

## KEYNOTE PAPER

### **Beautiful ideas that can make us ill: Implications for coaching**

**Tatiana Bachkirova**

International Centre for Coaching and Mentoring Studies  
Oxford Brookes University  
Oxford, UK

**Simon Borrington**

International Centre for Coaching and Mentoring Studies  
Oxford Brookes University  
Oxford, UK

---

#### **Abstract**

A moral conundrum for philosophy of coaching is the noticeable parallel between the growth of the coaching industry and the unprecedented growth of mental health issues in western societies. Even if wellbeing of employees is not the only purpose of coaching interventions, they should at least not in any way be responsible for its undermining. Unfortunately, a number of 'beautiful ideas' which have become thematic in the coaching industry may be playing a detrimental role at both the personal level and for wellbeing of society as a whole. In this paper we focus on three: 'Positive Psychology', 'Mindfulness', and 'Transformational Coaching'. On the face of it these 'beautiful ideas' appear to be unquestionably beneficial. However, they have been largely accepted into the mainstream thinking of coaches without too much critical consideration. The aim of this paper is to explore the shadow side of these beautiful ideas for the wellbeing of people in organisations and the role of coaching in relation to them. Our intention is to start a challenging conversation about a paradoxical situation in which that which is meant to scaffold our wellbeing initiatives may be making significant contributions to a lack of wellbeing.

*Key words: 'beautiful ideas', coaching, wellbeing, auto-exploitation, aspirations*

---

#### **Introduction**

Coaching, alongside other practices aimed at helping people to live a better life and to be more fulfilled at work, is a growing industry. However, the

lack of personal wellbeing and accompanying mental health issues in economically developed societies also appear to be growing commensurably (CIPD, 2019; Ritchie & Roser, 2019; Follmer & Jones, 2018). This situation is clearly problematic and indicates a potential disparity between intended and actual outcomes. As such, it requires practitioners, such as coaches, to explore if what we are doing could be causing harm to our clients. It would be ethically negligent not to consider the possibility that some of our efforts might turn out to be counterproductive and actually conducive to the reduction of wellbeing. To initiate this inquiry, we aim to take a closer look at major ideas in coaching discourses that influence current practice. In our intention of being primarily relevant to work-oriented coaching, we focus on the issues connected to employment and organisational contexts.

The coaching discipline and industry are known for actively expanding skills and knowledge base by taking on board a wide variety of ideas (Cox, et al., 2014; Bachkirova, 2017). Some of these ideas are the outcome of recent theoretical advances, and some have a much longer history but have been reintroduced into current modes of thinking and have, thus, gained a new lease of life (Farias & Wikholm, 2015). These ideas can be useful but not necessarily in all situations. It is also possible that some of them may not always be appropriately applied. That this application would have been done with the best of intentions is not in doubt. Yet the possibility exists that coaches have been dazzled by the claims of these beautiful ideas, which may have resulted in the obscuring of the further possibility that there is, perhaps, a 'darker side' to them that only becomes visible in the longer run. In such cases the clients whom we had intended to support might find themselves to be even more troubled than they were initially.

Some of the 'beautiful ideas' that we are suggesting should be treated with caution are amongst the hot topics to be found in multiple self-help articles, HR staff advice packs and training days, and the vast number of popular psychology and coaching books that are currently flooding the market. Amongst them we count positive thinking, Positive Psychology, mindfulness, personal wellbeing, and transformation. The more 'beautiful' these ideas appear (as in the more difficulties they claim to solve), the more power they have over us and so may blind us to their 'darker sides'. In order to see both the beauty and the shadows, we need to take a few steps back and examine some of the wider cultural and historic contexts in which these beautiful ideas are embedded. It is important to scrutinise some of the debates that surround these ideas (e.g. Miller, 2008; Hackman, 2009; Farias & Wikholm, 2015; Luthans &

Avolio, 2009; Lazarus, 2003; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2016) with particular reference to their implications for coaching.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore potential issues arising from three beautiful ideas: Positive Psychology, mindfulness and transformational coaching. We start, however, with a brief consideration of the socio-economic context and debates that offer potential explanations for the mismatch between the growth of helping industries and the apparent increase of issues related to stress, mental health problems and the growing rate of suicide (Han, 2015; Illouz, 2008). Next, we offer our interpretation of this problem in the context of coaching that provides some foundation to our critique of beautiful ideas. Following the discussion of these three beautiful ideas we offer our position on the implications for coaching and propose some ways of mitigating unwanted influences.

### **The problem and the debates**

It would appear to be the case, on the surface at least, that there is a considerable amount of effort being made by organisations, and society in general, to encourage individuals (employees and citizens) to invest time and effort in the pursuit of their personal wellbeing and happiness (e.g. Middleton, 2017; Fujitsu, 2019). If one uses an established search engine to explore both academic and popular literature, with the search term “wellbeing initiatives in UK”, as many as 16,800,000 matches are returned (as of 29/1/20). A brief look at the first few pages of these returns is sufficient to gain a general feel for the main themes. For the purpose of this paper we have identified the following three themes.

#### ***Improving employee wellbeing for the productive good***

The first theme concerns the relevance and merit of investing in wellbeing. It demonstrates how important it is at a number of levels to promote personal wellbeing as an effective cost-saving and performance-enhancing strategy, beneficial to both employers and government. The logic is that citizens who are being well are in work and, therefore, reducing the financial burdens of sick-pay, benefits, etc. This means that productivity is maintained, doctor’s waiting rooms are de-cluttered, and given that the vast majority of people also prefer to be well, this is clearly a win-win situation. As the research from RAND Europe suggests:

“Health and wellbeing at work can have a profound impact on individuals, organisations and societies. Emerging research indicates that a healthier workforce is a more productive workforce, with fewer sick days taken and higher productivity when at work. As a result of this, more and more organisations are introducing initiatives to help protect and promote staff health and wellbeing” (RAND Europe, 2019).

This suggests that concerns about wellbeing are not based on an employer's altruistic commitment but more a means to an end for which a cost-benefit analysis is entirely appropriate, reducing wellbeing to a quantitative rather than a qualitative project (Middleton, 2017). We identify this as ‘improving employee wellbeing for the productive good’.

### ***Negative impact of contemporary working life on personal wellbeing***

This second theme indicates that although there are welcome signs of organisations taking a proactive approach to the issue of employee wellbeing, there are still plenty of concerns to be raised regarding the burdens affecting individual wellbeing in contemporary work culture. For example, a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) infographic that accompanies their 2019 report shows that although “..absence is at an all-time low, ...83% of respondents say people work when unwell... 63% say people use their holidays to work, or work when off sick [and] 37% report an increase in stress-related absence...”. Heading the list of main contenders for why employees have to take long-term absence we find ‘mental ill health’ and ‘stress’, which is not, according to the CIPD, a manifestation of psychological difficulty (CIPD, 2019).

On the whole this theme suggests that there appear to be a number of difficult issues around the wellbeing of a significant proportion of the workforce. This leads to debilitating experiences involving stress and a lack of mental wellbeing which can often lead to difficulties associated with mental illness (Follmer & Jones, 2018). For advanced civilizations, supposedly concerned with promoting and pursuing the general happiness of their citizenry (upon whom the continued civilized advancement of society seems to depend), this suggests that all is not as it should be and that, collectively, we should be taking a closer look at the finer details. These concerns are further emphasised by regular articles in the popular press (Pym, 2018; Wilson, 2018; Behar, 2020;

Campbell, 2019; Rice-Oxley, 2019) pointing to the fact that workplace stress and mental health is a hot topic demanding considerable attention.

It is worth noting at this point that where the impact of working life is recognised as contributing to a wellbeing deficit, there is some confusion as to where the responsibility for the alleviation of this difficulty lies. For example, the Wellbeing section of the 'Fujitsu in UK and Ireland website' includes the more general heading 'Corporate Responsibility', within which it is stated that they aim "to foster a Positive Health Culture at Fujitsu, an approach which supports a whole person, whole organization approach to Wellbeing...", the main aim of which is to "[empower] colleagues to take personal accountability for their Wellbeing... [as this is] important and we support colleagues by providing access to a number of Wellbeing resources and initiatives throughout the year" (Fujitsu, 2019). This seems to indicate that for Fujitsu, the responsibility for dealing with workplace stress is a matter for which the onus of responsibility lies with the individual employee. The employer will 'nobly' support them whilst not admitting that perhaps it is their workload practices that are in any way responsible. We will come back to this approach later in this paper.

### ***Searching for the cause of deficiency in wellbeing***

This third theme emerging in the literature concerns how we conceptualise the difficulties associated with 'being well' in contemporary society. This is particularly important in light of the fact that post-Enlightenment modernity has understood itself in terms of being a project that seeks to improve the lot of the individual citizen (Fishman, 1999). For example, identifying the cause of decline in wellbeing, it would be difficult to argue that the conditions of work are the sole cause of this problem. There is plenty of evidence in the history of work to suggest that there have been times when conditions of employment were considerably worse than they are now and that work-related contexts have always consisted of multiple stressors (Dickens 1854/2003; Thompson, 1963/1980). The existence of such historical facts makes laying the blame solely at the feet of current working practices an insufficient explanation. It requires asking what other factors may be causally contributing to the debilitating impact of modern life for our sense of wellbeing.

Depending upon how the response to this is framed from a political perspective, there are various explanations as to where the finger of blame can be pointed. Amongst these we find: the breakdown of traditional patterns of working relationships (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018); the deregulation of the

neo-liberal economy with its notions of ‘trickle-down’ benefits for all (Steward, 2012); or the inherent dialectical contradictions of historical materialism (Grant & Woods, 1995). They may all have some explanatory merit but, for us as coaches, a recent contribution to this debate suggests an interesting, and somewhat startling, possibility as an origin for our lack of wellbeing and high levels of stress and burnout – ourselves. We are, as suggested by the German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, in the grip of what he describes as “auto-exploitation” (Han, 2015, p.10).

Although Han’s (2015) book could be seen as something of a speculative polemic, containing a number of unsubstantiated claims that should be read with caution, his observations offer interesting insights as to why the contemporary culture of work may be contributing to the lack of mental wellbeing. The key point it makes is that the norms and expectations that comprise our cultural affiliation to late-modern capitalism feed our tendency for ‘auto-exploitation’. We just follow the inherent demands of an economic model that enforces maximum efficiency for both production and consumption. As such, we are exposed to a relentless cycle of aspiration: we no longer work simply to stay alive in a reasonably comfortable manner. We are now encouraged to work in order to function as effective consumers to maintain the economic environment that we inhabit. The idea that we are expressing our preferences and choices as consumers fuels our sense of autonomy and agency. However, this freedom is illusory as we are giving ourselves up to voluntary self-exploitation according to the implicit expectations of the socio-economic culture.

Whilst what Han (2015) claims (utilising something of a neo-Foucauldian approach) is only one possible explanation, his analysis appears to have some validity. He has identified a genuine worry about the changing face of late-modern capitalism that takes us from a ‘discipline society’ into an ‘achievement society’, where we exist as “achievement-subjects” (Han, 2015, pp.8-15). He proposes that this is a consequence of the ‘positivation of the world’ for which the dominant modal verb applicable to the normative expectations moves from ‘I should’ to ‘I can’. At work, this creates a situation when people exploit themselves without any need for management structures to motivate and compensate them for their effort. There is no longer any need for ‘you should’ because it is ‘I can’ that does the same work.

### **Making sense of the situation with relevance to coaching**

One possible consequence of being an achievement-subject participating in an achievement-society is what we refer to as the *double burden of continuous aspiration*. Of course, we are not going to be claiming that aspiration, in and of itself, is something bad and of no benefit to either individual or society. Targets and projects seem to be a fundamental requirement for human thriving and give meaning to one's existence (Sartre, 1999). To undertake an activity of any significance without a strong sense of aspiration would seem to render that activity meaningless and inauthentic. However, this is not the same as when aspiration is culturally instilled and relentlessly drives a person in such a way as to permeate all major aspects of their life. It is not hard to imagine how such an endless perpetuation of the need to achieve, and to be seen as achieving, might easily lead to an increase in mental health difficulties and a serious lack of individual wellbeing (Dunkley, *et al.*, 2003).

The above suggests how motivational ideas, such as 'aspiration' and the 'pursuit of achievement', which are clearly important to our individual and intersubjective thriving and wellbeing, can turn sour given a particular context and setting. This may leave us open to implicit manipulation for ends other than those that these concepts were originally best meant for, making them examples of 'beautiful ideas' that can make us ill.

From a coaching perspective, as professionals engaged in the facilitation of individuals maximizing their full potential, such debates indicate the importance of careful consideration of what objectives we side up with as 'ends-in-view'. It also requires consideration of what contribution these objectives have for a longer-term future of the clients and society as a whole. Most importantly we need to consider what claims we tend to make, and what should be the expected influence of such claims. It is possible that in spite of our best intentions to make the world of work as good a place as it can be for our clients, perhaps we have too easily and uncritically bought into some 'beautiful ideas'. These ideas might turn out to be doing more to exacerbate the clients' burdens than to alleviate them.

How did it happen then that professions concerned with caring for individual wellbeing and which aim to provide appropriate support may have become entangled by these 'beautiful ideas'? The socio-economic analysis provided by Han (2015) and the sociological analysis that can be found in the work of Illouz (2008) provide useful clues. Both of them and the interpretation

of these ideas by Mercaldi (2018) help to facilitate the formulation of our hypothesis about the possible unwitting role played by coaches in adding to the crisis of mental wellbeing.

Becoming a successful achiever/consumer through the process of auto-exploitation, as suggested by Han (2015), is connected with notions around the pursuit of happiness that have come to permeate western thinking – a pursuit that, according to John Locke, constitutes the “foundation of liberty” (Locke, 1975). This pursuit, identified with personal freedom at the origins of social liberalism, has given rise to a mode of discourse that has had significant cultural influence. Following Illouz (2008), we will refer to this as the ‘therapeutic discourse’. She deconstructs this as a manifestation of our contemporary institutionalisation of individualism in which the self withdraws from social engagement “... inside its own empty shell... emptied... of its communal and political content, replacing this content with a narcissistic self-concern” (2008, p.2). Illouz sees this turn of events, the normalisation of therapeutic discourse, as the expression of atomistic individuality that encourages us “... to put our needs and preferences above our commitments to others” (Illouz, 2008, p.2).

Although Illouz’s and Han’s analyses and interpretations can be challenged as lacking empirical data to substantiate their arguments, their central message seen in the wider context of mental health and wellbeing statistics is important. We might feel moved to agree that there may be something to their arguments. If individualistic aspirations and impoverished relationships, both in and out of the workplace, have made significant contributions to a decline of mental wellbeing it might be that our efforts to help clients to achieve their goals are contributing to increased detrimental effects to their own lives and to wider society as a whole.

Such worrying trends are not only visible in the workplace across multiple levels but are also identifiable in young people at adolescence and even earlier (Mental Health Foundation, 2020). This would seem to be a far from satisfactory situation for a cultural project, such as liberal democracy, that has always had as one of its key themes the maximization of happiness (e.g. American Declaration of Independence, 1776; Bentham, 1988, p.26). It is with this concern that we can begin to provide a clearer identification of some of the ‘beautiful ideas’ that can make us ill, consider why this might be, and think about what we might be able to do to protect both ourselves and our clients against becoming victims of their negative effect.



### **‘Beautiful ideas’ as a source of harms**

All that glisters is not gold”  
(Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*: Act 2 Sc.7).

The ‘beautiful ideas’ that we have in mind as not always being as benevolent and beneficial as they might appear includes self-help concepts such as positive thinking, self-realisation, and various activities encouraging people to take personal responsibility for their own well-being. These ideas regularly feature in self-help literature, leaflets and posters distributed in the workplace, in doctor’s waiting rooms, and via various digital outlets. Practitioners, including coaches, take them on board and implement them in their approaches to improve the quality of their clients’ lives and to help them to reach their goals (e.g. comprehensive reviews by Kemp, 2017; Francis & Zarecky, 2017; Lawton-Smith, 2017). Some approaches offer incremental steps for achieving change (e.g. Burke & Linley, 2007) whilst others sometimes make bigger claims promising dramatic changes to the clients’ self with multiple benefits to both their working life and their interpersonal relationships (e.g. Seligman, 2007; Brown, *et al*, 2007).

We need to make it clear that we are not claiming that any of these ideas are simply nonsense and of no practical merit at all – far from it. Both as professionals and as ‘ordinary citizens’, we draw on and adapt strategies from many contributions into our practice. Our critical attitude is aimed at the becoming-too-common tendency amongst some practitioners to accept these concepts uncritically and in a wholesale manner as being a ‘one-stop’ answer to every difficulty faced.

Furthermore, it is our feeling that these concepts and interventions are being manipulated in ways that remove the responsibility for managing the negative consequences and disquietudes of modern life from their true origins and shifting that responsibility solely onto the shoulders of the struggling individual. As a consequence of this, when they are applied unthinkingly and inappropriately, these beautiful ideas can, we suggest, contribute more to a lack of wellbeing rather than alleviating distress and unease as they are intended to do. Out of the list of possible ‘beautiful ideas’ that we feel might benefit from having a more critical stance applied to them, we focus on the following three as being most in need of immediate re-evaluation by coaches.

#### ***Positive Psychology as a ‘beautiful idea’***

There is considerable practical research supporting how important it can be for individuals to develop positive attitudes to life (e.g. Boniwell, 2008). This research explores how developing one's positive qualities and attitudes enhances one's state of wellbeing in the world. The Positive Psychology field has done much to provide evidence that can be seen to promote this idea (e.g. Gable & Haidt, 2005). However, in the hands of some practitioners the power of the positive psychology approach becomes an ideology and as the answer to all ills (e.g. Seligman, 2007; Driver, 2011); almost a contemporary analogy of the 'snake-oil' of the travelling Medicine Shows of the Old West!

Amongst some current practitioners, Positive Psychology is often promoted as the main theoretical foundation of coaching (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Linley & Harrington, 2005). The obvious concern in this case is that human nature appears to be one-dimensional. The second concern is that very little critique of the Positive Psychology approach is encouraged within the coaching field (Western, 2012). Such critical discussions take place more freely in other associated disciplines, such as education and management in which very strong concerns have been voiced about 'positivity traps' (Alvesson, et al. 2017) and the evidence produced from some positive psychology research (Miller, 2008; Hackman, 2009; Luthans & Avolio, 2009; Lazarus, 2003). For example, it has been argued that the science of Positive Psychology is founded on a whole series of fallacious arguments, involving circular reasoning, tautology, and failures to clearly define or appropriately apply terms (Miller, 2008; Held, 2008). The concerns include the identification of causal relations where none exist and unjustified generalisations with arguments that positive psychology "merely associates mental health with a particular personality type: a cheerful, outgoing, goal-driven, status-seeking extravert" (Miller, 2008).

This later concern, in our view and in the context of the focus of this paper, is particularly worrying for coaching practitioners. It might imply that an uncritical 'strength-based' coaching approach may be helping to shape the client into a perfect auto-exploiting, achievement-obsessed employee and exemplary consumer of the capitalist economy who could eventually end up with a severe mental health issue. Some milder, but still important, concerns may include the danger of labelling clients such that they feel inadequate if they do not respond to explicit positive psychology interventions when they already suffer too much from the pressure of society's constant 'cheer-up' and be more resilient expectation.

We also believe that the domination of models advocating personal responsibility for cultivating positive attitudes and emotions can lead to a

paradigmatic expectation that all responsibility for not being positive and happy falls solely on to the shoulders of the struggling individual. This normative bestowal of personal responsibility may not be an explicitly intended outcome of taking a ‘positive psychology’ approach. However, for an individual who may be battling various levels of negative self-appraisal, the implicit message presented on multiple HR self-help posters may easily reinforce their feelings of failure and lack of self-worth even when it is clearly much larger socio-economic structures contributing to the risk of the individual becoming emotionally overburdened. It seems to us not unreasonable to postulate this as a contributory factor for significant recent increases in mental health issues in Western societies, where Positive Psychology has become the default best approach to take for multiple levels of difficulty.

### ***Mindfulness as a ‘beautiful idea’***

According to those who promote mindfulness as a wellbeing strategy or therapeutic intervention, there are no reasons to question such an overwhelmingly beneficent practice. Some mindfulness supporters evangelically claim numerous advantages to be gained, many of which are backed-up by an empirical evidence-base provided by neuroscientific research and statistical analyses of well-structured investigations (e.g. McKenzie & Hassed, 2012; Mascaro, *et al.*, 2013). They quote numerous well-researched papers evaluating clinical outcomes related to stress, depression, and anxiety (e.g. Shapiro, *et al.*, 2008). Amongst the personal improvements that advocates of mindfulness indicate we can find the following:

- enhanced physical and emotional wellbeing;
- stress-reduction;
- improved capability for greater self-regulation and self-awareness;
- facilitation of increased productivity and personal effectiveness (Kemp, 2017; Brown, *et al.*, 2007).

Along with these, there are claims that a mindful employee can become “more efficient in their practice and goal achievement” with the provision of the opportunity to become a “more highly-tuned, focused, and capable human being” (e.g. see an overview in Cavanagh & Spence, 2013). However, this picture may not be as rosy as it appears to be. Despite the overwhelming approval, an increased scepticism in regard to extent of the claims being made on behalf of mindfulness is beginning to be expressed more loudly (e.g. Farias & Wikholm, 2015; Hickey, 2010; Purser & Loy, 2013). The concerns are being

aired as to the possibility that anything that can make a positive contribution to wellbeing of many may also have the potential to be detrimental for some (Yorston, 2001; Farias & Wikholm, 2015).

Our position on mindfulness is that its practices are essential for anything with a developmental purpose. It does not have to be used only for this purpose, but the way it is often packaged and commodified does reduce it to being merely a coping strategy for dealing with stress by promoting self-pacification. We are not suggesting that people undergoing difficulties to do with experiencing a lack of wellbeing should not seek out whatever suits them best as a means of getting through these difficult periods. What we do dispute is the current tendency to sell the idea of mindfulness as an almost-universal panacea in which mindfulness as a state of being-in-the world is conflated with the practising of meditative moments, and that this is all that is sufficient for the acquisition of mindful awareness.

We would also raise a sceptical eyebrow at the idea of ‘mindfulness’ being anything much more than the detached decentering of the individual that encourages placid acceptance of conditions that might benefit from being thoroughly and critically questioned. Some of these conditions may need to be actively resisted, when looking to achieve any real progress in improving both individual and collective wellbeing. The self-pacification techniques that masquerade as ‘mindfulness’ under these circumstances, we suggest, become a framework for the perpetuation of auto-exploitation, as we have referred to above. In light of this, we feel it is not unreasonable to include ‘mindfulness’, especially in what has come to be referred to as its ‘McMindfulness’ form (Purser & Loy, 2013), as a beautiful idea that could contribute to making one ill.

### ***Transformational coaching as a ‘beautiful idea’***

The idea of coaching as a process involving ‘transformation’ or being ‘transformational’ has been highly popular within coaching circles (e.g. Hawkins & Smith, 2014). Given that coaching is looking to help a client to change in order to overcome barriers and increase capabilities suggests that transformation can only be a good thing. After all, any change is transformation at some level. But our concerns with this notion are several.

Our first concern is with the concept itself. Apart from becoming a vastly overused cliché, when it is held up to close scrutiny it is not clear what it is that a transformational coach is hoping to achieve. Secondly, even the desire for a

significant transformation of clients by means of coaching might be seen as controversial. Coaching as an intervention is traditionally promoted as suitable for people who are reasonably productive and content with major areas of their life (e.g. Peltier, 2001). This is how coaching is typically differentiated from counselling (e.g. Price, 2009; Summerfield, 2002; Williams, 2003). Therefore, it would be logical to assume that only minor adjustments need to be made to move them forward. This sounds less like the large-scale qualitative shift meant by ‘transformation’ (Hawkins & Smith, 2014) and more like development, learning how to grow and adapt to one’s changing environment in order to make the most of new situations as they arise (Bachkirova, 2011).

Our next concern is that transformation, if it is understood as a significant shift in the way a person sees the world (Hawkins & Smith, 2014), might also occasionally happen as a developmental by-product rather than as *an intended and prioritised outcome*. For such a paradigm shift to take place many contributory factors are usually involved (Kegan, 1982; Berger, 2006; Bachkirova, 2011) and need to be in place for transformation to occur. Therefore, for coaches to *promise* a transformation by calling their coaching transformational is a tall order and, strictly speaking, may not even be ethical.

Alongside of the issue of overselling, we are also concerned with the notional aim of setting out to transform a person as a matter of principle in that the intention to transform clients implies that these clients are somehow currently incomplete or unworthy and that there is something substantively wrong with their way of seeing the world. We would strongly suggest that this intention adds to the kind of pressure that we are concerned with in this paper – the kind of ‘auto-exploitative’ practices that contemporary ‘achievement-societies’ demand their citizens to participate in, by becoming *more* of everything. More successful, more authentic, more positive, more fully transformed. The implications of these aims not being achieved might be, in the least harmful scenarios, the individual falling into self-deception, or experiencing an intense sense of disappointment or failure. However, depending on individual resilience, temperamental dispositions, and numerous other contributory conditions, this mismatch of aspiration could be a significant factor in the triggering of mental health difficulties, suggesting that what is at risk here is not trivial.

We have a final, strong objection to the coaching intention ‘to transform clients’. That is, it implies that the coach supposedly knows the ways in which their clients need to be transformed and can deliberately and willfully perform this ‘magic’ on them. This, we would suggest, has more to do with being an

expression of a coach's self-delusion of grandiosity. However, in relation to the focus of this paper, we are concerned that the belief in the magic of transformation by a client, that by definition is not a regular event, can only lead to disappointments and a loss of belief in one's own capacity to act thus aggravating psychological issues.

### **Implications and conclusions**

Whilst the main implications of this paper are directed to coaches and by extension to coaching supervisors, we believe that these implications are also relevant and important for educators of coaches and organisations in general. Starting with coaches and supervisors we highlight three main points: (i) the need to revisit their personal philosophy of coaching; (ii) the importance of developing a more discerning and critical approach to beautiful ideas; and (iii) some ideas for counteracting auto-exploitation in both clients and in ourselves.

#### ***Revisiting personal philosophy of coaching***

This implication may sound quite dramatic, but we believe it is a healthy exercise for us as coaches and useful to undertake on a regular basis in order not to become complacent. It requires checking what it is that we wish to achieve in our practice and why this is important. Just saying 'I want to achieve what my client wants to achieve' is not good enough. Both parties might be jointly deluded about what is the best thing to do, and even to want, without considering the wider economic and socio-political forces at play and/or, more simply, the individual circumstances of the client's life.

For example, should we unquestioningly assume that aspiration and success are the most meaningful things in a person's life? Is it possible that aspirations and positive thinking may be well suited psychological strategies for *some* individuals and in *some* circumstances but not for everyone? We would argue that in some circumstances and contexts  *coping*  might be the most appropriate aim and should not be underestimated or overlooked as a fundamental aspect of the human condition, particularly with current challenges in the state of the world. Promoting our ability to cope with adversity prompts the development of new capacities and makes substantive contributions to building the levels of confidence and adaptability to deal with those difficulties that present themselves in both our working and our personal lives.

Thinking about our philosophy of coaching may require us to consider what is the intended end-in-itself of our practice. Is it to achieve success and

happiness, or to be motivated to learning and development as a never-ending project, as advocated for example by John Dewey (1916, 1920)? We have argued elsewhere that individual development (rather than transformation) creates the increased capacity of the individual to deal with whatever life brings and to face adversity with greater equanimity (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019).

If learning and development are considered more important than success and happiness, coaching may take different forms of joint and active inquiry with an increased opportunity for experimentation. A coach working within this conceptualization becomes a thinking partner, a facilitator of reflection, a provider of different perspectives and an anchor to the wider community. The task of the coach, and any other supporting professional, becomes not motivating people to pursue further achievements but enhancing their learning through experience and supporting their active engagement with the world. Mental health, happiness and well-being may appear to be by-products of such an attitude.

The above is only an example of a different philosophy of coaching that a coach might arrive at through their own process of inquiry. As part of this inquiry there would be the need to ask oneself what long-term purpose our interventions serve and how these fit with our personal philosophy. It is quite possible that coaches and supervisors have chosen to build their life around certain values but assume different ones when working with clients.

### ***Importance of developing a more discerning and critical approach to beautiful ideas***

There is no doubt that coaches have their clients' best interests in heart, and this is why they are on the lookout for new ideas that can add more value to the coaching process. However, this well-intentioned motivation should not dazzle them to the extent that it could undermine their critical capacities and discerning attitude towards such ideas.

For example, if learning and development are considered longer-term aims of coaching then it is important to remember that learning can be painful but still worthwhile – far from being positive and focusing only on strengths. In fact, recent research (Yin, *et al.*, 2019) shows that we learn more from failure. Learning often requires some degree of disequilibrium – a state of mind in the client generated by confrontation with a complex situation and accompanied by the doubt that current beliefs and habits are sufficient for future actions

(Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019). Excessive focus on positivity, mindfulness, and the quest for transformation can prevent the experience of ‘disequilibrium’.

Similarly, negative emotions (to the extent that emotions are either wholly negative or positive) are an intelligent response of the whole organism to difficult situations when our usual ways to fix them do not work or our own interests and intentions are in conflict. It would be a shame if coaching interventions were used only for shaping clients’ emotions to fit particular cultural or organisational expectations or worse still, because of the inability of the coach to stay with ‘negative’ emotions. In all situations, and especially in times of crisis, all kinds of emotions are useful indicators of how the process is going and in coaching we should learn from them rather than set out to tame them or only promote so-called positive varieties.

#### ***Some ideas of counteracting auto-exploitation in clients and ourselves***

Consideration of potential auto-exploitation might be interpreted as a need for discussing this topic in coaching sessions, which might not be what the clients want to explore. We do not advocate such an approach. Topics beyond their current concerns do not need to be imposed on clients. Even though some clients might be ready to take a broader view on the situation, it is their prerogative as to what to bring or not bring into their sessions. However, it is possible for the coach to do something that might appropriately stimulate such an exploratory process. With the idea of multiple self in mind (Bachkirova, 2011; Lawrence, 2018) the coach can invite different mini-selves of the client into the conversation and not side immediately with their ‘single-minded achiever’ mini-self. They could ask clients to look at their issue/goal for today from all angles that are personally meaningful.

In conclusion, we would like to extend these implications to educators of coaches and organisations in general. It is critical for educators to pay attention to how their programmes develop reflexivity and criticality in students, so they can be discerning in regards to how they are influenced by, and apply, these (and other) ‘beautiful ideas’. In the same way, the learning and development strategies of organisations need to be focused on the individual development of their employees, not only in terms of their skills and leadership capabilities but also their general skills of reflexivity and criticality. This would serve them in being ready for both successful and difficult work practices and potentially for being ready to challenge them.

#### **Acknowledgment**



We are grateful to Gisella Mercaldi (2018) for stimulating our thinking on these issues and pointing us in the direction of Han (2015) and Illouz (2008).

## **References**

- Alvesson, M., Blom, M. & Sweningsson, S. (2017). *Reflexive Leadership: Organising in an Imperfect World*. Sage.
- American Declaration of Independence (1776). Retrieved from <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.
- Bachkirova, T. & Borrington, S. (2019). Old wine in new bottles: Exploring pragmatism as a philosophical framework for the discipline of coaching, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 18(3), 337-360.
- Bachkirova, T. (2017). Developing a knowledge base of coaching: questions to explore in T. Bachkirova, G. Spence and D. Drake (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Coaching*, Sage (pp. 23-41).
- Bachkirova, T. (2011). *Developmental Coaching: Working with the Self*. Open University Press.
- Behar, D. (2020). The stress epidemic at work. *The Mail Online*, Retrieved from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-18951/The-stress-epidemic-work.html>.
- Bentham, J. (1988). *A Fragment on Government*. Cambridge University Press.
- Berger, J. (2006). Adult development theory and executive coaching practice. In D. Stober & A. Grant (Eds.) *Evidence based coaching handbook: Putting best practise to work for your clients*. John Wiley.
- Boniwell, I. (2008). *Positive Psychology in a nutshell*. PWBC.
- Brown, K., Ryan, R. & Cresswell, J. (2007). Mindfulness: Theoretical foundations and evidence for its salutary effects. *Psychological Inquiry*, 18(4), 211-237.
- Burke, D. & Linley, P. (2007). Enhancing goal self-concordance through coaching, *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 2, 62-69.

- Campbell, D. (2018). Three in four Britons felt overwhelmed by stress, survey reveals. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/14/three-in-four-britons-felt-overwhelmed-by-stress-survey-reveals>
- Cavanagh, M & Spence, G. (2013). Mindfulness in coaching: philosophy, psychology or just a useful skill? In J. Passmore, D. Peterson & T. Freire (Eds.) *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Psychology of Coaching and Mentoring*. Blackwell (pp. 112-134).
- Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2016). Strength-based coaching can actually weaken you, *Harvard Business Review*, January 4, 2016.
- Chernyak-Hai, L. & Rabenu, E. (2018). The new era of workplace relationships: Is Social Exchange Theory still relevant? *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 11(3), 456-481.
- CIPD, (2019). Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development: Health and Wellbeing at work annual survey 2019, retrieved from [https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/health-well-being-work\\_](https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/health-well-being-work_)
- Cox, E., Bachkirova, T. and Clutterbuck, D. (2014). Theoretical traditions and coaching genres: Mapping the territory, *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 16(2), 127-138.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education: an introduction to the philosophy of education*. Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1920, 2004). *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Dover.
- Dickens, C. (1854/2003). *Hard Times*. Penguin.
- Driver, M. (2011). *Coaching positively: Lessons for Coaches from Positive Psychology*. Open University Press.
- Dunkley, D., Zuroff, D. & Blankstein, K. (2003). Self-critical perfectionism and daily affect: dispositional and situational influences on stress and coaching. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 84(1), 234–252.

- Farias, M. & Wikholm, C. (2015). *The Buddha Pill: Can meditation change you?* Watkins.
- Fishman, D. 1999. *The Case for Pragmatic Psychology*. New York University Press.
- Francis, S. & Zarecky, A. (2017). Working with Strengths in Coaching. In T. Bachkirova, G. Spence & D. Drake (Eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Coaching*. Sage (pp. 363-380).
- Follmer, K. & Jones, K. (2018). Mental illness in the workplace: An Interdisciplinary review and organisational research agenda. *Journal of Management*, 44(1), 325-351.
- Fujitsu (2019). *Responsible business report*. Retrieved from <https://www.fujitsu.com/uk/about/local/corporate-responsibility/responsible-business-report/wellbeing/>.
- Gable, S. & Haidt, J. (2005). What (and why) is positive psychology? *Review of General Psychology*, 9(2), 103-110.
- Grant, T. & Woods, A. (1995). *Reason in Revolt, Marxist Philosophy and Modern Science*, Wellred.
- Hackman, R. (2009). The perils of positivity, *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 30, 309-319.
- Han, Byung-Chul. (2015). *The Burnout Society*. Stanford University Press.
- Hawkins, P. & Smith, N. (2014). Transformational Coaching, in E. Cox, T. Bachkirova & D. Clutterbuck (Eds) *The Complete Handbook of Coaching*. SAGE (pp. 228-243).
- Held, B. (2004). The negative side of positive psychology. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 44(1), 9-46.
- Hickey, W. (2010). Meditation as medicine: A critique. *Crosscurrents*, (June), 168-184.
- Illouz, E. (2008). *Saving the Modern Soul: therapy, emotions, and the culture of self-help*. University of California Press.

- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Harvard University Press.
- Kemp, T. (2017). Mindfulness and Coaching: Contemporary Labels for Timeless Practices? In T. Bachkirova, G. Spence & D. Drake (Eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Coaching*, Sage (pp. 381-398).
- Lawrence, P. (2018). A Narrative Approach to Coaching Multiple Selves *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 16(2), 32-41.
- Lazarus, R. (2003). Does the Positive Psychology movement have legs? *Psychological Inquiry*, 14(2), 93-109.
- Lawton- Smith, C. (2017). Coaching for Resilience and Well-being, In T. Bachkirova, G. Spence & D. Drake (Eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Coaching*, Sage (pp. 346-362).
- Linley, P. & Harrington, S. (2005). Positive psychology and coaching psychology: Perspectives on integration. *The Coaching Psychologist*, 1(1),13-14.
- Linley, P. & Joseph, S. (2004). Applied positive psychology: A new perspective for professional practice. In P. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds). *Positive psychology in practice*. John Wiley & Sons (pp. 3-12).
- Locke, J. (1975). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ch.XXI, S.51. Oxford University Press.
- Luthans, F. & Avolio, B. (2009). The “point” of positive organizational behaviour. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 30, 291-307.
- McKenzie, S. & Hassed, C. (2012). *Mindfulness for Life*. Exisle.
- Mascaro, J., Rilling, J., Tenzin, L. & Raison, C. (2013). Compassion meditation enhances empathic accuracy and related neural activity. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neurosciences*, 8(1), 48-55.
- Mental Health Foundation (2020). Mental Health Statistics: Children and Young People. Retrieved from <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-children-and-young-people>.

- Mercaldi, G. (2018). Is developmental coaching morally acceptable? *Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal*, 3(2), 60-72.
- Middleton, A. (2017). 'The i' Wednesday, November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, retrieved from <https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/wellbeing/companies-work-wellbeing/>
- Miller, A. (2008). A critique of Positive Psychology or a new science of happiness, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 42(3-4), 591-608.
- Peltier, B. (2001). *The Psychology of Executive Coaching: Theory and application*. Routledge.
- Price, J. (2009). The coaching/therapy boundary in organisational coaching. *Coaching: An international journal of theory, research and practice*, 2(2), 135-148.
- Purser, R., & Loy, D. (2013). Beyond McMindfulness. *Huffington post*, 1(7), 13.
- Pym, H. (2018). How do you tackle stress in the workplace? *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-46443379>.
- RAND Europe (2019). *Identifying promising practices in health and wellbeing at work*. Retrieved from <https://www.rand.org/randeuropa/research/projects/identifying-promising-practices-in-health-wellbeing-work.html>.
- Rice-Oxley, M. (2019). UK training record number of mental health first-aiders. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/sep/02/uk-training-record-number-of-mental-health-first-aiders>.
- Ritchie, H. & Roser, M. (2019). Mental Health. *OurWorldInData.org*. Retrieved from: '<https://ourworldindata.org/mental-health>' [Online Resource].
- Sartre, J-P. (1999). *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phoney War, 1939-1940*, trans. Q. Hoare, Verso.
- Seligman, M. (2007). Coaching and Positive Psychology. *Australian Psychologist*, 42(4), 266-267.

- Shapiro, S., Oman, D., Thoresen, C., Plante, T. & Flinders, T. (2008). Cultivating mindfulness: Effects on well-being. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 64(7), 84-862.
- Steward, H. (2012). Wealth doesn't trickle down – It just floods offshore, research reveals. *The Guardian*. August, 6, 2012. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2012/jul/21/offshore-wealth-global-economy-tax-havens>.
- Summerfield, J. (2002). Walking the thin line: Coaching or counselling. *Training Journal*. November. 36-39.
- Thompson, E.P. (1963/1980). *The Making of the English Working Class*. Penguin.
- Western, S. (2012). *Coaching and Mentoring: A Critical Text*. Sage.
- Williams, P. (2003). The potential perils of personal issues in coaching. The continuing debate. Therapy of coaching? What every coach should know. *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 2 (2), 21-30.
- Wilson, J. (2018). Work-related stress and mental illness now account for over half of work absences. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/01/work-related-stress-mental-illness-now-accounts-half-work-absences/>.
- Yin, Y, Wang, Y., Evans, J., and Wang, D. (2019). Quantifying dynamics of failure across science, startups, and security. *Nature*, 575, 190–194.
- Yorston, G. (2001). Mania precipitated by meditation: A case report and literature review, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 4(2), 209-213.

### **Author Contact**

Professor Tatiana Bachkirova  
Director, International Centre for Coaching and Mentoring Studies  
Oxford Brookes University  
Headington Campus  
Oxford, OX3 0BP  
England, UK  
E: [tbachkirova@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:tbachkirova@brookes.ac.uk)