

Book Review

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Developmental coaching: working with the self

Bachkirova, T. (2011). Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill.

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Developmental coaching as a specific approach is gaining in popularity, see for instance Palmer and Panchal's (2009) *Developmental coaching: life transitions and general perspectives*, a book review for which appeared in the last issue of this journal. Expanding on the usual objectives of the coaching profession of skills and competence development, a developmental approach considers the whole person against the background of transformational learning. Until recently, developmental coaching largely drew on cognitive-developmental theories such as those of Kegan (1982), Torbert et al. (2004), and Cook-Greuter (1999), although these theorists themselves do not refer to the term *developmental coaching*. Conversely, that which is referred to as developmental coaching suffers from an absence of an overarching theory to underpin its practice. *Developmental coaching: working with the self* by Tatiana Bachkirova, under review here, aspires to address this gap.

Citing scientists Guy Claxton and Susan Blackmore as her main sources of inspiration, Bachkirova's intellectual endeavour is to present nothing less than a new approach to developmental coaching, grounded in a new theory of the self which in turn, is an amalgamation of current thinking in a number of disciplines that goes far beyond that of developmental psychology alone. The impetus to this endeavour, outlined in the introduction, is to explore the tensions that exist between what Bachkirova refers to as a *phenomenological* and *metaphysical* perspective on coaching practice, i.e. tensions between adopting a 'first-person' subjective experience of living and a 'third-person' observation of the natural world. This exploration leads the author to ask fundamental questions of the terms used in the title of her book and outline a framework to structure the answers provided in the following chapters: what is development? What is the self? What is the role of coaching? And what does 'working with the self' mean?

Part I offers a thorough analysis of perspectives of the self mainly in the disciplinary domains of psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy. Findings from these domains are ordered in three collective theoretical perspectives: the self as an operator, the notion that there is no self, and the evolving self. In the resumé of this part, Bachkirova presents her own complex theory of the self, of which a short description here is only meant to encourage readers to read this book and become acquainted with her theory themselves. In Bachkirova's theory, an understanding of the self includes the following elements (p. 57.)

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- Sense of *I* as a pre-reflective self-consciousness
- *Ego* as an executive centre
- *Self-models* constructed by a *narrator* (conscious and reflective linguistic function of the mind/brain)

Bachkirova uses the metaphor of the *rider* and the *elephant* to refer to the conscious mind and the organism as a whole minus the conscious mind, respectively. Her main proposition is that there is no authentic self in the sense of a particular part of the brain that can be pinpointed as such. Rather, there are a number of selves that exist at any one time, which she refers to as ‘mini-selves’ or collectively, ‘ego’. Located in the executive centre, the mini-selves are mostly unconscious and each ‘responsible for its own engagement with the world’ (p. 66). The *I* is that which helps us distinguish ourselves in our entirety from the world, i.e. define what is ‘non-self’ and identify experiences as being ‘mine’ and happening to ‘me’. Finally, the *narrator*, part of the conscious element of the brain, i.e. the rider, and like the other two elements also not a physical substance, is no more than a linguistic function. Compare for instance the notion of the narrated self in sociology, where identity is seen as something that is grasped reflexively through keeping a particular narrative going (Giddens, 1991). Bachkirova asserts that, although desirable, there is no significant alignment between the mini-selves and the conscious elements in the mind of which the narrator is a part. The rider and narrator can therefore not be seen as the centre of agency and control, rather their function is as advisor to the organism as a whole. Developmental coaching can begin with the acceptance of this main proposition.

Part 2 of the book outlines Bachkirova’s practical approach of developmental coaching embedded in her theory of the self outlined in the previous part. In a thorough but nonetheless accessible style, she takes the reader through the main principles and mechanisms of her new model, further elaborating on the notion of the mini-selves and a possible purpose of coaching: “to create a coherent story of self that incorporates many various self-models” (p. 113). She outlines the realm and endeavours of developmental coaching as that of organic change, i.e. the change that affects the ‘whole organism’ of the client, set in opposition to non-organic change which ultimately can only sabotage the self. Defining development as: “a combination of changes in the organism in a sustained increased capacity to engage with and influence the environment and to look after internal needs and aspirations”, the author locates the process of development within the executive centre where she distinguishes between four types of ego. The main units of analysis for distinguishing between the first two types, unformed and formed ego, is the extent of dependency on others and a sense of control and self-ownership. However, a third type, the reformed ego, is a quest for authenticity and a more harmonious relationship between the rider and the elephant. The last type is ‘ego with a soul’, which includes a spiritual dimension. She offers a convincing justification for why she wants to include this fourth ego type, mainly around the observation that a spiritual dimension holds meaning to

most people in the world. At the same time, she pledges when developing her theory further, to stay within, or at least not go against what is currently known about human nature.

Part 3 of the book offers a coaching approach for working with all four ego types: coaching towards a healthy ego, coaching the ego, coaching beyond the ego, and coaching the soul. Whoever wants to try Bachkirova's developmental coaching approach will find enough material in the form of case studies, approaches and interventions in these four chapters to get started. It is encouraging to note that Bachkirova does not place the fourth type of coaching, coaching the soul, in a hierarchical position to the other three; rather she suggests that it, if part of the client's agenda, is best seen as a dimension of the other three types of coaching. Her conceptualisation of what a soul might be is of *an opening* to a sharper reality than the one to which we usually have access. It is to her credit that the chapter on this type of coaching, in the absence of fully developed theories, is very tentatively worded. It has to be noted however, that although hinting at an appreciation of existentialist thinking, Bachkirova situates a framework for the development of 'spirituality' in the Eastern traditions such as (Zen) Buddhism rather than coaching the soul within the (religious) culture of the western coaching client. She separates spiritual practices from organised religion and suggests that an unformed ego may be more likely to look for guidance from the latter, whereas non-western spiritual practices may appeal to the formed or reformed ego. This begs the question if to a non-western coaching client, whose religious traditions are deeply steeped in centuries of Buddhism, engaging even more with a spiritual practice within this religion, is considered an opportunity for self-transformation! Perhaps a challenge for a new paradigm to further the understanding of soul and spirituality could be that it draws on our *own* philosophical traditions, whether within organised religion or not. An example of this would be Solomon's (2002) *naturalised spirituality*. Defined as *the thoughtful love of life* it encompasses and advocates a passionate engagement with the world, transforming the self, coming to terms with death and seeing life as 'awe-inspiring'. Becoming spiritual in this characterisation is embracing a larger sense of 'us', referring both to humanity and the world in its entirety.

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