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ABSTRACT

The coaching industry has grown to become a multi-billion dollar business, yet there remain few barriers to entry and an absence of national governing bodies. Wide variation in quality of practice undermines the credibility of a field that has been found to be effective (Grover, S., & Furnham, A. (2016). Coaching as a developmental intervention in organisations: A systematic review of its effectiveness and the mechanisms underlying it. *PLoS One*, 11(7), e0159137. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0159137>; Theeboom, T., Beersma, B., & van Vianen, A. E. (2014). Does coaching work? A meta-analysis on the effects of coaching on individual level outcomes in an organizational context. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 9(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2013.837499>). Coaching stakeholders should therefore be motivated to understand what ‘good coaching’ looks like. However, it remains unclear what it means to be an outstanding, or expert, practitioner, or even whether the construct of expertise applies to the field of coaching. Within this paper, I critique literature that discusses coach expertise, and suggest the philosophical constraints embedded within current thinking imply the need for an alternative conceptualisation of expertise; *adaptive expertise*. Adaptive expertise is compatible with the complexity that characterises coaching, and prioritises coach decision-making (judgment and reasoning) over coaching outcomes. Many coaching texts largely ignore the construct of decision-making, with the exception of intuitive decision-making. Further research that seeks to understand coach judgment and decision-making will help coaches’ develop their practice, and may be a key to demystifying the central role of intuition in coaching.

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Practice points

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

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- Emphasising the importance of coach judgment and decision-making
- What are its tangible implications for practitioners?
 - Moving from exploring characteristics of ‘the expert coach’ to understanding coach reasoning processes in order to develop adaptive expertise
 - Changing how coaches evaluate their own practice
 - Demystifying coach intuition

Introduction

How do we recognise an expert coach, and what does the journey to coaching expertise look like? Knowing the answers to these questions would enable educators to help coaches’ transition from novice to expert status, thus raising the quality of practice. Professional bodies, through hierarchical accreditation systems, appear to view expertise, in part, as a function of experience and coaching competencies. The academic community has focused on two avenues of research in this area; the ingredients contributing to effective coaching outcomes; and attempting to discover the inherent characteristics of the expert coach. Despite an extensive literature, it remains unclear how to identify an expert and the process one must take to attain such status.

Nonetheless, as the number of coaches and market size increase, the need to better understand ‘good coaching’ remains urgent. In their review of executive coaching outcomes, Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2017) suggest research should be redirected away from an obsession with outcomes, in favour of understanding *how* coaching is effective. In this paper, I argue for the adoption of adaptive expertise as an alternative conceptualisation of coach expertise that is consistent with such a process approach. This conceptualisation gives primacy to a practitioner’s decision-making skills, a component of which is intuitive decision-making. Crucially, this offers a practical means to advance practice.

This paper is structured as follows; I begin with a critical review of literature containing an analysis of expertise in coaching, and then offer an alternative conceptualisation, that of adaptive expertise. Given the centrality of decision-making in adaptive expertise, I then review literature discussing coach decision-making, and analyse the construct of intuition, in light of its emergence from the discourse. Finally, I make suggestions for future research and practice.

Selection of literature

Reviewed literature was searched for predominantly using the Psychinfo and Academic Search Complete databases, as well as Google scholar. The following coaching journals were individually searched for specific terms; Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice; International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring; Coaching Psychologist; International Coaching Psychology Review; Philosophy of Coaching. They were selected on the basis of being the pre-eminent coaching journals. Terms that were searched included, but were not restricted to; ‘decision-making’; ‘executive coaching’; ‘coaching’; ‘mastery’; ‘expertise’; ‘intuition’; and ‘intuitive decision-making’. These terms were chosen due to the role of decision-making in

adaptive expertise, the emergence of the importance of intuition in the coaching literature, and in order to capture as relevant a range of literature as possible. They were combined using Boolean expressions. All papers that contained a conceptual analysis, or empirical investigation of, expertise (or synonym thereof) in coaching were selected. The limited discussion of expertise in the coaching literature led to an exploration of expertise within the related field of psychotherapy, in case it offered illumination. Finally, seminal texts (Charness et al., 2018; e.g., Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ericsson et al., 2018) in the general expertise literature were consulted, to help critique definitional and conceptual issues found within the review.

Expertise in coaching

This section represents the discourse surrounding expertise in coaching that was found for this review. Whilst several studies (Blumberg, 2016; Dagley, 2010; Drake, 2011; Lai & McDowell, 2014) offer useful analysis, each has limitations in relation to the questions that I wish to explore. The limitations relate to methodological, definitional, and conceptual issues.

Although not mentioning expertise specifically, Dagley (2010) used a qualitative design to understand the practices of exceptional coaches. Results indicated that capabilities of exceptional coaches included insight, skilful challenging, empathy and taking personal responsibility. However, participants were 20 human resource professionals who purchased coaching services. As such, their opinions can only be speculation on what coaches 'do' during sessions. For example, one respondent described a coach as being 'exceptional at seeing patterns and unconscious responses' (p. 68). It is unclear how a third party, who was neither a coachee nor present during a session, would be able to discern a coach's ability to see patterns. Moreover, only 7 of 20 participants responded to a request to validate emergent themes from the data.

In another article, Drake (2011) created a Mastery Window, which views expertise as operating within the planes of technical competence and self-awareness, as an effort at developing coaching expertise. However, his definition of Mastery is vague and although the Mastery Window recognises the role of intuition in coaching, it fails to explain *how* such a skill can be researched and developed.

An unpublished Doctoral dissertation by Blumberg (2016) adopted a qualitative, grounded theory approach to identify competencies of outstanding executive coaches. Data from semi-structured interviews of 16 executive coaches led to the finding that trusting and acting on intuition was a characteristic of outstanding coaching. How coaches could discern which intuitions to trust was not considered. The study design entailed asking participants which factors explain their competence, an approach that relies on accurate insight and is at risk of memory and attribution biases (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Tversky & Marsh, 2000).

In addition to individual studies, one systematic review was found. Lai and McDowell (2014) conducted a systematic review focusing on attributes of effective coaching psychologists. The authors distilled the factors into communication skills (e.g., asking powerful questions), empathy, objectivity, authenticity, enthusiasm and motivation to help. All of these factors underpinned the main finding, that the coaching relationship is key. None of the findings suggested decision-making, or reasoning skills were relevant. Perhaps

implicit within the findings is the assumption that coaches make the correct decisions as to *which* powerful questions to ask. Many of the included studies assessed effectiveness via coachee opinions, which may well not cohere with other opinions (Myers & Bachkirova, 2019).

Largely absent from the reviewed literature is the question of how coaches transition from novice to expert status. One suggestion (Peterson, 2011) has been to adopt the model of deliberate practice (Ericsson & Charness, 1994) that has been found to be a mediating factor in the development of expertise. Deliberate practice is a specific form of practice designed to improve performance through a cyclical process involving repetition of skills at the edge of one's ability, refined by feedback. In the related field of psychotherapy, a quantitative study by Chow et al. (2015) found the effectiveness of therapists in part to be differentiated by the amount of deliberate practice. However, deliberate practice was measured via retrospective recall, and it is unclear that the construct measured was, in fact, deliberate practice. There is a persuasive argument that factors necessary for deliberate practice are absent from coaching environments. For example, it relies on timely, accurate and objective feedback to facilitate improvement. The appropriate feedback in a coaching context is unclear – should it be the coachee, or an 'expert' observer of a session? And what if their feedback conflicted? With the notion of feedback being problematic, the applicability of the deliberate practice model to coaching is questionable.

Both the coaching and psychotherapy literature are constrained by the challenge of defining an outstanding, or expert, practitioner. In Blumberg's study, participants were selected based upon organisational purchaser ratings of coaches, raising questions of construct validity. Similarly, within the related field of psychotherapy, an on-going debate exists as to how to define expertise; either via client outcomes and therapist reputation (Tracey et al., 2014), via experience and skills relative to other professionals (Hill et al., 2017), or indeed if it lies more within a relationship than an individual (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2017). This definitional conundrum prevents a consensual research approach.

Not only are there definitional uncertainties with respect to expertise in coaching, but conceptual challenges also exist. The term 'expert coach' is embedded with practical and philosophical challenges. Studies in fields such as elite sport (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; MacNamara et al., 2010) and chess (e.g., Charness et al., 2005; Gobet & Charness, 2006) have used professional accomplishments, like Olympic gold medals and Grand Master status, to operationalise expertise. This approach is less appropriate for coaching, which begs the questions: how can expertise be identified, and who is the evaluator? These questions are premised on a positivist world-view. Empirical research has found the judgment of 'good coaching' to differ substantially across stakeholders (Myers & Bachkirova, 2019), and it has been argued more broadly that the construct of expertise may be incompatible with a coach grounding their practice in post-modern views (Corrie & Lane, 2013). It would appear, therefore, that the search for the expert coach is constrained by methodological factors.

In summary, studies to date are limited by questionable construct validity and macro study designs (i.e., deriving general truths from interviews of multiple participants) that offer little insight into *how* expertise could be developed. In response, I propose an alternative conceptualisation, which surmounts methodological obstacles, implies a different approach to study design, and is more practical for practitioners.

An alternative conceptualisation – *adaptive expertise*

The aforementioned definitional challenges reflect the general expertise literature, where expertise is defined differently depending on whether it is conceptualised as a process or as an outcome (Farrington-Darby & Wilson, 2006). An outcome conceptualisation is consistent with Ericsson and Charness (1994) definition of expertise as ‘reproducible superior performance’ (p. 726), which is the consequence of deliberate practice. This is referred to as routine expertise; the ability to master domain-specific skills without error (Carbonell et al., 2016). In this regard, routine expertise could be considered analogous to the competency frameworks within professional coaching bodies accreditation systems. Alternatively, rather than focusing on an outcome, expertise can be considered to be a process (Farrington-Darby & Wilson, 2006). From this perspective, experts in the helping professions have been shown to distinguish themselves in their ability to perceive meaningful patterns that novices cannot (Farrington-Darby & Wilson, 2006). In essence, different worldviews are consistent with different definitions of expertise, which have different implications for its relevance within coaching.

A process view is supportive of the ability of coaches to develop adaptive expertise, which is the ability to master novel tasks and transfer skills to unknown settings (Barnett & Koslowski, 2002; Sonnentage et al., 2006). It is built on routine expertise, but individuals with adaptive expertise do not rely on rule-based decision-making and know when not to rely on automatic processes, such as intuition (Carbonell et al., 2016). This is consistent with Bachkirova and Smith’s (2015) argument that competency models oversimplify the demands placed on a coach and fail to account for the need for complexity of thinking. Complexity within the coaching context (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012) underpins the need to focus on process (i.e., reasoning) rather than outcome (Owen & Lindley, 2010). Similarly, within the related profession of applied sport psychology an argument has been made for the development of professional judgement and decision-making (PJDM) expertise (see for example; Cruickshank et al., 2018; Martindale & Collins, 2010, 2013). Within a PJDM framework, expertise is about developing cognitive skills and adapting to new contexts. Adaptive expertise is less about repeating standardised tasks to a high standard, and more concerned with developing problem-solving skills. This would seem relevant to coaching, in light of recent findings that coaches’ appear to view sessions as problems to be solved (Berry, 2020). Therefore, fundamental to a PJDM or adaptive expertise framework is the need to analyse practitioner decision-making. As Bachkirova and Smith (2015) write: it is about understanding ‘why they do what they do’ (p. 135). Given the importance of decision-making within this conceptualisation, I now review literature that discusses coach decision-making.

Decision-making in coaching

What is noticeable from a review of several of the core coaching textbooks is how little attention is given to decision-making. Many well-recognised sources (Flaherty, 2010; Palmer & Whybrow, 2019; Passmore, 2015; Rogers, 2016) do not reference decision-making in their index, and those that do (Bluckert, 2006; Peltier, 2010), focus on developing client, rather than coach, decision-making skills. In his chapter on developing Mastery in coaching, Passmore (2015) discusses the focus of professional bodies on competencies,

one of which involves asking questions. However, no consideration is given to *how* coaches might judge which questions to ask. This is noteworthy, given Neenan's (2009) view that asking questions is the main role of the coach (p. 262), and that they must provide a sound basis for their line of questioning. Corrie and Lane (2013) have argued that little guidance exists on how to approach decision-making in coaching. They consider this gap in the literature to be explained by a commonly held view that explicitly training decision-making skills is unnecessary, as they are acquired automatically through experience. In light of the importance of decision-making in adaptive expertise, the lack of knowledge about coach decision-making would appear to be an omission.

One form of decision-making that plays an essential role in coaching according to coaching textbooks is intuition. For example, it is 'a crucial aspect of any coaches potency' (Bluckert, 2006, p. 84), 'extraordinarily valuable in coaching' (Whitworth et al., 2007, p. 52), 'plays a crucial role in a coaching relationship' (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 2009, p. 76), whilst a transpersonal coach 'relies heavily on intuition' (Rowan, 2014, p. 154). One study of 47 experienced coaches (de Haan, 2008) found positive change in a coaching relationship to be significantly driven by coach intuition. Despite its importance, only two texts were found that dedicated chapters to discussing intuition; Whitworth et al. (2007) suggest 'finding the access point' (p. 58), whilst Megginson and Clutterbuck (2009) advise coaches to 'lower the force field' (p. 68). Such abstract terms imply an element of mystery to intuition and focus on the output of intuiting rather than the process itself. Furthermore, the intuition literature (e.g., Epstein, 2010; Hogarth, 2010; Kahneman & Klein, 2009) is rarely, if at all, referenced in these chapters. Whilst intuition is considered important in coaching outcomes, little appears to be known about the intuiting process, or how coaches could develop it. Intuition needs to be demystified, as 'just knowing' can erode coaching competence (Neenan, 2009).

Two articles were found for this review that studied the role of intuition in coaching. Sheldon (2018) used a grounded theory approach in an attempt to learn how 4 experienced coaches work with their intuition. The role of expertise and maturity were considered key factors influencing the validity of intuitions. However, the study provided no detail of the data analysis process, making it difficult for the reader to establish exactly how the subsequent model was derived, limiting trustworthiness. Using semi-structured interviews with 14 coaches, Mavor et al. (2010) sought to understand the role of intuition in coaching, including how coaches access and apply their intuition. However, people are unable to 'see' their own intuitive processes (Hogarth, 2014) and as such, participants' responses on how they accessed their intuitions must be considered speculative.

The absence of decision-making within the coaching literature possibly suggests that it is undervalued as a stand-alone construct. Corrie and Lane (2013) may have a point that scholars implicitly believe decision-making is a natural output of other competencies. However, all decisions are influenced by one's perspective, and coaches need to be aware of what they may be missing as a result of a particular frame of enquiry (Lane & Corrie, 2009). Coaches make assumptions that inform their real-time decisions (Berry, 2020), and such assumptions need to be made explicit (Olson, 2008). This identifying and evaluating of assumptions is at the core of adaptive expertise.

The emphasis placed in the coaching literature on intuition is consistent with extant knowledge that optimal decisions do not exist in ambiguous environments. Rather,

intuitive judgments are more relevant to practice (Corrie & Lane, 2013; de Haan, 2008; Whitworth et al., 2007). Intuition can be considered to be 'a sense of knowing without knowing how one knows' (Epstein, 2010, p. 296). The intuitive processes that lead to an output of intuition are without conscious awareness, tacit in nature, with the output of such processes appearing quickly in consciousness (Gigerenzer, 2007; Hogarth, 2014). That is, intuitive judgements are based upon partial, holistic cues in one's environment. The extent to which such cues are sufficient to form intuitive judgements will determine the validity of this decision-making style. Central to the tacit system is the matching of environmental patterns to similar ones in memory (Eraut, 2000). As previously described, such pattern recognition is the essence of expertise seen through a process lens.

Three research traditions have explored intuition, two viewing it positively and one considering it a source of decision-making errors. The heuristics and biases (H&B) tradition holds a sceptical view, believing that decision-makers who use intuition are susceptible to non-conscious biases (Kahneman, 2011). The Fast and Frugal Heuristics (FFH) community also believe intuition to involve the use of heuristics, but see both in a positive light (Klein, 2015). Rather than irrational short-cuts, FFH researchers consider heuristics to be a reliable consequence of learning (Gigerenzer et al., 2008; Hafenbradl et al., 2016), central to which is the environmental structure (Gigerenzer, 2007). Finally, the Naturalistic Decision Making (NDM) tradition also holds an optimist view of intuition. NDM use field-based, ecologically valid settings in order to understand how experts make good decisions (Lipshitz et al., 2001). Ultimately, the NDM approach is concerned with how cognition adapts to complexity (Gore et al., 2015). In spite of the argument that ambiguity, complexity and ill-structured problems are pertinent to coaching (Corrie & Lane, 2013), NDM research appears to have eluded the radar of coaching researchers.

Despite coaching scholars espousing the key role of intuition in the coaching process, the impression given is that coaches are passive in their relationship with their own intuition. For example, de Haan and Blass (2007) posit that change in coaching relationships come from coaches 'allowing intuition to do its work' (p. 56), implying minimal coach agency. Yet, although tacit knowledge is developed non-consciously (Eraut, 2000), this does not imply that intuition cannot be trained. Through experience, our brains make mental connections between events. The environments we find ourselves in, and the frequency of associations, affect what and how much we learn. Environments that are considered 'kind' (Hogarth, 2001) or 'highly valid' (Kahneman & Klein, 2009) are conducive to developing intuition. No known research has explored whether or not coaching is a 'kind' environment.

Implications for research and practice

The practical and philosophical challenges associated with the concept of the 'expert coach' have implications for anyone seeking to advance coaching practice.

Conceptualising expertise as a process, rather than outcome, overcomes methodological constraints. This is consistent with the notion of adaptive expertise, an active process that is concerned with how individuals flexibly apply their knowledge (Gube & Lajoie, 2020). In so doing, adaptive experts are able to articulate why they make decisions, the

alternatives considered, and assumptions embedded in their reasoning. Such a conceptualisation aligns with the complex nature of coaching. In order to help coaches' develop their adaptive expertise, better understanding is needed of the reasoning that underpin their decisions. Applied cognitive task analysis (Militello & Hutton, 1998) could be a methodology that would help researchers in this regard. Such an approach would explore the real-time reasoning of coaches', via a 'think aloud' protocol.

With respect to intuition, it remains unclear as to whether coaching sessions, and a coach's observations during them, are conducive to developing valid intuitions. Berry's (2020) study of coach decision-making found drivers of decisions to be non-conscious in nature, but it could not be concluded that these drivers reflected intuitive processes. This is an important area of research, and more micro-design studies focusing on individual coaching sessions, similar to de Haan's (2008) critical moments, could usefully expand knowledge in this area.

Scholars should attempt to establish which contextual cues inform coaches' real-time decision-making. This may present a more fruitful avenue through which to explore intuition, as it will help educators understand if coach intuition can be trained. It will also facilitate practitioner insight into their own reasoning, which will help coaches' begin to discriminate between the trustworthiness of their intuitions, a characteristic of adaptive experts.

Coaches can benefit from adopting an adaptive expertise lens by creating their own internal framework to guide self-critique. Such a framework could be guided by the Why, What and How structure suggested by Bachkirova et al. (2017) which offers a pragmatic and constructivist approach to coach development. Similarly, given the value placed on intuitive decisions, coaches' would benefit from reflecting on the knowledge that underpins such decisions and links a coach's beliefs to their practice. This has been referred to as the epistemological chain (Crowther et al., 2018) and has been suggested as a useful scaffold to reflective practice (Collins et al., 2015). These approaches to self-critique circumvent the reliance on external indicators of ability, such as client testimonials, which may provide a false sense of confidence in one's own abilities. In this regard, outstanding coaching is inherently about critiquing one's process.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for an alternative conceptualisation of coach expertise. Limitations associated with the notion of the 'expert coach' point to a process view of expertise as being more useful. Adaptive expertise serves this purpose, central to which is the construct of coach decision-making. Paradoxically, although decision-making has hitherto been absent from the coaching discourse, the prevalence of intuition underlines the importance of decision-making. Scholars, practitioners and professional bodies would all benefit from considering *how* coaches make judgments during sessions. In this respect, it is very much the journey, not the outcome that counts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor



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