

QUALIFICATIONS AND THE COACHING RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

Coaching is a fast growing industry with a recent survey estimating there are currently over 53,000 practising coaches worldwide. Research has shown that coaching is a positive intervention in many contexts from executive coaching to life or personal coaching. The scientific literature is inconclusive on whether or not a psychological qualification is a necessary criteria for effective coaching. Research has shown that whether a coach has a psychology qualification is a factor considered by those seeking coaching. It has also been shown that the coaching relationship is one of the most influential factors on good coaching outcomes. The aim of the current research is to explore the impact of having a qualification in psychology on the quality of the coaching relationship from the point of view of the coach. The research was conducted using a qualitative method approach by way of interviewing both psychologist coaches and non-psychologist coaches. In total 9 participants were interviewed, 5 psychologist coaches and 4 non-psychologist coaches and a thematic analysis of the interviews conducted. The findings revealed four main themes that the participants indicated most influenced the relationship with the coachee. These key themes were identified as a) the coach's understanding of themselves; b) the coach's understanding of the coachee; c) having defined boundaries and d) the willingness of the coachee to engage. There were mixed views on the importance of a qualification in psychology on the quality of the coaching relationship. All participants were agreed upon the coach's understanding of themselves as the most important factor. The implications of this are discussed.

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Psychologist and non-psychologist coaches: A qualitative exploration of qualification on the coaching relationship.

Coaching is a broad term and can cover a wide range of interventions from health coaching to executive and leadership coaching. A survey conducted by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) in 2016 estimated there are approximately 53,300 professional coach practitioners worldwide (I.C.F., 2016). The definition of coaching used in this international survey was broad and included managers and leaders who reported using coaching skills in their work. A 2004 survey (Grant & Zackon, 2004) showed the broad range of backgrounds of practising coaches which included salespeople, teachers, consultants, managers and executives and only 4.8% psychologists.

The definition of what coaching is continues to evolve and change in the literature from Whitmore's definition involving a facilitation approach (Whitmore, 2017), to the definition accepted by the British Psychology Society in 2002 which emphasises the enhancement of performance and wellbeing in both personal and work domains using techniques grounded in psychological approaches (Grant, 2002 in Palmer & Whybrow, 2008). Coaching has been explored in much of the literature and been described as a Socratic based dialogue between the coach and the coachee using open ended questions to increase the self-awareness of the coachee and their personal responsibility (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Bartlett, Boylan, & Hale, 2014).

The distinction between coaching and coaching psychology has been discussed widely in much of the literature (Passmore, Stopforth, & Lai, 2018; Joo, 2005) and further if there is a distinction. It has been questioned if coaching psychology is the study of coaching rather than the practice of coaching psychology itself (Passmore, Stopforth, & Lai, 2018). What seems to be agreed upon is that coaching is a facilitative approach by the coach and the

coachee to bring about a change in the coachees circumstances and as defined by the coachee. It is a collaborative approach rather than a directive or prescriptive one (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008).

Impact of coaching

Coaching is a term which comes from sports training and in the psychological domain is seen to have its roots in the works of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow (Williams, 2003). Perhaps because of this, the literature reflects a concern that coaches are aware of the boundaries between coaching and therapy (Hart, Blattner, & Leipsic, 2001). Research in coaching has focused on different areas, from case studies on the effectiveness of individual coaching approaches to systematic reviews of the literature. It has been shown that in an organisational setting, coaching can be used as an effective intervention for individual performance (Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2013). A review of literature on coaching outcomes in organisations carried out in 2006 concluded that, on the whole, coaching is effective and does work (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006). This positive support for organisational coaching is backed up by coaching in other areas such as life coaching. A 2018 study involving college students reported positive outcomes across many areas including self-confidence, connection to life purpose and individual goal setting and attainment (Lefdahl-Davis, Huffman, Stancil, & Alayan, 2018). Research has suggested an agenda for coaching related research indicating a number of areas of interest, including the characteristics and competencies of effective coaches, (Bennett, 2006). The literature reflects a concern that coaching will not be seen as a profession unless there is consensus in how it is practiced and how it is taught (Grant, 2011).

Qualification of coach

A survey of coaches in 2012 showed that almost all of the participants (98.9%) came from prior professional backgrounds, prior to practising as coaches (Newnham-Kanas, Irwin, & Morrow, 2011). This survey also showed that the majority of the participants (63.3%) had no formal training in recognising mental health problems however 79.5% did refer clients on to other professional services, for instance to a psychologist. Research carried out in 2009 looked into the coaching practices of both non psychologist and psychologist executive coaches (Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009). This research challenged the validity of the assumption that a psychologist trained coach will be more effective at coaching than a non-psychologist. The results indicated that there were as many differences between non psychologist and psychologist coaches, as there were between psychologist coaches from varying psychological disciplines. The more important question according to this study, is what coaching behaviour leads to behaviour change, insight and motivation in the client. This appears to be backed up by research carried out in 2014 where a systematic review of literature focusing on the attributes of effective psychologists coaches found that the effectiveness of coaching process and results was most significantly impacted by the coaching relationship (Lai & McDowall, 2014). A U.K. based survey carried out in 2012 showed that psychologist and non-psychologist coaches used broadly similar approaches in their coaching practice (Jenkins, Passmore, Palmer, & Short, 2012). It would appear from this that the issue of the psychologist coach being preferable to the non-psychologist coach is an assumption that is open to question. In a 2016 paper, a summary of the research to that date looked at several areas of coaching research (Grant, 2016). One of these areas was the coach coachee relationship and the importance of it. It was found that coachees of professional coaches were more engaged and therefore it highlighted the importance of professional expertise in the coaching relationship. However, it does not specifically state if the coaches were psychologically trained or not.

Coaching relationship and qualitative approach

One method that may readily lend itself to uncovering rare insights into the coaching relationship is a qualitative approach (Grant, 2016). A good example of the kind of data that can be generated from qualitative research in coaching are studies carried out examining critical moments that can occur in a coaching session. A critical moment has been defined as “an exciting, tense or significant moment” that occurs during a coaching session (de Haan & Nieb, 2015) and such moments are usually a point of change. A 2008 study which found an association between the impact of critical moments in coaching sessions and the actions of the coach (Day, de Haan, Sills, Bertie, & Blass, 2008). Such data cannot be gathered from a survey or other quantitative research method and give considerable insight into the coaching session and further the relationship between the coach and the coachee. In 2016 an international survey of practising psychologist coaches showed that coach quality was a critical factor in successful coaching outcomes as well as the strength of the coaching relationship and the coachees willingness to engage in the process (Vandever, Lowman, Pearlman, & Brannick, 2016). Interestingly, it was also found that the personal attributes of the psychologist coaches and the important skill set required was also consistent with non-psychologist coaching models. However, this study also found that psychologist coaches used other theoretical frameworks and knowledge areas than other coaching competency models (non-psychological). It outlined the reason for this as representing the wide range of knowledge and theory backgrounds of the psychologist coach’s education.

Coach selection

The question of how important a coach’s qualification is to the decision-making process of people choosing a coach, and are any distinctions drawn between psychologist and non-psychologist coaches, has been the subject of several studies. Research has examined

what people look for when selecting a coach, ascertaining what factors influence the selection process (Wasylyshyn, 2003; Stern, 2004). It has been shown that in executive coaching, the most important criteria cited for coach selection was a background in psychology with a figure of 82% giving this as the most important criteria, and the next most important (78%) citing business training or experience (Wasylyshyn, 2003). This research concluded that a mixture of psychology and business was necessary for executive coaches. The research on other types of coaches is limited, as has been the case with the aspects of coaching this current paper is focused on. A survey carried out in 2009 showed that only 13% of the coaches surveyed considering psychological training “very important” in coaching with 45% replying it was “not at all important”, however again this research involved executive coaches (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). A 2006 paper (Grant, 2006) found that coaches should have an understanding of psychological issues in order to recognise and know where the boundaries are in therapy and coaching. Alternative views regarding executive coaching qualification are contrary to this and advocate that it is the coach themselves and not their qualification that is important (McCleary, 2006). Other research outlines that each coaching situation is different and should be looked at individually, and a psychological background may be relevant in certain circumstances (Sherman & Freas, 2004). A study carried out in 2008 investigated the literature on the components influencing how coaches are selected (Wycherley & Cox, 2008) and while it did outline several factors to be considered when selecting a suitable coach, the focus was on executive coaches only. Further this study did not go into any detail on the coach’s qualifications, instead it called for more research in this area. It has been shown that coachees see psychological attributes as key competencies in a coach and also have an expectation of a strong coaching relationship being forged by the coach through being compassionate and trustworthy (Gray, Ekinici, & Goregaokar, 2011). Furthermore, recent research conducted in 2020 found that coachees prefer professionally trained coaches

(although no distinction was made between psychologist and non-psychologist) and further that personal recommendations and client feedback were the two most critical factors in determining choice of coach (Rojon, Bode, & McDowall, 2020).

Coaching relationship

From this it appears that not only is the qualification of the coach a significant factor in determining the choice of coach, but that how the coach and coachee relate to each other is another very important aspect. This is backed by the research which has shown that the coaching relationship is one of the most important factors governing the success of a coaching outcome (Bluckert, 2005; Lai & McDowall, 2014; Wasylyshyn, 2003). A 2015 study looked at the level of expertise of the coach and the affect this has on the coach-coachee relationship (Sonesh, et al., 2015). It suggested that the best coaching outcomes were produced when the coach had a mix of both a business and psychological background. Looking at what occurs during critical moments as experienced by coaches during the coaching process might give some insight into the approaches of both psychologist coaches and non-psychologist coaches. As research has shown that the coaching relationship is one of the most important factors governing the success of a coaching outcome, the current study aims to explore whether a psychology qualification impacts the coaching relationship. The questions in the semi structured interviews have been developed from the literature reviewed. It is anticipated to gather data that will add to the research and the understanding of what coaches do in their sessions with a coachee and what impact if any a background in psychology brings to a successful outcome in the coaching relationship.

This study aims to explore the coach – coachee relationship from the point of view of the coach, some of whom are qualified psychologists and some of whom are not and gather data from the semi structured interviews with the coaches. This qualitative method of

studying these two categories of coaches simultaneously has not appeared in the literature reviewed and the questions asked have been developed from gaps in the literature.

Present Study

Currently it is estimated there are 53,300 professional coach practitioners worldwide according to the ICF Global Survey 2016 with only a small number of those holding a psychology qualification (I.C.F., 2016). The literature shows that one of the most important aspects of a successful coaching outcome is the coach – coachee relationship (Lai & McDowall, 2014). It has been shown that the other knowledge areas and theoretical frameworks used by coaching psychologists were important for this relationship and differed from other coaching competency models (Vandever, Lowman, Pearlman, & Brannick, 2016). However, it has also been shown that psychologists and non-psychologists utilise broadly similar approaches including facilitation, behaviour modification, cognitive/behavioural and goal focused (Jenkins, Passmore, Palmer, & Short, 2012). The authors advise that less than one in ten of the survey respondents were psychologist coaches and therefore this may be reflected in this finding. More research has been called for to understand the influence of coach's background on coaching outcomes (Pandolfi, 2020). There is limited research in Ireland on coaching, outside of sports coaching, and this dearth of research lead to this study on this population (Angulo, Passmore, & Brown, 2019). The purpose of this current study is to elicit the views of coaches themselves on the work they do and their view on the impact, if any, a formal qualification in psychology lends to their relationship with their coachees. The qualitative methodology has been shown to add to the understanding of how coaching works (Grant, 2016; de Haan, 2008). This method allows an exploration of the views of psychologist coaches and non-psychologist coaches on their work with their clients and this dual approach using qualitative methods has not been looked at in the literature reviewed. The qualitative nature of the research method allows for information

to be garnered in an open fashion which allows for a more detailed and rich exploration of the nature of coaching as practiced which will add to the knowledge of what impacts successful coaching outcomes.

Methods

Study Design

The research methodology employed was qualitative in nature. Qualitative analysis was used as this study aimed to explore the perspective of the participants and is based on a phenomenological position (Khan, 2014). Semi structured interviews were used to capture this data as this is the best approach to use when exploring the thoughts and experiences of the participants (Sullivan & Forrester, 2019). The interviews consisted of open-ended questions used to explore the views and feelings of the coach participants on the influence their qualifications have on their relationship with their clients. A broad guide for interview questions was devised by the researcher and every effort was made to avoid leading questions (Appendix A).

Ethical Considerations

The National College of Ireland Psychology Department's Undergraduate Ethics Committee granted approval for this study to proceed, and guidelines issued by the Psychological Society of Ireland were adhered to.

Informed consent was obtained from each of the 9 participants after providing them with full details of the nature and extent of the study and what their participation involved. This was outlined on the information sheet each participant received prior to consenting to partake (Appendix B). The information sheet also advised of the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation and their right to withdraw from the study without penalty. Prior to the interview the participant could ask questions and then complete the consent form (Appendix C). The consent form also advises participants of their rights to access their data under the Freedom of Information legislation.

To ensure confidentiality for the participants, any potentially identifying information was removed from the transcription of the audio recorded interviews. The audio recordings were immediately destroyed by the researcher after transcription was completed. Each participant transcript was given an identifier number and the identity of the participant was only known by the researcher. The transcripts were stored on a password protected laptop which only the researcher had access to. The signed consent forms were stored in a separate location, a locked drawer only accessible by the researcher and they did not contain any information that could link them to a particular transcript. Prior to the commencement of each interview, the participant was requested to verbally again confirm their consent and immediately after the interview they were debriefed. The debriefing form contained details of organisations they could contact in the event they experienced any adverse effects from taking part in study and answering the interview questions (Appendix D).

Participants

Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. There was a purposive element to the recruitment, as to meet the study aims and research question, the participants had to be working as coaches and had to have a qualification in coaching or a qualification in psychology. A letter of introduction was issued to interested parties which outlined the basis of the research and requested information on the length of time working as a coach and the qualifications of the prospective participants (Appendix B). Interested participants made contact with the researcher by email and were given the further information requested. Each of the psychologist coaches had a primary degree in psychology and each of the non-psychologist coaches had undergone coach training.

The number of participants required for an appropriate sample size for qualitative research is not defined. The literature specifies that the recruited sample must be sufficient to reach data saturation. In their book on qualitative research, Sullivan and Forrester (2019, p132) outline that the research question and theoretical approach will guide the sample size and they describe data saturation as the point in collection and analysis when no new codes are evident from the data. Braun and Clarke (2019) indicate that there is little agreement amongst researchers on how or when this data saturation is achieved. They advise researchers to determine their sample size during the actual collection of the data when the researcher determines that adequate data has been collected to address the research aim and question.

For the current study 9 participants were selected based on their meeting the inclusion criteria of working as a coach for 3 years or more and having either a third level qualification in psychology or a coaching qualification. Participants comprised of five psychologist coaches and four non-psychologist coaches. 7 of the participants were female and 2 were male.

Materials

The researcher's laptop was used to record the interviews on Microsoft Teams and the interviews were transcribed using the facility for this in that platform. The researcher's mobile telephone was used as a backup audio recording. An interview guide was used by the researcher to ensure each participant was afforded similar opportunity to describe their perspective on the impact of their qualification on the relationships they form with their client/coachees.

Data Collection

The present study is a qualitative design and was conducted by way of semi-structured interviews by the researcher on an individual basis with each participant. An

interview guide was devised by the researcher using open ended questions, to ensure the aims and questions raised in the study were addressed. The guide was used flexibly with some questions being expanded on and some omitted or altered depending on the context of each interview. The participants were asked about their qualifications and working backgrounds, about the influence this has on their relationship with their clients/coachees as well as describing particular incidents in a coaching session and the impact of these on the coaching relationship. As this interview guide was not used before, the researcher conducted a pilot study with one participant for the study who was made aware of this and agreed to participate prior to the interview. The purpose of the pilot study was to ensure that data relevant to the research question was obtained as well as affording the researcher the opportunity of timing the interview and allow for any necessary adjustments. As no changes were required, the data used in the pilot study was used in the main analysis. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim and ranged in length from 25 to 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Firstly, as this is a qualitative study, it is acknowledged that the beliefs and assumptions of the researcher can influence data interpretation. The researcher became interested in coaching after studying a coaching psychology module as part of her undergraduate studies and had no prior knowledge in this area. This study is driven by the researchers own curiosity about coaching particularly given the current prevalence of many and varied models of coach training available.

Having transcribed to text the data from the audio recorded interviews, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. This type of analysis suited the exploratory nature of this research as it is independent of epistemology and theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis is inductive and suits the social constructivist approach involved here which is data

driven and allows for a greater understanding of the research topic to arise. involves six clear phases of thematic analysis. The first step is familiarisation with the data which was brought about not only by the researcher transcribing verbatim the audio recordings, but also by repeated listening to them and re-checking the transcribed data, prior to destroying the audio recordings. Further familiarisation occurred from the researcher reading and re-reading the transcripts to generate codes. These codes were produced by highlighting recurring subjects on the typed transcripts and writing notes to identify common features. Thirdly groups of codes were collated into possible themes and sub-themes which were checked to ensure a reliable representation of the data was produced. These themes and sub-themes were then reviewed to ensure no additional data was missed in the coding stage and an initial thematic map was then produced (Appendix E). Next, the essence of each theme was defined to ensure themes accurately captured the data relevant to the research aims and question. Finally, these themes and sub-themes were written up in a way that truly reflected the data collected and were included in the final analysis of results.

Results

This section outlines the themes that were captured from analysis of the data in the interview transcripts of the nine participants. For ease of reference, participants who are psychologist coaches will be identified by the letters “pc” after their participant number and participants who are non-psychologist coaches by the letter “c”. It should also be noted that participants used the terms “coachee” and “client” interchangeably and in both cases they are describing the person who is being coached. Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) methods four main themes were identified in reporting how the participant’s perception of their relationship with their client is informed by their qualifications, which were either psychological or non-psychological. These themes are (i) Coach’s understanding of themselves, (ii) Coach’s understanding of the client, (iii) Defining of boundaries, (iv) Willingness of the coachee to engage.

Theme 1: Coaches Understanding themselves

Participants identified understanding themselves as a very important factor in the quality of relationship they form with their clients. This understanding of themselves was shown to have been derived from either their training, their own self-knowledge, attending supervision and in some cases by attending therapy themselves.

Participants spoke of how their training deepened their understanding of themselves and this was common to both psychologist coaches and non-psychologist coaches. As one participant put it:

.....training brought a level of self-awareness to understand that I'm not just coming as somebody who's there, able to help the person in front of me. I'm coming as a person with all of my stuff that will impact the way I interact with the person in front of me. And so the understanding of the psychology and the psychological background

has advanced that in me in the way that I engage with somebody, so I'm much more observant and much more self-aware. I'm much more conscious that how I experienced the person may be as much about me as it is about them, and none of that I would have got in my previous life coaching training or in my NLP training. It just you know, it wasn't part of it, but it's certainly something that's become much more em part of my awareness now from the training that I have in the coaching psychology... P1 (pc)

This participant had trained in life coaching prior to studying psychology and felt it was the psychological training that brought about the improvement in her relationship with her clients. Another participant spoke of what she learned during her coaching training “about professional conduct has definitely had an influence on my relationship with my client.” P6 (c). This participant also spoke about the emotional impact of the coach and “how the coach shows up and presents and connects with the client” as coming directly from her coach training P6 (c).

The data also illustrated that the participant’s understanding of themselves in general and their level of self-knowledge was a major influence in their relationship with the client. Participant 9 (pc) spoke of getting his “head right before a coaching session” with a top-level banking executive. Participant 7 (pc) echoed these sentiments in the following extract:

...I think maybe this is the thing like I would say in answer to the question about the relationship. I think, and for every single psychologist, therapist, coach.... until it becomes clear to us that the clients cannot be seen in any way other than through our own conditioning and our own reactions and our own defences, then we just, we’re just in a in an illusion, aren't we? That there are no clients, we’re just playing out our own stuff. And then? And so I think the clients come in, they press all our buttons,

they show where we're being hypocritical, they clean our words up, and then and then there's the privilege of knowing, knowing the client for what they are. Which is that space of potential and possibility. Until then, we're like blinkered, aren't we? ...”

From this it is clear that the coach's self-knowledge is a key factor in the success of the relationship they form with their clients.

Another aspect the participants attributed to informing their relationship with their client, came from engagement in supervision as part of their coaching practice. Participant 2 (c) spoke of how “absolutely essential” supervision is to her developing her relationship with her clients and said:

...and I tend to bring my deepest, darkest secrets to my one to one supervision and my supervisor there. Again, she would know more about me than many other people in the world actually so. So again, she understands my patterns, she holds my practice memory for me. So, she holds you know the themes that I want to work on, as in developing my own self-awareness of my own practice and she also holds what I am always bumping up against again and again. So I have quite a I have a driver around hard work and around not taking rest. And so she would kind of remind me of that... P2 (c)

From attending supervision this participant found herself better able to form successful coaching relationships leading to better outcomes. Another coach spoke about the role supervision played in assisting her in her time management which aided her relationship with her clients P6 (c). However, attending supervision was less common among psychologist coaches, with four of the five of these participants commenting that they did not know of any supervisor they could attend. On the whole, the psychologist coaches did not view supervision as necessary as they deal with people who are mentally healthy. One recalled

when supervision was first introduced for coaches and viewed it as necessary only for counsellors. Instead, they spoke of seeking advice or assistance from peers.

A fourth area the data indicated informed participant's knowledge of themselves informing the coaching relationship is the area of therapy. Many participants spoke of giving the client the benefit of a mentally well and healthy coach and four of the participants including both psychologist and non-psychologist coaches spoke of attending therapy for themselves and how this directly impacted their ability to form a good relationship with their clients. Participant 5 (pc) spoke of having therapy for grief after a death in the family, as did participant 4 (c) who also had counselling following a bereavement. Both reported dealing with clients who had also suffered a bereavement and how attending therapy had assisted them in the coach client relationship. They both expressed how the relationship deepened as a result of the understanding of themselves they developed after attending therapy. Two other participants spoke of how attending a therapist themselves improved their relationship with their clients, although they did not elaborate on their reasons for attending.

Theme 2: Understanding the client/coachee

This next area which was derived from the data is the participant's understanding of their client or coachee and how this informs the relationship with the client. Most participants indicated that their relationship with their client was informed by their understanding of the client and analysis of the data indicated they attributed this to one of three main sources: the training the coach underwent, the personality of the coach and the experience of the coach.

In terms of training, both psychologist coaches and non-psychologist coaches advised their training had directly impacted the relationship they had with their clients. One participant spoke of the relationship with the client forming "the heart of all the study and the work..." she had undertaken, and she referred to herself as "a relational coach" P2 (c).

Another participant spoke of the most important aspect of the coach/coachee relationship as “the biggest thing was building rapport and that was key to everything in NLP, so that is the basis of my coaching approach” P3 (pc). Another participant spoke of her training as informing her skill of building the relationship with her clients as follows:

...as a class we were allowed to watch an intake with psychiatrists and the patients within the hospital. So again, I suppose having been exposed to that, I saw first-hand.... you know you could see somebody making a connection and you could see what that looked like and then because we would see several psychiatrists at work, we could see maybe somebody who was better at that... P5 (pc).

This participant said she learned from early in her training what forming a positive relationship actually looked like and so knew what she was reaching for in her own client work. Similarly, participants reported the requirement to have a good foundation in understanding people with one participant stating, “I mean, ...you have to have a really good understanding of people and how people function, and so certainly my coaching has moved to the next level since I've started studying the psychology and the coaching psychology, particularly” P1 (pc).

Other participants however, felt that the basis of forming a good relationship with the client had more to do with the personal qualities of the coach themselves, their personality or their temperament. One participant felt that some people are better suited to coaching than others, despite the training, and stated:

...From my experience and I've been at this game for a long time, there's some people who are good in this area and some people who aren't...., but there's a huge correlation where people can almost get people to do things 'cause they have that enthusiasm. They have that rapport; they have that motivation. They have those set of

skills. And so those skills are not something that you can just pick up from a book. I supposed what I'm trying to say is it is down to personality. P4 (c).

These sentiments were echoed by participant 8 who said of his understanding of his coachees “I think it's a combination of where I grew up and who I am, and experience of working with young people for a long time” P8 (c).

This brings the next aspect of the findings to the fore. Like participant 8 above, a couple of participants indicated that it was a combination of both training and personality or training and experience that were the dominant factors in their understanding of the client. One participant said after speaking about her training, that “it was also a bit about who I am as well. I was always a good listener. Always.” P3 (pc). Another participant said:

....it's maybe the marrying of the individual character, mine in that instance, and maybe that training and some of the things I would have seen before instinctively let me know. ...that what I needed to do was be a person in that room with her and be a real person. Let her see the real person and let her see that she could be a real person that she didn't have to have any barriers up P5 (pc).

This participant stated that it was a combination of who she was as well as her experience and training that informed her relationships with her clients.

Theme 3- Defining boundaries

The next theme produced from the data is how defining boundaries with the client is of great importance in creating and maintaining a good relationship. Various elements comprise this theme including the presence of a coaching contract, having a clear distinction between what is coaching and what is therapy and consequently what occurs when boundaries are ill-defined.

A small number of the participants mentioned the coaching contract, both psychologist coaches and non-psychologist coaches. Participant 1 (pc) described how the coaching contract was used to set out how the coaching would progress and before "...taking a client on that I would identify maybe that these things will be there, so I would ask some very clear questions in my contracting, and this is something that comes out from coaching psychology ...". P1 (pc). For non-psychologist coaches, the coaching contract was also important both for agreeing what the purpose of the coaching was as well as such things as the length, cost and number of sessions. All participants who used a coaching contract felt this improved the relationship they had with their clients as it brought clarity to the coaching relationship.

All participants mentioned both coaching and therapy and the boundary they perceive exists between the two. Participant 9 spoke of meeting a client who was concerned about her mental health and he described the conversation:

"... and she went ...well I'm worried about this and I think there might be something there. I was going ... so let's imagine that we fix all this stuff up. That stuff is still going to be....driving everything that you do and she kind of went... yeah. So, I wentwhat do you need to do to figure out that? And she went .. well, I need to go to the doctor and get it.... get a diagnosis. And then I can come and talk to you, OK?..." P9 (pc)

This participant continued to coach the client after she had been to her G.P., received a diagnosis and also clearance to work with a coach. This participant described himself as having "some very good boundaries between me and them anyway.." when talking about his coaching practice. He said his psychology background helped him recognise there might be

something there that he was not “qualified to sort out, and frankly that will get in the way of this coaching anyway... and probably just derail it”. P9 (pc).

Other participants were not so clear on the boundaries and one described a conversation with a client who said “... oh God I feel like this is counselling...” and described him as becoming very uncomfortable. P6 (c). In this participant’s view this client was not willing to engage in the coaching process as “he had stuff he didn’t want to face..” and she also described their styles as being “mismatched”. Another participant who did not have a psychology background, spoke of assisting clients with trauma and depression and did not see a boundary between coaching and therapy.

Theme 4 – Willingness of Coachee to Engage

The final theme that was evident from the data was the role the coachee plays in forming a good relationship with the coach. All participants referred to this at some stage in their interviews. There were two main issues identified here, one being where a coach is brought in to work with a client by a third party for example an employer, and secondly where a client is initially engaged with the coaching process and then for some reason becomes reluctant.

Two of the participants spoke about working with clients who had not directly engaged them. In one case it was the client’s employer who engaged the coach and he found this a difficult relationship to establish as there was a lack of trust at the beginning, P9 (pc). He described his dilemma in doing his job as “how do you keep it so that you’re not betraying one or the other?” P9 (pc). In this case he described being brought in to deal with an issue that the manager had not raised with the client, and how he would only begin to work with the client after the manager spoke to the client first “as otherwise you end up in an

ambush” P9 (pc). He could then do his job by working with the client and “pull it down to a couple of behaviours that the person wants to work on” P9 (pc).

Another participant described working with a teenager whose parents had engaged her and said “... I knew within 20 minutes and I said you know this isn’t working and your parents are paying and you know I asked them to leave...” P4 (c). She said this was enough to shift the relationship and they then began to engage in the coaching process. A similar experience was recounted by another participant who recalled an incident with a client who was not engaging in the relationship. The outcome here was different as the client never really engaged and so the outcome was not successful.

Participant 2 (c) described an encounter with a client who had happily engaged with the coaching session but later contacted the participant to express her dissatisfaction with the process. This participant was taken aback by the contact as the client had not displayed any signs of dissatisfaction while they were working together. She could not account for the client’s reluctance to further engage and she herself wanted to engage further with the client, which was not an option. All she could do was bring it to supervision to see if she could learn anything from the situation.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the coach's view of how the coaching relationship was informed by their qualifications, and through qualitative method of interviewing them, explore their subjective experiences of the coaching relationship in practice. The participants were either psychologist coaches or non-psychologist coaches. Thematic analysis was conducted on the interview data gathered, and four main themes were found outlining the participants views on the impact of their qualifications on their relationship with their clients. These themes are a) the coach's understanding of themselves, b) the coach's understanding of the client, c) defining boundaries and d) the willingness of the client to engage in the coaching relationship.

In relation to the theme of the "coach's understanding of themselves", all participants referred to this as informing their relationship with their clients. Where participants differed was in whether they viewed this self-knowledge as coming from their qualifications and training, coming from their own knowledge of themselves or coming through attending supervision or attending therapy. There was no clear distinction between the psychologist and non-psychologist coaches in relation to their view on their own self-knowledge. Where the main difference occurred was in the area of supervision, with only one of the five psychologist coaches attending supervision, compared with half on the non-psychologist coaches. However, as this is a qualitative study with limited participants, not too much can be deducted from this finding. The aspect of a coach's own self-knowledge is reflected in the literature, with research indicating the coach themselves is a factor related to outcomes in the coaching process (Stober, Wildflower, & Drake, 2006; O'Broin & Palmer, 2006).

The participants who reported gaining self-knowledge through attendance at supervision is a finding that is reflected in the literature on critical moment research which

suggests supervision assists coaches in recognising their contribution to interactions in a coaching session (Day, De Haan, Sills, Bertie, & Blass, 2008; de Haan, 2008). The process of reflective writing is often used in supervision and by reflecting on critical moments in coaching, coaches report gaining insight into their own thoughts, beliefs and actions and hence gaining more self-knowledge. This then has a positive impact on the relationships they have with their clients.

It is widely reported in coaching research that the relationship between the coach and the coachee is one of the most important factors in positive outcomes for the coachee. Most participants in this study identified their understanding of the coachee as a significant factor in this relationship. The qualifications and trainings they had undertaken, were identified by all participants as informing their understanding of the coachee, either exclusively or in combination with other factors. The other factors that participants spoke of were the coach's personal attributes such as personality or temperament and further the coaches experience in coaching. Interestingly, all of the psychologist coaches attributed their understanding of the client to their training, with some saying their own personal qualities, expressed as "who I am", also playing a part. This finding is in keeping with the literature where a meta-analysis on coaching provided promising evidence that professionally trained coaches produced positive outcomes (Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2013). However, this research did not specify what qualifications of the coach. Only one of the non-psychologist coaches attributed their understanding of the coachee to their training and the other three said it was their personality or who they were that informed their understanding of the coachee. This finding must of course be viewed with caution given the sample size and its unrepresentative nature, as this is qualitative research exploring the participants perceptions of their coaching experiences.

The third theme of defining boundaries was again identified by most participants. Only two participants consistently used a coaching contract to specifically outline boundaries, one being a psychologist coach and one a non-psychologist coach. Other participants occasionally used a coaching contract, to cover matters such as length and number of coaching sessions as well as costs and insurance. Most participants had experience of the boundary between therapy and coaching and spoke of occasions when incidents happened in a coaching session. In general, the psychologist coaches said they recognised when a coachee presented with issues that went beyond what was appropriate for coaching and several psychologist coaches spoke of referring coachees for therapy rather than engaging in the coaching process. In contrast to this, three of the non-psychologist coaches who had coachees expressing concerns about their mental health, did not talk of referring them or discuss the possibility of therapy with them. This would appear to bear out a concern that is reflected in the literature of non-psychologist coaches not dealing appropriately with mental health issues (Berglas, 2002). However, once again this is qualitative research and quantifying results such as this could be misleading.

The final theme is one of the coachees willingness to engage in the coaching process and this is reflected in the literature (Bluckert, 2005; O'Broin & Palmer, 2006). Given that the current research aims to explore an aspect of the relationship between the coach and coachee, it was anticipated that this would be a prominent theme. However, only a small number of participants mentioned it and mainly in a negative way. One participant spoke of a dissatisfied coachee making contact after the coaching session and not wanting to engage further and another spoke of a coachee who did not engage until the coach suggested ending the session. Perhaps the willingness of the coachee to engage is only noticed in its absence. Or perhaps social desirability played a role in the responses during the interview process, which could in turn have influenced this result.

Strengths and Limitations

One of the major strengths of this study is that it is not limited to executive coaches as much of the available literature, particularly regarding the coach/coachee relationship focuses on the executive coach. The coaches who participated in this research had a wide variety of practices and while including executive coaches, also included sport coaches, life coaches and personal coaches. A further strength is again related to the population studied, as this study addressed a gap in the literature by qualitatively investigating the coaching experience in Ireland. There is a dearth of literature on coaching in Ireland, outside of sports coaching, and the researcher was only able to identify one study which focused on Ireland as part of a much larger study (Angulo, Passmore, & Brown, 2019). That particular study was a quantitative one and so did not give the richness and depth of data collected as part of this study. The exploratory nature of this study was facilitated by the qualitative design and the thematic analysis facilitated a non-ridged analysis and interpretation of the data. The interview process allowed participants to speak to their experience of their coaching qualification on the coach/coachee relationship and this would not be possible through a quantitative design.

Nonetheless, qualitative research can be criticised for exactly that phenomenon i.e., that the data generated is subjective and therefore not generalisable. However, given the dearth of scientific literature in Ireland on coaching, qualitative research can illuminate areas that may then be suitable for further investigation perhaps via a quantitative approach. A further limitation that warrants a mention is the purposive sampling method employed which may have given rise to some bias within the findings. The researcher selected the participants based on clear criteria, and participants were either a psychologist coach or a non-psychologist coach. Given the time constraints involved and the prolonged recruitment process, the researcher only recruited 9 participants who met these criteria, and a larger

sample may yield further themes for exploration between the two groups. Although most of the participants were not known to the researcher and were recruited via a snowball method, there is always the possibility that responses given may have been influenced by a desire to give a correct or appropriate answer, however this did not appear to this researcher to be the case as the participants presented as open and generous in what they shared.

Clinical implications and future research

This research adds to the small amount of research on coaching in Ireland. The rich data gathered from the coaches interviewed has given a novel insight into the coaches view of their qualification on the coaching relationship. It is not a straightforward matter of psychologist coaches having one particular view and the non-psychologists a different one. Each individual coach displayed their own individual view of their qualification and how it influences their relationship with their coachees. What may be of interest to future researchers is a mixed method approach to firstly collect survey data on a larger number of coaches and their training and education and compare that with a qualitative analysis of their views of this training on their practice. It may also be useful to gather data on the year of qualification as coaching is an emerging area and it is expected that training for both the psychologist and non-psychologist is evolving also. This could then inform future training.

What was clear from this research was all participants reported their own self knowledge as the most important factor in informing their relationship with their clients. Perhaps future research on coaches in Ireland could consider if there are certain personality types that are more likely to become involved in coaching in the first instance. This study looked at the coach's self-perception of their qualifications on their relationship with their coachees and future studies might look at this from the coachees perspective to see if there are any patterns there. This study is important for future coach training of both psychologist coaches and non-psychologist coaches, as it appears that the training undertaken was not the most important factor in assisting coaches in actual sessions with clients.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your qualifications in both coaching and any other qualifications you hold prior to coming to coaching, if applicable
2. Tell me about your work experience in both coaching and any other work you carried out before coaching or any other work you are currently engaged in
3. Describe how your qualifications inform your relationship with your coachees
4. Describe any experience you have of critical moments in a coaching session
5. Tell me how your qualifications assisted you or did not assist you in dealing with any critical moments you experienced in a coaching session, and if not what did
6. Do you think your relationship with the coachee was impacted by any critical moment and if so can you describe in what way?
7. Do you attend supervision? If so, describe what this lends to your coaching practice. If not, is there any particular reason?
8. Describe how attending supervision affects you and if it has an effect on your relationship with your coachees
9. Do you think it is necessary to have a qualification in psychology to work as a coach
10. Is there anything that you would like to mention regarding your qualifications and how they affect your relationship with your coachees?

Appendix B

Letter of Introduction

My name is Lorraine McCoy and I am a final year student in the National College of Ireland.

I am carrying out a research project as part of my undergraduate studies to lead to a Bachelors Degree in Psychology. It is my final year project.

I am conducting a study on the coach coachee relationship and whether having a formal qualification in psychology has any impact on this.

Taking part in this study will involve answering questions in an audio recorded interview with me. The interview will be one to one and should take between 30 and 40 minutes maximum. The audio recordings will be transcribed. Once transcribed, the audio files will be destroyed. If you are interested in taking part I would be obliged if you could contact me at my college email and provide the following information:

Do you have a third level qualification in psychology?

Do you have a coaching qualification?

Have you been practising as a coach/ psychologist coach for 3 years or more?

My email is x16148649@student.ncirl.ie

I thank you for taking the time to read this and I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix C

Participant Information Sheet

Project Title

An exploration of qualifications on the coaching relationship

I am a final year psychology student in the National College of Ireland and am interested in exploring the effect, if any, a formal psychology qualification has on the coaching relationship. My research will be supervised by a faculty member of the College and ethical approval has been obtained from the Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

I plan to conduct my research by way of audio recorded telephone calls using an online platform, Microsoft teams. My questions are open ended and relate to your experiences as a coach. I am seeking to interview coaches from both psychology backgrounds and non-psychology backgrounds. The questions will relate to your work as a coach and your training and background. I will record the calls and transcribe the data. Once the data is transcribed the audio calls will be destroyed. The data will be stored by me in a de-identified way and only I will know the identity of the participant. I will ensure your confidentiality at all times. I will request your written consent to taking part in the study prior to the interview. This will be by way of you signing the consent form at the end of this information sheet and emailing it to me before arranging an interview time convenient to you. Please type your name on the signature line as evidence of your signature

TIME COMMITMENT

I anticipate the interview will not take any longer than 40 minutes and there will only be one interview.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

You may decide to stop being a part of the research study at any time during the interview without explanation. You have the right to ask that any data you have supplied to that point be withdrawn/destroyed. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Any data collected from you can be withdrawn by you up to the point where I have written up the results for inclusion in my final year project. You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you without any penalty. You have the right to have your questions about the study answered. If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, you should ask the researcher before the study begins.

BENEFITS AND RISKS

There are no known benefits or risks for you in this study.

Participation in this study involves answering questions about your work as a coach. It is not anticipated that answering these questions will carry any risk other than perhaps mild anxiety or unease in answering the questions.

COST, REIMBURSEMENT AND COMPENSATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary and there is no compensation for your participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY

The data we collect do not contain any personal information about you after it has been transcribed. Prior to it being transcribed, your identity will be known to the researcher alone. While the data is being transcribed, any identifying data (for example your consent form) will

be stored in a separate location for the audio recordings and both will be treated with strict confidentiality. No other person will be in a position to link the data you provided to the identifying information you supplied. As advised, once the data is transcribed the audio recordings will be destroyed. The data will form part of my final year project and will be presented to my supervisors.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

My supervisor Colin Harte will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time.

His contact details are colin.harte@ncirl.ie

Appendix D

Debriefing Form

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of practising coaches and whether holding a formal qualification in psychology impacted the relationship between the coach and the coachee. In carrying out this study both psychologist and non-psychologists are being interviewed. The data collected is confidential and is analysed for common themes. I use the themes I identify to write up the results of my research. The data collected from the participants is not identifiable in the finished project. You can withdraw your data at any point up to when I have written it up in my final year project.

If you do wish to withdraw your data, please contact me at the details below. If you have any queries on any matter relating to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor at the contact details below.

If you have experienced any anxiety or distress because of taking part in this study, I have given details below of organisations who can provide help and guidance.

Once again, thank you for taking part in this study.

Lorraine McCoy Email: X16148649@student.ncirl.ie

Supervisor: Colin Harte Email: colin.harte@ncirl.ie

AWARE SUPPORT LINE: Phone: 01 661 7211; Address: 9 Upper Leeson Street, Dublin 4

IACP (Counselling and Psychotherapy): Phone: 01 2303536; Address: First Floor, Marina House, 11-13 Clarence Street, Dun Laoghaire, Co Dublin

Appendix E

Thematic map

