

Chapter 2

Developing a knowledge base of coaching: questions to explore

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Introduction

As a developing discipline, coaching is expected to generate a body of knowledge that, although shared in many aspects with other disciplines, also addresses themes and issues that are specific to coaching and includes unique ideas, theories, methodologies and results of research. For the last two decades many researchers, academics, professional bodies and practitioners, each in their own way, have been contributing to the ambition for coaching to be knowledge-based. This Handbook represents their contribution revealing a significant diversity in terms of scope, focus and research methodologies.

This diversity can be explained not only by the multidisciplinary nature of coaching but also by different attitudes the authors may take to the very idea of what knowledge is. Although such diversity creates exceptional opportunities for expanding the breadth and depth of the knowledge base of coaching it might also lead to questions about the validity of such knowledge and criteria for establishing its value. The aim of this chapter is to take as broad a perspective as possible on the knowledge base of applied disciplines in principle in order to consider important questions that need to be asked when a new discipline, such as coaching is being established.

For the purposes of this discussion we can use the following as a working definition and argue that knowledge can be taken as “a body of information, theories [and] methodologies broadly considered to have passed some tests of validity” (Alvesson, 2001, p. 867). It is important to explore what is meant by ‘broad consideration’ and ‘some tests of validity’ if we are to be concerned with the quality of the foundation on which the discipline of coaching is being built. This will help us to address those questions that are pertinent for researchers and the developers of models and theories of coaching, questions that are related to criteria of quality of their projects and propositions. All of the above are also important for coaching practitioners to become clearer about what it is that influences their judgment of the knowledge that constitutes the discipline of coaching and how this knowledge can be productively used. It is an intention in this chapter to demonstrate how an understanding of these complex theoretical issues can only enhance coaching practice at all levels.

In addressing questions of such magnitude, this chapter will position the developing discipline of coaching as a beneficiary not only of other applied disciplines, but also as a subject of influence by wider philosophical perspectives that inevitably shape this area of knowledge. These questions are:

- What is knowledge?
- How is knowledge generated and validated?
- What constitutes a theory for an applied discipline?
- How can theory be developed?
- How can the quality of research and theory be judged?
- How can this knowledge be utilised in practice?

The chapter will address these questions in light of the current debates in the coaching field with the recognition of relevant publications by coaching authors.

What is knowledge?

This question might appear simple at first glance. However, defining knowledge is a task that can be approached in a number of different ways: from the philosophical inquiries into the general principles of knowledge to the knowledge that a practitioner brings to bear on that practice. In the latter sense knowledge is 'what is known' about practice and can reside in the intelligence and competencies of practitioners. In this book, however, 'what is known' is discussed with a purpose of presenting the body of knowledge that can be formally recognised as a foundation of a new discipline. This purpose requires that, in the first place, there is at least some understanding of what the nature of knowledge is in the broadest sense. This inquiry inevitably leads to realisation that from different philosophical positions what is seen as knowledge can be conceived differently. This realisation may give rise to some level of tension and uncertainty in disciplines such as social science, organisational studies, psychology and sociology. To explore the implications of this for coaching in this section we compare two systems of thought that are currently influencing the way researchers and influential thinkers in various fields approach the task of generating knowledge.

It is impossible to acknowledge all of the ongoing debates as to what the nature of knowledge is. Those involved in knowledge production usually start from considering what there is to know, or in other words what the nature of reality is (ontology). Secondly, they then have to decide if what we want to know is 'knowable' in principle and how it is that we come to know it (epistemology). The following question is how this knowledge can be gained (methodology). And finally, it matters how we can verify what we know as valid knowledge, and establish what is true about it. Some actors in the field of coaching may find these questions too abstract and of little practical significance. However, it could be argued that at this stage of the development of coaching as a discipline, those who introduce new theories, begin their scholarship, design educational programmes or create their personal models of coaching practice would all greatly benefit from understanding the principles of the foundation on which they are building.

There are many philosophical positions that have developed as the result of different ways of addressing the above questions (Bem and De Jong, 2013). Consequently, as these positions are at the foundation of any line of inquiry, in all disciplines there are a significant variety of theories and approaches to research and practice. For creating some structure in dealing with this variety, these philosophical positions will be explored under umbrella of two systems of thought or general worldviews that are currently dominating intellectual and cultural inquiry: modernism and postmodernism. This differentiation is not free from contradictions and inevitably leads to the loss of subtlety and nuances of some specific philosophical positions. However, it also allows for the highlighting of current issues and concerns relevant for the coaching field and is therefore adopted here for pragmatic reasons and in spite of the recognized limitations.

Distinguishing between modernism and postmodernism

A convenient way to understand modernism in the context of this conversation is as the natural-science-centred worldview, a belief system with a commitment to clear, absolute, 'objective' answers to questions about reality. The search for Truth is guided by the ideal of establishing a grand narrative from which all other "facts" can be explained by linear, deductive logic. Modernism is driven by formal rational methods. It promises increasing social progress based on the rational application of universal laws about human nature that are 'discovered' through social science

research. This process was claimed to be the means by which an end could be brought to major ideological differences around the world (Fishman, 1999).

One of the simplest ways to grasp postmodernism is to view it as an epistemological assumption that we are always interpreting our experienced reality through a pair of conceptual glasses based on our goals, past experiences, values, knowledge, language, culture, etc. It is never possible to take the glasses off. There are no superior criteria according to which some particular glasses should be better used or evaluated (Fishman, 1999). As there can be no one grand narrative, only many local ones, the knowledge can only be contingent and partial (Lyotard, 1984). Since there is a plurality of truths, all of which are contextually justified, no over-encompassing Truth is possible. For postmodernists, knowledge is always both relational and positional (Kerruish, 1991). Accordingly, standpoints are always situated in social relations and within ideologies. Power and knowledge are intricately connected and hierarchically arranged (Lyotard, 1984).

In relation to providing an explanation of what is happening in coaching, modernism and postmodernism may suggest different perspectives. Traditional modernism appears mostly in the form of positivist methodologies in search of certainty and predictability. It tends to assume linear cause-effect relationships between established determinants and a proportional increase in their effect. The basic unit of analysis are usually individuals or discrete elements and categories and their contributory effects (e.g. Kochanowski, et al, 2010; Franklin and Franklin, 2012).

Postmodernists see things differently. They stipulate that proportional effects do not necessarily follow some incremental increase of an input; uncertainty and indeterminacy are the name of the game. Rather than aiming for a global theory, postmodernists look for knowledge at the local scale, aiming to consider a significant number of potential influences on the focus of inquiry with appreciation of context and allowing for multiple interpretations of data (Hayles, 1990). Where causation is identified it is often attributed to the dynamic interaction of field rather than to discrete particle effects (Bohm, 1980).

Modernist notions of truth in relation to coaching would generally look like this: that there is an underlying physical reality that is affected as the result of coaching, e.g. that interventions can cause a change in the client's brain and behaviors and can be measured. A specific example of a study that could be aligned with this philosophical position is Jack et al (2015). Many other research papers published in academic coaching journals would fit in this category particularly those which apply an experimental design (e.g. RCT- randomized control trial) expecting to control for various influences on coaching clients and to isolate an effect of a particular coaching intervention on the behavior of clients in order to measure it. Following established procedures for minimizing effect of the researcher and other interfering factors on the findings allows these researchers to claim cause-effect relationship between e.g. specific coaching interventions and outcomes of coaching (e.g. Kochanowski, et al, 2010, or see Grant, 2013, table 2.1).

Differing from the above, the expression of the postmodernist stance in coaching would be the view that coaching is a process of joint meaning-making - the process in which a coach and client co-create reality while in a dialog, which can in turn affect the state of those involved. Their perspectives on realities would be different but can be agreed on by trying to account for many influencing contexts and theories that both the client and coach hold. An example of the research from this position is a multifaceted analysis of a coaching session by Myers (2014). Researching coaching

from this paradigm obviously implies different design from the positivist and postpositivist stance and consequently different criteria of rigour. It offers nevertheless an understanding of the coaching process in a way that is different from the traditional studies.

Although not all qualitative studies are conducted in the postmodernist tradition (e.g. phenomenological or heuristic inquiries), their focus on specific phenomena of coaching with detailed consideration of context and rich description of the psychological background of the study make them more aligned with this paradigm than with the modernist tradition (e.g. Maxwell, 2009; Gyllensten and Palmer, 2006).

Table 1 describes the variety of philosophical positions with an attempt to locate these in relation to modernism and postmodernism, acknowledging, of course, that all boundaries between these positions are inevitably permeable and thus open to debates. It provides a loose but useful set of categorisations which could be particularly informative for researchers at the stage of establishing their position in relation to a new research question. Some of the included positions are more about ontology (e.g. objectivism), others are about epistemology (e.g. empiricism) and some are about both (e.g. realism). The concept of relativism is not included in this table because it is more of a general principle rather than a philosophical perspective. It places the meaning of experiential and physical events in the relationships that exist among them and therefore is often a key criticism that is aimed at postmodernism (Bem and De Jong, 2013).

	Modernism	Postmodernism
Philosophical perspectives	<p>Realism (there is reality that is separate from the mind and knowing involves a correspondence between the world and the mind)</p> <p>Objectivism (reality exists outside of the individual and consists of specific entities)</p> <p>Empiricism (knowledge comes from experience and through the senses. Scientific methods such as experiments and validated measurement tools can help to establish objective truth)</p> <p>Positivism (claims to achieve fundamental and objective knowledge about the world through natural sciences methods)</p> <p>Post-positivism (supports the view that reality exists and retain the idea of objective truth but accepts that it can be known only imperfectly and probabilistically, e.g. specific branches such as subtle realism and critical realism)</p>	<p>Anti-realism (a view of reality as mental, implying that the world is not separate from the mind)</p> <p>Social constructionism (reality to a large extent is constructed by individuals and groups)</p> <p>Critical Theory (is about understanding and theoretical explanation with an aim to reduce entrapment in systems of domination or dependence)</p> <p>Contextualism (meaning is context-dependent, and contexts are boundless)</p> <p>Hermeneutics (a method of reconstructing the meaning and experience of cultural products: an interpretation)</p> <p>Deconstruction (a process of analysis to reveal contradiction and injustice of conventional concepts and beliefs)</p> <p>Post-structuralism (a way of studying how knowledge is produced by analyzing an object of study and the system of knowledge that produce it)</p>

Table 1 An overview of philosophical positions with regard to modernism and postmodernism

In distinguishing modernism and postmodernism it is also important to re-emphasize that they are not 'clear-cut' approaches to understanding the world which allow us to separate different philosophical positions. In this chapter they are seen as epistemological attitudes that determine to some extent how knowledge-seeking groups and individuals make sense of what it is that they find out. We also need to remember that the postmodern epistemological attitude is still in its early developmental stages and only provides us with a potential direction as to what comes next. At this stage its priority is to point out the anomalies in the modernist paradigm and it is mainly concerned with asking questions rather than providing answers.

Both, modernism and postmodernism, as epistemological attitudes, have characteristics that can be seen as progressive in relation to knowledge generation and both of them are severely criticized, as it would be expected, from the opposite camp (Table 2). This may generate anxiety in those who are new to research and wish for clarity and certainty when design their projects. It might be also confusing for those who wish to make sense of research data in order to enhance their practice. It is however, a feature of our time and even those who hoped for the end of the 'paradigms war' and wish for some conversion of positions in research, may need to accept that "...there will be no single "conventional paradigm" to which all social scientist may ascribe in some common terms and with mutual understanding. Rather, we stand at the threshold of history marked by multivocality, contested meaning, paradigmatic controversies and new textual forms" (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p. 212).

Aspects	Modernism	Postmodernism
Acknowledgment of progressive contribution	<p>Creating order out of chaos</p> <p>Strong priority of the intellect and rationality over everything traditional, ritualistic, irrational</p> <p>Cultural rise of secularism, science and technology, which are designed to be 'value-free'.</p> <p>Opposition to all irrational authority - search for truth and active enhancement of human liberty.</p> <p>Development of new techniques for achieving the predictable control of events.</p>	<p>Acknowledging disorder</p> <p>Appreciation of diversity – giving voice to relatively powerless</p> <p>Challenging hegemony of rationality – accepting other ways of knowing (e.g. emotions, contemplation)</p> <p>Attempts to uncover power relationship and socio-political agendas</p> <p>Introduction of interpretation - the world is not only a perception but an interpretation</p>
Points of critique	<p>Science becomes scientism – the only source of knowledge</p> <p>Loss of human subjectivity – no depth</p> <p>Dominance of rationality</p> <p>All things have only instrumental value in the overall system</p>	<p>Reality may become nothing but interpretation</p> <p>Denying <i>depth</i> in general – no value or perspective is better than any other – flat field</p> <p>Scepticism of all theories</p> <p>At the extreme – anti-everything</p>

Table 2 Progressive and problematic aspects of modernism and postmodernism (based on Fishman, 1999, Cellier, 2005, Wilber, 2000)

Pragmatism: A helpful third way?

All aspects in Table 2 illustrate that a search for a 'perfect' perspective could be stimulating and developmental but also a futile exercise. However, for applied fields of knowledge such as coaching it is important to acknowledge the role of pragmatism as

a philosophical position that has had a significant role in the modernist/postmodernist divide and is therefore not included in Table 1. Although originating earlier in modernism (Dewey, 1910; James, 1955) it has come to be more usually aligned with a postmodern epistemological stance that states that there is no way to know absolutely (Rorty, 2010). It has also been argued (e.g. Fishman, 1999) that pragmatism provides the means of overcoming the dichotomy drawn between epistemological attitudes of modernism and postmodernism by 'transcending the argument'.

Pragmatists do not see the value of stating what reality is like. According to them knowledge is interactive, it is the product of actively exploring the world and establishing what reality is by acting on it (Bem and De Jong, 2013). For example Peirce (1977) argued that the act of knowing includes the object of knowing, the sign of it (e.g. words or methods of studies) and the interpretant of the sign. All three elements are inseparable and therefore it does not make sense to talk about the existence of separate objects or signs as separate representations of independently existing objects. Thus pragmatism does not separate ontology from epistemology and is mainly concerned with the usefulness of knowledge for solving specific problems that we face (Rorty, 2010).

Pragmatism is also influential in challenging the traditional image of science. Science is often identified exclusively with modernistic positivism with consequences for some fields relevant to coaching. For example, according to Ashworth (2000) "plainly most of psychology... is modernist in its assumptions" (p. 159). However, according to pragmatists, knowledge about the world comes in many varieties: "science is just more systematic, general, methodical, open, etc. than common sense" (Bem and De Jong, 2013, p. 9). Instead of a fixed and ahistorical tradition of scientific method pragmatists such as Dewey (1910) and James (1955) suggest that there is another meaning of science which is about disciplined, critical, reflective thought that compares and contrasts evidence arguing for alternative interpretations or explanations of a particular phenomenon (Fishman, 1999). This position is being further developed by contemporary pragmatists (e.g. Capps, 2015). Polanyi (1969) also extends this view by emphasising personal responsibility in creative freedom as an ideal to strive for in creating knowledge while recognising constraints created by the judgment of the community of knowers.

Individuals and communities seeking knowledge in applied disciplines are inevitably subject to holding various philosophical positions described in this chapter and their findings and interpretations should be seen in the light of these attitudes. The overall view on the coaching literature demonstrates a significant variety of philosophical positions that are not necessarily acknowledged by the authors. It could be argued that the research on effectiveness of coaching (e.g. Table 2.1 in Grant, 2013) is often driven by the expectations of traditional academia and organisational buyers who are educated in the modernist tradition. The popular, opinion-based literature on coaching (e.g. Whitmore, 2002; Rogers, 2012) is driven by the desire to share experiences, observations and models that represent what worked for these authors in practice. There are also much smaller, but growing categories of publications such as qualitative studies from the social constructivist position (e.g. Maxwell, 2009) and the conceptual work from the critical theory position (e.g. Western, 2012) that have more affinity with postmodern epistemological attitude. In the following sections some criteria for evaluating and using the insights of these will be discussed in further detail.

Knowledge in the multidisciplinary context

Coaching has obvious ties to other disciplines such as counselling and psychotherapy, mentoring, leadership development and consultancy, sociology, philosophy, psychology etc. (e.g. Bachkirova, 2007; Garvey, 2014, Day et al, 2009; Kilburg, 2000). Figure 1 describes the layers of influence for coaching that start from most generic fields such as philosophy, psychology, biology, but also sociology and the humanities. The next layer depicts more specific disciplines such as ethics, adult development and organisational studies which themselves can be seen as subsections of more generic fields of knowledge. The layer closer to coaching may include therapy, HRD and training and the closest one might be counselling, mentoring and consulting. Within each of these established fields there are various traditions and approaches, each of which might have its own assumptions about human nature and how individuals learn and change. Consequently, coaching practitioners and researchers originally trained in these traditions, may be influenced by theories and discourses dominant in these subject areas.

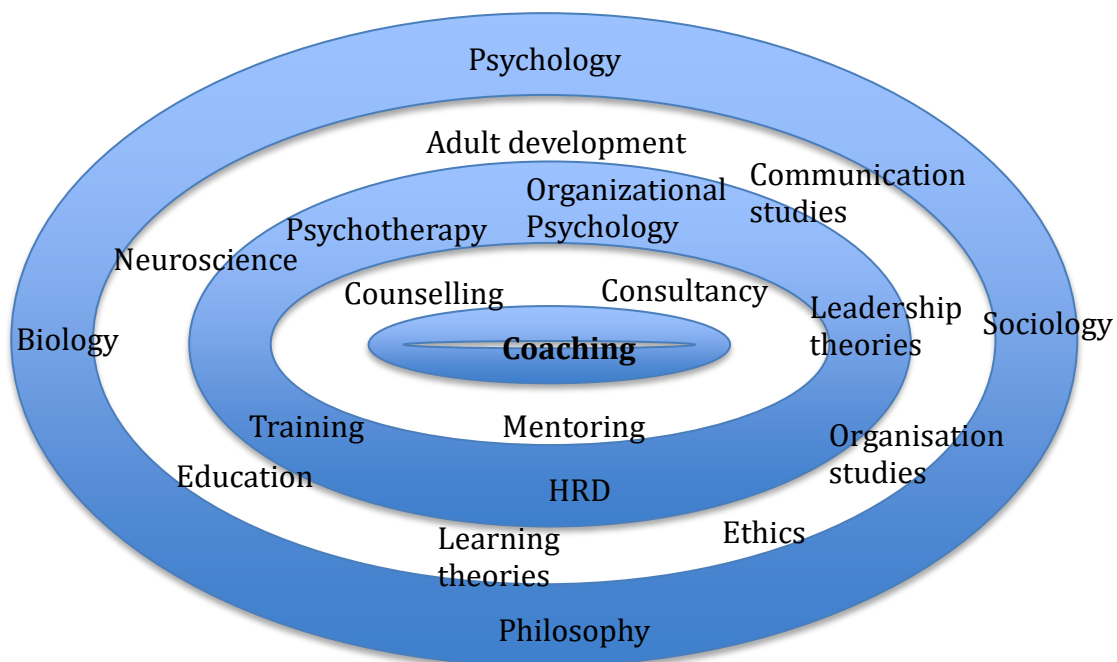


Figure 1 Positioning coaching amongst other disciplines of knowledge

It is important to notice that the epistemological attitudes of modernism and postmodernism have cross-disciplinary influences on the above fields of knowledge. For example, in a modernist manner a typical professional practice process would look like a step-by-step approach that starts from the laws discovered in basic science, which are then modified in applied research, finalised into a method and finally delivered by a professional as an intervention to a client (Peterson, 1991). However logical, this process would be seen very differently by those who take into account: how an individual client and coach view and experience it (phenomenology of the process); their beliefs, expectations and mutual sense making in interaction (hermeneutics) and many factors of their context and wider environment that are entangled in the coaching process (complexity theories). Figure 2 shows that coaching is not a simple intervention and its complexity derives from the combination of the significant number of factors influencing the process and outcomes of coaching. As a complex interactive process it requires a theoretical/epistemological framework that acknowledges the dynamics of this complexity.

Although complexity theories are not explicitly connected to postmodernism, Cilliers (1998) argued that a postmodern approach is inherently sensitive to complexity as “it acknowledges the importance of self-organisation whilst denying a conventional theory of representation” (p. 113). The importance of complexity theories for coaching is in providing an alternative perspective on applied practice to the linear cause-effect explanations of reductive positivism.

According to Barnes (2004) we should refer to complexity theories rather than theory, as there are variations on the theme of complexity by different authors (Rescher, 1996; Styhre, 2002; Stacey, 2003). Stacey (2003) argued that other theories seek to construct mathematical models of systems at the macro level, whilst the complex adaptive systems theory (CAS) that he proposed, seeks to formulate rules of interaction for the individual entities that make up a system or population. All complexity theories see natural systems as both non-linear and self-organizing. It is not a combination of a number of linear systems but a purposeful system with emerging properties that makes this system adaptive. Adopting a CAS lens to coaching implies that although coaching is an intentional activity of the participants, their relationship and the context of engagement are regarded as being in a state of flux (Stacey, 2003). Consequently, as indicated in Fig. 2 the quality of coaching engagements is subject to fluctuation in the characteristics of the coach, the characteristics of the client, nuances of the coaching relationship and various contextual factors (Cavanagh and Lane, 2012; Cox et al, 2014). According to this view the process of coaching is seen as “a conversational, reflexive narrative inquiry ... as an alternative to restrictive rules and procedures” (Stacey, 2012, p. 95). Thus the emergent nature of this process makes its outcomes largely unpredictable (Alvesson, 2001; Cavanagh and Lane, 2012; Garvey, 2011; Jones and Corner, 2012; O’Connor and Cavanagh, 2013; Schön, 1983; Stacey, 2003, 2012; Svensson, 1990).

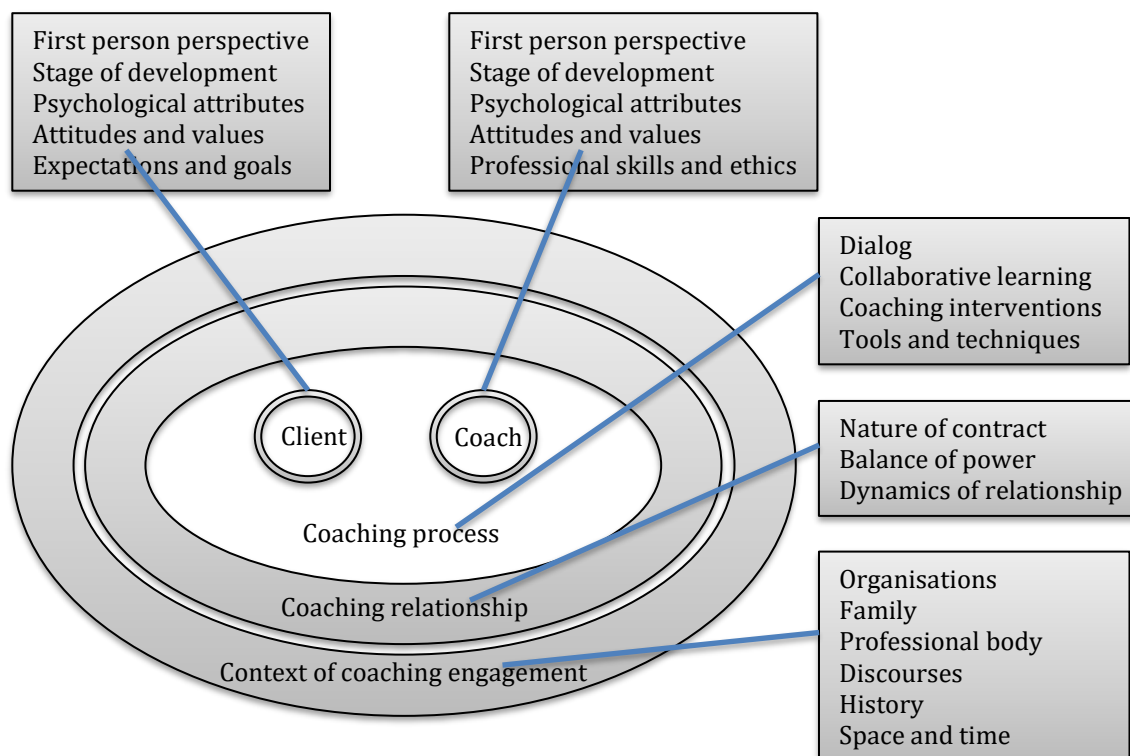


Figure 2 Complexity of factors involved in coaching engagement

In relation to issues and debates in coaching, this view of the coaching engagement presents a strong challenge, for example, to the assumptions behind competency-based assessments of the coaches. It has been argued (Bachkirova and Lawton-Smith, 2015) that approaches to the accreditation of coaches developed by professional bodies are more in line with a modernist view of the world that implies a linear cause-effect relationship between theories, methods and outcomes in applied practice. A more postmodern stance on practice that is in line with complexity theories would question the above causality by introducing the element of joint meaning making of the practitioner and client and the emergent nature of coaching conversations (Stacey, 2003, 2012; Cavanagh and Lane, 2012; Bachkirova & Lawton-Smith, 2015; Garvey, 2011; Jones and Corner, 2012). Consequently, Bachkirova and Lawton-Smith (2015) argued for a capabilities approach rather than competencies-based frameworks.

If coaching is understood as a process of 'joint meaning making' between coach and client this places it automatically in a hermeneutic context – it is a complex interpretative process and, as such, falls outside of any methodological approaches that seek to limit it to linear-causal relationships. The 'hermeneutic flexibility' of the creative, interpretative dynamic of the coach-client relationship naturally places the theoretical foundations of coaching as a 'knowledge-based discipline' in sympathetic alignment with a postmodern epistemological attitude. However, pragmatism can then rescue it from the obvious pitfalls that postmodernism leaves itself exposed to.

It is important to notice, at the same time, that complexity theories can be also adopted by those researching from the modernist stance (e.g. Boyatzis, 2006; Jack et al, 2013; O'Connor and Cavanagh, 2013). For example, in testing Boyatzis's (2006) Intentional Change Theory (ICT) – an attempt to explain behavioural change, using concepts from complexity theories, some of the studies use approaches that are fairly reductive in relation to the complexity of a coaching conversation. For example, in the study by Jack et al (2013) the attempt was made to imitate the coaching process by interviewing undergraduate students about their experiences and future goals using a pre-recorded video of the 'coach' who asks specific questions and gives pre-recorded responses. When these pre-recorded questions invited students to contemplate their desired future "instead of the more typical approach for coaching or advising in which a person is reminded of his/her weaknesses or deficiencies and told how to improve" (p. 374) their brain scans indicated that the former is better than the latter, "because they activate neural regions and circuits that cause the person to be more cognitively and perceptually open and engage positive motivational processes" (p. 382).

From other theoretical and practical perspectives, these types of experiments may look like an unjustified reduction of the complexity of interaction involved in coaching. It is important nevertheless to build on the advantages provided by the multidisciplinary nature of coaching. Research in neuroscience and epigenetics provides an important additional perspective on the process of coaching that can only add to our understanding of it on the biological level. The insights from this level of analysis are currently available because of the proximity of coaching to other related activities, such as learning and stress management, in relation to which some significant progress has been made. At the same time, it is also important to consider and acknowledge the limitations in the degree of adaptation of such knowledge. For example, it is quite likely that advances in neuroscience will become more relevant for developing the knowledge base of coaching. However, premature promises with far reaching extrapolations of findings (the above study is named "Visioning in the brain:

An fMRI study of inspirational coaching and mentoring”) that significantly oversimplify coaching may also create a false image of the profession amongst potential clients, sponsors and those who wish to study coaching.

Creating a knowledge base of coaching – research, theories and reflections on practice

In addition to the relevant knowledge from other fields for the last two decades many researchers, academics and practitioners around the world have been working with the aim to advance our understanding of coaching as a unique discipline. Even being educated in various professional fields they are united by the intention to extend the knowledge of coaching. Although this chapter questions the intention to reach certainty in a pursuit for knowledge and instead advocates the “acceptance of provisional and contingent in everything we do” (Burbules, 1996, p.46), further understanding of our practice is important and can be advanced by research and theorising. This section will consider what may constitute the knowledge base of coaching and what benchmarks could be considered to ensure a useful contribution.

As in other disciplines, knowledge includes a) the body of rigorous research as well as b) theories, models and conceptual propositions. Both of the above are examined in practice by practitioners through their reflection and analysis. Their systematic reflection and analysis of practice in the form of case studies and action research projects can also contribute to knowledge.

Research and theory building are equally important for the development of the knowledge base. It could be said that research generates evidence of effectiveness and a rich description of coaching practice to allow for the analysis of coaching with various levels of detail. Theories on one hand, provide synthesis of such information in the form of propositions that organise, predict and explain observations by telling how phenomena relate to each other. For example, research studies specific interventions and qualities of the coach that influence the outcome of coaching. Theory, on the hand, explains why such interventions and behaviours of the coach might be helpful in certain situations.

On developing research

So far, there is a clear tendency that the body of research on coaching is growing year by year (Stern and Stout-Rostron, 2013) in comparison to the evident lack of theories specifically developed for coaching. One of the explanations for such a discrepancy is the growing emphasis on the importance of research in postgraduate programmes in coaching, growth of specific research-oriented units in professional bodies, a pressure for large organisational buyers to demonstrate the effectiveness of coaching and limited available funding for research. There are also many publications that provide guidance for running research projects specifically on coaching in the handbooks and academic journals (e.g. Fillary-Travis and Cox, 2014; Saunders and Rojon, 2014).

Although overall awareness about the importance of research in the coaching field is growing, there are differences in the influence of modernist and postmodernist paradigms in the way the research methodologies are chosen, evaluated and disseminated. The dominance of modernism is evident in the preferences of the editors of academic journals and research users for generalisation of findings, large samples and use of statistical packages for analysis. Recognition of this state of

affairs is not meant to minimise the value of the modernist types of research. These studies are highly important for the coaching field as they allow testing viable hypotheses, generalization of findings and provide a meta-perspective on coaching from a number of studies. These studies enrich our understanding of specific and detailed questions about practice and add to the credibility of the field at the stage when it is highly needed. At the same time, the defence of postmodern studies that might seem to be strongly presented in this chapter is intended in order to establish a more balanced stance to what is considered valid knowledge about coaching. The discipline of coaching would equally benefit from the appreciation of rigorous, hypothesis testing research and also contextually grounded studies which provide rich qualitative data and in-depth investigation of specific elements of coaching, giving voice to multiple stakeholders of the coaching engagements (Fillary-Travis and Cox, 2014).

This balanced stance to various methodologies would allow researchers to freely choose the methodology they feel is more suitable to the question they wish to explore, and the epistemological attitude with which they are more philosophically aligned. They should not feel constrained by expectations other than the rigour of the process. In a developing discipline such as coaching, probably more than in the established fields, Feyerabend's (1975) suggestion that knowledge is best obtained "from a proliferation views rather than from the determined application of a preferred ideology" (p.52) rings true. He also argued for the need not to destroy, but rather to deprive the rules of traditional science and encourage alternative modes of knowledge inquiry.

At the stage of the co-existence of both epistemological attitudes the researchers might well benefit from mutual learning from each other. The writing of postmodernist researchers can be well improved by the standards of clarity and precision usually characteristic of positivist presentation of findings. At the same time, some values advocated by postmodernists would be usefully adopted by traditional researchers. As Mascolo and Dalto (1995) argued, positivist researchers "would also profit by adding the postmodern value of self-reflexivity to their bag of virtues" (p.188).

It is important, however, to remember that the appropriate criteria of rigour need to be applied to the studies conducted from different paradigms. For example well known criteria of quality for more traditional research are validity, reliability and generalizability of the findings (Robson, 2001). However, applying the same criteria for evaluating the rigour of qualitative research is inappropriate. This type of research varies in terms of the main philosophical assumptions and therefore needs to be judged according to their relevant principles. For example Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as alternatives to the above criteria of quality three others: confirmability, dependability and transferability – criteria more suitable for qualitative studies. However, even these criteria would vary if different qualitative methodologies were used, such as for example phenomenological study, Grounded Theory or Discourse Analysis (Willig, 2006).

On developing theory

As already noted, theory building in coaching is far behind research activity. In order to encourage this process this section includes a discussion of the following aspects:

1. What are the general and specific elements of the theories?
2. What are the methods of theory building?
3. How can a theory be evaluated?

Theory can be described as “a coherent description, explanation and representation of observed or experienced phenomena” (Gioia & Pitre, 1990, p. 587). Wacker (1998) argued that a theory should have “four components: definitions, domain, relationships, and predictive claims to answer the natural language questions of who, what, when, where, how, why, should, could and would” (p. 368). It has been argued that any theory of coaching should include the following elements:

- the main concepts and assumptions about human nature
- core distinctive features, such as processes of change and methods and techniques of influencing
- an indication of in what context and with what type of clients this approach would be most or least helpful (Bachkirova et al, 2014).

Theory building is the ongoing process of producing, confirming, applying, and adapting theory (Lynham, 2000). According to Toracco (2002) there are five specific methods for building theory that do not preclude authors from staying aligned with their deep-seated values and assumptions about ontology, epistemology and their other philosophical beliefs. He also argued that some theory-building methods are better suited for the particular purposes of theorising than the others, notwithstanding personal intentions of the theorist. These methods are: Dubin’s method, grounded theory, meta-analytic theory building, the social constructionist approach, and theory building from case study research (Toracco, 2002). The adaptation of the description of these for the coaching field is presented in Table 3.

Method	Description (adapted from Toracco, 2002)
Dubin’s method	Dubin’s (1978) method for theory building follows the quantitative research and is used by those who adopt a theory-then-research strategy for theory building. This method is based on the assumptions that knowledge is created to explain, predict, and control the phenomenon of interest and that the discovery of generalizable laws and explanations e.g. of coaching effectiveness is possible and desirable. The method consists of an eight-phase process for theory-building from initial construction and the development of the theory to conducting research for empirical verification.
Grounded Theory	Grounded Theory method is an inductive approach to generating theory. Theory evolves during grounded theory building through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection. During the research process, theory is provisionally verified through continuous matching of theory against data. New theoretical understandings of a particular theme of coaching from the perspective of relevant stakeholders, e.g. coaches or clients, emerge from the data. Theory building using this approach is particularly well suited to generating novel theoretical understandings and tentative hypotheses about under-researched elements and processes of coaching.
Meta-analytic theory	Meta-analytic theory building uses formal statistical techniques to sum up a body of separate but similar empirical studies of, e.g. effectiveness of coaching programmes. The purpose of meta-analysis is to synthesize and organize existing empirical findings on a topic into a coherent pattern. Theory is based on general conclusions drawn from across multiple studies.

The social constructionist approach	Theory building by this method is not undertaken to uncover a theoretical truth or reality but to model an understanding of the sense that people make of e.g. the coaching process. The emphasis is on the specific, the local, and the particular as a means to more closely represent the lived experience of those studied. The researcher remains visible and self-declared during the process of research and theory building, so that it is clear when the voice of the researcher is represented and when the voices of others are put forward. This method seeks to present meaning through carefully crafted narratives of how people make sense of the phenomena in question.
The theory building from case study research	This method focuses on understanding the dynamics present within a single organisation, coaching programme or even one coaching session, by taking advantage of the rich context for empirical observation provided by case settings. It uses qualitative or quantitative methods to explain the dynamics of phenomena occurring within case settings. It is particularly appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon, current perspectives seem inadequate because they have little empirical substantiation, or they conflict with each other or common sense. This method can be consistent with any paradigmatic approaches to knowledge creation.

Table 3 Methods for theory building

It is important to say that not all research projects that use the methods in Table 3 lead to a theory. Some of them only provide an element of a theory, some may only develop relevant concepts that could potentially lead to a theory, but others may simply not generate significant findings that allow them to be considered as a theory.

However, it is more difficult to establish the quality of a theory in comparison to the quality of research. In fact, there is no way to prove, in the conventional positivistic sense, that one theory is better than another. This is partly because the methods one would use to make such arguments are based on a set of ontological and epistemological commitments that are different between the authors (Greeno, 1997). However, as George E. P. Box said that “essentially all models are wrong but some are useful” (1987, p. 424), pragmatists would argue that some theories could be more useful than the others for some particular tasks and situations within coaching. Hence, experimentation with theories in practice and theoretical debates are an important part of developing a new discipline and need to be encouraged. For the purpose of initiating positive approaches to theory development, a theory could be considered useful if it:

- identifies patterns in observations of practice previously unrecognized
- explains relationships between concepts
- extends understanding provided by other theories
- creates building blocks for new theories
- suggests an intervention or a course of action that proves to be useful in coaching practice.

Finally, it is important to highlight that theories of coaching would not be able to establish something absolute about how the coaching engagement functions. They can however, provide dynamic frameworks in which a constructive discourse allows for, or facilitates a creative, pluralistic approach out of which the knowledge base emerges. It is clear that there are no right approaches to practice, or that definitive

conclusions can be reached. However, it is important that those producing a theory can rationally justify their approach by reference to empirical data, theoretical discourses and the set of desired aims to be addressed.

How knowledge is used

The knowledge users include coaches, coaching students, researchers, educators of coaching, supervisors, policy makers, organizational sponsors and potentially clients who wish to be informed about the process of coaching. The themes of this chapter can be of concern for all of them as indicators of the quality of practice they are involved with. It is, for example known that industry-funded studies are more likely to report positive outcomes (Killin and Della Sala, 2015). Therefore, one of the first implications of the theme of quality for knowledge users is engagement with a question: What is important for differentiating the quality of sources of knowledge for coaching practice? Table 5 describes some ideas that knowledge users can consider in relation to research and theories.

What can be useful for evaluating the quality and practical value of:	
coaching research	coaching theories and models
Understanding of the paradigm of knowledge (e.g. positivism or constructivism) from which the research is conducted	Understanding a philosophical position at the base of the theory and recognising that social theories are always incomplete and impossible to prove
Understanding of different criteria of quality and rigour according to paradigm	Taking a theory or model as a perspective on practice, one of many possible
Asking questions that can position research findings in relevant contexts	Establishing a specific niche/context where it could be useful
Comparing to the observation of practice and reflection	Evaluating the value of theory and models by experimenting on practice

Table 4 Suggestions for knowledge users for differentiating the quality of research, theories and models

Most of the suggestions in this table were already discussed in previous sections of this chapter. Only the very first suggestion in each column of Table 4 may benefit from examples of coaching theories and bodies of work by specific authors and demonstrate how the positioning of these in their philosophical 'home' can help to understand them better. Currently there are only a few fully developed theories that are specifically created for coaching, e.g. a theory of developmental coaching by Bachkirova (2011), a meta-theory of coaching (Western, 2012), and a theory of narrative coaching (Drake, 2015). Although not presented as theory there is also a body of conceptual work by such authors as Garvey (2011), Grant (2013), Hawkins and Smith (2013) which contribute to a conceptual understanding of coaching. The authors are rarely explicit about the philosophical background of their work, but understanding their epistemological stance can place the purpose and style of their work in an appropriate context. For example, knowing that the work of Garvey (2011)

is written from sceptical or critical postmodernism helps to put into context that his purpose is to challenge current discourses in coaching. Similarly, in Table 5 the attempt is made to locate a selection of specific conceptual work written on coaching in a potential philosophical orientation, with a caveat the authors may not see it this way.

Theories and conceptual papers	Influencing philosophical position
Grant (2013), Boyatzis (2006), Palmer (2008)	Post-positivism
Garvey (2011)	Sceptical or critical postmodernism
Bachkirova (2011)	Postmodern pragmatism with developmental structuralism
Hawkins and Smith (2013)	Connectionism and system theories
Western (2012)	Critical theory and contextualism
Drake (2015), Cox (2012)	Social constructionism
Cavanagh and Lane (2012)	Complexity theories

Table 4 Conceptual work and theories of coaching with corresponding philosophical positions

Knowledge users can also influence the development of the knowledge base of coaching explicitly and implicitly. An explicit part of their contribution may be in taking part in research when there is a call for participants. In a more active way coaches in particular can describe and collect case studies from their own practice with a rich description of processes and contextual details. The bank of such case studies could be invaluable for research purposes.

In terms of a more implicit influence, it is important to recognize that the level of thinking amongst practitioners and other stakeholders also creates dominant discourses that in turn shape the discipline and policies of coaching. For example, some theoretical generalizations and policy decisions are made on the basis of the collected views of coaches when they are participating in various studies or endorse certain policies of professional bodies.

Coaches in particular are interacting with the knowledge base of coaching by making decisions in each particular professional situation. They formulate ways in which to understand and address issues and problems they face (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). These informed frameworks of knowledge and experience are seen as personal theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1996) or theories-in-practice (Lynham, 2000, 2002). Some postgraduate programme and accreditation schemes are now asking coaches to make their theories-in-use more explicit and be able to articulate and defend their position. When the decisions about these positions are made understanding the roots of these positions may help to avoid unexpected surprises. In the words of one insightful secondary school pupil “nothing I think about are my original thoughts”. What could make them ‘mine’ is examining their source in light of one’s current values and intentions. Using the following Table 4 it is possible to compare potential differences in how modernist and postmodernist epistemological attitudes may be evident in coaching practice.

Aspect of	Modernists tendency	Postmodernists tendency
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coaching		
Focus of the coach attention	'Quality': improvement of the client and the client's system	'Equality' and joined meaning making as there is no one 'true' way to see situations or to act
Role of the coach	Expert of the process and facilitator of development	Partner in a dialog
Coaching relationship	Is a means for successful work (development of trust)	Is a purpose in itself – a model of joined inquiry
Trusted information for development of practice	Results from large projects that use statistical analysis and are published in well-known journals	Findings of qualitative studies with in-depth analysis of data from experienced practitioners in in well-described contexts
Evaluation of coaching	Is important as a proof of good work	Is seen as a disruption from learning
Potential problems	Quality and creativity may be compromised by compliance to external expectations	It is difficult to achieve consensus as to where the benchmarks for progress are giving the appearance that 'anything goes'

Table 5 Aspects of coaching practice influenced by the modernist and postmodernist epistemological attitudes

It is evident that both paradigms are currently present in coaching discourses and all stakeholders are influenced by both of them. This may lead to incompatible beliefs and consequently to incompatible models of practice and policies. For example:

- We believe in the unique self-expression of individuals, but create uniformed competences frameworks.
- We hate hierarchies but develop categories of professionalism, e.g. master-practitioner.
- We advocate evidence-based practices and policies but support gradation of expertise in certification systems without any research supporting that master-coaches demonstrate better results than a novice coach.
- We believe in self-determination of the client but subordinate the needs of the client to the needs of the organisations.

The inconsistent beliefs and policies may need to be examined as we attempt to be more careful and rigorous in our thinking. However, the expectation to be neutral, unbiased, or value-free as coaches is also unrealistic from the postmodernists' point of view. From the position of philosophical hermeneutics and complexity theories Cillier (2005) suggests that to make a responsible judgement - whether it be in law, science or art – would ... involve at least the following components:

- Respecting otherness and difference as values in themselves.
- Gathering as much information on the issue as possible, notwithstanding the fact that it is impossible to gather all the information.
- Considering as many possible consequences of the judgment, notwithstanding the fact that it is impossible to consider all the consequences.

- Making sure that it is possible to revise the judgment as soon as it becomes clear that it has flaws, whether it be under specific circumstances, or in general” (pp. 139-140).

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide an overview of the influential forces on the process of building a knowledge base for the discipline of coaching and their effect on the current literature on coaching. The literature was reviewed with examples of modernist and postmodernist epistemological attitudes in the way authors conceptualise learning, change and individual development in coaching. Such conceptualisations in turn define what is possible in practice, what theories and methods of practice are relevant and how the outcomes of practices can be evaluated. It is hoped that this chapter can serve as an aid for various stakeholders of coaching in their pursuit for developing as full an awareness as possible about the foundational values of their practice and make informed decisions about research, educational programmes and coaching strategies.

This chapter has focused on questions that have long been of importance to the stakeholders of coaching, and, if coaching is to continue advancing as a discipline, they will not diminish in their importance. As this volume demonstrates, the knowledge base of coaching is growing fast. However, it is vital that the industry develops a more sophisticated understanding about both what knowledge is and how it is best and most appropriately generated. In keeping with the spirit of coaching, the simple process of engaging with such questions is inherently developmental for researchers and practitioners, irrespective of whether the outcomes of future coaching research are satisfying to all its stakeholders.

A strong theme of this chapter is that there is a significant amount of diversity in the philosophical positions, genres and theories currently reflected in the coaching literature. Its key message to readers is that effort should be made to appreciate the diversity of such perspectives, rather than opt for unjustified universality. This message fits well with a core strength of coaching, which aims to work with a unique combination of factors in clients' situations, their self and the whole organism. Thus it attempts to develop unique ways of addressing the challenges that this world presents for them. The uniqueness however is not something completely new. More than often the unique is a creative combination of what is known. In the same way this might be a model for developing a new discipline of coaching.

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