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There is No Such Thing as Coaching Ethics: An Opinion Piece

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Abstract

This opinion piece suggests that the idea of coaching ethics is flawed. There is no particular professional ethic associated with coaching, nor should there be. The implications of the conflict between the ethics of caring and "business ethics" for coaching are poorly recognised. Guidance from and the ethical stance of many of the organisations that represent and accredit coaches does not serve ethical coaching well. Many of the frameworks for accreditation are inconsistent with the stated values of the organisations promulgating them and could be considered unethical.

Keywords: coaching ethics, business ethics, coach accreditation

Introduction

Coaches should behave ethically, be represented by organisations that are ethically driven, and be accredited through ethically based procedures. This opinion piece suggests that coaches wishing to practice ethically have been poorly served in a number of areas: by the idea that there should be a particular coaching ethics; by the associated literature; by the ethical guidance from major organisations that offer coaching accreditation; and by the ethical stance of those organisations in their accreditation protocols.

The author considers the development of coaching ethics and codes of ethics associated with organisations that offer coaching accreditation, such as the Global Code of Ethics (2021a), to be inconsistent and unhelpful. There has been a failure to critically examine the basis of ethical behaviour and confusion between behaving professionally and being a professional. This paper explores the literature on ethics. Professional (Koehn, 2006) and business ethics (Brenkert & Beauchamp, 2012) are examined for their relevance to coaching. It will be shown that coaching has none of the features that should lead to the creation of a specific professional coaching ethic and that there is no framework required for coaching ethically other than common morality (Gert, 2004). Indeed, the proposition that coaching should have a particular professional ethic is often an instrumental one related to concerns about the status of coaching (Weinberg, 2022).

Lack of clarity over whether coaching is part of the caring professions, concerned with human flourishing, or primarily a process for optimising business success has led to confusion about where a coach's responsibility lies. The literature is not always clear if "client" means the coachee or the sponsoring organisation. Coaching cannot prioritise both the welfare of individual coachees and the needs of the organisations they work for. The author shows that this confusion is embedded within many of those organisations that seek to accredit and regulate coaching and is seen in inconsistent ethical statements and core values that could be considered unethical. Examples include the protocols that determine their most

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basic function, coach accreditation, as well as the demand for compliance with behaviours such as supervision that are not evidence-based and are self-serving.

Ethics is the study of what “are good and bad ends to pursue in life and what is right and wrong.” It aims to support decisions about the moral choices to make (Deigh, 2010, p. 7). Acting ethically assists in “generating harmony out of discordant interests” (Neiman, 2009, p. 276). Ethical thinking concerns recognising that one's interests “cannot count for more, simply because they are my own, than the interests of others” (Singer, 1993, p. 13).

Whilst there are many definitions of coaching, an overview has shown that they usually agree that coaching is a reflective, developmental process involving a coach and a coachee, with a purpose that is to support the coachee to change positively. Coaching is likely to be performance-focused (as contrasted with mentoring), and the coach will probably have limited sector knowledge. The definitions considered in the overview did not consider any actors other than the coach and coachee and did not attempt to describe the skills of the coach (Passmore, 2021). It has also been suggested that the key role of the coach is to develop the “client’s resourcefulness through skilful questioning, challenge, and support” (Rogers, 2021, p. 8).

This opinion piece is therefore concerned with whether the frameworks of ethical coaching described in the literature and the activity of organisations that accredit coaches promote ethical behaviour and are relevant to coaching. It aims to provoke discussion about the basis upon which a coach behaves ethically and to encourage coaches to consider the ethical implications of their coaching activities and the ethics of organisations that “represent” and accredit coaches. Do the ethical codes support coaches by ensuring that their coaching is developmental, enables change that is moral, good for individuals and society, and recognises the interests of others? Do the organisations that train, represent, accredit, and devise ethical codes for coaching show consistency in the values they espouse, their ethical codes, and in other activities, particularly accreditation?

Common Morality and Professional Ethics

Common morality describes the system that most people use when they make moral decisions. Gert (2004) describes ten general rules claimed to account for the kinds of actions that might normally be considered prohibited or required within a moral code. These rules do not provide a complete framework for ethical decision-making. They explain why there is agreement concerning most moral decisions, why there may be disagreement, and that when the general rules conflict resolution may be achieved through judgment. Gert and other theorists justify common morality by suggesting that each person has reason to consider the interests of others as well as their own (Nagel, 1994) and that a moral system would be adopted by rational actors to manage behaviours. Candidates for universal moral rules that promote cooperative behaviour have been shown to be present across many cultures (Curry et. al., 2019).

Professional ethics largely derive from practice in caring (Thobaben, 2024, Section 2.1). The common morality approach holds that professional ethics, in particular medical ethics, is simply the ethics of normal life applied to the health care environment; “bioethics is not a new set of principles or manoeuvres, but the same old ethics being applied to a particular realm of concerns” (K. Clouser, 1982, p. 553). This approach is normally encountered as principlism. The four principles that underlie medical ethics: respect for autonomy; non-maleficence; beneficence; and justice derive from well-established moral

beliefs found in common morality (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994) and were unleashed on the emerging field of medical ethics in 1979 (Holm, 2002). This approach to professional ethics suggests that basic principles establish moral obligations, which are implemented within a real context such as medical practice (Beauchamp & Rauprich, 2016; Jones, 2020). There is disagreement amongst common morality theorists concerning the value of principlism, some claiming that the "principles" are simply a collection of diverse ethical duties and ideas without theoretical grounding (Clouser & Gert, 1990) and cannot replace moral theory.

Common morality theorists grant that there may be justifications for violations of the rules that underpin moral decision-making. For example, "do not cause pain" and "do not deprive of freedom" (Gert, 2004, p. 20) may be violated with socially approved justification, in these cases by doctors and judges. Consequently, one of the key tasks of professional ethics is to clarify and interpret the implementation of common morality. Under what circumstances is there justification for an action that would normally be considered to violate a moral rule? This viewpoint suggests that professional ethics are based upon common morality and balanced reflection about violations.

Common morality theory is not the only basis for professional ethics. Rhodes (Rhodes, 2019) claims that the conduct expected within medicine cannot be reconciled with common morality and that the propositions of medical ethics are distinctive. Behaviours that are ideals in everyday life become duties within professional ethics, for example, the duty to base decisions on evidence. Permissible behaviours in everyday life (such as being judgemental) become impermissible (medical staff should avoid being judgemental), and impermissible behaviours in everyday life become duties (rather than assume autonomy in a person, the doctor has a duty to assess capacity). The ethical framework for the professional is therefore "starkly different" (Rhodes, 2019, p. 792) from that expected in everyday life and cannot be derived from common morality.

As well as possessing a systematic body of knowledge and the proficiency to use that knowledge to benefit others, a professional should be aware of the impact of their professional acts within the context of professional practice. This broader understanding underpins professional ethics (Kasher, 2005). The elements that underlie the existence of a discipline as a profession with an ethic include the concept of the discipline (law, medicine) as a distinct vocation that has a moral purpose (serves a public good) and acknowledgement of the social constraints upon the discipline. Rules of conduct arise from the existence of a coherent body of activity that comprises professional practice. Engineering is "not what engineers do; engineers are those people that participate in the professional practice of engineering;" the same could be said about doctors: "medical ethics is impossible without a conception of medicine" (Kasher, 2005, p. 75).

Kasher and Rhodes, albeit from different approaches, come to similar conclusions about the link between the concept of the professional and the ethics of the profession. Professionals, either as a result of socially agreed carve-outs (a carve-out can be an exception or exemption to general rules in a legal contract) or because of distinctive professional ethics, are allowed behaviours that would not otherwise be considered acceptable. Professionals have expertise that they use to benefit others. This creates rights and duties that are unique to the profession. A professional can justifiably behave in ways that would not normally be considered ethical and may infringe on the ethical rights of others (Gewirth, 1986) in order to be effective. Surgeons may hurt or deform their patients; a lawyer may know that a client has

lied on the witness stand and will not divulge that lie; a doctor may put a person at risk in a drug trial.

Consent and context also need consideration. Informed consent is usually considered a cornerstone of professional relationships (Barnett et al., 2007). Professional activities performed on behalf of the client underpinned by consent become permissible and justified on the grounds that they are effective actions within a particular context. Judges would not be allowed to perform lumbar punctures or doctors to imprison (except when invoking mental health or public health interventions). Activities are permissible within the framework of that profession's activities; the same activity performed outside the sphere of the professional interaction would be considered unethical. A judge using their legal knowledge within the legal system to deprive someone of their freedom may be acting professionally and ethically. If they deprive their spouse of freedom using coercive control, they are not. Even if the professional/client relationship exists outside the professional context, an action may be ethically permitted within it but not outside.

Context applies to membership in particular types of professional institutions. Application of an institution's activities (medicine, law, etc.) by a member, within the right context, confers the right to behave in ways that would normally be considered unethical. The characteristics of the institution are that it has a set of rules, that the institution is "morally justified," meaning that those subject to institutional activities consent to accept it and its rules and roles, and that the purpose of those rules and roles is to "protect and promote the well-being of all the persons subject to them" (Gewirth, 1986, p. 291). Members of those professions are highly trained specialists with a degree of autonomy; their knowledge and skills give them power over their clients in an asymmetric relationship where the client's well-being (health, wealth, liberty) is at risk. It is expected that such professionals put the needs of their clients first and respect the need for confidentiality and informed consent. The behavioural norm is that the professional/client relationship is special and is only interfered with for specific reasons, such as crime or threats to public health, that are usually carefully defined. The professional is expected to promote a relationship with the client based upon trust that has a clear ethical dimension (Brien, 1998). The doctor seeing a patient should not consider the needs of the person or organisation that is paying the bill, solely the concerns of the patient. The judge should consider the law, not the current concerns of the political state.

Professional ethics are the codes of behaviour of groups of professionals, such as those highly trained specialists described above whose status can be defined using a neo-Weberian approach. This identifies activities where concern about potential risk to the public leads to formal regulation by the state; close monitoring of entry to the profession; granting a monopoly of the right to practice to those admitted; and a formal system of quality control (Saks, 2016; Saks & Adams, 2019).

Coaching and Professional Ethics

Coaching has none of the features described above to suggest that it is a profession that should be underpinned by a distinctive professional ethic. There is no commonly agreed systematic body of knowledge and proficiency; interactions do not take place where a professional is part of a clearly defined professional community; there is no agreed social consensus that the coaching community should be granted the privilege to undertake what would normally be considered unethical behaviour; and there is confusion over who the beneficiary of coaching should be (as shall be explored further below). Coaching does not have the marker for the professions of "distinctive powers and privileges" (Rhodes, 2019, p.

792); it fails the test of being a profession. The same conclusion is reached using a neo-Weberian approach to defining professions (Saks, 2016; Saks & Adams, 2019).

Coaching is not a profession, and it has been argued that it should not be (Weinberg, 2022); it is a role. Many roles have obligations (builder, parent, chef), and we hope that people behave ethically when we interact with them in their role. We do not want to be cheated by the builder or meet a dishonest car salesman. We want people to “behave professionally,” even though the roles are not professions. Role morality (Gibson, 2003) is consistent with common morality, and society does not grant those undertaking roles a carve-out from normative ethics (Airaksinen, 2012) as we might grant true professionals. Professions differ from roles because they are potentially dangerous. Society articulates the duties of professionals and regulates them. They may be granted ethical carve-outs, be allowed to hurt people, enquire about taboo subjects, and keep secrets about social deviance so that they can be effective.

Professional ethics are necessary where professional activities carry significant risk to individuals and communities. Coaching is a low-risk activity. The main tool of coaching is the conversation. Coaches do not prescribe dangerous drugs, cut people up, deprive them of their liberty, or construct potentially hazardous buildings. Gas engineers have an agreed body of knowledge, have skills in implementation, and are allowed to undertake hazardous work that would normally be considered unethical (putting lives at risk); they are nationally regulated (Gas Safe Register, n.d.). They are much closer to being a profession than coaching. The main hazard of coaching is if a coach goes outside the bounds of coaching and, for example, fails to recognise or exacerbates a mental health problem. This hazard is hardly different from the risks of conversation in everyday life. Those developing coaching ethics seem to be basing the need for ethics on the risks of coaches undertaking activity that lies outside coaching rather than the need to mitigate hazards inherent in the activity. This is like medical ethics ignoring the risks inherent in medicine and focusing on doctors who decide to write legal opinions or design penthouses. Or perhaps they recognise that the risks are really very low.

One of the elements of the concept of a profession is that it has ethics at its core (Tapper & Millett, 2015). This has been recognised in coaching by the suggestion that developing a particular coaching ethics has an important function in establishing coaching as a recognised profession (Fatien & Clutterbuck, 2023). The author of this piece finds it inappropriate that ethics should be considered instrumentally, the purpose of coaching ethics being the construct of a profession for which there is little justification (Weinberg, 2022). Ethics should not be an instrumental input into status-seeking.

Coaching is a low-risk activity; there is no agreed professional practice of coaching, there are no shared core values or common purpose (Smith et al., 2023, p. xxxviii), and there is no consensus as to the scope or limits of coaching. For all these reasons, there is no profession of coaching. It is difficult to think of why a coach should need a “carve-out” from common morality. Therefore, there is no place for coaching ethics, though coaches should, of course, act ethically and professionally.

Coaching and Business Ethics

The place of “business ethics” as a framework for ethical coaching will now be considered. The academic field of business ethics comprises the investigation of moral problems as they arise within a business setting using traditional philosophical/ethical tools

and concepts and the study of the norms of business relationships (employer/employee, customer/supplier); this is often associated with legal, regulatory, and compliance and how effective management can minimise or avoid ethical issues (Brenkert & Beauchamp, 2012).

Business is undoubtedly an important sphere of human activity and therefore one within which there will be disagreement and controversy about behaviour. Business activities raise issues of trust, honesty, decency, fairness, discrimination, etc. and are therefore an important arena for the investigation of ethical standards and the promotion of good ethical behaviour. However, the author suggests that the notion of a "business ethic" implies that the ethical behaviour of businesses cannot be contained within the framework of common morality. As discussed above when considering professional ethics, the main driver for considering an ethical code other than that based on common morality is the need to recognise and codify necessary behaviours that would normally be considered wrong. Therefore, the notion of "business ethics" implies that business requires justification to act in ways that would be a violation of common morality, and that business, like the professions, needs a particular set of ethics with derogation from a common morality framework. If there is no justification for a carve-out from common morality, "business ethics" becomes a redundant term, merely concerning the application of common morality to a business context. Ethics concerns the relationships between individuals, and as people acting within communities (Malcolm & Tabor Hartley, 2009), businesses are a form of community and therefore should be subject to ordinary ethics as derived from common morality. The concept of a particular "business ethic" is flawed, as there seem to be no reasons for granting business derogation from a common morality framework.

Peter Drucker, a leading business thinker, suggested that the idea of business ethics was dangerous nonsense and that businesses and their leaders were not outside the laws and norms of behaviour of society, so there was no place for a special business ethics (Drucker, 1981). Indeed, the term "business ethics" has been called an oxymoron (Duska, 2000). Nobel Prize winner Milton Friedman (Friedman, 1970) suggested that business decisions are not moral in nature and that there are no grounds for an ethical approach to business, which merely has to act within the law. Individuals should behave ethically, and therefore the decisions that they make within a business context should be ethical. The point that both Druker and Friedman make, albeit from different perspectives, is that business does not provide a context that justifies modifying ethical stances derived from common morality in contrast to the professional context described above.

A statement of business ethics, that of the American Marketing Association (2021), exhorts marketers to do no harm and to be honest, responsible, fair, and transparent; hardly evidence that there are special "bedrock ethical standards" (Laczniak, 2012, p. 308); they are simple reiterations of how we should expect people to behave. Behaving ethically is simply the right thing to do, even for a business, and is guided by common morality; there is no case for a special business ethic.

Business may consider that there is a competitive advantage from corporate social responsibility programs or proclaiming their business ethics (Burke & Logsdon, 1996; Harris, 2001; Vidal-Salazar et al., 2012); ethics is viewed as an instrument for maximising profit. This approach to ethics is not new; ethical codes do not develop in social isolation and may have less altruistic roots than is often recognised. Professionalisation and the adoption of codes of ethics can be used for commercial advantage, as a restraint on trade and a way of reducing and controlling competition (Carstensen, 2019; Loozen, 2006). The original authors

of the Hippocratic oath asserted that a moral stance was effective in attracting patients and competing with other schools of medicine (Nutton, 1993).

Professionals working within a business have their own professional ethical code, which applies when and wherever they are exercising their professional duties and skills. They are ethically responsible as demanded by their professional code, usually to the individual client, not to the employer or funder. A physician claiming that they have a greater responsibility to ensure profit for their employer than they have for patient care would be poorly thought of by the guardians of their professional ethics.

Individuals working within business should behave ethically, creating business cultures where relationships between individuals and between organisations are based on sound ethical principles. This is merely to say that when working in business, there is no opt-out from ethical thinking nor refuge in a confected business ethic. Drucker was right; “business ethics” is nonsense. Businesses should simply behave ethically.

Coaching and Business: Caring or Commerce?

Whilst, as has been shown, coaching is not a profession (Saks, 2016; Weinberg, 2022), for the purpose of this paper it has been assumed that coaches wish to behave professionally and with similar consideration for the well-being of their clients as the traditional regulated professions (medicine, dentistry, law, etc.) (Saks & Adams, 2019). The ethical behaviour of coaches is at risk of distortion: by the instrumental use of ethics as a marketing tool; as a balm for professional status anxiety; and by confusion over the role of coaching as a people-facing activity or a tool of business success.

Bachkirova, Cox, and Clutterbuck (Bachkirova et al., 2014) describe coaching as “a human development process that involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools, and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the coachee and potentially for other stakeholders” (p. 1). The emphasis here is on the benefit to the coachee.

Another perspective describes coaching as having two aspects: “an approach to how someone functions in the role of being a manager” and “a set of management skills aimed at getting the most productivity out of employee performance" (Brounstein, 2000). A leading business coaching accrediting organisation defines the goal of business coaching as “to enhance the client’s awareness and behaviour so as to achieve business objectives for both the client and their organisation (Worldwide Association of Business Coaches [WABC], n.d.). Critics of coaching within business identify a lack of strategic alignment between coaching initiatives and organisational objectives and “questionable approaches to delivery” such as coaches who are “sophisticated in psychological language” or who “over-empathise” with individual clients and fail to consider overall organisational need (Sloan & Utts, 2003, p. 52). The emphasis here is on business objectives.

This paper suggests that coaching cannot be both a care-orientated profession orientated toward human flourishing and a tool of business-orientated human resources. It cannot pretend to be concerned with the individual and personal development (Knowles, 2021) if coaching goals are being set (with the shareholder in mind) as a tool of business competitiveness (Vidal-Salazar et al., 2012). Both coachee and business client may have worthwhile and valid goals; indeed, one may well support the other; however, there needs to be clarity over primary responsibilities. Identifying the intended beneficiary of coaching is

recognised as one of the key challenges in business coaching (Blackman et al., 2016). If coaching is primarily concerned about the individual being coached and their needs, it should be clear that is so, and therefore also clear that the sponsor cannot have any special rights.

Business coaching concerns the personal and organisational. Coaching occurs within business because an individual, or group of individuals, wants, or is wanted to, change the way they work or interact within the business, usually to enhance performance. This immediately raises ethical issues as individual motivators are complex, barriers to performance may lie inside or outside the organisation, and may be personal rather than organisational. What are the ethical issues when the coach has been appointed by a business because they want to develop and retain the individual, and the coach finds that the salient issues for an individual lie in their domestic sphere, or they are deeply unhappy with the organisation and wish to work elsewhere? Business ethics frameworks do not help the coach, nor do definitions of business coaching or statements of coaching ethics since none provide clarity on the ethics of who the client is.

Using coaching techniques does not make an activity coaching. If coaching is primarily about individual flourishing, then an activity mainly undertaken to maximise business outputs by getting the most out of an employee is not coaching, even if coaching methods are employed; just as using physiological knowledge to torture someone is not medicine. Good ethical understanding should help coaches navigate these issues; unfortunately, as is shown in this paper, coaching ethics often obscures rather than illuminates.

Clarity over the primary concern of the coach for the coachee eliminates, or at least simplifies, many of the ethical issues in coaching. If clarification is not possible, then the relationship should not be confused with coaching, even though it may use coaching methodology and ethos. If a "coaching" relationship exists within a workplace, for example, between an individual and someone who reports to them or with an HR professional, there will be a conflict between the responsibility to the coachee and to the organisation. A coach cannot "unknow" something that may have organisational implications. The use of coaching techniques is to be encouraged; however, if coaching is about human flourishing and derives its ethics from care, then coaching should only be considered to be happening when the coach/coachee relationship is paramount and it is clear that the coach has no special responsibility to the sponsor other than those they have under the law. If the purpose of the coaching activity is to deliver organisational benefit ("improve this person's performance"), then it is a business activity, using coaching techniques, and the "coach" should make it clear to the client/coachee what they are doing and where their responsibilities lie. A physician doing what a third party wants to a patient is not acting ethically except under very particular circumstances (treatment under mental health or public health legislation, for example).

Team coaching brings other challenges; however, the ethical issues are still the same. What is the coach trying to achieve? If it is the development and flourishing of a group of people so that they can work better together, then the sponsor organisation has no standing other than to pay the bills. Coaches should not be acting as an arm of performance management or performance review if coaches are independent and behave professionally (for emphasis, behave professionally, not as professionals, which they are not).

There will almost always be a power imbalance between a sponsored coachee and the sponsor. It is not sufficient to say that the coach will only pass on information agreed to by the coachee. The coach cannot know what (explicit or implicit) pressure the coachee is under to allow the coach to collude with the sponsor. It is much simpler if coaches simply

considered the coach/coachee relationship to be paramount and confidential (in the absence of legal impediments).

Codes of Coaching Ethics

A code of ethics should provide a framework for dealing with ethical dilemmas and facilitate fairness and morally sensitive behaviours (Brandl & Maguire, 2002). Unfortunately, many of the codes of ethics for coaches fail this simple test.

The Global Code of Ethics for Coaches, Mentors, and Supervisors has as co-signatories several of the leading accrediting organisations in coaching. The code (*Global Code of Ethics*, 2021b, Section 2.4) gives equal weight to client and sponsor expectations, and that account should be taken of the "needs and expectations" of other relevant parties. The code also suggests (sec. 2.6) that the contract duration is appropriate to meet the client's and sponsor's goals and that while coaches should be guided by clients' interests, they have a responsibility to ensure the interests of sponsors are not harmed (sec. 2.8). What is a coach who finds out an unhappy coachee wishes to leave the sponsoring company to do? The code also makes an "ethical" case that coaches take part in activities that are not evidence-based, for example, supervision (Weinberg, 2023). The International Coaching Federation's (ICF) Code of Ethics (ICF, 2021) refers to "client(s) and sponsor(s)" when describing agreements, contracting, issues of information exchange, and confidentiality and suggests that conflicts of interest can be managed through ongoing dialogue and coaching agreements implying that the sponsor is an equal partner with rights to information.

The World Association of Business Coaches (WABC) claims that it has one of the most advanced and comprehensive ethical codes in the world! However, its code differentiates client and coachee, implying a special relationship with the business client (WABC, n.d.), and hides its coaching competencies behind a pay wall requiring membership. This does not seem consistent with best business practices, which extol the virtues of transparency (Parris et al., 2016).

The British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2018) is principlist in nature and constructed around respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity. In applying the principle of respect, members are reminded to consider privacy and confidentiality, issues of power, consent, and self-determination. Under responsibility, potentially competing duties are acknowledged. The BPS Practice Guidelines (BPS, 2017, Section 1.15) set out that the coaching psychologist should "work in the best interests of the client at all times." However (sec. 3.4), a client hierarchy states, "The psychologist's role will be *mainly* to the primary client and then the commissioning stakeholder" (authors italics), implying that the psychologist has a responsibility to the commissioner. The implication here is that the act of commissioning (paying) creates a position of privilege for the commissioner, giving them rights. There is no ethical reason for any special responsibility to the commissioner that may put the coachee under pressure or at a disadvantage and introduces a conflict of interest for the coach. In contrast, the initial simple point in the General Medical Council's (GMC) ethical guidance is that "as a good doctor, you will: make the care of your patient your first concern" (GMC, 2013).

Ethics of Accreditation

The ethical stance of an organisation can be revealed by how it determines its membership. The methods by which an organisation chooses to bestow its credentials and

membership are a key test of ethical probity. Examining the processes for accreditation of coaches by some of the leading coach accrediting organisations shows that accreditation is often based upon foundations this paper considers unethical.

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) insists that at the associate level the candidate documents at least 100 hours of coaching experience, of which 75 are paid; higher levels demand 500 hours (450 paid) and then 2,500 hours (2,250 paid) (ICF, 2023). The Association for Coaching (AfC) has a similar obsession with payment, setting minimum amounts of paid coaching for foundation level (25 hours) and a maximum of 25% at more advanced levels (AfC, 2020). The ICF accreditation standard is at odds with the "core value" of "humanity," "we commit to being humane, kind, compassionate, and respectful toward others," and its ethical code, "avoid discrimination by maintaining fairness and equality in all activities." The AfC is clearly acting at odds with its own code of ethics by discriminating against those who cannot pay when it states (section 3.4) "members will avoid knowingly discriminating on any grounds." In neither case is there a justification given for discounting pro-bono coaching when it comes to accreditation. It suggests that those organisations consider people who cannot afford to pay as less challenging to coach or less worthy of coaching! However, this matter is not stated explicitly, nor is it stated that understanding how to bill each client is an essential coach competency.

It would be odd if a surgeon had three-quarters of their experience ignored for accreditation purposes because it had been done in a not-for-profit environment or whilst working unpaid for a charity rather than in a private, for-profit hospital. Perhaps treating the cancer of a Fortune 500 CEO has greater training value than the same treatment for a leader of a not-for-profit, or even a homeless person! There is no reason to think that people who pay more have more challenging coaching issues.

Coaching accreditation commonly demands that the person applying for accreditation has a supervisor, even though the evidence base for the benefit of supervision (as against other systems for supported reflection) is poor across a number of professions. Furthermore, the organisations are conflicted as they provide and benefit from supervisor accreditation! Other much higher-risk activities, such as medicine, do not demand supervision, though they do expect engagement with professional development and critical reflection (Weinberg, 2023).

Discussion

This opinion piece has been written to provoke discussion about the role of the coach and the ethical position that underpins coaching. The role of ethics in coaching is confused; unfortunately, ethics are often viewed from an instrumentalist point of view. In the foreword to a recently published multi-author volume on coaching ethics (Bachkirova in Smith et al., 2023) the tension between coaching as a "performance-enhancing organisational intervention" and coaching as concerned with "clients' priorities and interests" is recognised. Unfortunately, this crucial issue is not discussed fully in the volume; this is both an opportunity missed and evidence that coaching has failed to find ethical coherence between the duty to the coachee and the organisation. The question of who the client is and the role of the commissioning organisation (Möller & Zimmermann, 2022) is one of the key tensions in business coaching. In a chapter on ethics in coaching education (Garvey & Giraldez-Hayes, 2023) a problem is presented that concerns whether a coach should present results of a coachee's "360" to their employer because the employer had paid; the problem is left

unresolved for discussion. It is not really a problem; the breach of confidence would simply be unethical.

Bachkirova goes on to suggest that codes of ethics are there “partially to counteract some of the issues that are created by this lack of clarity about our purpose” (Bachkirova, 2023, p. xxxix). This seems to be treating ethics as means, not ends. Another instrumentalist approach to ethics in coaching has been to see ethics as a pathway to professional status: “Talking about ethics in coaching is a necessary way to strengthen an emerging profession that needs structure and regulation” (Fatien & Clutterbuck, 2023). Ethics are not there to counteract problems in the purpose of coaching or to solve coaches’ lack of status (Weinberg, 2022). Coaches should understand that the purpose of ethics is to enable the coachee to flourish, and coaches should act ethically towards that purpose. Commenting on a claim that coaches are “ethical pluralists, who hold to a few solid principles" (Passmore, 2009, p. 7), Iordanou and Hawley (2020) point out that having a few solid principles is “inadequate to safeguard ethical standards” (p. 335).

Ethical principles are not easy to universalise, and they may often conflict. However, there is little chance of any coherence if coaching cannot even decide who it serves. Despite the fact that coaching is described as a “helping profession” (Smith & Arnold, 2023, p. 3), with a culture that owes much to the health care professions, clarity of ethical responsibility is missing. There is a clear, inadequately confronted, difference between the role of a professional, guided by professional ethics, and the needs of business. Indeed, the importance of the paymaster is often emphasised, and the paymaster is given a privileged position. “Coaches must remain aware of all relationships, including and especially the paying or sponsoring organisation” (Lai & Turner, 2023, p. 14); “understanding the tone, language, and goals of the coach commissioner can also make a significant difference, ensuring the coach understands the commissioner’s expectations and organisational priorities” (Passmore & Deges, 2023, p. 79); “The organisation would expect to be updated on the progress of the coaching and its outcomes” (Lai & Turner, 2023, p. 224).

The subservience of coaching to business interests is evident in coaching accreditation organisations’ guidance on the role of the coach and their approach to accrediting coaching. This extends to their own business interests when promoting activity that is not evidence-based and in which they have a financial interest. This is incompatible both with their ethical statements and with the ethics of client-centred caring professions. Ethics that fail to put the coachee first and are not evidence-based are of little value.

A discussion of what ethics is and how it applies to coaching in a recent handbook (Fatien & Clutterbuck, 2023) does not address the crucial question of who the client is; it offers a typology of ways to define ethics in coaching: as a level of maturity reached by a coach; as an innate feature of a coach to be developed through self-reflexivity; as a practice adapted to local contexts; and finally as “performative practice,” meaning that the “ethicality is attached to the situation rather than the coach.” This seems to be a complex way of describing simple ethical human interactions: that we mature and learn; should be active learners and self-critics; and should be aware of our and others’ relationships to local social customs. Hardly a basis for a particular coaching ethics.

Coaching should be about doing good while following the principles of simple common morality. This is rarely emphasised in discussions of coaching ethics. Many of the ethical problems and dilemmas described in books on coaching ethics would disappear (or become easier to resolve) if the paramount duty of the coach to the coachee were more clearly stated.

A profession that works under the conditions of business logic restricts and damages its ethical independence and autonomy.

Coaching has been captured by business; a clear conclusion to be drawn from the fact that coach accreditation sees up to 90% of the value of coaching in the financial transaction and coaching where there is no financial transaction of less value. Ethics in coaching seems to be a means of marketing a service, of providing a professional patina, and of resolving internal inconsistencies within coaching. Ethics has been confused with business concerns masquerading as business ethics. Placing coaching firmly within care rather than business addresses many of the difficult ethical issues that arise within coaching, whichever theoretical approach to ethics is taken: Kantian (O'Neill, 2013), virtue ethics (MacIntyre, 2013), care ethics (Slote, 2007), or a pragmatic approach such as principlism (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994).

The business of accrediting, membership, and supervision adds to the costs of coaching, and increasing cost limits access to coaching. That may be why only those who can pay are worth considering for accreditation purposes. Coaches have a responsibility to their coaches and other clients to work ethically. They therefore have a responsibility to challenge the ethical codes and accreditation systems of the organisations they pay membership and accreditation fees to and should ask if the ethical statements clearly define the paramount responsibility of the coach and where that lies. Is it toward the coachee or the sponsor, or is that responsibility confused or divided? Coaches should also ask if the organisation, which purports to set out ethical standards, adheres to an ethical way of doing business and is consistent with its own published ethical stance.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Coaches are ill-served by the literature on coaching ethics and by many of the bodies that seek to guide coaching. It is important that coaches behave ethically, and it is worthwhile reminding coaches of this and providing them with ethical guidance. However, it should be clear that such guidance is derived from common morality and that coaches do not need ethical carve-outs.

Business ethics serve marketing and not ethics; businesses should simply behave ethically, and coaches within businesses should serve the needs of the person(s) they are coaching, not the business. Coaches should reject the imposition of business values and focus upon the coachee, who should be able to trust the coach to maintain confidentiality and act in their interest.

Coaches should concentrate on behaving ethically rather than worry about the instrumental role of ethics in gaining status and be honest (and ethical) about their conflicts of interest when promoting activities that are not evidence-based but where they have commercial or academic interests, such as supervision.

The ethical codes of the leading coach-accrediting organisations fail to address the issue of who the coach is responsible to, particularly when working within a business. This is of such fundamental importance to the ethics of coaching that the omission makes the codes at best of little value and at worst unethical as they fail to take an ethical stance. Many accreditation processes for coaching are unethical.

If coaches are to behave ethically, they have a responsibility to ensure that those organisations that accredit them and purport to represent them are reformed.

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