

Academic Paper

Developing Adaptive Expertise in Executive Coaching

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Abstract

Although the coaching industry appears to place great value on developing coaching effectiveness, absent from the discourse is coach decision-making. This study explored the construct of adaptive expertise - judgement under uncertainty, in order to better understand 'good coaching'. A case study approach, within an interpretative epistemology, entailed the separate videoing and debriefing of two coaching sessions. Findings suggest a need for coaches to create a framework for critiquing their own reasoning, with implications for coach education and research. One question that arises from this study is how we understand non-conscious drivers of coach decisions.

Keywords

decision-making, adaptive expertise, executive coaching, judgement, ambiguity,

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Introduction

With few barriers to entry and no single governing body, the coaching industry faces an on-going need to maintain its credibility. Credibility is supported or undermined by the quality of practitioner practice. In this regard, clients need to be confident in the abilities of their coaches. Equally, self-development is in the interests of coaches of all ability levels and experience. Consequently, as the industry professionalises (Gray, 2010), multiple stakeholders are motivated to understand what 'good coaching' looks like, and how to develop it.

The term 'good coaching' has different meanings for different stakeholders (Myers & Bachkirova, 2019). To date, the approach taken by professional bodies to ensure quality of provision has been to evaluate coaches around prescribed core competencies. Bachkirova and Smith (2015) have discussed the limitations of this approach and Garvey (2011) also considers competencies inadequate to deal with complexity. Consistent with these positions, the current study was premised on the belief that greater attention should be placed on developing adaptive expertise (Barnett & Koslowski, 2002; Collins, Burke, Martindale, & Cruickshank, 2015), in order to facilitate coach development. Adaptive expertise is closely related to the concept of *phronesis* - a practical wisdom

where judgment is based on the ability to deal with uncertainty, a true barometer of professionalism (Gray, 2010).

During coaching sessions the coach is constantly making judgments: what they pay attention to, what they choose to respond to, the intention of the response, and how it manifests. These decisions materially impact the direction of a coaching session, and consequently influence perceptions of coaching effectiveness. The dynamic and complex nature of such decisions (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012) is supportive of a focus on adaptive expertise.

Although decision-making is largely absent from professional bodies competency frameworks, it appears to be implicit within many of those competencies. For example, one indicator of competence for the Association for Coaching is asking powerful questions to help a client move forward (Association for Coaching, 2012). One of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council's (EMCC) eight competency categories requires a coach to adapt one's approach in response to client information (EMCC, 2015). The inference appears to be that a coach will know *how* to decide what may be an appropriately powerful question, or *how* to adapt one's approach. The antecedent mechanism that leads to demonstration of such competencies, i.e. the process of decision-making, is absent from competency frameworks.

One decision-making competency that is identified by professional bodies is intuition, and a coach's ability to 'go with the gut' (International Coach Federation, n.d.). This view suggests one's gut should be trusted. A more nuanced understanding of decision-making could help coaches develop their capabilities, increasing confidence in knowing when to use their intuition, in turn reducing their experience of self-doubt (de Haan, 2008).

This study aimed to explore coach decision-making processes in order to facilitate the development of adaptive expertise. A novel study design, adopting a rare micro-perspective, was created to answer the following research questions:

- How do coaches make real-time decisions during coaching sessions?
- What is the nature of coach decision-making?

This article is structured as follows; a literature review that critically evaluates the extant knowledge in this area, identifying the need for further research; a methodology that describes the philosophical underpinnings of the study and justifies the methods adopted; a findings section which depicts two themes, illustrated via participant quotes; a discussion section where findings are interpreted through the prism of broader literature; a conclusion where implications for coaching stakeholders are discussed.

The decisions of interest in this study were moments in which a decision could materially influence the direction of a conversation. These have been referred to as 'decision points' (Klein, 2015, p. 165), where other plausible options exist.

To clarify what is meant by decision-making, I adopt the definition used by Yates and Tschirhart (2006), of a decision as 'a commitment to a source of action that is intended to yield results for specified individuals' (p. 422). In this regard, decision-making is broader than simply consciously evaluating amongst options.

Literature review

With a couple of exceptions, decision-making is conspicuous by its absence from the coaching literature. Most texts (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. A greater number of empirical

studies exist exploring characteristics of expert coaches (or synonyms thereof), but they often view expertise through personality attributes (e.g., Lai & McDowell, 2014). Such studies are predominantly macro in design, and often limited methodologically. For example, Dagley (2010) used a qualitative design to understand the practices of exceptional coaches. Participants were 20 human resource professionals who purchased coaching services, but did not receive coaching. As such, their descriptions of capabilities of exceptional coaches can only be considered to be speculative.

The role of decision-making in coaching expertise studies is rarely discussed. Where the coaching literature *does* reference decision-making, it is in regard to intuition. Although several scholars emphasise the importance of intuition, there is a lack of exploration as to what it is, or how to develop it. Indeed, suggestions as to how to improve decision-making skills more generally are largely absent from the coaching literature (Corrie & Lane, 2013). Two empirical studies (Sheldon, 2018; Mavor, Sadler-Smith, & Gray, 2010) have explored intuition in coaching, both focusing on the output of an intuitive process. No known studies have explored decision-making processes, or what factors may influence such processes. In fact, other than intuition, the nature of coach decision-making has been left unexplored.

Decision-making therefore seems under-researched in coaching. In contrast to previous macro studies, this study adopted a micro design in order to expand the current knowledge base by exploring the decision-making *processes* of coaches during sessions. That is, it sought to understand why coaches make particular decisions during sessions and how they choose between decision options. Adopting a process perspective supports a better understanding of how decisions are made, which forms the basis of adaptive expertise and helps coaches improve their professional judgment. In this regard, this study draws on research in the related profession of applied sport psychology (Martindale & Collins, 2013).

Methodology

This study adopts an ontological perspective that decision-making exists independent of observation (Sayer, 1992). The focus on underlying decision-making processes assumes that such processes cannot be readily accessed, and so a critical, rather than naïve reality (Easton, 2010) of decision-making is assumed.

The epistemic position follows from such a realist stance. Knowledge of the underlying processes that informed a decision can only ever be partial. Indeed, interpretation will always be a factor in this form of research (Carter & Little, 2007). Not only the participants interpretation of why and how they made decisions, but also the researcher's interpretation of their explanation. The researcher also affects the outcome by influencing the focus and direction of the interview. It is therefore not possible to be an objective researcher in this study. These considerations indicate an interpretivist epistemological position.

A qualitative case study design was chosen to answer the research questions. Case studies can be situated in multiple paradigms (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014), are "ideally matched" to critical realism (Easton, 2010, p. 127), and the study's primary research question of *how* decisions are made lends itself to a case study (Yin, 2003). It is further supported by research in other fields that have used case studies to explore decision-making such as Baxter & Rideout (2006) and Baxter & Boblin (2008).

Design and data collection methods

Two coaching sessions, of 20 and 25 minutes duration were observed and video-recorded by the researcher, who remained in the room during the sessions. In each case, the coachee chose the

coaching topic. Immediately thereafter, the researcher and coach (the coachee was not included in this part of the procedure) together debriefed the coaching session using the video as an aide-memoire. The debrief duration was 60 minutes in both cases. The process for each debrief was as follows; the coach was advised that the researcher was seeking to understand their decision-making during the session. They were asked to stop the video at any moment they felt they could provide insight into their own decision-making. Additionally, whilst observing the coaching session, the researcher made notes of any decision points considered relevant to the research questions. Consequently, the researcher at certain points also paused the video, in order to ask the participant questions.

The study design was intended to minimize memory bias susceptible within retrospective interviews, and to optimize quality of data collection. To that end, several prompts were created which had two main goals. Firstly, to help participants' better access their cognition by returning them to their real-time experience. Secondly, to provide a conversational framework that would facilitate answering the research questions. A pilot study helped inform the study design. As a result of the pilot, the debriefing session was changed such that the video played from start to finish, with the coach choosing to stop it at whichever point they felt relevant.

Participant selection

Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) was used for this study. Two female coaches, both known to the researcher, were approached and volunteered for the study. Both had extensive coaching experience; one six years, the other nine years. One held an MA Coaching and Mentoring Practice, the other was a WABC accredited coach. Because anxiety can adversely impact decision-making (Hartley & Phelps, 2012), it was decided that both coach and coachee needed to be familiar with each other and that this would not be their first coaching session together. As the quality of the debriefing component of the study was largely dependent on coach reflection, a judgment was taken that experienced coaches would more likely be proficient reflectors than novice coaches.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse and elicit knowledge from the data. Thematic analysis is consistent with this study's research paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016) and has been used in other studies taking a critical realist perspective such as Terry & Braun (2016).

Analysis closely followed the six phases advised by Braun & Clarke (2006). The two debrief sessions with the coaches were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The content of the coaching sessions was not transcribed. Each script was read once to establish familiarity. They were read again, listening concurrently to the audio recording of the debrief to establish accuracy of transcription and to note intonation of language, pauses etc. They were then read in conjunction with watching the coaching session in order to re-establish the context of the debrief. Multiple further readings were made of each transcript in order to immerse myself in the data.

Codes were then generated, which entailed highlighting words or phrases that seemed pertinent to the research question. Codes were a mix of descriptive summaries of the text, and interpretations that sought to find underlying meanings in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Various approaches were used in an attempt to control for researcher bias when coding the transcripts, as well as continually questioning one's own assumptions in an attempt to raise awareness of any biases (Mauboussin & Callahan, 2014).

The codes were subsequently collated into potential themes. Being clear as to what counts as a theme and explicating how they are generated is important for demonstrating research quality. Themes in this study reflect interpretive choices and as such are consistent with the underpinning

interpretivist epistemology. That is, themes are conceptualized as ‘outputs’ of a deep analysis of underlying codes. As such, they are not summaries of what participants said, but are central organizing concepts built from codes in order to capture implicit meaning within the data (Clarke, 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Themes needed to be internally homogenous and externally heterogeneous (Patton, 2005). To achieve this, all the codes within each theme were reviewed, adding or removing codes until coherence was achieved. Then, the entire data set was re-read in order to ensure the themes reflected the meanings across both case studies. Themes were then named based upon implicit meaning that tied the underlying codes together. The themes were; sense making and decision-making style.

Criteria of quality

Adopting the view of Sparkes (1998), that qualitative studies represent alternative paradigms to post positivistic research, the criteria of credibility and confirmability (in contrast to internal validity and objectivity) were used to achieve trustworthiness (Sparkes, 1998).

Reflective notes were used during data collection and analysis in order to provide an audit trail and substantiate confirmability (Vaismoradi et al, 2016). A reflective diary was used throughout the research process. Reflective notes were also made during data analysis, where answering questions such as; Is this an observation of data or an interpretation? What assumptions underpin this interpretation? Could there be another interpretation?

A detailed exposition of data collection and analysis methods is intended to enhance credibility (Mays & Pope, 2000). The space given to describing data collection and analysis is critical to demonstrating transparency and minimizing ambiguity when the reader attempts to understand what happened to the raw data in order to arrive at results (Malterud, 2001). Alternative, and disconfirming examples that seemed to contradict the themes were also sought.

Findings

Two themes were generated in relation to decision-making within the data set; sense making, and decision-making style.

Theme 1: Sense making

Sense making revolved around reducing ambiguity by better understanding the coachee:

“So what I want to do is get inside your logic so I can better coach you. There is that element of understanding where you’re coming from and making sure I get it.” Coach B

Both coaches appeared to take a perspective that the coaching session was partly about solving a problem, which seemed to be underpinned by various assumptions they made during the sessions. At the beginning of their session, coach B’s decisions were driven by an awareness of incomplete information.

“I’m not sure if I’m making assumptions at this stage, so I need more data and I get as much data (as I can).” Coach B

There were deliberate attempts to minimise assumptions, and to test hypotheses in order to validate any assumptions she may have made.

On occasions the coaches may have *unknowingly* made assumptions. For example, coachee 2 had been expressing her frustration at not being listened to by her friend. When describing the physical environment in which their chats would take place, this provoked a reaction in coach B:

"I had this whole 'aha' moment....so I thought this explains a lot of the not listening... I thought if I'm having this aha moment then she is having the aha moment." Coach B

This reaction perhaps served a useful purpose, in that it supported the coach's confidence that the session was going well:

"(It) made me feel that the direction of travel was the right one in that moment. I didn't need to go in a different direction." Coach B (emphasis added)

This is consistent with seeing the session as a problem to be solved. The coach had received information (noisy kitchen) from the coachee, as being a causal factor explaining the nature of the problem (making sense of someone not listening). This in turn supported her confidence in her analysis. The session then proceeded on the basis that she had made an accurate assessment. The useful purpose of increased confidence in direction of travel may have come at the cost of crowding out alternative possibilities.

Similarly, at one point, when discussing a sensitive topic, coach B noticed the coachee adjusting her necklace. The coach considered this to be symbolic:

"It's massive. It's personal. She says it's nothing personal and you realise how the whole thing is intensely personal - so again, something is dawning there." Coach B

The coach clearly believed this was a significant moment. However, it cannot be concluded that the coach was correct in her interpretation of the necklace adjustment. Nonetheless, it provided a source of information that served to increase her confidence in her sense making. The signal informed an assumption, hence driving underlying decisions.

Less obvious assumptions were also made. Coachee 2's coaching topic centred around tension in the dynamic with a close friend. The coach chose an approach that focused on developing her coachee's resourcefulness. An alternative approach could have seen this topic through a relational lens. The perspective taken by the coach illustrates how decisions within coaching sessions are embedded with assumptions.

Theme 2: Decision-making style

Decisions did not seem to be characterised by a single decision-making style. Rather, they varied between being deliberate and spontaneous in nature.

Deliberate decisions

During the post-session debriefs both coaches mentioned that their decisions were 'conscious.' My interpretation is that they were actually referring to a decision being deliberate rather than simply their conscious awareness of a decision. To illustrate, coach B described the approach she took to manoeuvring the conversation in a particular direction:

"She was in a flow and I didn't want to break that flow either. But I just wanted to redirect the flow away from the closed relationship with 'M' in order to go back at the end. So that was quite conscious." Coach B

Decisions were not just deliberate, but also deliberative, in that they entailed considering and possibly discarding, alternative courses of action:

“Part of me thought ‘well that’s a whole other topic, do you not want to be held to account for some of these more irregular conversations’. But I parked that because it wasn’t really the point.” Coach A

Another feature of the deliberative processing of decisions was each coach’s awareness of their own thoughts. In this regard, they were independent observers of their own thinking.

Spontaneous decisions

In contrast to the deliberate nature of decision-making, many decisions appeared to be spontaneous in nature. Both coaches referred to the role of instinct. Coach B believed that instinct was her strength as a coach, and its use was preferable to accuracy of decisions:

“Your instincts are the strongest part of your coaching so don’t try and bury it with correct process, because that works for you.” Coach B

Two points are worth highlighting here; firstly, that coaches were not attempting to find the ‘best’ decision; and secondly, that in many cases they did not weigh up alternative options:

“I don’t recall thinking particularly creatively what the right next question is. It just came out.”
Coach A

I take the view that the non-conscious nature of decisions may be explained as intuition rather than instinct. Coaches were unable to explain how their thoughts reached the level of awareness, therefore interpreting them as instinctive. However, intuition also involves non-conscious processes, and its association with feelings and a sense of embodiment are more consistent with language used by the coaches:

“I could feel that there was a disconnect between what she said she wanted to talk about and the level of energy and commitment she had. I could feel that.” Coach A

Discussion

This section advances the debate towards a better understanding of how to improve coach judgment. It focuses on two discussion topics; the nature of coach decision-making and improving judgment.

1. The nature of coach decision-making

One of the research questions enquired into the nature of coach decision-making. This can be considered from the perspective of decision-making style, as well as the dynamic context within which decisions were made.

Intuitive vs analytical decisions

Findings from this study support the premises of previous studies that coaches draw on intuitive judgments. Many decisions involved coaches experiencing thoughts spontaneously, which suggests tacit processes at work, consistent with intuitive processing (Hogarth, 2010). Furthermore, the monitoring of environmental factors, such as coachee body language and tone of voice could have been a form of pattern recognition, which is known to underpin intuitive judgment (Klein, 1993; Okoli, Weller, & Watt, 2016). Both coaches also reported ‘feelings’ influencing their reasoning, indicating a somatic component to decision-making, again consistent with intuition (Bechara, 2006; Bechara & Damasio, 2005).

One difference between this study and previous findings is the relationship between confidence and intuition. Although intuitions were associated with more confidence in this study, the direction of causation appears to be opposite to that posited elsewhere (e.g., Mavor et al., 2010). In experiencing her 'aha' moment, coach B reported feeling more certain that she was going down the right path. Confidence followed, rather than preceded, this moment.

The finding that coaches used an analytical/deliberative style of decision-making in addition to intuiting, raises some interesting questions; which is the more dominant style; is there a preferred sequence of reasoning, such as intuiting first and then analysing one's intuitions; how does one's environment influence reasoning strategies? One perspective is Hammond's (2000) cognitive continuum theory, which suggests that decision tasks can be classified as analysis-inducing or intuition-inducing. The task environment will determine which reasoning style is preferable. This study did not aim to illuminate this point, but results do suggest that analytical modes of decision-making were used to evaluate ideas, with intuition informing creativity. If coaches are to use more than one decision-making process, more needs to be understood about how the most desirable process varies with context.

Similarity to naturalistic decision environments

When viewing the findings of this study through the lens of decision-making theory, there appear to be significant similarities to that of Naturalistic Decision Making (NDM). This approach explores decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, ill-structured problems, inadequate information, shifting goals and time pressure (Flin et al., 2008). The process of sense making in this study appeared to be a function of the uncertainty emanating from incomplete and ambiguous information. These factors suggest that the decision-making environment within which the coaches operated was akin to that of NDM.

Furthermore, the study's findings suggest that the decision-making processes of both coaches reflected those associated with decision-makers in an NDM environment. Although different NDM models for the process of decision-making have been proposed for specific contexts, (e.g., fire-fighting; Okoli et al., 2016), common to all models are two stages: situation assessment and deciding what to do (Flin, O'Connor, & Crichton, 2008). Situation assessment entails gathering information as part of a 'survey' of the environment. The purpose of situation assessment is to help the decision-maker create a mental model, which explains the situation. Both coaches engaged in a process of questioning, and gathering information to form a view as to how they might direct the conversation. This appears synonymous with situation assessment.

After situation assessment, the second stage is deciding what to do, which can involve various decision-making methods. Naturalistic decision-makers tend to rely on the 'recognition-primed decision' (RPD) method. This intuitive approach, which is quick in nature, is founded upon recalling patterns stored in long-term memory that are derived from previous experiences. This seemed to be the case in this study, where both coaches remarked several times that their decisions were instinctive. Consistent with this, decisions within the recognition-primed model are automatic with little conscious deliberation.

One of the challenges in transposing the RPD model to a coaching environment involves the nature of pattern recognition. The sub-conscious mind links a current problem with past experiences (Chater 2018; Okoli & Watt, 2018). More experience leads to greater pattern recognition, with the consequent likelihood that any given situation will match a pre-stored pattern. However, the effectiveness of this process is premised on past experiences providing *useful* information for the current situation. The challenge is to ascertain if coaching environments are sufficiently 'kind' (Hogarth, 2010), in that they allow appropriate lessons to be learned. It seems unclear if patterns that are consistently repeatable within coaching can usefully inform accurate decisions.

The potential limited applicability of the RPD model suggests that Cohen, Freeman, and Wolf's (1996) 'recognition/metacognitive' (R/M) model may be relevant. The R/M model identified a flaw in the RPD model that novel situations may not allow decision-makers to draw on existing mental models. In such situations, the R/M model posits that decision-makers must rely on metacognitive skills that facilitate critiquing initial pattern recognition via a more deliberate process. Effective decision-making would hence rely on how analysis and intuition work together.

Adopting a different perspective, yet related to the limitation of pattern recognition, Dorfler and Ackermann (2012) make a distinction between intuitive judgment and intuitive insight. Whereas pattern recognition is useful for intuitive judgments, they theorise that another form of intuition is known as intuitive insight. It is drawn upon when new knowledge is created and is particularly relevant in domains requiring creativity (Kounios & Beeman, 2015). It may have been the process of intuitive insight that explained the coaches experiences of spontaneous thoughts within this study, rather than the pattern matching of intuitive judgment

2. Improving judgment

Three sections within this discussion topic explore how to develop better judgment; situational awareness, creating a systematic process, and metacognition.

Situational awareness

Situation assessment by coaches is maintained through a process of continual information gathering and interpretation, known as situational awareness (Flin et al., 2008). This is influenced by how people process information. Once information is gathered, it is interpreted and assimilated with knowledge structures (mental models) stored in memory (Flin et al., 2008). These mental models help interpret information, but errors can be made if incorrect mental models are used. Coach B's 'aha' moment may have been an example of overconfidence bias, after which there was no subsequent hypothesising during the session by the coach. This is consistent with overconfidence bias prematurely closing information search (Kahneman, 2011) and this 'early return' illustrates the phenomenon of self-deception in coaches (Bachkirova, 2015, p. 6).

Another obstacle to maintaining a broad perspective is the tendency to associate certain behaviours with personality traits, known as implicit personality theory (Schneider, 1973). Once coaches form an opinion on a coachee's personality, they are likely to selectively attend to factors that align with this perspective. One de-biasing technique is to actively consider alternative interpretations, as this limits the likelihood of bias in subsequent information processing (Arkes, 1981).

Creating a systematic process

The ambiguity and anxiety that characterises coaching sessions create a challenge for any coach to decide 'what to do.' An appropriate starting point could be gaining awareness of which beliefs underpin the prism through which they approach coaching sessions, illustrating the role of the self in coaching (Bachkirova, 2016). In respect of the research question asking how coaches deliberate between choices, it would seem that their world-view was a mediating factor.

A coach's personal epistemology is central to their philosophical, and consequently practical, approach. Coaching can be considered an environment where knowledge is created that facilitates change. Therefore, a coach's view on how knowledge is created is important. The link between beliefs about knowledge creation and coach behaviour has been referred to as the epistemological chain (Grecic, MacNamara, & Collins, 2013). Different epistemological positions will impact coach decision-making, the coaching process and, by implication, the coaching relationship

Within the framework of philosophy, a coach's approach to change will not solely be a function of their beliefs about knowledge creation. Lane and Corrie (2012) posit that a coach's interpretation (situation assessment) of a coachee's story will depend on his/her therapeutic approach, which will fit into one of three broad categories: the personal, interpersonal and systemic. A personal view will orient the coach towards considerations of the factors of a story that are within the coachee's control. Within this category, accuracy of decision-making is primacy. The interpersonal perspective is concerned with relational considerations, impressing the importance of coachee narrative. A systemic view is that causes of the coachee's issues cannot be located within the individual.

The aforementioned considerations surrounding philosophy offer an alternative stance on evaluating coaching effectiveness, which is to consider a coach's reasoning processes. There are many circumstances where a coach cannot know what works. Therefore, understanding *why* coaches make decisions, their reasoning and alternatives considered, are important to the development of adaptive expertise.

Clarity about one's philosophical position would enhance reflective practice by enabling coaches to create criteria upon which they can evaluate their effectiveness (Crowther, Collins, & Holder, 2018). This is consistent with Bachkirova, Clutterbuck, and Cox's (2010) view that a uniform assessment of best practice is not possible given the different world-views underpinning coaching approaches.

Metacognition

The ability to maintain situational awareness, and to articulate why one makes a decision seem bound by a common skill: metacognition, or 'thinking about one's thinking' (Flin et al., 2008). Metacognitive skills facilitate thinking *well* (Claxton & Lucas, 2007) by allowing coaches to modify their mental models and minimise self-deception by noticing when they 'fall into traps' (Bachkirova, 2015, p. 16). This is the essence of *adaptive expertise* identified in the professional judgment literature (Martindale & Collins, 2013). This has implications for coach educators, who will need to play the role of facilitators of learning rather than providers of knowledge.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore decision-making processes of coaches, in order to facilitate the development of adaptive expertise. From a critical realist perspective, a case study design was used to explore the nature of decisions, and how coaches discriminated between choices. Decisions seemed to be framed by a process of sense making, informed by environmental uncertainty, akin to other naturalistic decision contexts. Assumptions played a key role in the sense making process. Whilst decisions were both deliberate and spontaneous in nature, it remains unclear what factors inform spontaneous decisions and under which circumstances coaches should rely upon them.

Coaching scholars interested in factors that underpin coaching effectiveness may be advised to direct their attention towards understanding how coaches develop adaptive expertise. Indeed, for all stakeholders, greater emphasis should be placed on a coach's capacity to reason *why* they make particular decisions.

Developing decision-making skills and judgment should be goals of professional development. This study is supportive of the view that educators should help coaches develop curiosity towards different perspectives (Myers & Bachkirova, 2019). To this end, greater use of techniques that have successfully been used in counselling psychology (McEwan & Tod, 2015) may be beneficial. For organisational coaching sponsors, questions to ask coaches could be: what frame of reference might guide your deliberations during sessions; which type of coaching topics would be less/more compatible with your approach; how does your coaching philosophy constrain your practice? Such

an approach would be a more useful indicator of adaptive expertise, in contrast to objectives measures of 'good coaching' that are grounded in (and constrained by) a modernist philosophy.

Coaches need to be aware of contextual factors that will guide them towards either accurate or constructivist framings of judgment. Awareness of framings of judgments facilitates consideration of alternative perspectives. This awareness will be enhanced by continual critical reflection and reflexivity, shaped by an appreciation of the philosophical underpinnings of one's practice.

A key question for future research to address is whether non-conscious drivers of coach decisions *actually* reflect intuition. Applied cognitive task analysis (Militello & Hutton, 1998) could be a methodology that would help provide an answer. This would form the basis for an exploration of whether or not intuition in coaching can be trained. It would also be informative to learn how decision-making processes vary according to coach experience, philosophical approach and across cultures. Finally, understanding coachees' perspectives of coach decision-making would be desirable in future research.

Study limitations

The primary limitation to this study is the ability of coaches to access their cognition. In reality, coaches will only be able to achieve this indirectly via their own interpretations of their decisions. It cannot be assumed that this necessarily reflects the actual explanation for a decision. Non-conscious bias is an inevitable possibility when recalling and explaining decisions. Furthermore, coaches may consciously create a narrative during debrief that fits their wish to present an expert decision-maker image to the researcher. To mitigate the latter, both coaches were selected who were well known to, and had rapport with, the researcher in order to minimize any ego defence mechanisms.

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