

The Rashomon effect in the perception of coaching sessions and what this means for the evaluation of the quality: A grounded theory study

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Abstract

To enhance the value of coaching provision, coaching sessions are assessed as part of the accreditation of coaches by professional bodies and through the selection of coaches for programmes in organisations. However, the idea of the quality of a coaching session and a valid standpoint from which such an assessment can be made, remain problematic. Using constructivist grounded theory, this study explores how coaching sessions are perceived by three parties: clients, coaches and groups of coaches acting as observers. Analysis of the multiple perspectives on each of six sessions shows a significant discrepancy between them supporting the relevance of the *Rashomon* effect in coaching, based on Kurosawa's (1950) film in which different witnesses provide conflicting accounts of the same events. The study questions the practice of prioritising first or third-person perspectives when the quality of a coaching session is assessed and addresses the potential implications of the identified issues for coaches, assessors and educators of coaching.

Practice points

- To which field of practice area(s) in coaching is your contribution directly relevant?
Evaluation of coaching practice, assessment and selection of coaches, continuing professional development of coaches, coaching education.
- What do you see as the primary contribution your submission makes to coaching practice?

The study identifies ambiguities and challenges in the typical practices currently used in the coaching field. It provides a potential explanation for their origin with implications for practitioners, professional bodies and educators.

- What are its tangible implications for practitioners?
 - Changing the way coaching sessions are evaluated
 - Changing the way coaches are assessed and selected
 - Changing coaching education programmes.

Introduction

According to many studies, coaching is considered effective in helping clients achieve valued outcomes (e.g., Greif, 2017; Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2016; Sonesh et al., 2015; Theeboom, Beersma & van Vianen, 2014). However, the effectiveness of coaching in principle, is no guarantee that the quality of coaching provided by specific coaches and in specific assignments will be of a high standard. That is why coaching assessment centres or validation processes are run by large organisations to select coaches who can provide quality coaching, and coaching associations set out to provide a high-quality service by accrediting coaches. For example, International Coaching Federation (ICF) and Association of Coaching (AC) as part of the assessment process require candidates to submit audio recordings of coaching sessions (ICF, 2019; AC, 2019). These sessions are assessed by observers who are typically experienced coaches practising from a range of different traditions and backgrounds. They use their professional judgement to evaluate coaching sessions according to an expected set of competences. This process seems to prioritise the viewpoint of an independent expert observer as the perspective of the clients on the same sessions are not part of the assessment process (ICF, 2019; AC, 2019). This calls into question whose viewpoint should be trusted the most. The assessors use their professional expertise to arrive at an overall evaluation but there is no literature we could identify which demonstrates that this viewpoint is in some sense the most useful in assessing session quality. By definition, the

assessors are outside of the relationship between the coach and client which has been considered fundamental in the success of coaching (Bluckert, 2005; De Haan, Duckworth, Birch & Jones, 2013; De Haan & Gannon, 2017).

Establishing the quality of coaching sessions is also important for practising coaches to know if they are coaching effectively and how they can improve their coaching practice. Most coaches rely upon their own self-assessment of their sessions coupled often with feedback provided by the client (Gregory, Levy & Jeffers, 2008; Liljenstrand & Nebeker, 2008). However, coaches' perceptions of the quality of their sessions is limited and might be open to distortions based on their needs for self-assurance (Bachkirova, 2015). The clients' perceptions of the session may also be limited as clients are likely to be focused on the content rather than the process elements of coaching. In summary, all three ways of assessing quality seem objectionable or at least insufficient, and little is known about the relationship between them (Grant, 2013).

Very few studies compare perspectives of whole coaching sessions and if they do, only one or two perspectives are usually explored (Day, De Haan, Sills, Bertie & Blass, 2008; De Haan, 2008; De Haan, Bertie, Day & Sills, 2010; De Haan & Nieß, 2012). For example, Bachkirova, Sibley & Myers (2015) evaluated coaching sessions but only from the perspective of coaches describing imagined rather than actual coaching sessions. Although the Ashridge Critical-Moment Study Group (e.g., De Haan & Nieß, 2015) has carried out the analysis of the viewpoints of coaches, clients and sponsors of coaching, it has not been done in the context of actual coaching sessions and always limited to a review of critical moments. In psychotherapy, there is a body of literature (Mintz, Auerbach, Luborsky & Johnson, 1973; Weiss, Rabinowitz & Spiro, 1996) which has found differences in observer, client and practitioner perspectives. These differences have led to the inference of what is described as the *Rashomon* effect after Kurosawa's (1950) film in which the same event is described in

mutually contradictory ways by different witnesses. Only one study in the field of coaching by Lawley & Linder-Pelz (2016) compared coach, client and observer perspectives. They found perspectival differences in the evaluation of coaching sessions which corresponds to findings in psychotherapy research (Mintz et al., 1973; Weiss et al., 1996). However, this study only used a single observer who used a quantitative framework for evaluating sessions. There seem to be an absence of explanations in the literature for the identified discrepancies, which leaves practitioners wondering whose viewpoint is in some sense more valid and to what extent single-sided or two-way-sided evaluations are justified.

This study, therefore, set out to explore the quality of coaching sessions from multiple perspectives. Our intention was to investigate in depth, similarities and differences in the perception of the same session by the coach, client and observers from multiple backgrounds and orientations with a view to understand and critically evaluate the current situation in the assessment of coaches.

Literature Review

There are two bodies of coaching literature that have relevance for exploring the quality of coaching sessions. The first is interested in the evaluation of the attributes, behaviours and competences of the coach (De Haan, Culpin & Curd, 2011; Gray, Ekinici & Goregaokar, 2011; Moen & Federici, 2013; Passmore, 2010; Stevens, 2005). The second focuses directly on the understanding of the coaching process (e.g., Bachkirova et al., 2015, De Haan & Nieß, 2012; Lawley & Linder-Pelz, 2016). We will consider the contribution of both literatures on the issue in question.

A first body of literature aims at the identification of the attributes of the coach that are needed to provide a valuable service (De Haan et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2011; Passmore, 2010; Stevens, 2005). Empirical studies of such attributes, however useful at this stage of

coaching research, mainly rely on feedback from clients. Naturally, several conceptual and critical papers question this practice and competence-oriented frameworks adapted by professional bodies (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015; Garvey, 2017; Lane, Stelter & Stout-Rostron, 2010). Although some of these papers suggest more innovative approaches to the assessment of the coaches' capabilities in addition to competences (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015), these studies are not a substitute for the required focus on the quality of the actual coaching sessions as conducted by each coach. A coach recognised as competent and capable could in principle have an ineffective session and could learn from understanding more about it if appropriate feedback were provided (Gregory et al., 2008).

The second strand of literature is directly concerned with the quality of coaching sessions and is attempting to explore the process of the session from multiple perspectives (Bachkirova et al., 2015; De Haan et al., 2010; De Haan & Nieß, 2012; De Haan & Nieß, 2015; Lawley and Linder-Pelz, 2016). Although these studies are an important step for understanding the nature of coaching process, their focus so far has been different from the issue of quality. For example, a significant contribution to the microanalysis of the coaching process has been made by the Ashridge Critical-Moment Study Group (Day et al., 2008; De Haan & Nieß, 2012, 2015; De Haan et al., 2008; De Haan et al., 2010). Their studies have focused primarily on what coaches and clients (and in one study, sponsors; De Haan & Nieß, 2015) have found significant in the interaction. However useful, the focus of these studies was only on critical moments rather than on the quality of whole coaching sessions. Stein (2009) considered different 'hats' or 'conversational identities' a coach might wear in a coaching session. Although this study adds to understanding the coach's approach, no attempt was made to evaluate the quality of the process depending on the approach used. Bachkirova et al. (2015) have developed an instrument for the microanalysis of a coaching session from

multiple perspectives. However, their research, at the first stage of using this instrument only focused on the self-assessment of a typical imagined session by the coach.

In psychotherapy, research has systematically compared the perspectives of therapists and clients and has sometimes included the perspective of observers (Mintz et al., 1973; Weiss et al., 1996). Most of these studies identified that there were often differences in how these sessions were reported by the client, therapist and in some cases, observers (Mintz et al., 1973). These differences were alluded to as the ‘Rashomon’ effect. Stiles and Snow’s (1984) study, for example, suggested that therapists valued sessions which were “deep” (more threatening and searching) while clients preferred sessions that were “smooth” (less threatening and less searching). However, very little theory was provided to understand these differences and no serious consideration was given to issues of quality. The notion of the *Rashomon* effect was presented more as curiosity rather than as an important finding worthy of serious theorising. This literature lost momentum towards the end of the 1980s and was summarised by Weiss et al. (1996), a decade later.

In coaching, initial research conducted by De Haan (2008) led to the inference that coach and client had different perceptions about what was significant in a coaching session. However, later research led to a revision of earlier studies and a dismissal of a possible *Rashomon* effect in coaching (De Haan et al., 2010). The research team found that only in exceptional circumstances might there be differences between the coach’s and the client’s perceptions of significant moments in coaching sessions. Meanwhile, Lawley and Linder-Pelz (2016) explored multiple perspectives on a coaching session and found that the accounts of a coaching session by observer, coach and client varied, which confirms the *Rashomon* effect. However, this study only considered the expert view of one observer evaluating coaching sessions from one theoretical frame of reference. This does not mirror the

evaluation of coaching sessions in typical assessments in which coaches of different theoretical backgrounds and with different values might evaluate a whole coaching session.

Recognising these mixed findings, we believe that the possible *Rashomon* effect in the evaluation of coaching sessions has important practical implications for the coaching field, more important than in counselling and psychotherapy where the assessment and accreditation of practitioners has not mushroomed to the same extent as in coaching. When accreditations and assessment centres include the observation of coaching sessions and significant decisions result from them, the prevalence of the third-person perspective of the observers needs to be questioned and compared with other perspectives. It is important therefore to explore if there are differences in the perceptions of quality by taking account of the viewpoints of all the participants of a coaching session: coach, client and observers.

Methods

Grounded theory was chosen as a methodological approach for this study as it allows the in-depth exploration and theorizing of social life (Charmaz, 2016, p.299) and can provide “theoretical sufficiency” (Dey, 1999, p.257) with relatively small sample sizes (Charmaz, 2014). A constructivist grounded theory approach was taken (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2013) that “assumes that neither data nor theories are discovered, but researchers construct them as a result of their interactions with their participants and emerging analyses” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013, p.3).

For participant coaches who would conduct the sessions, a choice was made to work with those who had a formal theoretical underpinning to their work (e.g., had studied to doctoral level, were trained in a specific coaching tradition, were actively engaged with the broader coaching community (e.g., at a university, coaching association, supervision, assessment of coaches) and who had several years of experience of coaching at senior

executive levels. In this way, they would be expected to be coaching in a way which would likely demonstrate professionalism and high standards of quality in their coaching sessions. The coaches were identified through personal networks and their willingness to take part. Six coaches accepted the invitation and were serendipitously 1 man and 5 women in their late 40s and 50s and white British. All coaches described their practices in broadly humanistic terms, but all drew on a range of theoretical traditions and practices and had come into coaching through different professional routes (e.g., management training, HR, consultancy, occupational psychology). Only 2 of the coaches agreed to work with existing clients owing to their felt need to protect client confidentiality. This led to four coaches being asked to coach one of 4 volunteer clients identified by the lead researcher through personal networks and who were willing to work through a real-life issue in a “one-off” session and with an “able and experienced coach”. This did set an expectation, but it is likely that most employees taking part in coaching do expect to take part in a quality service with an able coach. Setting this expectation therefore created a realistic scenario for volunteer clients. Two coaches were willing to work with existing clients. All clients held senior managerial or professional positions in a range of organizations, three of whom had previous experience of being coached, two having formal knowledge of coaching and one without any knowledge. In this way, the clients represented a cross-section of executives, typical of those who are often coached in formal contexts. Each coaching session lasted for 60-90 minutes and reached a natural point of closure. All sessions were professionally video-recorded.

At the end of each session, coach and client were interviewed separately according to an adapted form of interpersonal process recall (Elliot, 1986) designed to encourage the free recall of events that are considered psychologically significant for the participants. In this way, researchers identify what is important for the research participants rather than imposing unduly, their own frames of reference. Interviews were held either immediately after or in the

days following the session to accommodate the time constraints of the participants. Once the participants had provided their free recall of events, additional questions were asked that encouraged the interviewees to expand on their initial reflections and which arose as the data analysis progressed.

At a later date, an invitation was sent out to identify experienced coaches (e.g., more than 2-3 years of practice and formal coach training) who would be willing to observe the coaching sessions (6 groups to view one of the 6 recordings) to explore a different perspective from within the broader coaching community. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009) which led to some observer groups sharing a common professional background. One group (Session 1 Observers) consisted primarily of coaches trained in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP); another group (Session 5 TA Observers) had a background in transactional analysis (TA); one group was shown the same video as the Session 5 TA Observers because of their small numbers and consisted of two coaches with a background in cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC). The TA and the CBC coaches were considered to form sub-groups of one overarching group (Session 5 Observers). The other four groups were mixed but included coaches who described their practice for example, in terms of solutions focused, person-centred or Gestalt coaching. Neither coach nor client was present at the observer groups. Some minimal contextual information was provided on the session but without any indication of the experience of the coach in order not to influence the evaluative process.

At the start of all coaching sessions, coaches were asked to reflect on their observations using the Coaching Process Q -Sort (CPQS), a tool used to describe coaching sessions (Backirova et al., 2015). The use of this tool was intended to encourage individual reflections. Participants were then asked to share in turn their individual views about the session by highlighting what they had noticed, and which was prompted by using the CPQS.

After considering each individual viewpoint, the lead researcher facilitated an open-ended discussion encouraging the group to focus on what had arisen from the individual reports and what had stood out collectively as being very noticeable in the sessions. The data collection process thereby allowed the exploration of individual subjective impressions while at the same time enabling shared viewpoints to emerge.

All participants were aware of the purpose and procedure of this research and gave their consent for participation and publication of findings. The data was analysed in accordance with the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013). This involved analysing the data as it was collected from coaches, clients and observers using the constant comparative method and a progressive system of coding. After 6 sessions, the process was considered to meet the criteria of ‘theoretical sufficiency’ (Dey, 1999, p.257) for the selected sample reaching a clear understanding of how coaches, clients and observers made sense of coaching sessions and what the reasons for this sense-making process could be.

Main Findings

The overarching pattern in the findings was that of conflicting evaluations of the sessions across participant groups. The clients spoke highly of the coaches, their own positive experiences and identified a range of benefits. The coaches were also satisfied with their sessions focusing primarily on their in-session decision-making. In stark contrast, the observers evaluated the quality of the coaching sessions very negatively, highlighting concerns over the coaches’ interventions. Their comments were unexpected given the measures of expertise which had been used to select the coaches.

More detailed analysis of the discrepancy of the evaluation of the sessions is presented in three inter-related themes with implications for coaching practice:

1. Re-constructing the experience positively
2. A social process of private meaning-making
3. Differing frames of reference

Re-constructing the experience positively

This first theme is about how the clients re-evaluated events which had initially caused grounds for concern. This seemed to relate in part to confirmation bias in how the clients appeared to ignore evidence that contradicted preconceived notions of the likely high quality of the coaching experience (Kahnemann, Lovallo & Sibony, 2011, p.51). Client expectations had likely been set when being recruited as volunteers or had arisen based on previous positive experiences and beliefs about the benefits of coaching.

The Session 4 Client, for example was initially “surprised” by the casual dress and manner of the coach. However, the client reconstrued her initial impression of the coach: “She would work with a lot of senior people. Why? Because she is non-threatening.” In contrast, one of the Session 4 Observers remarked that the coach’s informal manner conveyed a lack of “professionalism”. In another instance, the Session 5 Client reported feeling a “bit uncomfortable” taking part in an “Empty Chair” exercise. Some observers noted the client’s discomfort. However, the client readily dismissed the experience: “That’s more about me”. Session 6 was evaluated especially negatively by the observers in the way the coach encouraged the client to note down emergent issues for reflection after the session rather than discussing them in the session. This prompted one Session 6 Observer to compare this process to the client’s “writing [of] a shopping list”. The client explained how she typically had reservations about the value of the session but persuaded herself that the sessions were useful based on long-held assumptions about the value of coaching:

I look into my diary in a day like today and I think, ‘an hour’s coaching?’ ... So, you start to say, ‘Is there any value in this?’ And, you think, ‘Yes there is! [banging the table]: Buy into the process!’ (Session 6 Client).

Overall, the first theme suggested that from a third-party viewpoint, the interventions of the coach might have appeared to lack elements of quality. However, owing to the clients’ expectations of the usefulness of coaching, the assumptions they likely made about the coach and the patterns of interacting which had become normative for the pair, the clients tended to overlook any possible limitations in the coach’s interventions.

A social process of private meaning-making

This second theme is about how the meaning of events within the session appeared to have been created in the micro-moments of the relational exchange. Although meaningful interactions were experienced by the client and by the coach, this meaning-making was either not witnessed by the observers or was constructed by them as problematic.

For the Session 3 Client, for example, referring to her participation in a visualization exercise, the utility of the experience came about through being in the presence of the coach: “You just wouldn’t do it on your own. It wouldn’t make any sense. It’s having someone ask you the right questions”. This contrasted with the perception of the coach “being too busy in her head” and “failing to pick up on...the really important things” (Session 3 Observer). For the Session 5 Client, the most important moment of learning in the session was when the coach asked her to vocalise her belief in herself as a senior manager: “She made me say it as if I meant it and it felt really good. It felt quite empowering and I came out thinking, ‘I could do this’”. This contrasted with the Session 5 TA Observers’ overarching impression of the coach “going round and round in circles”. These examples indicate the discrepancy between the client’s in-session experiences and the third-person observation of the coaching sessions.

The observers also missed the importance of events which had a clear shared meaning for the coach and client. A shared sense of humour together with an awareness of the coach's physical responses, enabled the Session 1 Coach and Client to explore issues further:

We both saw the funny side of it; we both saw the relevance of it and it led us into something a little bit deeper ...It's only when I play in out in my head and get some reaction from T that an even richer understanding comes forward. So, what's resonating for T, responding to his body language, and just the way that happened had some significance because he started smiling and I thought okay, something must be happening here (Session 1 Client).

In contrast, the observers limited their evaluation of the coach's display of humour to "self-gratification". The analysis therefore revealed how shared patterns of meaning in coaching sessions do not match the observers' view on the specific elements of coaching sessions.

The observers struggled to make sense generally of many of the coach's interventions. The Session 2 Coach for example was observed to forcefully put down her notebook on the table. The observers argued that the coach appeared at that point to be so overwhelmed at her difficulty in "not getting through to the client" that she simply "wanted to end the session". The coach however explained that this was a turning point in the session:

I was feeling that physically, a sort of *trappedness*, circularity, and *on and 'onness'*. It's got to stop...it's quite interesting because putting that notepad down nosily, it was like 'right, we're going to get out of this' (Session 2 Coach).

This example suggests that without gaining an understanding of the coach's intentions or conceptualisation of the process, it is difficult to evaluate actions in a session from the third-party perspective.

Differing frames of reference

The coaches generally considered the way they had conducted their sessions as typical of how they normally coached. They referred to various theoretical influences and models to describe their practice. The Session 3 Coach for example referred to “a non-linguistic sense” which enabled her to make helpful, in the moment decisions. Similarly, the Session 5 Coach emphasised how she attended to very detailed physiological changes in the client which allowed her to be “guided” by the client’s emotional responses.

It seemed therefore that the coaches enacted models of practice which had stood the test of time and which made sense for them given what they felt was important to achieve in the context of the sessions. They had no reason to doubt the quality of their coaching. Only the Session 6 Coach said that she would not be surprised that an external audience might evaluate her session negatively. She justified her approach however, on the grounds that she had been contracted to act as a “sounding board” rather than to do developmental work while at the same time, working in a way that the client found helpful. These examples strongly suggest therefore that the context of the coaching sessions, including contractual arrangements and on-going understandings agreed between coach and client provide important elements in evaluating coaching sessions.

The observers evaluated the sessions from very different frames of reference. Differences in frames of references were perhaps clearest in the session reviews provided by the Session 5 TA Observers who were particularly critical of the coach. These observers drew on specialist knowledge to make sense of the coach’s interventions:

There was a lot of rescuing going on. It was rescuing that hadn’t been asked for. There wasn’t equal effort being put into what was going on. I was also pondering about protection; there was a lot of ‘Yes, yes, yes’, I agree... Oh well you can be arrogant’. Okay, so there is permission but where about the protection? Where’s the downside?

How can you frame what's the positive and negative of being serious and being fun?

When is it appropriate? And so, permission, protection, potency...there was no invitation to adult, no decontamination (Session 5 TA Observer).

The Session 5 TA Observers were also disturbed by how the coach had seemingly manipulated the client into engaging in an "empty chair" exercise:

There was no contract to the experiment, there was no rationale for the experiment; there was nothing about what was meant by experiment. It's like "I've got this experiment and you're going to do it!" (Session 5 TA Observer).

However, the Session 5 Client did not report a sense of being directed by the coach: "It was always following where I wanted to go. She always asked me permission: 'Can I suggest this? If you don't want to do it, don't do it!'" From the Session 5 Coach's perspective, she too reported having acquired the consent of the client: "I asked her if she was open to some experimentation. I invited her to inhabit both of these polarities [being serious and humorous] as a way of really getting in touch with what they were with a view to seeing what the middle ground was for her." How the event therefore appeared from a transactional analytic third party perspective was very different to how it was experienced from the perspective of coach and client. The two coaches practising from a cognitive behavioural tradition (Session 5 CBC Observers) were less critical of the coach's approach. Their focus was on how they would have worked more on what they inferred to be the client's "underlying beliefs" which suggested that they were attending to specific aspects of the interaction considered relevant to them and they were interpreting the interaction from their theoretical perspective. Their less critical stance suggested that when viewing a session from a different theoretical perspective, the impressions of quality, at least in some instances, may be less critical.

Differences in conceptual frames of references were however apparent within and across all observer groups . One Session 2 Observer for example raised an objection to other Session 2 Observers who saw a need to explore the client’s past because from her “solutions-focused” viewpoint, this would be futile: “You can’t unravel on embedded thinking”. There was also a concern expressed by many observers with a person-centred orientation how some coaches appeared to adopt a dominant stance in relation to the client. In Session 4 for example, one observer had the distinct impression that the coach was adopting an authoritative stance towards the client:

I was very struck by the directedness. It appears to me that the coach was adopting quite an expert attitude, almost looking down her glasses... So, there was this strange power differential going on (Session 4 Observer).

In the same session however, another observer who described herself as a “business coach” training coaches for accreditation, described the same coach’s approach as “subtle”. The above examples demonstrate that while there was a lot of criticism by observers, interpreting what they saw from their own frames of reference, evaluations were also contested within the observer groups. This suggested that different observers of the same session can sometimes hold different notions about what constitutes an appropriate and quality experience.

Discussion

The findings overall confirm what is routinely reported by coaches and is supported in the literature on the effectiveness of coaching (De Haan et al., 2011; Lawley & Linder-Pelz, 2016). Clients in the study were very satisfied with the coaching in which they engaged. Coaches in the study emphasised specific elements of the session and were also satisfied with the way they had conducted the sessions. In contrast, the observers severely contested the quality of the sessions. This can be interpreted as confirming the *Rashomon* effect posing a

dilemma for coaching sponsors, clients, coaches, accrediting bodies and coach supervisors, all of whom play a key role in determining and aiming to safeguard quality standards.

The differences between the coaches and clients' reports of the session and those of the observers may be best understood by making sense of the interaction between coach and client as a private if social process of *joint meaning-making*. This process seemed to be negotiated moment by moment (or in some cases, over time) in the intimacy of the interaction. This sensemaking social process allowed the coach and client to construct their sessions positively. Removed from the immediacy of the social interaction and the coach-client meaning-making system, the observers drew upon different frames of reference for making sense of the sessions, including paying a great deal of attention to any potentially problematic events which were readily dismissed by the clients.

It could be inferred from these findings that session quality might not be a shared notion but depends on how it is constructed. For example, it is evident that quality from the clients' perspective may be about how well they felt understood, listened to and how useful they found the session. From the coach's perspective, quality is about how well they believed they managed the session in terms of their typical experience of coaching, individual norms of good practice and how well they achieved what they felt was important in the coaching session (coaching context). For the observers, quality is what is demonstrated as competent work; something they can recognise as being in alignment with their own frames of reference. Recognising what quality means for the different parties, it is hardly surprising that we have an issue with identifying the quality of a particular session. Everyone is using different benchmarks.

Analysis of current practices in evaluating coaching sessions demonstrates interesting discrepancies when the quality of coaching is assessed for different purposes. Evaluation

practices for the purposes of the accreditation and selection of coaches seem to side with a perspective of observers, largely ignoring the clients' and coaches' perspectives. Meanwhile, researchers evaluating coaching effectiveness typically rely on the client's perspective (De Meuse, Dai & Lee, 2009), despite this being at variance with that of the observers. The perspective of coaches is significantly underused in both cases, considering that it is the only perspective that is able to provide some coherence between the observed interventions by the coach and the rationale behind them.

As the discrepancy in terms of the notion of quality is inevitable, it is important to consider the implications of this situation for research designs, for the practice of assessment of coaching sessions and for the reflective practice of coaches relying on client feedback. Where possible, each of these would benefit from aiming for *intersubjectivity* by making use of all three perspectives and potentially adding criteria for including the longer-term implications of the session, not only on the part of the client but from the perspective of another third party who can provide an observer perspective on the progress made.

Because of the substantial difficulties in implementing these ideal case scenarios, researchers and accrediting bodies may be tempted to minimise the effect of different frameworks; for example, by establishing one observational scheme for evaluating a coaching session for all observers. However, it must be recognised that establishing one single normative and observable approach strips the coaching session bare of potentially meaningful characteristics impacting on session outcomes (Grant, 2013; Greif, 2017). This approach would also overlook the importance of the coach's sensemaking of the complexity of each individual coaching interaction, something that depends on the capability of the coach rather than basic observable competence (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015; Garvey, 2017). Therefore, the assessment of coaching sessions needs to be done with a recognition of

multiple perspectives on the notion of quality and appreciation of the complexity involved in this process.

Conclusion

The study raises a difficult question which in many respects remains open. We believe that the findings bring to the fore those aspects of coaching that divide the coaching community, fuel theoretical debates within this field and demonstrate the complexity of developing workplace coaching as a discipline.

Recognising this complexity, we also believe that this study indicates a number of practical and immediate implications for organisational coaches, assessors of coaches and educators. Coaches, for example, need to be aware that they might risk being misguided when they rely on the immediate responses of their clients about how useful or constructive their sessions have been (Bachkirova, 2015). They would benefit from recognising all the partiality and inevitable subjectivity of their own and the client's perspective and make as much effort as possible to expose their practice to feedback from peers and supervisors. They also need to see their work with an appreciation of the complexity involved in these interactions and develop critical reflexivity and self-awareness about many perspectives and their limitations.

The assessors in accreditation frameworks and assessment centres need to recognise that their observations can be limited because of the inevitable frames of reference they take on the session. They may not be aware of what is actually being achieved in a coaching session through the idiosyncratic approaches of coaches, the result of the joint-meaning making process or the implicit trigger for the client's readiness to change. While it is encouraging that some coaching associations are taking account of general feedback from the client (e.g. AC, 2019) and the coach is required to describe how they achieve a range of

competencies, *in the use of live coaching sessions* it is important to collate feedback from the coach, the client and multiple assessors.

However, the most important implication of this study is for educators of coaching. The findings suggest that a breadth of awareness and knowledge of alternative ways of making sense of a coach's interactions are highly important for the development of coaches. With recognition of many theoretical perspectives and paradigmatic attitudes on practice, the function of education extends from imparting knowledge and teaching practical skills to fostering the capabilities of coaches to apply different lenses to understanding their practice. Educators are expected then to focus not only on the development of competences but also coaching capabilities (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015; Lane, 2017). Coaching capabilities imply a spacious mind-set that include at least a curiosity about different perspectives and flexibility in action that follows from such a mind-set. For educators themselves, this approach requires a willingness to subject various lenses themselves to critical evaluation; recognition of the fallibility of knowledge and ability to model an attitude of open-mindedness for the benefit of their students.

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