

Book Review

Bachkirova, T., Spence, G., & Drake, D. (Eds.). (2017). *The SAGE Handbook of Coaching*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

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The Sage Handbook of Coaching brings research on diverse aspects of coaching together in a single volume, reflecting the limits and possibilities of coaching, both as a practice and as a field of study, at this time. Happily, the editors avoid the potentially negative consequences of imposing an ideological narrative on a field still in the process of finding itself, resisting the natural desire to define coaching at the outset. Instead, they recognize that there is currently no unified definition of coaching and embrace the opportunity to stage “an open inquiry into the nature of coaching, along with an examination of whether, and to what extent, such a unified definition might be possible” (p. 5).

The philosophical underpinning for the uncertainty that orients the Handbook is coherently articulated in Bachkirova’s opening article ‘Developing a knowledge base of coaching: Questions to explore,’ in which she contrasts (somewhat ironically, given postmodernism’s suspicion of binaries) modern and postmodern notions of truth, arguing that pragmatism might ultimately set us free from the seemingly insurmountable gulf that separates the two. With a pragmatic orientation in place, Bachkirova then situates the knowledge base of coaching in relation to other, related disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy and biology.

These multidisciplinary influences on coaching are also taken up by Simon Western in his chapter ‘The key discourses of coaching.’ Western distinguishes between four discourses shaping coaching today, highlighting the extent to which the word ‘coaching’ masks considerable differences between what coach practitioners, drawing on different discourses, actually do. To what extent can a life coach focusing on spiritual wellness really be said to be engaging in the same practice as a leadership coach focused on managerial effectiveness? I think this is a question many coaches struggle with as they differentiate and integrate knowledge from different discursive traditions,

pragmatically addressing client needs as best they can, and Western does a good job of bringing conceptual clarity to this question.

While these chapters offer rich opportunities for reflective thinking about coaching and its contexts, others simply bring together the research on a given topic, itself a considerable feat, given that the coaching literature is not contained within a few key journals, but spread across a wide range of publications serving different communities of practice. These literature review articles also serve the important role of evaluating the quality of the research findings, which I found especially helpful with regard to Adult Development and Neuroscience. When most coaches (at least in my experience) pick up their knowledge from webinars that serve the dual purpose of educating and selling, a more sober analysis of the validity of various experimental findings is welcome, especially when this is done with a full appreciation for both intuitive understanding and the importance of ongoing practical experimentation in the face of inconclusive evidence.

Some of the more interesting chapters challenge the status quo of current coaching practice. Hany Shoukry's chapter on 'Coaching for Social Change' calls for the critical pedagogy that is now commonplace in teacher preparation programs to be incorporated into coach training and development. In practice, this would mean coaches develop more social, cultural and political awareness, critical thinking, and self-reflectiveness, particularly around notions of power and privilege. Shoukry provides a strong ethical rationale for coaches to embrace not only individual concerns but also larger social imperatives.

Another challenge to the status quo comes from Gordon Spence and Stephen Joseph in their article 'Coaching for post-traumatic growth' which, as the title suggests, focuses on "the suitability of using coaching to help people grow through traumatic experiences" (p. 399). Long considered a big no-no as a result of a widespread fear of conflating coaching and therapy, the authors argue that "coaching has an important role to play during some of the most difficult periods of a person's life" (p. 399).

The volume closes with a reflective chapter titled 'Discipline, profession and industry: How our choices shape our future,' a meditation on the state of the coaching ... well, exactly how to finish that sentence is what the chapter is about. Is coaching a profession, and if not, why not? Is coaching a discipline, and if not, why not? These questions may seem solely academic (in the pejorative sense of the term), but for those of us who have embraced 'coach' as an identity, and 'coaching' as a scholarly interest, they are important. The

volume, then, for me at least, ends on a note of pathos as, despite the 750-odd pages dedicated to exploring the various dimensions of coaching, it is still not clear whether coaching has really come of age. It is still, perhaps, the optimistic step-child of psychotherapy, or the coercive tool of management. It still doesn't quite know what it is, or where it fits. While that can be seen as part of its aberrant charm – its inherent category-defying interdisciplinarity – it leaves actual coaches and real-life coaching scholars struggling to carve out a space for themselves.

How that struggle plays out ultimately depends on us, with the authors of the chapter, Annette Fillery-Travis and Ron Collins, concluding that

Whether it [coaching] becomes a fully developed profession or emerges as a distinct academic discipline remains, as with any practice, in the hands of its practitioners. It will depend on the direction they collectively take and on the impact they have on their clients and their businesses as a result. (p. 741)

We each, then, have a responsibility, to ourselves and to each other, to advance the theory and practice of coaching in a direction that aligns with our values and honors the ongoing developmental needs of our clients. How that collectively plays out over the next twenty years is anyone's guess, but I have little doubt that *The Sage Handbook of Coaching* represents a pivotal moment in that emerging narrative.

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