Should 'The Grey Space' be Front of Mind for the Coaching Psychology and Coaching Community more so now due to COVID-19 Pandemic?

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Abstract

This article presents preliminary findings from research exploring the lived experiences of coaches and coaching psychologists navigating the boundaries of coaching and therapy when working with coachees on stress management and resilience; suggesting that these findings may inform and benefit practitioners during these precarious times of COVID-19 as we as practitioners may find ourselves in 'the grey space', where the boundaries between the therapeutic space and the coaching space become blurred. This is particularly the case when considering the levels of distress and functioning our coaches bring to coaching, which may be affected by the undercurrent and impact of the pandemic. This therefore requires coaches to be skilled in boundary management, with the ability to navigate the boundaries of coaching and therapy, suggesting that this is not as clearly defined as theory suggests.

Key Words: Boundaries, stress management, therapy, coaching, coaching psychology, COVID-19 coronavirus.

Introduction

The rationale for this article has evolved from me currently undertaking a Professional Doctorate of Practice in Coaching, where I am investigating "'The grey space': How can I and other coaches improve the practice of dealing with ethics and managing boundaries in the grey space when working with coachees experiencing stress?", and the current context, the impact of the global pandemic COVID-19, and the implication that may have on us as coaching psychologists and coaches. Particularly, the impact of COVID-19 on stress and mental health. I suggest that there may be an increase in coaches navigating the grey space, due to the current global pandemic, and therefore calling for increased acknowledgement, awareness and

consideration of how to navigate these times for coaching psychologists/coaches and supervisors.

Stress: a 'wicked problem', like nothing we have seen before!

In my article "The Role of Coaching Psychology and Coaching in 'The Grey Space'", where I outline my current PhD research (Cundy, 2019), I present a case for stress being a 'wicked problem' (Brown, 2010).

Palmer and Cooper (2013) define stress as "stress occurs when pressure exceeds your perceived ability to cope" (p.7). Moreover, research reveals that stress is at an all-time high (Mental Health Foundation, 2018). As a result "it could be argued that we are faced with an entry point into inquiring into stress as a wicked problem" (Cundy, 2019, p. 60). "An entry point for an inquiry into a wicked problem is usually some wake-up call, crisis event, a new idea, or shift in social expectation" (Brown, 2010, p. 65). Furthermore, research has shown that by tackling stress we would make great strides in dealing with mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression (Mental Health Foundation, 2018).

More than ever, we are aware of the negative implications that chronic stress has on our mental and physical health (Palmer & Cooper, 2013), as well as our relationships, personally, professionally and with ourselves, including our quality of life (Crouter, et al., 2001). Consequently, a case is presented that coaching may be seen as a practice which could support the '(re)production' of society (Gherardi, 2009) in abating and "managing stress, and in the development of resilience"

(Cundy, 2019, p. 61). As Palmer and Cooper (2013) suggest, there may be less perceived stigma surrounding coaching because it is viewed more positively then that of therapy/counselling. Thus, suggesting that individuals may view coaching as more accessible and consequently more open to confronting the concerns pertaining to stress, prior to the difficulties becoming clinical (ibid). However, it is at this juncture that the edges between therapy and coaching may become obscured, "entering a 'grey space'" (Cundy, 2019, p. 62). This brings with it considerations of ethics and practice, and how we as practitioners navigate this terrain, as this becomes even more relevant in our current climate.

Will we be seeing more grey space due to COVID-19?

In light of the impact of the current pandemic, I suggest – now more than ever – that we as practitioners need to pay attention to the grey space (ibid).

We have hit a new level of stress, due to COVID-19, and so coaching psychologists and coaches must now be aware of the implications for our practices. We are living through unprecedented times, with the full impacts of COVID-19 unknown yet, and with the potential for them to be far reaching. We are already beginning to see some of these impacts from a mental health and resilience perspective. There is no question that the pandemic and, more specifically, lockdown, is going to have a long-term impact on mental health.

Research carried out by Mind (https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/5929/the-mental-health-emergency_a4_final.pdf) illustrates

the scale of the effects: 65% of adults over 25 and 75% of young people (aged 13–24) with an existing mental health problem have reported worsening mental health. More than 1 in 5 adults with no previous experience of poor mental health now describe their mental health as poor or very poor. Furthermore, factoring in increased anxiety around returning to work, Bupa (https://www.bupa.co.uk/newsroom/ourviews/return-to-work-anxiety) found that 65% of British workers are worried about this, as well as the future impact of the end of schemes like furlough and mortgage holidays.

On a global level, the United Nations released a policy, 'COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health' (https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief-COVID-19_and_mental_health_final.pdf), reporting increased levels of symptoms of anxiety and depression than usual, documented in various countries – and it seems likely that the full ongoing psychological impact is yet to be seen. As a result, we may be seeing more and more of our coachees shift into the grey space (Cundy, 2019).

The grey space

The indistinct boundaries between therapeutic and coaching work are depicted in Figure 1 (*right*). The sections of this image represent the two spaces; the therapeutic space as black and the coaching as white. This image illustrates how the boundaries between the two are not clear-cut. Rather, depending on the coach, coachees and context, these boundaries can bleed into each other at times, creating a 'grey space', where boundaries become blurred (Cundy, 2019).

Boundaries within the coaching

Figure 1: Image depicting Boundaries between Therapeutic and Coaching Work *Source:* **http://dans-le-townhouse. blogspot.ca/2012/02/simple-but-striking-diy-painting.html**

relationship perform several roles for both coach and coachee; offering transparency to the coach regarding appropriate practice, including acting as a benchmark to discern expectations (Popovic & Jinks, 2014).

On reviewing the current literature relating to the boundaries between therapy and coaching, ethical procedures and guidelines, I concluded that there are no clear-cut margins, but more vague, generic guidance, which is at times conflicting (Cundy, 2019, p. 64).

The difference relating to concern within coachee-therapy and coachee-coaching is ambiguous (Bachkirova & Cox, 2004).

Furthermore, there appears to be "discrepancy between the espoused ideas of what coaching 'should' be and the reality of what happens in real-life coaching practice" (Grant, 2007, p. 250). Rather, that the boundaries between the practice of coaching and that of the therapeutic terrain can bleed into each other at times (Cundy, 2019). Moreover, Grant (2007) presents questions surrounding coachees who present or experience mental health problems during coaching as "do such issues exclude them from coaching?" (p. 253); creating further questions as to how we as coaches can work ethically with coaches who may have, or may develop, anxiety and depression, taking into consideration the current figures mentioned in Mind's report (2020) because of the current climate.

Furthermore, Joplin (2007) presents a case that there is a 'fine line' and even a 'fuzzy space' between what signifies coaching and what starts to become therapeutic territory. Grant (2007) proposes that one key distinction is that of working towards the coachees' goals, where mental health/mental illness and coaching goal striving can reside alongside each other (Keyes, 2003).

Keeping within the boundaries of coaching, a coaching psychologist's/coach's primary focus is not on alleviating psychopathology or concentrating on distress; instead, it relates to the assistance of helping coachees in articulating goals and supporting them in systematically striving for goal attainment (Grant, 2007). "These goals may be developmental or focused on enhancing performance or acquiring a specific set of skills" (p. 250). Such skills may be the development of adaptive coping strategies. It is here that I propose that,

through the development of adaptive coping skills, stress can be managed, affecting the individual's trajectory towards the clinical population; suggesting that an ameliorative essence occurs when working within the grey space (Cundy, 2019).

We may already be seeing such examples, through the work of Project 5 (https://www.project5.org/volunteersarea), where both coaching and counselling interventions are on offer to NHS staff, in a bid to support them during these challenging times resulting from the pandemic. Additionally, psychological coaching may be viewed as a primary or secondary intervention, dependent on what the coaching goal is, where our counselling/therapy may be considered as tertiary interventions (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008).

Further supporting my argument that coaching within the grey space contains within its process ameliorative strategies, particularly pertaining to stress and challenging emotions, I believe that coaching can assist those individuals who are "distressed but functioning" (Grant, 2007) as an ethical practice. Cundy (2019) suggests that, rather than coaching impeding the therapeutic/counselling communities, or hindering individuals who suffer with mental health illness to received appropriate support, coaching can "seen to be 'filling a gap' and serving an area of the population that may be currently 'slipping through the cracks'" (Cundy, 2019, p. 66). This may be more poignant than ever, due to the mental health implication because of COVID-19, as discussed earlier.

Consequently, this had led me to my research investigating how coaching can offer a framework for the development of

adaptive coping (Grant, 2007; Palmer & Cooper, 2013; Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008); primarily the ameliorate implications this may hold, in addition exploring a richer understanding of how one may manage this work whilst remaining within the ethical and boundary consideration of coaching, thus safeguarding best practice (Cundy, 2019).

Preliminary research results to aid navigating the grey space, particularly during the pandemic

I am currently undertaking a Doctorate of Professional Studies in Coaching, investigating "'The grey space': How can I and other coaches improve the practice of dealing with ethics and managing boundaries in the grey space when working with coachees experiencing stress?" It is fair to say that that, on a global level, due to the pandemic, we are experiencing unprecedented times, with increased levels of stress. I suggest that knowing how to navigate our practices as coaches will be even more precarious as a consequence of COVID-19. Therefore, I present my primary findings, as this work may be viewed as timely.

My research aims to investigate the lived experience of how coaches navigate ethical and boundary issues when working with a coachee on stress management or when a coachee presents that they have or may be having a mental health issue. I surmise that this is not a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, with much being left to the coach's discernment, and that there are moments when the coaching work enters what I define as 'the grey space' (Cundy, 2019).

For this particular paper, the findings from the 'cross-boundary experts' appear to be most relevant because they may offer insight

to coaching psychologists/coaches as to what further actions they may like to consider as we may experience more of the grey space as a result of COVID-19. My preliminary research findings from the first cycle of my action research are presented, offering ways in which we as practitioners may bolster our practices when navigating the train of the grey space (ibid).

An action research inquiry was conducted, with the incorporation of a retrospective critical reflection and autoethnographic personal reflexive narrative, and drawing on Constructionist Thematic Analysis (CTA) to draw out themes between action research cycles. CTA (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to draw out the themes during the first cycle of the action research workshops (in total there are two cycles of action research), as well as the one-to-one, 60-minute interviews with the cross-boundary experts, which were transcribed and analysed utilising CTA. I define cross-boundary experts as individuals who have had significant influence on progression in the field of coaching psychology and coaching, in addition to having begun their careers as clinical psychologists, counselling psychologists or psychotherapists. They are established experts in the field of coaching/coaching psychology, who have a 'foot in both camps'; their other foot being in clinical, counselling psychology, psychotherapy and therapy.

Themes:
Bring in your definition of coaching in contracting

This brings the recommendation for practitioners firstly to become clear on their own held definition of coaching. There are many nuanced definitions of coaching,

Table 1: Constructionist Thematic Analysis Findings and Themes

Cross-Boundary Expert Suggestions Navigating the Grey Space
Bring in your definition of coaching in contracting
Increase supervision sessions during periods of grey space
Find a supervisor willing/comfortable to explore grey space
Peer-to-peer support
Clarity on your offering as a coach
Continued learning – not becoming complacent – regardless of experience – does not mean you are an expert on every individual
Signposting is vital where appropriate
CPD – foundations of mental health and emotions
Note: Those who are worried about doing harm are usually less likely than those who feel/think they know how to navigate every situation

dependent on which board/body you may be associated with, or which area you are coaching in, such as executive, health or life coaching. The following are two such examples. The International Society for Coaching Psychology's definition is: "The practice of coaching psychology may be described as a process for enhancing well-being and performance in personal life and work domains underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established adult and child learning or psychological theories and approaches" (https://www.iscpresearch.org/what-is-coaching-psychology/). The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching as "partnering with coachees in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential" (https://coachfederation.org/about).

Furthermore, how one coaches may also depend on the training or ontological view held by the coach. Such an example is coaching from a social constructionist/postmodern position, which is defined as: "third generation coaching views coaching in a societal perspective, and when society changes, coaching as a specific form of interaction has to develop further: the mission of third generation coaching is to develop sustainability by putting stronger emphasis on values and meaning-making – away from a sometimes limiting focus on goals towards a stronger emphasis on aspirations, passions and values" (Stelter, 2014, p. 51).

This theme calls for all coaches to be reflective, reflexive and to know oneself because these held definitions and views will inform the lens through which one works.

Secondly, relating to having clarity on your held definition and ontological positions, this needs to be explicitly defined as well as the type of coaching on offer during initial contracting with a new coachee; thereby providing transparency and offering the coachee an opportunity to discern if this approach resonates.

Through the view of COVID-19 we can consider this theme to be relevant and timely, as many individuals will have been impacted by COVID-19 in one way or another. As a result, some coachees' existential anxieties (Yalom, 1980) may be brought to the fore. By ensuring that we are transparent with our lens and ontological position of our coaching, we will go some way to provide the space to open up conversations surrounding how and where our type of coaching can support, and where it cannot.

Increase supervision sessions during periods of grey space

When working with a coachee in the grey space (Cundy, 2019), 'distressed but functioning' (Grant, 2007) space, as previously mentioned, there is a likelihood of an increase in psychological material surfacing, which practitioners will need to navigate. Therefore, the suggestion of increased supervision to support the practitioner in navigating this period as well as ensuring best practice on behalf of the coachee, is derived. As previously mentioned, when navigating the grey space, "decisions, such as, if, when and how coaching can continue, may not be a 'one size fits all' approach, with much being left to the coach's discernment" (Cundy, 2019, p. 64), including the "willingness and ability of both

coach and coachee to work with personal/ psychological material" (Maxwell, 2009, p. 82). Therefore, increased supervision assists in navigation during these moments.

With the current impact on mental health and well-being due to COVID-19 (Torales, et al., 2020), it is fair to suggest that we may be navigating the grey space even more now as coaches. Therefore, increasing our supervision support may be more helpful than ever.

Find a supervisor willing/ comfortable to explore grey space

In addition to increased supervision when navigating the grey space (Cundy, 2019), the selection of the right supervisor is crucial. Drawing from the interviews, the theme of willingness and comfort became apparent. Ensuring that one has a supervisor who is capable, able (through training), experienced (with psychological knowledge) and willing to act as a guiding light through navigating this space is essential.

Furthermore, due to the impact, both personally and professionally, that COVID-19 may have on us as coaches, ensuring that we have the right supervisor may be especially vital now, not only to facilitate the navigation of this terrain but also to draw on supervision during these times as a space to 'resource' ourselves as practitioners (Henderson & O'Riordan, 2020).

Peer-to-peer support

It is suggested that practitioners form peer-to-peer support networks or groups during times of navigating the grey space (Cundy, 2019). This may perform and have benefit on multi-levels, such as: reducing feelings of isolation that practitioners may experience;

acting as sounding boards; performing as peer-to-peer supervisors; and creating a space for shared learning.

I suggest throughout this paper that we may find ourselves as coaches navigating the terrain of the grey space more so at this current time due to COVID-19. Therefore, the resource of peer-to-peer support may be indispensable as this may create an additional resource of support for us as coaches because we will all be experiencing the impacts of COVID-19 in our work. Maben and Bridges (2020) highlight the importance of peer-to-peer support in order to enable positive recovery after stressful periods. Furthermore, Page (2020), suggests that peer practice groups have four main benefits to coaches 1) learning, 2) networking, 3) continuous professional development and 4) peer to peer supervision.

Clarity on your offering as a coach

Much in the same way that the theme of 'Bring in your definition of coaching in contracting' speaks on which definition of coaching one adheres to, dependent on ontology or the association one seeks membership of, it informs the lens in which one coaches, so one must gain clarity on one's coaching offer. Therefore, defining one's offering and niche are important factors for creating clarity and the ability to explicitly define as well as the type of coaching on offer during initial contracting with a new coachee; thereby providing transparency and offering the coachee an opportunity to discern if this approach resonates because this will inform the lens through which a practitioner works.

When considering COVID-19 in a similar way to the theme 'Bring in your definition of coaching in contracting', many of the same principles apply. Ensuring transparency with our offering as a coach is particularly important, as coachees may be seeking support that exceeds the remit of coaching or it may not resonate.

Continued learning

I see a call for humility within this theme; a reminder of the importance of continued learning as a practitioner. In addition, compelling caution that one does not become complacent, regardless of the number of years or experience in practice, as well as an acknowledgement, regardless of professional experience, that one is not an expert on every or any individual.

The landscape relating to work, social and family life is constantly shifting at the moment as a result of COVID-19, in addition to the constant background 'current' relating to the unknown that the pandemic brings. It is vital that we as coaches develop our skills and knowledge during this time, particularly any additional skills required, and adapt practice accordingly. There are many such initiatives in place, including from the British Psychological Society (https://www.bps.org.uk/coronavirus-resources), the International Society for Coaching Psychology (https://www.isfcp.info/iscp-COVID-19-information/) and the International Coaching Federation (https://coachfederation.org/COVID-19-resources-for-coaches).

Signposting is vital where appropriate

The importance of knowing one's capabilities, and capacity, is vital, as well as

knowing when it is appropriate to engage in discussions regarding signposting; always coming from a position of the coachee's best interests.

This may be one of the most relevant themes in light of COVID-19, as we may experience more and more of our coachees experiencing mental ill health due to the pandemic, as presented earlier in this article. Therefore, we as coaches may need to feel comfortable to open up dialogues surrounding signposting our coachees to alternative forms of support, should it become apparent that the support required is beyond the scope of coaching.

CPD – foundations of mental health and emotions

To ensure that one can navigate the grey space, it is fair to suggest that, as practitioners, we should possess a basic understanding of mental health and emotions; not to act as information to diagnose. Rather, as a way of being able to navigate the terrain of the grey space. Within this theme, a view of being informed assists in gaining clarity relating to where one has capacity, and it is coaching work versus that of the therapeutic terrain.

Once again, with so many individuals' mental health being negatively impacted due to the pandemic, it is vital that we as coaches have a basic understanding, so that we can navigate training and coaching in an informed way.

Note regarding harm

This was not so much a theme; rather, a side note from several of the cross-boundary experts in the position of supervisor; suggesting that those

practitioners who were more concerned about doing harm are usually less likely to, in contrast to those practitioners who felt or thought that they knew how to navigate every situation.

Finally, what became apparent from the discussion within the action research groups is a need for coaches to 'normalise' what they are experiencing in their coaching work and to be given the space to acknowledge and discuss this. Coaches hold fear during these moments in the grey space (Cundy, 2019), and having support in navigating it is something they seek. Furthermore, now may be time to bolster our practices as coaching psychologists/ coaches. Henderson and O'Riordan (2020) suggest that the utility of the resourcing function of supervision during this time of COVID-19 may be a fundamental element of resilience and self-care as a practitioner.

These are preliminary findings, as I am currently completing the analysis of Cycle 2 of my action research.

Conclusion

The impact of COVID-19 is something many of us are likely to be experiencing at the moment and, undoubtedly, this means that we may find ourselves in the grey space with our coachees. As humans, uncertainty can be very destabilising, and there is much uncertainty around our health and physical safety due to COVID-19. We are all experiencing these underlying tensions to some degree, and no one has been left entirely unaffected by this pandemic. Things will not just return to the way they were. Too much has changed in our world, and the situation is still ongoing. What is needed now is a self-compassionate,

proactive approach that focuses back in on what centres us: our purpose and values.

Furthermore, I believe that, as coaching practitioners, we have a contribution to make. However, we also need to hold a deep awareness and acknowledgement for what we as a collective are currently experiencing because many people are moving further into the grey space (Cundy, 2019): a mental state where they are distressed but functioning (Grant, 2007). These individuals are not yet at the point where they require clinical intervention but they are operating in the area where lines between coaching and therapy can become blurred. Now, more than ever, we as coaching psychologists/coaches and supervisors need to be aware – informed – as well as ensure that we are taking steps to make sure that we can navigate the grey space. By so doing, I believe that the coaching community has much to offer in support of the impact the world is facing due to COVID-19. My hope is that this article will inform and benefit practitioners during these precarious times.

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Biography

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