not that you’re going to fall into traps less, but you notice it as you are going down the hole, you notice that you’re sliding down. It is not that you can really stop these things from happening, it’s just that you catch them quicker and sometimes in the moment...”* (Paul)

Conclusion

This paper discussed the findings of a qualitative study that was aimed at exploring the concept of self-deception in coaches from the perspective of experienced coaching supervisors who also drew on their experiences as coaches. The model that was created as the result of this collaborative process sheds light on how self-deception can be manifested in the coaching context and what contextual factors can be at play. From the range of theoretical positions presented in the literature, the model of self-deception in coaches seems to be most aligned with psychoanalytical and existential traditions. It offers a new developmental perspective on self-deception and contributes to the applied knowledge about self-deception with ideas for influencing it for developmental purposes and with the intention to improve the quality of coaching.

As this study is exploratory it does not aim to make any definitive statement about the nature of self-deception in coaches, but may add to these debates from the pragmatic point of view. The limitations of the methodological approach used, such as the limited number of participants and the significant role of the researcher’s input, suggest the need for further studies. However, the study serves the purpose of the initial mapping of the issue for further research, which may ask questions such as how the changes in self-deception can be identified and if it is possible to differentiate types of self-deception according to the stages of development or level of experience. The findings can also inform practitioners: coaches and supervisors, and influence educational and training programmes if these programmes consider the development of self as the core of their philosophy.

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