Using the 'Autodidact' Subject-Object Interview in coaching: The experience of learning to administer and score the Subject-Object Interview through self-teaching

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Abstract

The use of the in coaching is on the increase. This qualitative study discusses the experience of a coach who taught herself to conduct, analyse and score the Subject-Object Interview (SOI) (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman & Felix, 2011). Using heuristic inquiry the study explored what is involved in learning to conduct the SOI with the aid of a written guide; how the coach and eight volunteers describe benefits and limitations of an autodidact approach to SOI (ASOI) and what would be the implications of using the ASOI in coaching practice for coach, client and the coaching profession. An important finding was that participants considered coach credentials and experience more important than their status as SOI practitioner. Trust between participant and coach emerged as key to a successful ASOI and timing of the ASOI, ethical issues and contracting are of crucial importance. An approach for the use of the ASOI in the coaching process is proposed, offering scope for further research and discussion.

Key words: coaching, subject-object interview, assessment, coach development.

Introduction

The Subject-Object Interview (SOI) is a psychological interview used to assess orders of mind (or orders of consciousness) in Kegan's constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1980; 1982; 1994). It derives its name from its aim to map those things which the interviewee can take a perspective on – things that are object to them – and things that are beyond their field of vision - those that they are subject to. Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman and Felix (2011, p.1) describe the SOI as an "assessment procedure" which was developed, and continues to be used, as an academic research tool designed to measure an individual's mental complexity. As Kegan explains *"a given system of meaning organizes our thinking, feeling and acting over a wide range of human functioning."* (1980, p 374) [italics in original]. Lahey *et al* further describe meaning-making as "what really happens in the personal construction of interpersonal and intrapersonal experiencing" and as "self-constituted apprehensions of the truth" (2011, p.1).

Kegan's theory identifies five developmental stages stretching from infancy into adulthood, each of which can be discerned by key characteristics in subject-object relations (Kegan, 1980; 1982; 1994). Each stage 'builds' on the subject-object relations of the earlier stage; it could be said that when what was subject in a certain stage becomes object to the individual, this marks movement from one stage to the next. The stages are summarised in Table 1.

Stage	Key Characteristics	
	Subject	**Object**
1: Impulsive Mind	Impulses, (social) perceptions	Reflexes (sensory)
2: Imperial Mind	Point of view, needs, preferences	Impulses, (social) perceptions
3: Socialised Mind	Abstractions, mutuality, inner states, self-consciousness	Point of view, needs, preferences
4: Self-Authoring Mind	Abstract system, multiple-role consciousness, self-regulation	Abstractions, mutuality, inner states, self-consciousness
5: Self-Transforming Mind	Dialectical interpenetration of self and other	Abstract system, multiple-role consciousness, self-regulation

Table 1: Subject-object relations by stage (adapted from Kegan, 1980; 1994)

The relevance of Kegan's theory for coaching according to Bluckert is that until individuals become aware of something which needs to change, they will not be able to see it in the first place because they are subject to it. Coaches need to truly understand what is involved in letting go and updating beliefs and assumptions. In addition, coaches need to know how comfortable they are challenging their clients in the first place. He regards the use of the self as "*the* highest order coaching skill" (Bluckert, 2006, p.84) [italics in original] and as such, coaches need to develop their (own) psychological mindedness.

Two important features of the SOI need to be discussed in this context: the hierarchy of the 'results' and the subjective nature of its application. The SOI shows the individual the stage or position they presently occupy in the developmental arc. It looks for the blind spots – what the individual is subject to – and thus highlights the limitations they were not aware of beforehand. In my experience as a coach there is a real difference between undertaking an assessment to learn about preferences which can both be strengths and weaknesses in a specific context, and being assessed to find opportunities for growth and development. The former creates a more boundaried arena in which the coaching is to take place compared to the latter, for example when it is limited to professional situations.

The SOI takes approximately 60-90 minutes and is recorded and transcribed before being analysed and coded. Through a discussion of one or more index cards selected by the interviewee, together with prompts offered by the interviewer, the interviewer probes for responses which provide clues to the individual's meaning-making structure. A feedback session usually follows when used in a helping relationship such as therapy, counselling or coaching (Berger, 2012). Some authors refer to the SOI as a psychometric (Laske, 2008), while others argue it is not a psychometric, but a 'measurement' (Berger, 2012, p.50). The precise nature or status of the SOI is not the focus of this research, and both terms are therefore used in this account.

Conducting and analysing a SOI is a highly skilled process (Berger, 2012). Mastering the SOI as a practitioner takes months of study and practice, even after attending an intensive 3-day workshop. To use it to support others in their development, Berger recommends either calling in an expert or investing in more training.

For many coaches interested in developmental theory and practice, the SOI could be a valuable instrument. Until recently the only way to learn the procedure was through attending the intensive workshop. However, *A Guide to the Subject-Object Interview: Its Administration and Interpretation* has been published in book-form (Lahey *et al.*, 2011), so that coaches and other professional helpers could now teach themselves the SOI if they so wish. Although the book takes no clear stance on adopting the autodidactic (self-taught) approach, a clue is given in the description of the authors' philosophy behind publishing the guide: "we have tried to recreate here conditions similar to what we've discovered are the most successful aspects of our efforts to teach people, in workshops and classes, how to use the assessment procedure." (Lahey *et al.*, 2011, p3).

Teaching myself the SOI is exactly what I set out to do for this study. As part of the learning journey I conducted the interview with eight participants; then transcribed, analysed and scored the interviews myself. For practical reasons I did not use a second scorer as the procedure demands.

The research problem consisted of two parts:

1. Implications for coaches and coachees

What does it take to 'master' the SOI on your own? What views did participants have on the coach being a self-taught 'SOI' interviewer? What are the ethical considerations of using the ASOI with a coachee? And importantly, how would participants describe the benefits, limitations and advantages of using an ASOI?

2. Implications for the coaching profession

Consequently other questions needed to be answered: What would the ASOI contribute to a coach's practice in this respect? What are the ethical considerations of this approach from the professional point of view? Should the ASOI be used as an assessment in the first place? How would the coach and coachee contract on the use of the ASOI, especially when used in organisational context? And when in the coaching intervention and relationship would the ASOI be beneficial?

The use of the SOI in coaching: overview of the literature

Berger (2012) sees many benefits in using the SOI in a coaching context. Conducting it builds rapport with the interviewees, who, in Berger's research, almost unanimously reported enjoying the experience. The method of conducting the interview gives the interviewer a 'break' from being helpful. The skill required as well as the experience of taking a look into someone's meaning making system is developmental for the interviewer as well. And finally, just being interviewed is developmental as it provides food for thought for the interviewee (Berger and Atkins, 2009; Berger, 2010; 2012).

However positive Berger is about the SOI, she also sees its limitations in addition to those identified by its creators: it is expensive to use in commercial practice, and should always be considered a snapshot, a quick peek through someone's meaning-making window. The method also relies on the analysis of the transcript of the interview which misses out important data such as tone of voice and non-verbal communication, making the data incomplete by definition (Berger, 2010, 2012).

The SOI sets out to measure an individual's mental complexity, but does not measure the complexity of the environment that individual operates in. Executive coaches need to understand their coachees' internal worlds as well as the organisational context in which they are required to function (Berger, 2012; Pinkavova 2010; Bachkirova and Cox, 2007; Bachkirova, 2011). It is critical that these two are well-matched. According to Berger and Fitzgerald (2002), an executive may be expected to

possess certain level of mental complexity in order to meet the demands of his/her role, but simply be in over their heads developmentally. Measuring the fit with organisational demand is down to the professional insight of the coach working with the client (Berger and Fitzgerald 2002). Bachkirova points out the dearth in research into the demands of the organisation on the individual, and the link with the latter's developmental stage (Bachkirova, 2011).

Bachkirova and Cox discuss the effects of increased mental complexity in the coach: more attuned to others, articulate, increasingly self-aware and capable of helping others at an earlier stage in their own development (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007). They explain how Kegan's theory is important for coaching because it identifies the difference between informational learning and transformational learning, with only the latter being able to change the form of mind (Mezirow, 1990; 2000; Cranton, 2006). They also stress the role of the coach as the keeper of valuable new insights, and quote Kegan who encourages the professional helper to help the client avoid regression (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007).

Even so, Bachkirova and Cox sound a critical note. They emphasise that Kegan's theory cannot be used to determine someone's worth by looking at their developmental stage, but by looking at the appropriateness of the task. A hierarchical framework is by definition judgemental, despite Kegan's best intentions (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Like Berger and Fitzgerald, Bachkirova and Cox say that "what matters most is the fit between the environment and the individual's capacity for dealing with it" (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007, p.337). Additionally, they ask, is it the role of the coach to ensure developmental growth takes place at all? Berger does not take a very clear position on the question of whether and how Kegan's theory is judgmental of the individual. She gently reminds the coach they are being allowed a 'look in' by the coachee and to be mindful of their own limitations when working with the client (Berger, 2012).

A further point Bachkirova and Cox (2007) make is that they do not believe that in the coaching process the developmental agenda should be made explicit, because this may distract the client from the issue brought to the coaching; undermine self-confidence in the client; and because a shift cannot be forced through effort or desire. Development of the self takes years, and this is by definition at odds with the temporary nature of the coaching relationship. Finding out and 'judging' a client's developmental stage is not the point of coaching (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007).

Writing about developmental coaching specifically, Bachkirova (2011) argues that it can matter that coach and coachee are a good match developmentally, since it is more difficult, she suggests, to recognise a client's developmental stage or position if that stage or position represents unfamiliar territory for coaches themselves. Furthermore, as coaches grow developmentally, so the ability grows to support their clients through providing constructive challenge and influencing. One could question how well a coach at an earlier stage of development compared to their client will be able to offer up these key ingredients in the coaching process (Bachkirova, 2011).

Bachkirova also queries why measurement is required in the first place (Bachkirova, 2011; 2014). She reminds us that developmental theories such as Kegan's were not developed for coaching, but have been adopted by the coaching profession as valuable. This distinction is important: the measurements and assessments that these theories have created may simply be generating more detail than really is necessary for the purpose of coaching. Instead of measuring developmental stage of the client, the coach can listen for developmental themes in the coachee's narrative to discern patterns and connections.

Referring to leadership development programmes, McCauley, Drath, Palus, O'Connor and Baker (2006) point out that actual development may take place (long) after concluding the developmental activity. Coaching can have similarly deferred benefits to the coachee; some of my

past coachees occasionally 'report back' long after concluding our work together to share a new insight or important a-ha!-moment. Also a good coach prepares for coachees to 'go it alone' as part of the coaching intervention (Rogers, 2008; Flaherty, 2010), and avoids creating dependency on the coach. Helping the coachee to tap into what Kegan terms "natural supports of family, peer groups, work roles and love relationships" (Kegan, 1982, p.255) can contribute to maintaining and sustaining development that may have just been set in motion by the coaching intervention.

Goodman (2002) defines increased mental complexity as an increased capacity for broad perspective taking, which he sees as crucially important in leadership effectiveness. Goodman, who co-authored the guide to the SOI, says that for coaches challenge is a crucial component of the holding environment, along with presence, support and managing disequilibrium (Goodman, 2002). Goodman has found a way to make his application of constructive-developmental theory explicit through the development of a coaching model which he calls "Developmental Coaching Dialogue" (Goodman, 2002, p.147). He makes use of theory by for example explicitly referring to the client's "system of thinking and operating" (Goodman, 2002, p.147).

In summary, discussions on the use of the Kegan's framework and the SOI in coaching are centred on the themes of user-friendliness; whether or not, and to what degree to make the use of the theory explicit with clients; and in what sense the theory can be seen to be judging of other people. Longitudinal studies 'proving' the value of the SOI in coaching are non-existent (McCauley *et al.*, 2006). Another gap in the literature for the purpose of this research is that I have not found any studies on the experience of mastering the SOI (whether coaches or other professionals) and none either on the experience of learning to master the SOI as an autodidact learner. The literature does not give any indication what it might mean for the coaching profession if the SOI is applied by autodidact learners. However, the literature does show evidence of the potential benefits of using the SOI and Kegan's constructive-developmental framework in coaching, and those benefits stretch to the coaches themselves too.

Methodology

The nature of the research question made the interpretivist paradigm appropriate: the observed data is contextual and consists of the subjective perceptions of all participants (including the researcher in this instance) who construct and attribute meaning to data they create themselves (Mason, 2002). A qualitative approach was sought to allow rich data to emerge from a small sample of participants. It is interesting to note that the SOI is often used to generate quantitative data, for example in leadership studies (McCauley, Drath, Palus, O'Connor and Baker, 2006), but that qualitative studies into the use of the SOI are less common (Berger, 2012).

An autobiographical heuristic inquiry approach was chosen for this research because it allows researchers to share their personal journey alongside insights from participants (Moustakas, 1990). The heuristic methodology enables the researcher to follow the twists and turns of the research as it progresses, which lends itself well to the exploratory nature of this particular study. Taking the primary researcher as the starting point is one of the discerning features of the method; their personal fascination triggers and leads the research.

The term 'heuristic inquiry' is widely attributed to Clark Moustakas, who published the seminal *Heuristic Inquiry. Design, Methodology and Applications* in 1990. In fact, the term 'heuristic' was coined by the Hungarian philosopher Michael Polanyi, whose body of work heavily influenced Moustakas' work (Hiles, 2001). It is derived from the Greek word 'heuriskein', which means 'to find' or 'to discover'. Moustakas explains the heuristic method as "a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for

further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process" (Moustakas, 1990, p.9).

Eight volunteers were recruited from a single organisation (purposive sampling) to participate in two interviews each. Participants' insights contributed to the research as it developed, helping to interpret and validate outcomes. It is this active involvement of all participants in the research process which sets the heuristic methodology apart from other methodologies, most notably phenomenological approaches, which require the researcher to remain an external observer instead of an active research participant (Hiles, 2001; 2002; Etherington, 2004).

Of the eight volunteers three were practising coaches. By selecting coaches as well as coachees (past or future) it was hoped a wider range of perspectives on the experience would lead to richer data. See table 2 for a profile of the sample.

Coachees	Age and gender	Managerial level	Coaching status
Bill	34, male	Mid-level	'Coaching-on-the-job'
Ted	30, male	Junior level	'Coaching-on-the-job'
Sally	50s, female	Senior level	Pre-coaching
Alex	48, female	Senior level	Pre-coaching
Lewis	46, male	Mid-level	Post coaching
Coaches	Age and gender	Coach type	Internal/external
Diane	43, female	Executive coach	External coach
Emma	43, female	Lead coach; supervisor	Internal coach
Andy	50, male	Developmental coach	Internal coach

Table 2: Research participants

All 16 interviews took place face-to-face, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each participant's ASOI and semi-structured follow-up interview were scheduled a minimum of five days and up to three weeks apart to allow for transcription, coding and analysis of the ASOI. The delay between both interviews also allowed for reflection on the experience by interviewer and participant.

In addition to interview data, observations were recorded in my field note book during and immediately following the interviews, while I also kept a separate reflection journal to collect thoughts, questions and insights throughout the entire process of studying the SOI through to writing up findings. All data was gathered in a spreadsheet and coded. Thematic analysis took place over a period of two weeks to allow for checking data and validating themes with participants – another discerning feature of the heuristic inquiry.

Findings

Thematic analysis of all data resulted in the following eight themes.

1. Participants experienced the ASOI as enjoyable and safe

Consistent with the literature, each of the eight participants fed back after the interview that the experience had been enjoyable and interesting. Although this might seem inherent to the SOI in the

eyes of seasoned SOI practitioners such as Berger and Atkins (2009), in this case it is not an insignificant outcome, as neither interviewer nor participant knew what to expect. Participants identified a number of contributing factors: the fact that all participants already knew me prior to the research; my professional experience as a coach; and their trust in me having a decent enough grasp of the SOI to conduct a safe ASOI. Sally, who during her ASOI explored how she doesn't easily talk about herself, summarised her experience of the ASOI thus:

> It was really useful to have a word with myself. [...] It's a lot more comfortable than I thought it would be, I don't know why thought it wouldn't be. [...] The interview didn't trigger anything, there wasn't anything overly difficult, sensitive or traumatic about any of it that I was carrying, it was more, 'actually on reflection that word means this. Ooh isn't that interesting, that has brought *that* to the fore!

The use of the prompt cards proved a stand-out feature of the experience and drew several observations from participants. Lewis found the cards reassuring: "The first thing that worked in my favour, when you put the cards down, I was struck by how much control I had over the interview". However, the words on the cards had the potential to distract the interviewer, as illustrated by Diane's observation: "Although it is the coachee who picks the card, there is something about the rationale of why they chose that card, which I would absolutely pick out". This is an important point, as the words on the cards are intended as a conversation opener, but unlike a tool such as eMotive Cards they are not the focus of the conversation (Duffell and Lawton-Smith, 2014).

2. Parallels with coaching and coaching conversations

Participants identified some differences and similarities between the ASOI and coaching. Coach Andy saw the ASOI as a developmental coaching session. Coach Diane said she "felt the same kind of curiosity from you that I expect from a coach in a coaching session"; two other participants each also remarked how easy it was to open up and just talk. Bill and Ted, both used to 'coaching-on-the-job', mentioned the lack of a solutions focus in the ASOI, in contrast to the coaching they are accustomed to. Bill described experiencing the questions as "coming from the left-field". However, coach Emma also saw a distinct difference with coaching in organisations: "coaching is more boundaried: there are pre-set limits on the agenda". Lewis agreed that had been his experience and added that in his view "the difference may be in the level of challenge", with coaching having been more challenging in Lewis's view.

3. Relevance of the ASOI to coaching from the participants' perspective

The coachees in the sample had either recently engaged in coaching (Bill, Ted and Lewis), or were about to start working with a coach (Sally and Alex). The study was interested in finding out from participants how the ASOI might support the coach-coachee relationship as well as inform the process itself.

Coachees described how the ASOI had influenced their perception of coaching. Ted stated that the ASOI broadened his definition of coaching: "What I found very interesting about this was the emphasis on how I felt and reacted as a person, rather than what I did necessarily. [...] my definition of coaching to that point had been very outcome focused". Sally remarked that doing the ASOI before embarking on coaching made her realise that "actually the coaching sessions could be far more useful than I perhaps thought it might have been before. [...] I might want to do a bit of preparation before I start."

The coaches responded from their role as coach when asked about the relevance of the ASOI in coaching. Diane observed that "People who are not used to self-awareness will find this very insightful". For Andy, who coaches young people, the cards provided an opening for the coachee:

"For a man for example it can be quite difficult to say, 'I am really hurt by that'. But if there is a card on the table, you can say, I really relate to that"

4. Timing the ASOI and contracting

The findings suggest that although doing the ASOI at the start of a coaching relationship would give the coach a lot to work with, some coachees might prefer to get used to their coach first. As Lewis observed: "a lot of people will find it possibly a bit scary, particularly if you started off with this. [...] I think for me it worked really well because I got to know you through the coaching." For some people the ASOI might be too reminiscent of counselling; the emotive words on the cards might give this impression. This would then need redressing by the coach. Yet the findings also seem to support Berger and Atkins' view that the SOI/ASOI can be valuable in building the coaching relationship early on in the intervention (Berger and Atkins, 2009). For Andy, when "somebody is coming to the coaching with a specific thing, having some prompts is quite a safe thing to be using as opposed to just feeling like you have got to talk".

Furthermore, the findings suggest that using the ASOI late or even at the end of the coaching intervention could have some merit, but that this depends on the individual concerned. For Lewis the ASOI seemed to bring together and consolidate key insights gained through coaching: "what I have got out of it is, it has given me a bit of perspective [...]. It might be like an option to take coaching a stage further. Advanced coaching, if you like!"

The crucial importance of contracting clearly and with integrity before embarking on the ASOI became very clear. For two of the participants finding out the true extent of the analysis of the ASOI at the feedback interview came as a bit of a shock. This creates a dilemma for the coach: telling the coachee too little about the analytical nature of the ASOI would be akin to misleading them, while telling them too much would set the scene beforehand in such a way that it is likely to influence the way the interview unfolds. It is telling that Berger warns that agreeing a feedback session with the coachee beforehand can alter the results (Berger, 2009), as evidenced by Alex's observation that had she had more insight into the 'technique' of the ASOI "I might want to manipulate it!"

5.Impact on the coaching relationship

The findings from this research are in line with Buckle's, who found in her study on the use of psychometrics in coaching that the critical factor in the successful application of such tests is the coach-coachee relationship. Often psychometrics are introduced early on in the relationship. One way of ensuring the balance remains equal is by coaches sharing their own profile with the coachee and to contract on this beforehand. This can contribute to building the relationship (Buckle, 2012).

While this can be done relatively easily and openly with an assessment such as the MBTI, sharing SOI/ASOI results is less straightforward. To begin with, the coachee would need a reasonable grasp of constructive-developmental theory and Kegan's Orders of Mind framework, neither of which lends itself to a reasonably quick introduction – a prerequisite when the coach is working against the clock. The amount of information could also be too much, and difficult to interpret for the coachee. Perhaps even more pertinent is the question of how the coaching relationship is affected when/if the coach reveals his/her own stage or position as more or less developed compared to the coachee's: it could create distance between coach and coachee, and the confidence of both could be undermined.

One of my participants reminded me to be mindful of the power balance: the ASOI could lead some coachees to believe that through its analytical properties, the coach could be seen as making discoveries for them, as opposed to facilitating the coachee's own journey towards discovery. In such a scenario, the ASOI would sit very uneasily alongside a coachee's agenda (Peltier, 2010). In Diane's words, the ASOI "needs to be coachee-led".

6.Agenda setting in organisational context

In common with other assessment tools, the ASOI could contribute to setting the agenda at the start of the intervention. However, this becomes less clear-cut when there is an organisational agenda and three-way coaching is part of the process. The organisational context in which the coaching takes place does determine in part the coaching agenda (Peltier, 2010; O'Neill, 2007; Zeus and Skiffington, 2000).

Not all organisations are ready to embrace developmental coaching, preferring to use coaching as a tool to enhance individual performance instead (Hunt and Weintraub, 2007; Stelter, 2014). Although developmental coaching can still take place even if the organisational agenda is a more performance-oriented one, in my experience it is the coachee who often feels that developmental coaching translates into more personal benefits more than into organisational ones. Feelings of guilt about spending time paid for by their employer on themselves usually stop them from fully utilising the opportunity. However, Emma, who supervises a large internal coaching network, observed: "an agenda is negotiable with a coach and using the [ASOI] cards does not mean everything that could come up actually goes on the agenda too".

7. Ethics

Prior to the ASOI I had carefully avoided giving too much detail about the 'inner workings' of the interview, so as not to influence the experience beforehand (Berger and Atkins, 2009; Berger, 2010) while still explaining the purpose of the ASOI as aimed at gaining insight into the participant's meaning-making structure.

Two participants in particular were genuinely taken aback in the feedback interview when I explained how I had structured the ASOI and revealed the amount of hypothesising and probing that had been going on. Experienced coach Diane, who had felt during the ASOI itself that it had been completely non-directive, changed her view on this entirely:

> "there are moments when there are legitimate reasons for the coach leading. I guess it is only now that I realise that it is a directive technique. I think I now understand the importance of feedback, based on the interview, because this is quite a reflective process. Without the feedback I think it would be quite unethical, because this is a diagnostic".

What Diane pointed out was that the SOI/ASOI, conducted outside the ethical boundaries of academic research needs to be framed by very clear and upfront contracting with the interviewee. This suggests that the information I had provided her prior to the ASOI would not be sufficient to use in a coaching context. An experienced practitioner of several psychometric assessments herself, she was drawing my attention to the judgement that is inherent in any diagnostic or psychometric.

The 'duty of care' of the coach during and after the ASOI is a very clear theme across the research data. While I am reassured that none of my participants suffered any ill-effects in participating, and while all enjoyed the experience, these ASOIs took place between two people who knew and trusted each other already, and for the purpose of research. Coaches wishing to employ the ASOI in their coaching practice need to take the above limitation into consideration.

8. Reflections on learning to conduct the SOI autodidactically

As predicted by Berger and Atkins, learning the SOI makes significant demands on the learner: the process is intensive and arduous (Berger and Atkins, 2009). This is not only because the theory the SOI is based on is complex, and by definition requires the SOI/ASOI interviewer to be at such a developmental level as to be able to make sense of and recognise stages and the nuances of the

midzone positions. Learning to understand and apply Kegan's theory also takes discipline: giving up on those aspects of the theory which are hard to grasp is not an option, if only for ethical reasons. A SOI/ASOI practitioner cannot truly claim to understand the measure if the theory it is based on is still partially obscured from their own understanding, and so it was with some relief that I noted Berger and Fitzgerald's observation that our language is simply lacking when it comes to describing the world of the Fifth Order of Mind (Berger and Fitzgerald, 2002). The process taught me that the learner will undoubtedly run into the limits of their own meaning-making in the process of mastering the SOI/ASOI.

A further demand is that the SOI/ASOI practitioner will one day be faced with an interviewee who they suspect is at a more developed stage than the interviewer themselves. There is great scope for self-deception on the part of the interviewer in this respect, because we all build on our previous stage, and will therefore provide evidence of previous structures being present (Kegan, 1982; Berger, 2012). An interviewer could lack the means to probe beyond their own developmental order, simply because the situation asks them to 'punch above their weight', leading to them collecting evidence on a more familiar, preceding stage instead. It should be borne in mind that the validity of SOI/ASOI findings depend on the skill, experience, expertise and form of mind of the interviewer conducting the interview. Interviewers can have bad days or project their own blind spots onto the assessments.

A third learning theme concerns the difference between the SOI/ASOI and coaching: the SOI/ASOI is a measure, an almost clinical procedure which needs interviewers to suspend their helpfulness and empathy (Berger, 2010) in order to collect information about the individual. In the case of coaching, this information is for later use, this time in an explicitly helpful context. Put in another way, the ASOI is an investment into the coaching future of the client.

An important question was whether my participants felt this particular interview could or should only be conducted by a fully trained SOI practitioner. The general view was that with the technique and psychological insight, training would not be necessary for it to be a valuable experience for the coachee. The outlay and potential gains did not add up, and they pointed out that coaches already are trained professional helpers, who are skilled in observing and providing constructive feedback. Even after explaining the extent of the assessment and analysis that had taken place during and after the interview two participants made a point to explicitly reiterate having felt safe in the hands of an experienced coach.

I put the 'to train or not to train' question to Robert Kegan himself during a short exchange after a public lecture in May 2013. Referring to Berger's work (2012) Kegan responded that it is encouraging that its potential is now being recognised beyond the academic arena. He also pointed out that there is a difference between using the SOI for academic research, where reliability of scores matters when working with samples designed to provide insights that can be generalised, and using the SOI on an individual basis with coachees (Kegan, 2013b).

Feedback and more practice is crucial, and a potential way to get both is by joining forces with a fellow ASOI or SOI practitioner, and score each other's interviews. Additionally, during my research I also noticed I needed to keep revisiting the theory itself to feel in good enough shape to conduct the interviews, and to analyse and score them afterwards. Being an ASOI practitioner will require continuous practice and study.

A final learning point worth mentioning is about giving feedback on the analysis, especially since the quality of the ASOIs was variable across participants. Of course, all participants were aware of my learner status, and were willing to forgive me where I could not be more specific about the result of their ASOI: all but one participant wanted to hear more about their ASOI 'score'. It was important to gauge how much detail each participant actually wanted in the first place. After all, they

were volunteering, and we had a different contract in place compared to what we might have if the ASOI had been done in a coaching context. I settled on highlighting the 'safe' bits from the interview which I hoped each of my participants could relate to in the context of the theory, and use this as a springboard to tell them as much as I was able to about their growth edge. Judging by their response to this, the approach worked well.

A proposed model to integrate the ASOI into the coaching process

The findings of this study support our collective view that the developmental potential of the ASOI is of great value to coaching practice: independent of each other, all participants reflected positively on this point. Taking into account the limitations of the ASOI described above, I propose that the ASOI could serve as a blank canvas for the coach and coachee to work on early in a coaching relationship, rather than use the ASOI as a measurement or an assessment with the aim of finding an as accurate as possible score for the interviewee. The ASOI can have several functions in this early stage: building the coach-coachee relationship; agenda setting; identifying developmental needs to be further discussed and agreed as part of the agenda; setting the pace and the tone of the coaching. It can be an opportunity to consolidate new insights and harness what Kegan refers to as "natural support" (Kegan, 1982, p.255) which can be found in the coachee's relationships. Figure 1 summarises how coaches can integrate the ASOI into the coaching process.

Figure 1: Integrating the ASOI into the coaching process

However, conducting a 'full' ASOI, including recording, transcribing, analysing and feeding back may not always be the best option because of time and budgetary pressures, or because the thought of having the conversation recorded and analysed is an uncomfortable one for the coachee. A way to benefit from the ASOI could be by conducting a 'live' ASOI: while engaged in the interview, the coach analyses the interview in the moment. While this could be distracting it could also help the coach to remain focused on the 'technical' listening the ASOI requires.

Taking this approach requires the coach to contract clearly on what is happening in the session, and how the interview is different from a 'regular' coaching session. A real benefit of this approach is that the feedback session can follow immediately after its conclusion, but can also be conducted at a next scheduled session: there is a choice for a coachee. Figure 2 shows an analysis sheet for the 'live' ASOI approach based on the ASOI Analysis Process Formulation Sheet.

'Big Five'	Range of hypotheses	Notes
Key themes likely to lead to structure being identified	Socialised Self-Authoring Self-Transforming	What is the structural evidence? What other stage could it be? What is the most likely stage?
Authority		
Conflict		
Perspective-taking		
Responsibility		
Assumptions		

Figure 2: Analysis sheet for the 'live' ASOI approach

This approach allows the coach and coachee to 'bookend' the coaching by revisiting the ASOI and picking up the earlier themes. It can also help to explore opportunities for the coachee to benefit from the natural support in their environment. The ASOI becomes a tool to evaluate the coaching and provide the coachee with some inspiration to continue learning and feel supported after the coaching intervention comes to an end.

Conclusion

Ethical considerations of using the ASOI are related to contracting, timing and positioning the interview as a distinct component of the coaching intervention and process. Explaining clearly what the benefits of engaging with the ASOI are to the coachee makes sharing at least some of constructive-developmental theory a necessity. This enables the coachee to make an informed decision whether or not this approach is the right one for them.

Conducting an ASOI in an organisational context could be extremely valuable when used in developmental coaching. However, it may not always be appropriate. The scope of the ASOI should be considered: it is very likely to venture away from work situations and into personal and family life, something perhaps not all coachees who come to coaching in organisational context would expect or welcome. Furthermore, coachees are invited into a reflective space which may have an impact on their mood immediately afterwards, and perhaps even longer. While in this research participants experienced the ASOI as a very positive conversation, it is not unthinkable that this will not always be the case. Finally, the investment needed from the coach in order to conduct a SOI/ASOI coupled with the availability of a wide range of well-known assessment tools available to the organisation, it seems unlikely that it will become a mainstream tool anytime soon.

In my view it is important for the coach to have tools and methods at their disposal to help their professional judgement and to uphold standards in their practice. At the same time there is an inherent danger in creating distance between coach and coachee by becoming the 'expert' in the relationship, and above all, passing judgment on the coachee while using an approach such as the SOI. This study

aimed to explore that tension in the context of my own practice, and in doing so hoped to add some insights of value to the profession as a whole.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

A number of limiting factors can be discerned. My pre-existing relationship with all participants ensured there already was a degree of trust in place before the interviews took place. This is not representative of a coaching situation. The sample was chosen from a single organisation, with all nine researchers sharing the same organisational culture and context, which influenced certain perceptions and my questions during the ASOI and feedback interviews. The variable quality of the interviews and subsequent feedback would be a limiting factor but for the fact that this concerned a heuristic enquiry – these differences were in fact important sources of data and new insights.

Bluckert (2007) writes that all coaches should be proficient in one or more assessment method, be it MBTI or 360 or a recognised tool which works for them and their clients (Bluckert, 2007). The nature and validity of the ASOI as a psychometric assessment was not investigated in depth by this study. A collaborative study involving a greater number of interview participants and ASOI 'practitioners' could lead to more insight into this question. Following the experience of coaches learning the SOI autodidactically as a group could be of interest on its own, and could contribute to model development.

It will also be interesting to repeat this research using participants who do not know the coach prior to the ASOI and find out whether and how the ASOI is perceived differently. This may shed more light on the question how early in the coaching intervention the ASOI can be conducted.

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