Academic Paper

How do coaches work with clients showing signs of burnout?

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Abstract

This paper explores approaches coaches are undertaking with 'burnout' clients and uses constructivist grounded theory to help address a paucity of coaching related literature. Analysis of interviews with six coaches, with a range of different qualifications, identified categories which were strengthened with other academic literature. The findings emphasise how supervision is central to the 'burnout' self-care of the coach and client. In addition, the way in which coaches are tailoring the coaching contract as they diagnose burnout is incorporated. It is proposed that a coaching approach to burnout is respectful of professional boundaries and can complement counselling and/or psychotherapy.

Introduction

In the UK, it has been reported that 828,000 workers suffered from work related stress, depression or anxiety prior to the first Coronavirus lockdown in March 2020 (HSE, 2020). The pandemic has impacted mental health as demonstrated by Americans reporting their lowest self-evaluation of their mental health since the Gallup survey commenced (Gallup, 2020). In England, statistics indicate one in six people are reporting that they are experiencing anxiety and/or depression in any given week, although only one in eight of those are pursuing treatment (MIND, 2020).

Bachkirova and Baker (2019) argue that identifying mental health issues is challenging even for experienced medical practitioners. This provides an ethical dilemma within coaching and highlights respect for professional boundaries. In addition, since the availability of workplace coaching is growing it also raises the question of whether coaching can contribute to or positively impact the mental health statistics.

In May 2019, burnout was included in the eleventh revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon. It is not classified as a medical condition and

refers specifically to an occupational context. It is characterised by three dimensions including feelings of exhaustion, negativity and reduced professional efficacy (WHO, 2019). The World Health Organisation (WHO) definition for burnout is informed by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) which is validated internationally, supporting 88% of burnout research publications (Mind Garden, 2019). It is argued that burnout is experienced because of prolonged exposure to work related stress, although it is not stress itself, and precipitates depression and anxiety conditions (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001). This suggests that if a coaching client could come into an awareness of their potential for burnout, then they may address a level of depression or anxiety. However, there is a paucity of academic coaching literature on methods to approach burnout. This raises the question, which was central to this research study, how do experienced coaches identify and work with clients showing signs of burnout as defined by the WHO?

The following sections outline how a constructivist grounded theory approach was used with an interpretivist paradigm to explore the research question. Six participants based in Ireland and the UK were interviewed. The findings from the participants' contributions were examined and discussed with reference to academic literature. A representative framework was developed to provide insights into how coaches identify and work with clients showing signs of burnout, with a view to informing coaching practice.

Methodology

The study maintains a relativist position where it is recognised that there are multiple subjective constructed realities within both the research interviews and coaching sessions. These are influenced by the variety of contributors' own past conditioning, environment and experiences (Ponterotto, 2005). Ethical decision-making and professional boundary respect are at the core of every interaction. Therefore, an epistemological position of subjectivism was adopted in acknowledgement of the author's coaching experience and collaboration with research participants, to construct a theory where values are acknowledged and evident to all (Mills, Bonner and Francis, 2006; Charmaz, 2017).

The 'social reality' within ethical decision-making in coaching sessions is generated from the 'perceptions and consequent actions of the social actors' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019 p.137). Therefore, there are many reality constructs within the context of the coaching environment attributable to every client and coach interaction, creating multiple realities each of which is unique (Mills et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2019). This study adhered to an interpretivist method to glean how experienced coaches are making ethical decisions in proceeding with burnout clients. The study therefore aspired to generate a rich robust understanding of the researcher's interpretation of this exchange within the coaching setting.

The grounded theory methodology is a good fit for this research paradigm and provides a structured approach to interpret and explore the manner in which coaches interpret burnout and how that informs their practical application in a coaching environment. The aim of the study was to generate a theoretical model that contributed knowledge to the coaching profession (Willig, 2008 and Charmaz, 2014).

Data collection

A pilot interview confirmed that interview questions would not create an adverse reaction with participants and were suitable for use in data collection (Ciuk and Latusek, 2018). This method informed a purposive sampling approach to recruitment of participants who had relevant experience in this field. An opportunity was identified to triangulate across coaching background and approaches namely those with only a coaching background, those with a complementary psychology or counselling qualification, and coaching supervisors were sourced to provide a

diversity of experience and perspective for this research. The WHO places the definition of burnout in a workplace context. Consequently, potential research participants were sought via internet searches for practicing career coaches.

LinkedIn was chosen as a way of approaching professional coaches and to validate the research participants' qualifications. Table I summarises the experience of the participants who met the criteria and engaged in this study.

Table I: Participant Profiles

Experience		Pilot Interview	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Zara	Ava	Naomi	Isabella	Mark	Rachel	Emma
Years of experience in coaching:		2	3.5	10	25	9	3.5	21
Years of experience in coaching supervision:		0	0	3	5.5	0	0	11
Years of experience delivering coach training:		0	0	0	16	7	0	10
Additional experience	Supervision	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
	Counselling	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
	Psychology	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Client reach:	Ireland	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	UK	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
	Internationally	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

Each interview focused on the participant's interpretation of the WHO burnout definition and their experience with clients where burnout was a possible issue. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using the 'Otter' transcription platform. The participants were offered an opportunity to review the transcript prior to proceeding with initial coding.

The initial coding process was performed using Microsoft Excel since this package complements the coding process requirements. Each line was coded, reflecting on the outcomes from the data and using 'gerunds' to represent the activity. The coding procedure connected the interview data to the emergent theory to answer the research question. (Holton 2007, Charmaz, 2014; Saunders et al. 2019).

Memos were utilised to capture interpretations of the data and ideas for exploring in follow-up interviews (Polkinghorne, 2005). This afforded the opportunity for abstract reflection, documentation of thoughts from constant comparison of similar codes and category consideration (Lempert, 2007; Charmaz, 2014). Furthermore, as Berger (2015) suggests, no research is free of biases from the researcher and therefore a research journal was maintained, to help provide balance throughout the research.

Data analysis

Constant comparison procedures were utilised to group codes by similarity and then analysed in the way they differed (Ryan and Bernard, 2003; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Frequent initial codes and those that had greater significance were identified as focused codes. Focused codes were used for initial categories to determine if they were suitably representative of the iterative emerging framework (Charmaz, 2014).

Bryant (2009) describes theoretical sensitivity as the ability to conceptualise from the analysis of the data. This method enabled generation of descriptive codes and categories that were representative of the empirical indicators (Charmaz, 2014). The identification of core categories prompted a readiness for theoretical sampling. Two additional experienced coaches were targeted to contribute to 'litmus testing' of the emerging theory (Morse, 2007).

Engagement with academic literature connected emerging categories to academic discussion and arguments (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Holton, 2007). Conscious awareness was enhanced by

incorporating the current literature conversations into memos and enriching theory development in a burnout coaching context (Lempert, 2007) further strengthening the final category identification (Charmaz, 2014). Consequently, the literature review is incorporated with the interview findings in the discussion section. This is representative in the way this research study was approached and completed.

Theoretical saturation is identified when there were no new codes or categories generated from coding and constant comparison thus ending data gathering (Holton, 2007). Thus categories were saturated when there were no new theoretical insights from the abstract conceptualisation techniques, and satisfactory core theoretical categories were achieved. This contributed to the output of this research, in providing a framework to illuminate how coaches identify and work with clients showing signs of burnout.

Rigour and reflexivity

Charmaz (2014) argues that grounded theorists seldom embrace validity and reliability criteria where the priority is focused on the theoretical usefulness of the study as opposed to meticulous accuracy. Nevertheless, an approach was used which positioned the researcher to provide an explanation and meaning of the practical applications to coaching in the field of burnout (Mills et al., 2006). The researcher aspired to generate a theory that grabs the reader's attention (Bryant, 2009) whilst contributing transferable knowledge that they can employ in their practice and stand up to tests of validity (Strübing, 2007; Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings and De Eyto, 2018).

Ethical considerations

Prior to undertaking this study, approval was sought through the researcher's academic supervisor and the University Research Ethics Committee. Research participants were advised that if they had concerns about how the study has been conducted, they could contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee.

Documented consent was sought from research participants and detailed within a research participant information sheet, a privacy notice, that explained how the data was collected and analysed. Permission was requested prior to interview to audio-record for the purpose of completing a transcript of the interview to enable coding and to generate categories. All information collected was kept strictly confidential and password protected. Pseudonyms were used to protect all identities.

Findings

The experience of the six research participants totalled 72 years of coaching practice; 19.5 years of supervision practice and 33 years of training other coaches. The findings suggest that the practical approaches used were not linear, but rather formed an interdependent synergy of activities as illustrated in Figure 1. Three key themes were identified where coaches are possibly 'self-caring for all through supervision' so that they may be prepared for 'tailoring the coaching contract' when perhaps faced with 'diagnosing burnout' with a client.

Figure 1: Map of interview findings
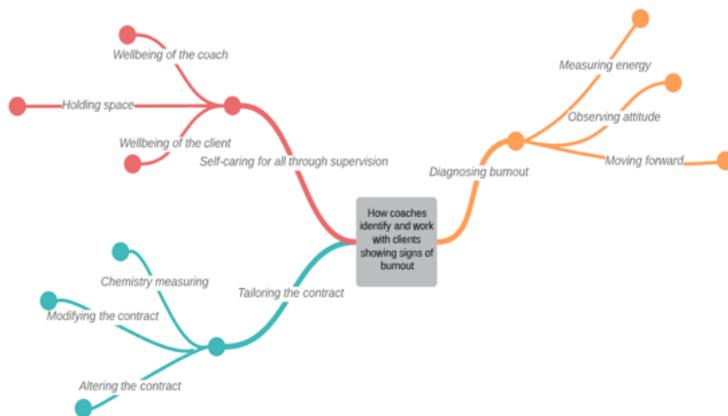
i) Self-caring for all through supervision

The participants stated that supervision facilitates a coach's reflective practice to further understand burnout, where the perception is that it is an act of self-care for the 'wellbeing of the coach'. The participants also regarded this as an opportunity to experience the manner in which the supervisors facilitate a 'holding space', so that they can provide a similar experience for their own clients. Supervision is the opportunity to highlight vigilance against stepping into a rescuer role and challenge their client coaching to remain within ethical boundaries for the 'wellbeing of the client'.

Wellbeing of the coach

The research participants unanimously agreed that a clear understanding of the concept of burnout is a pre-requisite. They also concurred that supervision is a resource that supports and challenges coaches in their own personal self-care and their ethical practice. The general consensus was summarised in a belief that a coach needs to 'have supervisor support before you go forward to understand the different indicators of burnout and what they look like' (Naomi) and to empower the coach to know when to refer because 'referrals are going to be needed in quite a large number of cases' (Emma).

The participants expressed awareness of the manner in which burnout may appear differently across clients and therefore there was a need to 'equip yourself with all the resources that you need to manage yourself' (Mark). A 'supervisor who knows a bit more' (Isabella) can assist the coach to be prepared for the unexpected.

There was evidence where the participants experienced being like 'the knight in shining armour' (Emma) and getting caught up in the energy of rescuing the clients. The participants suggested supervision as the place to reflect on such encounters to assess the coaches quality of practice, both their own and client's wellbeing whilst remaining within coaching boundaries.

Holding space

Participants discussed how the holding space created in the coaching relationship benefits the client in moving forward. There is a fine balance between 'staying in a safe or a comfortable space' (Mark) with the client to monitor their capacity to self-resource or self-regulate and 'more of a sense than it is a hard line' (Naomi) and is an area of exploration within supervision.

This is created for the client, 'constantly working in the coaching space" (Isabella) using to support their clients so that they 'can express their emotions' (Emma). Furthermore, it is suggested that

coaching can complement therapy: 'It doesn't necessarily mean coaching has to stop; it just means that they're doing that work while we're doing our work together' (Emma).

Wellbeing of the client

The participants expressed concern for the wellbeing of potentially impacted clients from burnout by the manner in which client's present themselves. In addition, the participants noticed burnout across life-coaching (Ava); career coaching (Naomi and Mark); executive coaching (Isabella and Emma) and mental health (Rachel) contexts.

The participants reported the manner in which clients are impacted by burnout where there are challenges for clients to understand 'what wellness means to them' (Ava) and generally when clients 'take too much on, their self-care is weaker, the self-worth is weaker' (Rachel).

As burnout is defined within a workplace context there is likely an involvement of a sponsor for the client's coaching. In such instances, it presents a challenge where burnout is identified for the client as a theme it is a 'very difficult thing to manage well without breaking confidentiality, and that is also for supervision' (Emma). The participants shared a consensus for the client's wellbeing which was summarised as 'do no harm' (Naomi).

ii) Tailoring the contract

The participants suggest ways in which they appear to look for indicators from the initial 'chemistry measuring' meeting. There is a sense that they are 'modifying the contract' throughout the coaching relationship to check in on the level of support and challenge the client requests. Some of the participants suggested contracting can possibly move a client forward when burnout is a theme. The participants thought that the coach may ultimately finish up 'altering the contract' if referral is a possible way forward to maintain professional boundaries.

Chemistry measuring

Chemistry introduction meetings are the first opportunity to source underlying issues for a client and to get familiarised with the client's requirements in advance of coaching. Thereby affording the opportunity to check that the client's needs and/or current medical condition is within the coach's boundaries. A notable consensus is that 'very few come for work life balance who have burnout'(Naomi).

A primary approach is to explore what may be behind the client's needs through questioning: 'I gather two things. I ask why now? and I ask what do you want to be different? If burnout is there, there is a difference' (Naomi).

A secondary approach suggested another step in the process with a tailored questionnaire for the potential client addressing any flags or concerns from the initial chemistry introduction. 'Is there something I need to be more aware of? I ask questions like how do you manage your emotions, and have you ever felt stressed?' (Isabella).

Modifying the contract

There was consensus that as the coaching relationship evolves that possible burnout may surface as a real issue. The participants suggested re-contracting as a means to check in with the client on what level of support and challenge they require. Coaches may suspect 'a few niggles' (Isabella) that burnout may be an issue from the chemistry meeting, however generally coaches 'have no idea that it's burnout' (Mark) that the client is experiencing.

In such instances participants expressed checking with the client to identify the level of support and challenge that was previously agreed, similar to the way a cook strives to 'perfect the recipe for a cake' (Mark), in order to move forward with the client in the interest of both the client's and coach's wellbeing. Thereby allowing the client to 'first of all, feel safe and then, secondly, understand it and then move forward' (Mark). Fundamental to operating in this space is the working knowledge and appreciation of the essence of burnout. This is necessary for establishing boundaries 'before you actually burn yourself out from coaching, and it is knowing that and identifying that in clients as well' (Ava).

Altering the contract

There was agreement across the participants that knowing their own boundaries was important in 'what they can deal with and then when they can't, that they refer' (Mark). Occasions will arise when questioning the client becomes necessary to establish their suitability to continue with coaching. Sometimes a 'client is so deeply in burnout they have not got a clue, then the coach needs to refer out' (Isabella).

It is beneficial to prepare for referral discussions in advance of a session to be in a position to 'offer this service' (Rachel) in order to have supportive discussions to work through this with the clients and 'invite the client to make a choice' (Naomi). It is favourable to have worked through referral approaches in contracting to assist clients: 'As we contract it for at the beginning of the relationship I may well have to go and talk to your HR department because I'm really worried that you are not feeling as you should' (Emma).

iii) Diagnosing burnout

The participants suggested ways in which they appear to diagnose burnout by 'measuring energy' and/or 'observing the attitude' of the client to ensure that the client is capable of 'moving forward' in the coaching relationship. The findings suggest that this diagnosis of the client is required to assess their capacity for coaching and whether referral is required.

Measuring energy

There was a unanimous view across the research participants that a client's energy levels in a coaching session influence their ethical decision-making. However, they experienced challenges in identifying energy level issues possibly attributable to burnout. A client may mask burnout as an issue from the coach initially and present with something 'more socially acceptable, or something that the individual feels more comfortable identifying' (Naomi). Some clients have the ability whilst being 'so exhausted but just continue doing the job they're doing' (Emma). Burnout can present itself in different forms not only 'for different people, but in different sectors as well' (Rachel). In extreme cases where the client's energy is compared to a 'flatline' (Ava) there is a potential for inducing transference impacting the comfort zone of the coach.

The importance of the client's language assists the evaluation of the energy levels, 'the extent to which they use metaphors' (Naomi) such as 'spent; there's nothing left' (Rachel) or 'I feel that I can't breathe, I can't come up for air' (Ava). Such red flags may present as an indicator for the suitability of coaching and the way in which energy can be a cause of concern. Thereby prompting the coach to contemplate if their client is even ready for coaching since the 'energy is not there to engage in' (Isabella). The participants reported how scaling is useful in this subcategory to empower the client to self-evaluate to give their energy levels 'a level or rating' (Mark) to see 'how a client is' (Rachel) to avoid clients from leaving with 'a solution but not with the energy' (Naomi) to move forward.

Observing attitude

There was consensus across the research participants that a client's attitude towards a coaching approach influences their ethical decision-making. There is a need for the coach to 'identify when somebody is withdrawn' (Ava) or if the client is 'finding it hard to concentrate' (Emma) or 'not engaging anymore' (Isabella) in the holding space.

The participants described a sense of helplessness as a consequence of burnout where the client may feel 'they can't do anything' (Emma) or 'expresses either consciously or unconsciously a lack of hope' (Naomi). In such instances the coach needs to 'explore as much as you can'' (Rachel) what is going on to identify if the client is 'distancing themselves' (Isabella) further in coaching and prompting a referral discussion.

Moving forward

The research participants conveyed a sense of assessing the client's ability to move forward in the coaching process. Coaching can empower a client with burnout to recognise whether coaching is even appropriate: 'If a person can engage with us and move forward positively, there's a good chance that they're in the right space' Isabella.

A client with burnout may experience limitations to moving forward and may need support. If a client is not able to move forward it is the responsibility of the coach 'to call that out' (Mark) so that any blocks maybe explored, and a way forward identified. Where there is no change it flags to the coach 'something is going on here' (Rachel). If the client's scaling response remains stagnant and the client remains in a state of 'helplessness' (Emma) then this client requires referral.

Discussion

This discussion is a synthesis of the interview findings and literature review to advance theoretical sensitivity and strengthen the final categories. The support of the academic literature to the participants contribution of experience produces a theoretical framework for working with the WHO definition of burnout as a theme that can inform coaching practice.

Self-caring for all through supervision

It is the belief of the participants that it is imperative for a coach to comprehend and recognise all aspects of burnout as a pre-requisite for their own self-care in advance of working with burnout clients. Fundamentally, a coach is expected to be energised, in a positive state of mind and focused on their client for effective coaching (Bachkirova, 2016). This resonates with the WHO definition of burnout dimensions. Reflective practice is fundamental for effective coaching for the benefit of the client and the coach's wellbeing (Watts, Cavett and Dudney, 2016). To that end Bachkirova (2016) suggests that coaches use a metaphor to describe what instrument they are to reflect upon their self-care app roach, which in turn keeps their coaching 'instrument' in quality working order.

The study reported the participants perspective of creating an appropriate holding space to encourage the client to self-resource and self-regulate, which in turn can lead to empowerment for the client to move forward. The benefits for possible burnout clients is supported in coaching academic literature where Spinelli (2018) states that the 'coach's primary role lies in the attempt to be with and be for the client' (p.88) in order to explore the uniqueness of the client's experience and challenge their worldview, values and obligations. The coach facilitates this holding space for the client to feel safe (Joseph, 2018), to explore their reality within contracted supporting and challenging arrangements (Lee, 2018) in a professionally protected (Hawkins, 2018) environment.

The participants reported that burnout presents differently across clients in different contexts, which is reinforced throughout extensive literature across the different dimensions, individuals and professions (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Maslach, Jackson and Leiter, 1997; Maslach and Leiter, 2016; Maslach, Jackson and Leiter, 2018). Iordanou, Hawley and Iordanou, (2017) identified that it is important for a coach to be aware of the context in which their occupation is positioned in order to utilise the appropriate approach for the client. This current research shows that supervision improves the coach's lens to identify burnout challenges for the client's welfare, which is at the heart of coaching. It is through supervision that coaches can be guided in their reflection to performing within their limitations, whilst respecting professional boundaries (Brennan and Wildflower, 2018).

The participants expressed the way in which supervision is an opportunity to explore and identify scenarios where a coach can get caught rescuing a client. The literature supports the importance for vigilance in recognising the difference between coaching and rescuing. It is a coach-rescuer trap which has the potential for a destructive interaction for both (St John-Brooks, 2018; Hawkins, 2018). Hicks and McCracken (2014) argue that there are no professional exceptions to those at risk of 'falling prey to the dreaded drama triangle' (p.62) where a coach is susceptible to an unconscious reaction to act as a rescuer for a client (Crowe, Oades, Deane, Ciarrochi and Williams, 2011). A coach potentially acting in a rescuer capacity is not empowering a client and may create a sense of dependency on the coach (Hicks and McCracken, 2014). Furthermore, Iordanou et al., (2017) argue that if such ethical challenges are not apparent in the coach's reflection, this is an indication for the supervisor to prompt for a deeper reflection to ensure that they remain within ethical boundaries.

Figure 2: Self-care for all through supervision

In Figure 2 the wellbeing of the coach is represented as a prism, a metaphorical representation of the coach's 'instrument'. A place where they can practice their self-care, self-reflection, and acquire a clear understanding of burnout and a lens for identifying burnout within clients. The coach's being is transformed through their coaching instrument to create the holding space to work through with the client. Furthermore, the symbolic prism is a visual reminder for awareness of the coach's behaviour within the drama triangle. The client is represented with a heart, a reminder that fundamentally the wellbeing of the client is at the forefront of the coaching interactions

Tailoring the contract

The participants suggested that a supervisor can assist with clarity in understanding burnout, which in turn can enhance the coach's competence whilst remaining within ethical boundaries. Where there is a chemistry introduction session it is an opportunity for a coach to first identify possible burnout for a client, to understand client's needs and for both to contract accordingly. The literature endorses clear clarification of contracts with explanations of the coach's roles and responsibilities,

qualifications and competence. A review of an established code of ethics identifies the responsibility of the coach to establish boundaries, whilst respecting a client's confidentiality and to clearly contract the approach to be taken should a coach perceive a client to be at risk from harm to themselves or others (EMCC, 2019; ICF, 2020). Iordanou et al. (2017) argue that such boundary management is an important aspect to cover in supervision as is recognising a client's prerogative to end the relationship at any point. Similarly, Fennah (2019) argues that contracting outlines the agreement on the level of support and challenge between both parties and Watts et al., (2016) state that a coach is required to be explicit about their relevant experience and that they are undergoing supervision as a form of continuing professional development.

The participants reported how, despite no signs from a chemistry meeting, burnout can arise as an issue for a client and that confidence in re-contracting is required. Re-contracting activities have been likened to perfecting a recipe for a cake and participants advocated moving forward safely in the process. This is supported in the literature where Jackson and Cox (2018) argue that the contracting process is an opportunity to move forward in a challenging situation. Confidence in the knowledge that it is natural to re-contract affords a coach an opportunity to re-negotiate client expectations and for reflection within supervision.

Participants were concerned that a coach must always be open and supportive in the referral process to another coach or professional that may be of greater value to the client, thereby demonstrating that professional boundaries are considered, acknowledged and respected in the interest of the client. Brennan and Wildflower (2018) state that this should be highlighted to the client together with the coach's assistance in the referral approach. The wellbeing of the client is paramount, and Cavanagh and Buckley (2018) even claim that coaching can be a complementary approach to therapy or medication after discussion with the relevant professionals already engaged.

The current research, represented in Figure 3, showed evidence of the benefits of a proactive approach to being aware in advance of the referral options for burnout. The tailoring of the contract to meet the client's needs re-establishes clear expectations for both the client and the coach while simultaneously allowing the coaching relationship to flourish through constant care and attention. Furthermore, the contracting space affords the opportunity to 'minimise several ethical pitfalls you might fall into as a coach' (Iordanou et al., 2017, p.56) as referral is addressed with the client.

Figure 3: Tailoring the contract
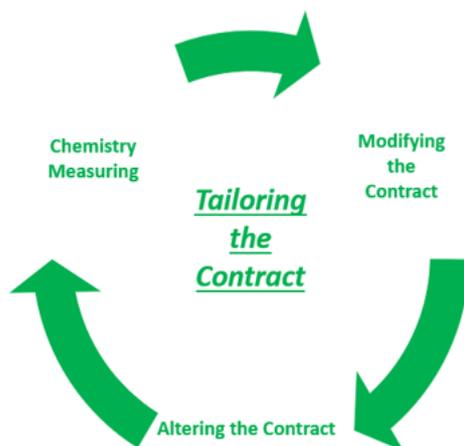
Diagnosing burnout

The language used by the participants to describe a burnout client's energy included a 'flat line' where coaching could 'feel heavy' and 'even toxic'. Emotional and physical exhaustion is recognised as the core experience of burnout throughout the academic literature (Shirom, 1989; Pines, 1993; Schaufeli, Enzmann and Girault, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001; Shirom and Melamed, 2006). The study found that a client's energy levels and their ability to engage as fundamental for coaching with burnout.

The participants reported concerns for a client who presents with low energy, possible burnout, for different aspects of their client's life and wellbeing. Further reading of the burnout literature supports the participants where the impact of burnout contributes to a reduced sense of personal accomplishment or professional efficacy, which are complex dynamics to work with (Byrne, 1994; Lee and Ashforth, 1996; Maslach et al., 2001). Iordanou et al., (2017) identifies that experience of working with challenging clients can provide an opportunity to question both our ethical position and capacity for coaching.

In such moments, the participants suggested the use of scaling questions, for the client to self-reflect and measure their energy levels, which is supported in the academic literature. Grant and Cavanagh (2018) defined scaling as 'a versatile way of subjectively measuring experience, and can be used in many different ways' (p.40). They describe the way in which a coach may use a scaling question to prompt a client to reflect and measure. However, Grimley (2018, p.188) argues that 'not everything that is specific is measurable' and suggests in such instances to use scaling to measure before and after a client experience. In addition, St John-Brooks (2018) argues that a scaling self-reporting question approach is effective in moving a client forward.

The participants described challenges with clients where they were lacking the energy to engage with coaching. Kiazad, Seibert and Kraimer, (2014) describe the way innovation in the workplace requires energy as a resource for an employee. Similar to the workplace, client innovation is a component of the coaching synergy as the pairing collaborate on attaining the client's needs. The participants' position and the academic literature support the finding that energy is a fundamental necessity, so much so that a lack of vitality would result in referral.

The participants assert that both a client's energy and attitude are essential for a client to move forward in workplace coaching. Research has established how coaching is a crucial job resource to achieve work goals (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli, 2009) through enhancing an employee's capacities and enthusiasm (Kiazad et al., 2014). Furthermore, Ladegård (2011) argues that workplace coaching provides an insight for the client to identify their own resources. Coaching can provide the client with coping tools and strategies for workplace stressors to shift attitude challenges.

Furthermore, Oades (2016) suggests introducing a positive mindset through positive thinking, mindfulness and gratitude exercises that may assist clients overcome cynical thinking and perspectives. Maslach and Leiter (2016) identified that taking a whole person approach is complementary to working with burnout. A positive psychology type approach can empower the client for optimal performance through challenging their values and beliefs in a safe, trusting environment (Joseph, 2018). Iordanou et al., (2017) state that a coach who is aware of their position as a professional eliminates any confusion with respect to professional boundaries.

Each of the subcategories relating to diagnosing burnout are identified as barometers in Figure 4 and suggest how solution focused scaling techniques can be utilised with the client to reflect and measure their current capacity and engagement with the coaching process. A healthy and a flat line heartbeat is added to represent the overall wellbeing of the client.

Figure 4: Diagnosing Burnout

Figure 5 represents the collective contribution of the three categories identified in this study and their corresponding sub-categories discussed above. The research showed that supervision is the 'interweaving' activity undertaken by ethically aware coaches to enhance their professional competence. It is through supervision that coaches can reflect on their own self-care, contracting and professional practice, so that they may be best positioned to assist clients with possible burnout.

Figure 5: Graphical representation of framework
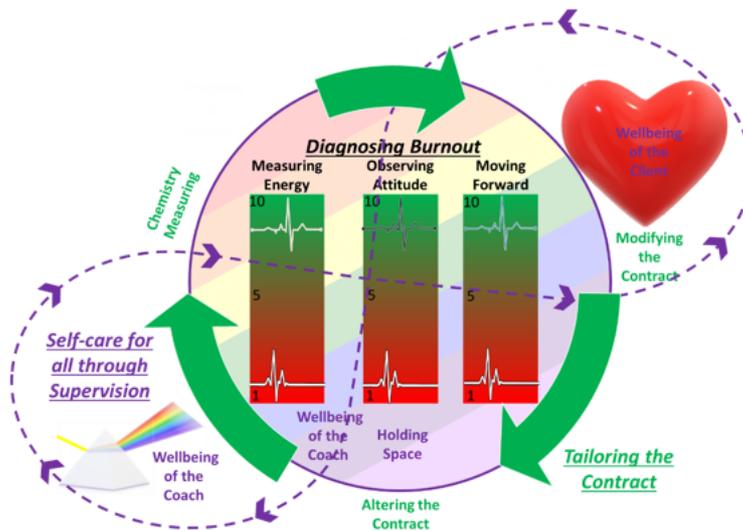
Limitations

The categories were identified after the fourth interview and were confirmed through theoretical sensitivity and subsequent interviews. However, a purposive sample size of six participants, whilst beneficial for informing an emerging theory, reduces transferability of findings and implies generalisation challenges (Saunders et al., 2019). The qualitative exploration produced representative core categories for a conceptual description that is a quality grounded theory to satisfy the reader. The findings are detailed for critical evaluation to determine if the theory is transferable to the readers own experience and practice (Thorne, 2000). This study generated a theory, to grab the reader's attention (Bryant, 2009) whilst contributing useful transferable knowledge that they can utilise in their practice, standing up to tests of validity (Strübing, 2007; Maher et al., 2018).

Future research

The study provides a proposition and framework for another IPA study to further qualify themes such as coaching approaches and their efficacy (Saunders et al., 2019). It may be advantageous to collaborate with coaches who have personally experienced a level of burnout through a hermeneutic study. This insight would afford the opportunity to provide a rich description of their experience (Moustakas, 1990) and explore the way in which coaching may have improved their wellbeing. This approach addresses potential transferability and generalisation challenges through inclusion of participants across geographies, genders, races, and cultures.

Conclusion

This study aspired to illuminate the best practice of experienced coaches when working with clients who present with possible workplace burnout. A paucity of academic research exists within this context but a structured methodological approach was followed to contribute to coaching theory and practice and include working with burnout as a theme. Preliminary categories were generated from the participants' experiences and supported with academic literature that provides a framework to empower workplace coaches, to help them make a difference and be more comfortable in their approach to working with possible workplace burnout challenges.

Supervision is the primary resource for coaches when working with burnout, ensuring their own self-care and confirming the wellbeing of the client remains priority in their coaching. A supervisor challenges the coach to reflect and prepare for contracting discussions. Opportunities are created to reflect on the client's energy levels; attitude towards coaching and their ability to move forward to assess their capacity for coaching and question referrals.

In summary this study has found that, conditional on the competence of the supervised coach and the level of the client's burnout, a coaching approach is ethically respectful of professional boundaries. In addition, a coaching approach can complement medical intervention when contracted appropriately with the client.

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