

An ethical framework for coaching research among vulnerable groups: paving the way to a more inclusive approach

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Abstract

Scholarship on vulnerable groups in coaching is growing. Yet, there are no specific ethical frameworks focused on guiding researchers and practitioners in researching coaching among vulnerable groups. This theoretical article addresses this gap by developing a framework to depict the multiple dimensions of ethical decision-making when working with vulnerable groups in coaching research. It contends that focus on the tensions emerging through the dual role of practitioner and researcher in coaching research is key to navigating ethical decision-making. The article also identifies ‘vulnerable groups’ as worthy of study within coaching research as a means to bolster the evidence base for coaching and to address scholarship’s biases towards more privileged groups.

Keywords: coaching research, coaching, coaching in community, vulnerable groups.

A key concern of coaching research is building an evidence base (Passmore and Lai, 2019). While executive and organisational coaching continues to be prevalent in coaching research, the field is opening to other contexts, including health coaching (Rogers & Maini, 2016), relationship coaching (Ives & Cox, 2015), bereavement coaching (Menaul & João, 2023), and prison coaching (McGregor, 2015). Some of these domains are for groups which can be considered vulnerable and who have been on the margins of coaching research until recently. Consequently, explorations of the complexities of ethics in coaching research among vulnerable groups have hitherto been lacking in coaching scholarship.

Ethics is a flexible and continuous reflective practice, aligning decision-making and its consequences with “a sense of rightness” (Fatien & Clutterbuck, 2023, 23). It is a developing and evolving field of study within coaching scholarship (e.g. Iordanou et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2023), and ethics in coaching research should be considered a subfield of this emerging body of knowledge. Ethical decision-making involved in coaching research can be complex as coaching ethics and research ethics imperatives may not neatly overlap.

In addition, context can contribute to the complexity as coaching researchers can be working both within and outside of academia. Whereas the former have the support of ethical guidelines and formal channels for the ethical approval of their studies, the latter may find it

difficult to get the support they need to navigate ethical concerns and, ultimately, they do not have the means to gain ethical approval for their research projects. Furthermore, whereas academics may decide to distance themselves from the practice while conducting research (although this is not strictly necessary), practitioner-researchers choose to occupy both roles (coach and researcher), usually with a focus on further understanding their own practice and client groups. Coaching bodies, such as the European Mentoring and Coaching Council and the International Coaching Federation, have acknowledged the importance of research and knowledge transfer in the field and could potentially play a more significant role in research ethical practice.

In the absence of agreed specific ethical guidance for coaching research among vulnerable groups, this article explores the complexity of ethical decision-making in this area and develops a framework practitioner-researchers can use when designing and carrying out research projects. It also shares recommendations to help with the development of a robust ethical mindset.

Vulnerability in coaching research

In recent years, there has been an increase in coaching clients among client groups from vulnerable populations, for example, prison coaching (McGregor, 2015), vulnerable youth (Choaibi & Lomas, 2021; Robson-Kelly & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016), domestic violence survivors and HIV positive people (Nacif, 2021), and bereavement coaching (Menaul & João, 2023). Outcomes around gaining self-awareness (Robson-Kelly & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016; Nacif, 2016) and agency/choice (Choaibi & Lomas, 2021; Robson-Kelly & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016; Nacif, 2016) are prevalent in such studies, alongside a focus on wellbeing.

There are no existing studies that define vulnerability in the context of coaching research, and how it may influence the coaching process and outcomes. Rogers et al. (2012) identify three categories of vulnerability: inherent (ontology: all humans are vulnerable), situational (context-specific vulnerabilities), and pathogenic (arising from morally dysfunctional interpersonal and social relationships such as prejudice, abuse, neglect, disrespect, or injustice, persecution or political violence).

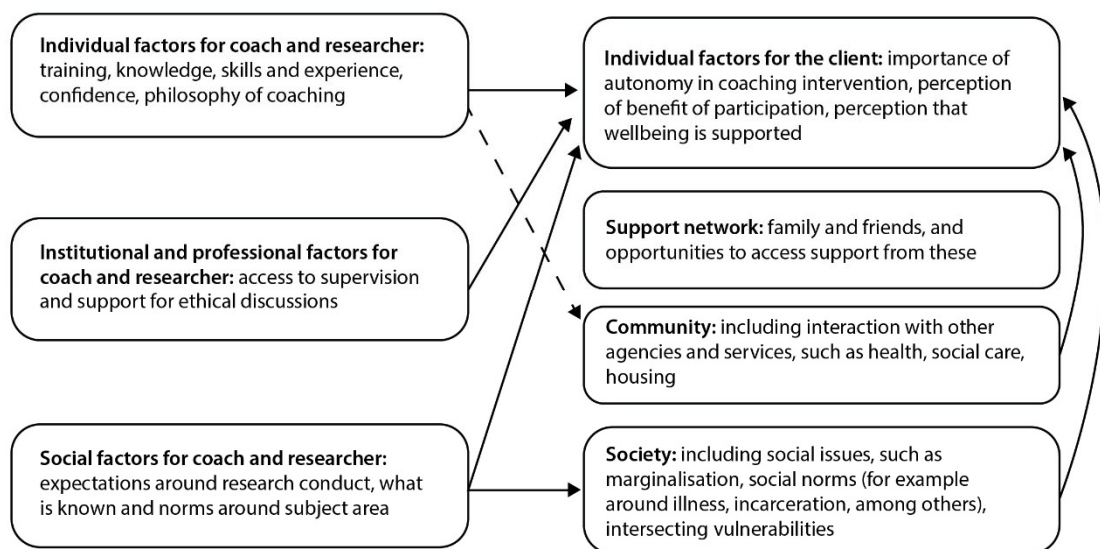
Conducting coaching research could involve navigating all of these vulnerabilities, with some groups considered more vulnerable due to a combination of personal and social factors. Personal factors relate to individual history and self-concept, such as childhood experience, cognitive biases, values, and education, whereas social factors refer to broader societal influences such as social class, norms, and culture (Gifford & Nilson, 2014; see also 'Vulnerable Groups' below). Furthermore, inherent vulnerability (of the human condition) may feature for both coach and client; situational vulnerability may emerge for the client, and the vulnerability of the coach can become a bridge to build rapport and communicate with the client. In coaching, attention should be given to the contexts that create participants' vulnerability to avoid pathogenic vulnerability (i.e. amplifying the client's vulnerability through ignorance or disrespect).

Ascertaining vulnerability in the area of coaching research involves gauging and evaluating the balance between distress/detriment and benefit in the coaching/research intervention to the individual, whilst recognising where membership or alignment with any vulnerable groups may also be impacting the coaching work. Due to life events and circumstances, a vulnerable group/client might be more likely to be distressed during

coaching or research in comparison to other non-vulnerable participants. Yet their distress and vulnerability do not detract from the benefit they can gain from the coaching intervention. Coaches navigate ‘vulnerability’ in research by understanding the situational context of the participant, including other stakeholders and agencies when applicable, by carefully considering the relational alliance between the participant and the coaching practitioner-researcher; and by methodically designing the coaching intervention and study. Practitioner-researchers need to reflect on how they can work ethically considering all these factors, across different contexts, starting with the individuals involved, including the coaches themselves, and moving to broader social research concerns (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:

Factors that impact vulnerability in coaching research



Vulnerable groups

The British Psychological Society (Oates et al, 2021, p. 15) defines vulnerable populations as “children, persons lacking capacity, those in a dependent or unequal relationship, people with learning or communication difficulties, people in care, people in custody or on probation, people who have suffered physical or psychological trauma and people engaged in illegal activities, such as drug abuse”. Yet, as Katz et al (2020) contend, the term ‘vulnerable population’ can falsely imply that vulnerability is an internally generated condition of population membership. Vulnerability may also exist in individual and personal conditions and cannot be entirely affixed to specific socio-economic or demographic characteristics. According to Brown and Quickfall (2022), vulnerability may be a contingent, temporary, or situational condition, generated by overlapping factors, which may not be static. However, working with vulnerability only on this individual level can problematise finding a group to work with for research purposes. Thus, this article uses the term ‘vulnerable group’ to capture both social marginalisation and individual circumstances, and

the potential interaction between the two. In doing so, it seeks to recognise that vulnerability may be generated by temporary interlocking factors.

For coaching research, researchers need to be aware that clients from vulnerable groups may come from a more complex background and therefore may present a higher level of distress when they participate in coaching than those in non-vulnerable groups. Notwithstanding these considerations, Brown and Quickfall (2022) argue that the assumption that vulnerable groups are invariably high risk for researchers is a fallacy. Excluding a group from research based on vulnerability can also lead to that group's heightened vulnerability through marginalisation (Srinath & Bhola, 2016). On the other hand, working with vulnerable participants can increase the vulnerability of the researcher, (Brown & Quickfall, 2022). Researcher vulnerability might emerge where professional ethical guidelines are challenged by the needs of vulnerable populations, leaving researchers with ethical dilemmas (Nordentoft & Kappel, 2011); or researchers may 'take on' aspects of the vulnerability of the populations they work with through their interactions and relationship building (Michell, 2020; Kumar & Cavallaro, 2020; Smith, 2021). Consequently, what constitutes a vulnerable group is not fixed, but rather exists within various continua. A vulnerable group may be more at risk of harm and distress in a research intervention (Shaw et al, 2020), although not necessarily so (Brown & Quickfall, 2022). The conditions leading to vulnerability may be longstanding and linked to social suffering (Fisher, 2012), or these conditions may be temporary; there may be one or multiple dimensions that contribute to vulnerability; and finally the term may have legitimacy for ethical planning but not necessarily be accepted by the participant.

Dual-role complexity

In addition to considerations involving vulnerability and vulnerable groups, coaching researchers must navigate between the different roles and responsibilities of coaching and research in each aspect of their interaction with clients/participants. In counselling research, this has been defined as a 'dual relationship' or 'dual role' where the counsellor simultaneously holds more than one role and relationship with their client (Syme, 2003; Gabriel, 2005), a definition which is relevant to research in helping professions more broadly. In helping professions, dual relationships occur where the practitioner role may not entirely coincide with the demands of research (e.g. social work: Coy, 2006; health research: Geddis-Regan et al, 2022; counselling: Gabriel, 2005). Counselling research also points to the potential conflict of interest that emerges between the two roles (Gabriel, 2005). In coaching research, the aim of coaching to support the client may not neatly coincide with the aim of research to answer a research question. In counselling research, because of the sanctity of the therapeutic relationship, dual relationships have typically been suspected of exacerbating client vulnerability and causing potential harm (Etherington, 2007). Whilst client vulnerability is potentially a more pressing issue in counselling than coaching research (Bachkirova, 2008), the need to avoid harm is a key ethical principle (Oades et al, 2019). A key aspect of the potential for harm emerges with a potential power imbalance, where the practitioner-researcher gathers and holds knowledge (Gabriel, 2005), and the client/participant is expected to be vulnerable in the intervention.

One possible means of navigating tensions between the dual roles is to switch positions at different stages of an intervention. Fleet et al. (2016) argue that conflict can be managed by pivoting roles and interactions, where researchers adopt a 'counsellor' approach for counselling practice with participants; simultaneously dealing with research concerns through supervision; and switching to a 'researcher' approach with participants at the intervention's

conclusion. Whilst this solution can be applied in coaching research interventions, it does not address the fact that, whilst roles can be switched, the nature of the relational alliance that is developed in such interventions cannot always be compartmentalised in neat boxes. Perhaps accepting the limitations of attempting such compartmentalisation and exploring the ethical challenges emerging from this dual role would be more conducive to research integrity. Such a suggestion is not dissimilar to the criterion of *sincerity* proposed by Tracy (2010), as a *sine qua non* for excellence in qualitative research. This criterion is characterised by self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s) and transparency about methods and challenges.

Practitioner-researcher's dilemmas

Where practitioner-researchers are navigating a dual role, seeking to fulfil both coaching and research aims, they may encounter a variety of ethical choices or dilemmas about how to achieve those aims. These dilemmas can be compounded by aspects of vulnerability in the group targeted for an intervention, or any individual clients. In research with vulnerable groups, context, the working relationship and interaction, all have the potential to variously recognise, elaborate, and even exacerbate that vulnerability. Below we elaborate on some of the circumstances that may lead to dilemmas in coaching research.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is the sharing of personal information with a client (Audet & Everall, 2003), which can help to build trust, a relationship, and potentially reduce clients' feelings of isolation. In research, self-disclosure may be particularly important if participants feel stigmatized (Ross, 2017). For Etherington (2007, p. 611-612) "transparen[cy] about our presence within a research relationship requires [...] that researchers [...] emerge from behind the secure barrier of anonymity and own up to their involvement. This requires varying degrees of self-disclosure for the researcher." Creating transparency around the research process (through self-disclosure) helps build trust and rapport with clients. As such, it forms part of what Tracy (2010) terms indicators of sincerity and authenticity for research. Nevertheless, self-disclosure constitutes an ethical boundary in helping interventions, which raises questions about whether self-disclosure will help or harm a client (or practitioner-researcher), or whether there may be a conflict of interest in that disclosure. Self-disclosure also raises dilemmas around whether sharing personal information will build a bridge between practitioner-researchers and participant-clients, or conversely make participants feel less entitled to speak on a topic (Ross, 2017).

Self-disclosure in counselling is generally viewed negatively (Syme, 2003; Gabriel, 2005; Audet, 2011) because it privileges the therapist rather than the client. In coaching, it has been characterised as a disguised way of offering advice (Biswas-Diener, 2023). In counselling, Rogers (2004, p. 48) argues that empathy is achieved by the counsellor seeing the world through a client-centred 'internal frame of reference'. The counsellor sidelines their own 'external frame of reference', whilst reflecting the client's internal frame to give them greater self-perspective. This is an important underpinning of coaching practice. Thus, the act of sharing the coach's story shifts to the 'external frame of reference', where judgment risks emerge in the coaching space.

On the other hand, self-disclosure has been shown to have positive therapeutic effects in counselling (Barnett, 2011; Audet, 2011), suggesting potential positive effects of self-disclosure in coaching, particularly around creating a bond with the client (Biswas-Diener,

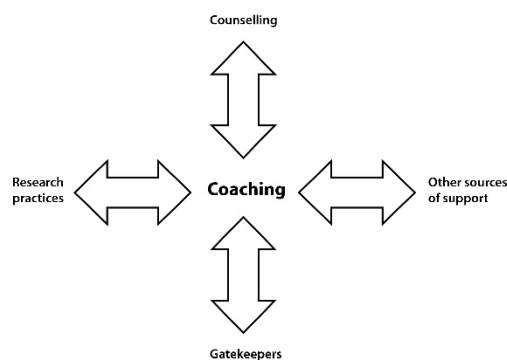
2023). Seeking client permission for disclosure is key to ethical coaching (Van Nieuwerburgh and Love, 2019), although politeness may mean that it is unlikely that participants refuse a coach's story.

Boundaries of professional practice

Where coaching and research co-occur, issues around boundaries emerge (see Figure below for examples).

Figure 2:

Boundaries navigated in coaching research



Firstly, as outlined, coaching is in a dual relationship with research. This potentially entails switching between roles (Fleet et al., 2016), or infusing one role with aspects of the other. Consequently, research interviews, which can be therapeutic spaces (Coy, 2006) may take on aspects of coaching (e.g. active listening, asking powerful questions to prompt participant reflection). Coaching might involve 'research' elements such as information-finding and evaluation; indeed, counselling scholarship has found aspects of research in practice (Syme, 2003). Practitioner-researchers navigate the benefits and challenges of switching between or infusing elements of these different roles.

Secondly, coaching research may also need to navigate its boundary with counselling practice and research. Here the vulnerabilities of the participant group and individuals would need to be considered to ascertain whether coaching is the most appropriate intervention for a particular client group and their needs. Furthermore, it is paramount that informed consent for the research intervention is addressed not only at the beginning of the research. Consent should be sought throughout the programme, as participants may experience distress during the research (Sherlock & Thynne, 2010) and the coaching. It is not always possible to predict the impact of such interventions on clients and, depending on the type and level of distress and personal circumstances, some may decide to remain in the coaching space whereas others may need to seek support from other services, such as counselling. This is further complicated by the potential overlap of counselling and coaching in a research intervention. The importance of maintaining a professional boundary between coaching and counselling underpins ethical codes in coaching (EMCC, 2021, [4.1](#)). However, in practice, there may be overlap between counselling and coaching. The same populations may seek both counselling or coaching (Bachkirova & Baker, 2018; Grant, 2020; Giraldez-Hayes, 2021) so it is not

possible to differentiate counselling from coaching because the latter is for the mentally healthy only (Bachkirova, 2007; Grant, 2020).

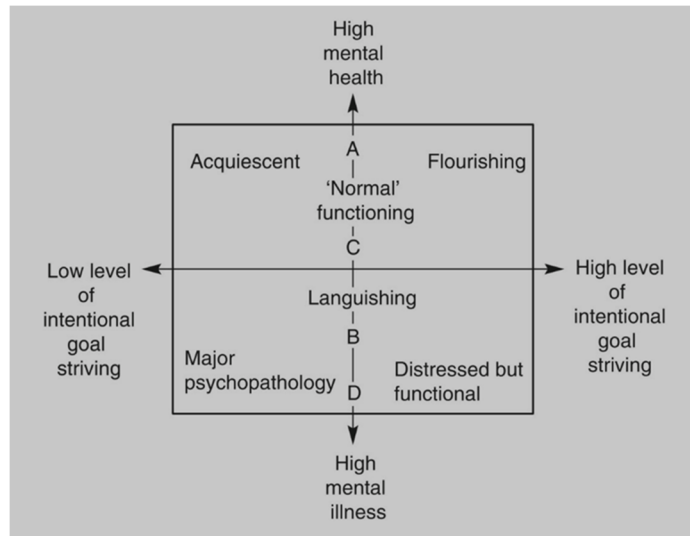
Finally, whilst practitioner-researchers may need to navigate the boundaries between coaching and counselling, they will also need to be aware of any potential overlap between their coaching research and other sources of support. This might affect the scope of the intervention (see ‘after the intervention’ below), and there may already be specialist charities and organisations working in the field with their interventions. A related aspect of navigating these boundaries is that to access and recruit vulnerable groups, practitioner-researchers will need to engage with gatekeepers (potentially via existing support services). Alexander (2010) suggests that gatekeepers are often cautious about vulnerable groups participating in research. Vulnerability is often conflated with lacking autonomy (Morberg Jämterud & Sandgren, 2022). Ironically, by situating particular groups as ‘too vulnerable’ to be researched, gatekeepers may inadvertently decrease these groups’ autonomy, and heighten their vulnerability through marginalisation (Srinath & Bhola, 2016). Here, practitioner-researchers will need to navigate group boundaries and how and where gatekeepers position access to these groups.

After the intervention

While coaching practitioner-researchers will be concerned with what is happening before and during interventions, what comes after the intervention will also need consideration. There may need to be post-intervention signposting to charities and relevant organisations for continuous and/or further support. However, not all eventualities can be anticipated before the intervention (Tutenel et al, 2019) and adjustments may need to be made to support emergent needs during any research project, as explained in the previous section, and potentially beyond it. For example, interventions and projects can be extended, but practitioner-researchers need to carefully consider the impact of such offers, as ties beyond the formal conclusion of a relationship in coaching can encourage dependency and prevent closure (de Haan, 2019).

Dilemmas around choosing who can be a recipient of coaching

One of the potential aims of coaching is to support wellbeing (Grant, 2020), where clients leave coaching feeling better than when they started it, which arguably can be helpful for all clients. However, practitioner-researchers may find it challenging to make decisions around the inclusion criteria for coaching interventions. Grant’s model of mental health (2020) may be helpful when exploring levels of distress among vulnerable clients (Figure 3).

Figure 3:**Grant's (2020, p. 72) model of mental health**

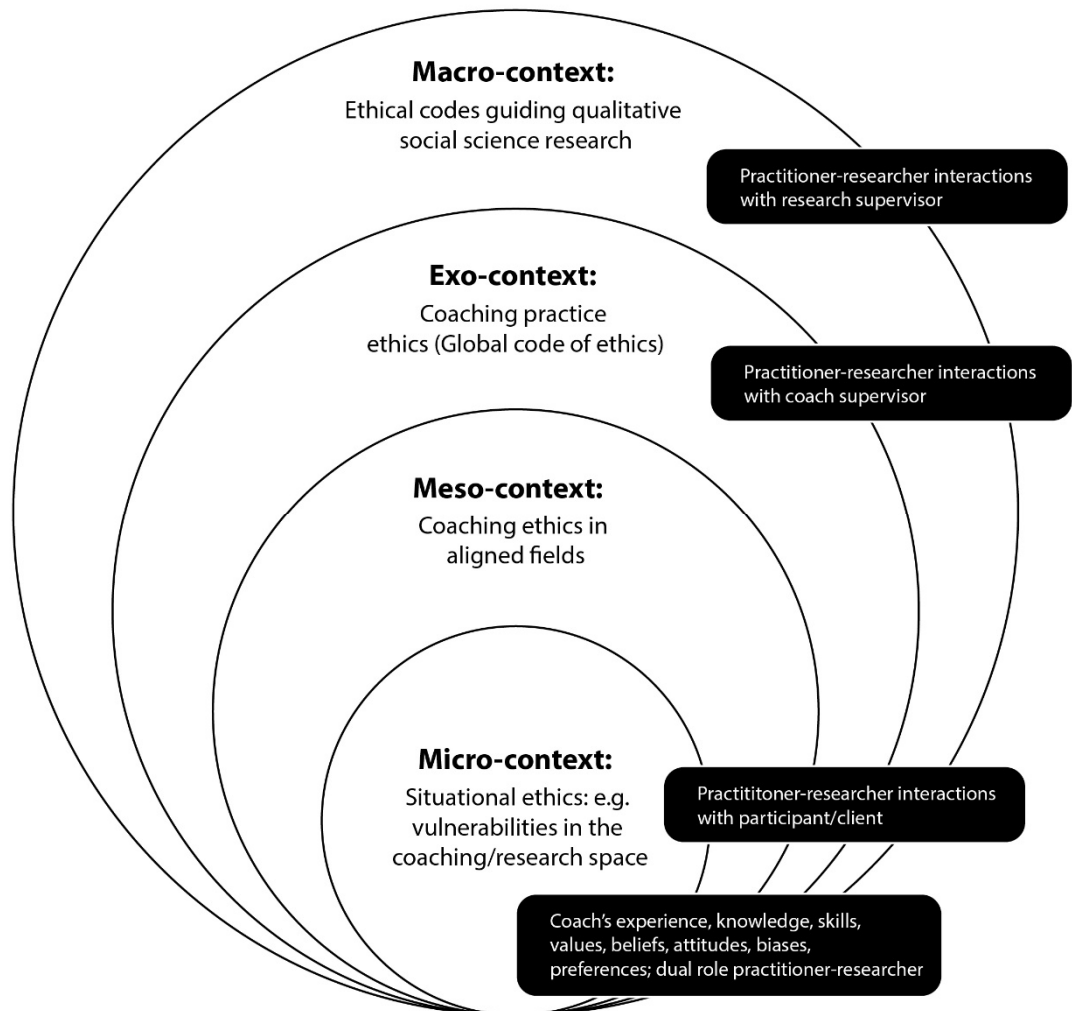
Clients in the flourishing quadrant, in which people have high levels of goal striving and high mental health, can be perceived to be suitable recipients of coaching. However, Grant (2020) also shows that clients who are 'distressed but functional' are also able to strive towards change. Indeed, clients in vulnerable groups may fit well in this category and would benefit from coaching. These groups can be distinguished from those living with major psychopathology and low levels of intentional goal striving, for whom coaching would not be an appropriate intervention. Groups in the acquiescent category could benefit from coaching, but may not be sufficiently engaged to commit to such intervention. Although this model can be helpful, levels of goal striving may not necessarily be the focal point of attention for people in vulnerable groups, who may instead benefit from space for sense-making. This approach is more aligned with third-generation coaching (Stelter, 2014) which focuses on values, identity work and meaning, rather than goal achievement. A consideration for practitioner-researchers is whether the coaching intervention, (which may well be delivered in tandem with other support services), would be beneficial for the client or potentially add pressure, especially to the clients in the 'distressed but functional category', such as those in mental health recovery (Bishop et al., 2018), cancer survivors and those in prison, to name just a few.

Accepting the complexity and conflict in their dual role and the potential ethical dilemmas they will encounter, and being transparent about them, would help practitioner-researchers navigate the ethical tensions involved. It would enable them to navigate challenges around methodological choices and their limitations; the potential impact of the coaching alliance on the client's perception of the intervention; the different perspectives coaches and clients may have on the same coaching process, and the inherent conflict that occupying both the coaching and researcher roles will bring to the research process. To help address some of these challenges, we propose the use of an ecological model of ethical systems in coaching research.

An ecological approach to ethics

This section sets out the foundation for the framework for ethical decision-making in coaching research among vulnerable groups. Such a framework must start by recognising the distinction between ‘procedural ethics’ and ‘ethics in practice’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). ‘Procedural ethics’ refers to the formal procedures of ethical consideration in research design – typically involving a review of an application at a research ethics committee (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). ‘Ethics in practice’ are the unforeseen conundrums that arise in practice but which cannot entirely be accounted for in procedural ethics. For Guillemin and Gillam (2004), ethical reflexivity is a key resource to navigate the gap between procedural ethics and ethics in practice. They see ethical reflexivity as enabling reflections on the researcher’s practice, the contexts within which the research takes place, and unique moments in the practice. This article extends these ideas by situating ethical reflexivity in a broader ecological framework, which identifies different contexts impacting ethical concerns. We adapt psychologist Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development to expand on Guillemin and Gillam’s (2004) ideas and create a framework that can inform and guide ethical considerations. Bronfenbrenner is considered one of the most influential contributors to ecological thinking in health research (Eriksson et.al. 2018), and his model places the individual at the centre, whilst social practice takes place within nested systems which interact with each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, both clients and practitioner-researchers are individuals at the centre of this ecological system, being impacted by multiple interdependent systems during the process of research, which can be considered a form of social practice. Thus, ‘vulnerability’ for participants and researchers is present in multiple levels of these dynamic systems. It is also important to note that Bronfenbrenner contended that individuals were not simply subject to these systems – they interacted with them and shaped them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Similarly, ethical decisions are not simply the domain of the coaching practitioner-researcher – they are co-created and influenced by all levels of this ecosystem.

Coaching practitioner-researchers can use the framework below to reflect on ethical considerations that will inform their research.

Figure 4:**Ecological framework for ethical decision-making in coaching research**

This model uses Bronfenbrenner's terminology and adapts it for coaching research. Each circle represents a specific context that potentially inflects ethical decision-making in coaching research. Within each of these contexts, particular relationship configurations can also influence ethical decision-making (these are represented by the boxes on the right of the figure). The micro-context represents the specific coaching interaction, and the formalised, but also spontaneous decisions that are taken to support this interaction. Within the micro-context, the relationship between coach and researcher roles for the practitioner-researcher, and between the coach and the client will also influence ethical decision-making. In Bronfenbrenner's model, the meso-context represents interactions between various elements of the 'micro-context'. In this model, the meso-context depicts where ethical decision-making in coaching research may draw on work from the helping professions and compare dilemmas to those in aligned fields such as counselling, social work, health, and clinical research. The exo-context represents where professional ethical codes for coaching guide ethical decision-

making. Within this, a relationship with a coaching supervisor as part of the research process is key for supporting ethical decision-making. Finally, the macro-context represents the broadest considerations, where ethical codes from social sciences are used to shape ethical research decisions. Below, we will explore each level and how they apply to coaching research in more detail.

Table 1:

Practitioner-research dilemmas considered ecologically

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| <p>Micro-context</p> | <p>Self-disclosure: How does coach self-disclosure impact the client/coach relationship? What does this mean for researcher bias? How could this help or harm the individual client?</p> |
| <p>Meso-context</p> | <p>Navigating the boundaries of coaching and counselling: Where could navigating the boundaries between coaching and counselling with participants support those participants? How will practitioner-researchers judge their competency in a research intervention where knowledge may be emergent?</p> |
| <p>Exo-context</p> | <p>After-life of the intervention: How can the intervention continue to be ‘ethical’ after it has concluded? What steps or signposts are reasonable to include within the project to adhere to codes of research and ethical codes within coaching? What do participants need (differently) in terms of support and building their autonomy post-intervention?</p> |
| <p>Macro-context</p> | <p>Deciding who receives the coaching: How can exclusion criteria be fair? How can choices about who is excluded navigate potentially marginalising vulnerable groups?</p> |

Coaching research: applying the ecological model of ethical systems in practice

1. Micro-context: situational ethics

Whilst coaching practitioner-researchers will design their research partly by attempting to anticipate possible ethical dilemmas, inevitably they will need to navigate unexpected ethical challenges and navigate this moment-by-moment. For university-based researchers, the micro-context ethics is formalised in an ethics application approved by the university's ethics committee. However, whilst research ethics seek to anticipate and mitigate any potential challenges in the research, they cannot foresee all the moment-by-moment decisions of 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This aligns with De Haan's (2007) observations that coaches experience 'critical moments' in their coaching practice. These are in essence ethical moments, where the coach is both 'in the moment and present' with the client, whilst reflecting on decisions about question choice, potential intrusiveness, building client relationships etc. These critical moments of decision-making might then also be part of any data collection process: researcher practitioners need to be aware of inherent and situational vulnerabilities to avoid creating pathogenic vulnerability for the participant.

Micro-contexts involve situational ethics (Tutenel et al., 2019) or 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), for example, where a coaching client reveals a need for support that is closer to counselling, or where taking care of the client may not coincide with taking care of the practitioner-researcher. 'Situational ethics' might also involve scenarios beyond the coaching space, such as where anticipated recruitment does not proceed as planned (e.g. navigating gatekeeping), and new decisions need to be made about how to access participants; or where a pre-set number of coaching sessions are ethically approved but at the conclusion of an intervention the participant does not feel ready to finish coaching. Such scenarios are not necessarily anticipated in formal ethics procedures and require careful navigation, as they are vulnerable moments for the practitioner-researcher and for the client-participant.

2. The coach practitioner-researcher's needs

Within the micro-context, the coach will also need to navigate between the roles of coach and researcher. Prior training, coaching philosophy, skills, expertise, and experience would influence how the practitioner-researcher approaches the coaching intervention. A useful approach is Bachkirova's (2016) notion that the coach is an instrument through which coaching takes place. Similarly, in the research context, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that the researcher, in collecting data from 'inside' the participant's context, is an instrument. However, this needs careful positioning as whilst 'instrumentality' might open up possibilities for rapport, it also nullifies the identity of the researcher in the process. Rowling (1999), a counselling researcher, argues that this instrumental self cannot inevitably bracket off emotion from the research process, and such a model of researching can downplay the need for researcher self-care. For Rowling (1999) there is a contingency of response within the research process, which she termed 'being in, being out, being with'.

3. The practitioner-researcher and client interaction

In coaching, the client's story, needs and aims shape the interaction (Pokora & Connor, 2017). Whilst this is important in coaching research interventions, answering research questions is also important. These different emphases in coaching and research may lead to ethical challenges in decision-making. A key consideration for working sensitively with vulnerable groups is how to navigate and balance the aims of research and coaching. This

involves empowering the participant-client within the process, for example, highlighting their right to withdraw from the intervention at any time. Safeguarding is also part of this process, where a participant-client must be made aware of the limits of confidentiality where safeguarding challenges might occur. Whilst clients may be vulnerable, working with vulnerable groups may make the coach vulnerable. Qualitative research involves emotional work and researcher vulnerability (Holland, 2007). If the coaching practitioner-researcher is working with vulnerable groups, the intersection of the vulnerability of the client context and the relationship and interaction style will need to be managed as part of a careful ongoing negotiation of ethical decisions in practice.

4. Meso-context: making ethical decisions by drawing on aligned fields

The meso-context involves ethical decision-making where coaching research searches out solutions, ideas, or practices from aligned fields such as counselling, social work, health, and clinical research. Of these fields, counselling scholarship is the most closely aligned to coaching research. Health and clinical research use models where vulnerability aligns with incapacitation (Tutenel et al, 2019) which would not apply to coaching research. There are synergies between counselling and coaching research, but coaching practitioner-researchers also need to attend to the differences between coaching and psychotherapy (Bachkirova et al., 2020). Any ethical decisions considering aligned work would need to be mindful of what applied to the coaching context.

When working with vulnerable groups, the so-called grey area between coaching and counselling must be considered. The challenge is that the borders between these interventions can be obscure (Giraldez-Hayes, 2021). The ‘procedural ethical’ codes of the coaching bodies (see also exo-context below) emphasise the importance of professional boundaries, without clear definitions or exploration of commonalities between coaching and psychotherapy. The Global Code of Ethics for Coaches, Mentors, and Supervisors states that the coach should remain professional by ‘operating within the limit of their professional competence’ (4.1), but no further explanation is offered. Theoretically, groups that are termed psychiatrically ‘vulnerable’, i.e. vulnerable to a particular mental health disorder, may not have the capacity to participate in coaching (Evans-Krimme & Passmore, 2023); and would not be seeking coaching, unless they felt in a position to move on from counselling into action (Grant, 2020). However, as we saw earlier, Grant’s work suggests that counselling and coaching populations might overlap. In reality, coaches working with vulnerable groups need to be acutely aware of the limits of their competence and practice, having clear arrangements for signposting should the need arise. For coach practitioner-researchers, contracting through the initial pre-intervention consultation is key to navigating the ‘grey area’ where coaching and counselling overlap. This step helps the coach-researcher to establish whether coaching is suitable for potential participants, to set expectations and parameters of the work, and to mitigate any potential harm to participants (Evans-Krimme & Passmore, 2023).

A key part of clarifying the parameters of the intervention is for the coach-researcher to explain their approach to coaching and how they work. The traditional idea of coaching being goal-focused (as opposed to counselling being used to eliminating dysfunction) (Bachkirova & Baker, 2018) may not apply to some participants. Within the research process, coaching practitioner-researchers have an ethical obligation to establish the most suitable coaching approach for the client groups with whom they are working. Clients will have different coaching needs and co-construction of knowledge is empowering for vulnerable groups in research (Amann & Sleight, 2021).

5. Exo-context: operating in line with professional ethical codes

For any coaching research intervention, formalised codes of professional practice need to be adhered to, exemplified by the ICF Code of Ethics (2021) and the Global Code of Ethics (GcoE) subscribed to by members of the Association for Coaching (AC) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC). Ethical guidelines are an essential component in securing the professional status of coaching (Garvey & Stokes, 2023; GcoE, 2020, 4.3), guaranteeing standards of conduct and service across this field of helping. Core principles for the Global Code of Ethics include integrity, not misleading clients, confidentiality, clear contracting and boundary setting (e.g. signposting to appropriate sources of support where matters may be beyond professional competence), avoiding conflict of interest and any inappropriate relations, and ending the relationship ethically. Yet, if this represents Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) 'procedural ethics', then there is also 'ethics in practice': the formalised ethical codes are also subject to individual interpretation (as we have seen in 'micro-context'), including how supervision is used in coaching research (see below).

Garvey and Stokes (2023, p. 42) argue that the "dominant model of coaching ethics is individualistic", as it is guided by models from therapeutic and psychological traditions. Indeed, De Haan (2007) posits that Rogers' (2004) core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard no matter what the client brings, and congruence (the honesty of the therapist or coach), are foundational for coaching. This suggests that any basis for making ethical decisions when working with vulnerable groups would need to be made through a lens that sought to put the coach in the client's shoes, where the coach unconditionally trusted in the client's resources, and in which the coach was completely genuine with the client. Furthermore, ethical decisions are not completely individualistic: coaching itself is relational and constituted in the space in-between the coach and the client (Jackson & McKergow, 2007), and as such, ethical decisions are relational. This relationality of ethical decision-making in the coaching space is crucial because it is co-created and empowers the client. This may include checking on where the client wants to go next and eliciting feedback on how things are working for them. Yet the coach as 'practitioner-researcher' is also necessarily 'out, in and with' (Rowling, 1999), during the research process, meaning that mutual ethical decision-making may not be part of every element of the study. Participants may not get to feed into the research design process, and the researcher 'holds' data in a form of 'ownership', not to mention an overt interest in completing the research and potential biases towards the results.

6. Coaching Supervision

Another key element of relationality within ethical coaching is the role of the coaching supervisor in supporting the coach's growth and integrity in practice. Indeed the GcoE states: "Members will engage in supervision with a suitably qualified/experienced supervisor [...] with a level of frequency that is appropriate to their coaching" (2020, 4.3). Coaching supervision may manifest as coaching between equals, as well as mentoring through passing on knowledge and role modelling (Hays, 2016). This supervision is crucial for supporting the coach's reflection on practice, providing accountability, challenge, and opportunities for feedback (Bachkirova et al, 2020). Coaching supervision is vital when dealing with vulnerable groups in coaching, for both the research and the coaching process to ensure the duty of care to both participants and the researcher is upheld. As Bachkirova (2008, p. 16) contends, "Coaches are less equipped than counsellors to identify mental health issues impinging on the boundaries of coaching".

Fleet et al. (2016) give clear procedural guidance around counselling supervision for counselling research, advising that before research commences the counselling supervisor should be consulted, with these consultations continuing throughout the research. Fleet et al. (2016) recognise the imbrication of research within the fabric of counselling. The dual relationship is addressed in counselling supervision, which is crucial for facilitating reflexivity to support the client/participant and for Fleet et al. (2016) generative of theoretical ideas for research analysis.

Whilst in coaching, supervision may fulfil several functions – qualitative/normative, developmental/formative and resourcing/restorative (Proctor, 2000) – no guidance exists about the role of supervision in coaching research. Recent books on coaching research noticeably separate coaching supervision from research supervision, with no discussion of the role of coaching supervision in practitioner-led research. Oades et al. (2019) and Jackson and Cox (2020) concentrate discussions on research supervisors rather than coaching supervisors. Integrating coaching supervision as an integral part of coaching research, when appropriate, is an area for future work, to facilitate the discussion of research ethical issues vis-à-vis coaching practice while fostering research reflexivity.

7. Macro-Context: core research considerations

Within social sciences, fundamental high-level codes around research ethics have remained relatively consistent over the decades. These codes provide guidance that research should be worthwhile, research participants (and the researcher) should not be adversely affected, and participation should be anchored in informed consent, volition, and anonymity (Ritchie et al., 2014). Different kinds of research questions will necessarily be anchored in specific epistemologies and methodologies (Jackson & Cox, 2020), and these will lead to different kinds of ethical challenges working with vulnerable groups. A key consideration is how the underpinning research design for coaching research benefits participants. Research design would also need to consider practical factors, such as intervention accessibility, participant comfort, and accessibility of any online components of the research. Other considerations of research design would include risks where the intervention might harm the participant, (such as unknown and/or sensitivity to life circumstances of participants which can impact client commitment); participant commitment to attending sessions as agreed; energy during sessions; ability to concentrate and be present; challenges where what clients may want to achieve could clash with the limitations of their circumstances. Finally, researcher bias may skew a coaching intervention: wanting the coaching to help participants may result in researcher bias.

Interventions, which seek to elicit positive outcomes for clients, may unwittingly harm participants. The coaching practitioner-researcher ultimately must continually and reflexively consider the purpose of the study and the appropriateness of the means to achieve that purpose in the context of both delivering and investigating ‘helping’. Aligned with Bronfenbrenner’s ideas (1979) of a dynamic ecosystem, ethical decisions must be considered alongside the participant and other parts of the system, if appropriate. Crucially, research practitioners may consider the ‘shadow side’ of helping (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012), i.e. the researcher’s motivation to help being driven by their desire to heal their pain. Exploring assumptions that underpin the research design, and considering coaching research through the ‘shadow side’ of helping, are a crucial part of striving towards ethical research decisions. An important consideration here is that focusing on ‘minimizing harm’ to participants might nevertheless be reductionist: defaulting to thinking in terms of harm can reduce the possibilities of participant agency and co-creation (Hammett et al., 2022). Focusing on harm

potentially elides the specifics of the participants' situational contexts, the helping relationship that is built, and the interaction of the intervention.

Recommendations for ethical coaching research with vulnerable groups

The complexity of working with vulnerable groups, combined with the tension of the dual practitioner-researcher role requires awareness and careful and deliberate consideration of potential ethical implications for both the coach-researcher and participants. Based on the discussions above about the use of an ecological model of ethical systems in coaching research, below are recommendations upon which ethical principles for working with vulnerable groups in coaching research can be further built. These recommendations are not intended to be definitive, but to serve as a discussion point for further developments in this area.

- **Coaching supervision:** There is a gap in coaching scholarship around what coaching supervision with coaching-practitioner-researchers might look like. Coaching supervision enables the exploration of the complexities of dual roles, and assumptions about the vulnerable group can be recognised and evaluated. This might work in tension with research supervision. Here, the development of guidelines concerned with working with both sets of supervisors on research, the different functions of the supervision in different contexts, and whether the supervisors might even work together, would be a valuable next step. In the absence of set guidelines, an ongoing negotiation and consideration of where both sets of supervision are most helpful is important. The supervisee can bring/negotiate an agenda from across the systems discussed.
- **Coaching practitioner-researcher self-care:** To coach vulnerable groups and navigate sensitive issues, the researcher must attend to self-care to enable coaching and research with self-awareness, clarity and energy (e.g. coaching supervision, reflective practice (e.g. field notes), and ensuring activities to replenish energy involved in coaching/researching). This might be reinforced with training to help coaching practitioner-researchers recognise care needs associated with different aspects of their dual role.
- **Congruence:** Awareness of incongruence (particularly in the dual role of researcher-practitioner) is crucial as this may impact the efficacy of the coaching and the 'critical moments' of ethical decision-making within coaching.
- **Confidentiality:** Notwithstanding safeguarding, and the importance of coaching supervision, to avoid pathogenic (or exacerbating) vulnerability of participants, protection of identity and data is important.
- **Role boundaries:** Role boundaries can be difficult to navigate considering the duality of roles that results from researching and practicing coaching and the client's and coach's needs as human beings. These role boundaries are continually renegotiated across the situational context of the participant, the relationship between the participant and the coaching practitioner-researcher, and through the format of the coaching intervention.
- **Scope:** Being aware of and navigating boundaries with other kinds of help such as counselling, and professional knowledge (e.g. theoretical underpinnings of the project), informs ethical decision-making. This might be to draw inspiration from

other areas or to use them to pinpoint the specificity of coaching practice, and identify where different kinds of decisions or information are needed.

- **Facilitating benefits, minimising harm:** Coaching seeks to unlock the client's potential to achieve outcomes that are meaningful for them. The resources of the client/participant should be central to the intervention. This must be done sensitively. The coaching approach needs to be flexible and, regardless of study design, the coach must be able to adapt to the clients' needs without imposing specific viewpoints or expectations. For example, sessions may need to be shortened if the client's energy level cannot be sustained and maintaining the original contract could cause the client discomfort.
- **Client-centred awareness:** This involves putting the 'human' at the centre of the work, through using dialogue and checking in to build respect. Ongoing awareness includes building knowledge of how each participant arrives at the session, being attentive to the client (rather than the 'presenting problem') and by creating a picture of the multiple intersecting situations that impinge during the intervention. These factors should underpin approaches to data collection.
- **Right to withdraw:** To maintain a client-centred approach to research, participants should have the right to withdraw during the research project. Furthermore, consent should be renegotiated, updated, or re-checked with clients throughout the project.
- **Contracting:** Depending on the study design, contracting might be spread across several stages of the project. An initial 'chemistry' meeting could include explanations about the differences and similarities between coaching and counselling; ascertaining client expectations and hopes for the intervention; outlining the duration and scope of the work; and where and how the coaching aspects and the research aspects will take place (and how this will be ethical, including confidentiality, safeguarding and right to withdraw). Re-contracting might then occur in the first session, and throughout coaching as needed.
- **Co-creation:** Coaching strives to ensure that clients feel that they are equal to the coach and are treated with dignity. Participants needed to be able to articulate how coaching could best help them to create, together with the coaching practitioner-researcher, a meaningful and valuable coaching intervention.
- **Reactivity:** It is crucial to have an awareness of how the research questions might impinge upon how the helping intervention is transpiring. It is important to consider how researching coaching might affect the coaching itself, and whether this is something participants need to be made aware of.
- **Training:** Coaches are responsible for ensuring that, as far as possible, they have undertaken the training needed to support their work – this may be coaching or research training.
- **Awareness of systemic impacts on the client:** Clients may experience multi-dimensional challenges that could impact their engagement in coaching (see Figure 1). Coaches (sensitively) must seek to gain knowledge and understanding of the context for the client.

Conclusion

This article explored the complexity of ethical decision-making in coaching research among vulnerable groups. It adapted Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model to provide a practical ethical framework for researchers. Ultimately, part of the ethical process is the discovery of the specific needs of the vulnerable group to tailor coaching to them, whilst being aware of the varying and intersecting vulnerabilities that may be present for any group. Whilst some aspects of working with vulnerable groups can be generalised, others will need to be customised to meet the needs of specific client groups. Considering the requirements of coaching, research among vulnerable groups is important to develop the scholarship of coaching in communities whilst contributing to the equity, inclusion and diversity imperative in coaching research and practice.

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