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Exploring the Experiences of Coaches Working on the Edge: Trauma, Posttraumatic Growth, and Coaching

Abstract

Background: Coaching has traditionally been a way to facilitate peak performance and wellbeing in individuals. However, it is slowly recognised that many clients entering the coaching realm are also going through highly challenging life situations, even trauma. Therefore, a coach may find themselves regularly working with individuals who are trying to navigate life after traumatic incidences.

Aims: Explore the experiences of coaches who identify as having worked with individuals who are navigating a personal trauma(s) and how if at all, the coaching has facilitated a positive transformation in their clients.

Method: Ten coaching practitioners were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Transcribed interviews were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). 492 codes were listed from the data and through an inductive analysis, the themes were identified.

Results: Provide three overarching themes which reflect the experiences of coaches working on the edge: The Complexities of Life Emerge; Ethics and Safeguarding when Trauma Narratives Emerge; and Transformation of the Client After Trauma. The themes illuminate the high prevalence of trauma within coaching clients as well as how the coaching relationship can potentially facilitate both the process and outcomes of growth in clients.

Conclusion: The results have significant implications for both research and practice. Coaching practitioners are not automatically trained as qualified mental health professionals, therefore, there is an urgent requirement to recognise the need for safeguarding both the coach and client. The authors suggest a preliminary framework for starting the conversation around providing standard professional ethical guidelines, trauma-informed training, and support for coaches.

Keywords: Coaching psychology, posttraumatic growth, coaching, ethics.

Coaching is often sought by people when they are going through a difficult time in their life (Spence & Joseph, 2016) as a result of a highly stressful life event, such as dealing with a toxic relationship at work, redundancy or a failure to achieve workplace ambitions. However, a client may seek coaching not knowing why they feel blocked and/or cannot move forwards, and there could be underpinning trauma-related issues (Tehrani et al., 2012). Trauma-related narratives could also emerge organically during a coaching session, which requires awareness, witnessing and acknowledgement by the coach. However, very little is currently known about how if at all coaches do or could navigate these situations.

Coaching is a human development process involving structured, focused interventions directly challenging an individual and supporting them to actively pursue their goals for sustained change, results, and increased performance (Crowe 2016; Cox et al., 2018). Influenced by sports coaching, it made its appearance in the workplace during the 20th century, as a way to accelerate performance in those deemed by Grant (2001) at the higher end of the psychological functioning spectrum.

In the mid-1990's the term "posttraumatic growth" (PTG) was coined by Tedeschi & Calhoun and defined as "positive psychological changes experienced as a result of the struggle with traumatic or highly challenging life circumstance" (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p.3). This can be thought of as the paraphrased adage of Nietzche (1990) that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger (Janoff-Bulman, 2004; Joseph 2011). The ability for humans to overcome their struggles of suffering to experience personal growth has been recounted since ancient times and the psychological research of individuals such as Frankl (1985) and Maslow (1954) started the foundation for research on this topic.

With one in six adults experiencing a common mental health problem every week such as anxiety or depression (McManus et al., 2009) and the effect of a global pandemic, which has seen more than two-thirds of adults in the UK (69%) reporting to feel somewhat or very worried about the

effect COVID-19 is having on their life (ONS, 2021), inevitably there will be a proportion of clients who will attend coaching with adversity in their background, thus the inevitably of a coach facing these situations is high. However, little is known about how coaches safely navigate these situations, how are they currently doing it and how to potentially help their clients grow from these experiences. There is a gap in the systematic attention to providing qualitative evidence between the concepts of PTG and coaching.

There has been a strong demarcation among authors drawing lines that coaching is not therapy (Williams, 2003; Bluckert, 2005). However, recognition is slowly being developed that coaching has an important role to support an individual navigating a difficult period of their life (Spence & Joseph, 2016). It is not the traumatic event itself where the growth emerges, but when the individual engages with the aftermath of it (Tedeschi et al., 2018). Therefore, coaching is an intervention where an individual might engage with the challenges caused by the trauma(s), which in turn could lead to growth. However, currently, the experiences of coaches in this space are mostly unknown. The qualitative pairing of these topics gives exploration as to whether the process of coaching, can in time help facilitate growth in clients who have undergone personal trauma.

Posttraumatic growth

When an individual undergoes PTG the change is transformational and their struggle or coping in the aftermath of a traumatic experience is a key characteristic, therefore we can view PTG as a process or an outcome, depending very much on where the individual is at the point in time (Tedeschi et al., 2018). For this qualitative study PTG is being viewed as a potential outcome of the coaching process, and it is also recognised that the coaching can facilitate the PTG process. To appreciate the nuances of PTG it is helpful to understand some concepts, especially when applied to the coaching process.

Trauma is defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as

“An emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster” (APA, 2021)

Janoff-Bulman's (1992) model of trauma posits traumatic life events produce psychological distress, shattering our fundamental assumptions about ourselves and the world around us. In the theory of PTG, trauma is defined more broadly as a highly stressful life event faced by an individual which has a 'seismic' impact on the individual's life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998). The rebuilding of oneself after trauma is at the heart of Janoff-Bulman's (2004) shattered assumptions theory.

PTG can be viewed as the phenomenon of positive change, therefore when an individual has experienced trauma they return to a different and higher level of functioning than prior to the trauma or stressful life event (O'Leary & Ickovics,1995). This can be recognised as a positive change or benefit. By the individual acknowledging the trauma in a non-anxious way, PTG can be defined as the process of an individual rebuilding themselves post-trauma (Hefferon et., 2008).

The perceived growth of an individual who is struggling with trauma or highly stressful life circumstances has been reported in the domains of: changes in perception of self, a change in relationship with others and a changed philosophy in life, which includes a deeper appreciation for life, this comes with a new sense of life direction, opportunities, purpose, and priorities (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998).

The APA definition of trauma emphasises trauma whereby only catastrophic events are deemed traumatic. Whilst events such as natural disasters or war zones are indeed highly traumatic, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) have made this less restrictive in definition when thinking about PTG, by broadening out the terminology to encompass 'an individual who has faced circumstances which have been capable of at least shaking the foundations of the individual's assumptive world' (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998. p. 360).

Synonymous expressions such as trauma, crisis and highly stressful events are interchangeably used. This study will use the same approach in its language for the reader to understand the concept of PTG, as we are describing a personal and unique set of circumstances. These circumstances represent complex deep-seated challenges in the way a person identifies with the world and their place in it post-trauma (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

There are caveats in applying the term PTG. It is not a universal experience for each individual who experiences trauma to experience growth, nor a state of complete hedonic happiness, or denial of the traumatic experience. It does not leave the individual feeling happy or glad the trauma happened (Ivtzan et., 2016), but is about how an individual grapples with the existential realities of their life (Joseph, 2019).

The complexity between adversity and subsequent personal growth can be viewed under the umbrella term 'adversarial growth', a term created by Joseph & Linley (2006) to encompass the collection of research terms focusing on positive changes and perceived benefits following a traumatic experience. However, it is argued that PTG has features which are unique in comparison with other growth theories and is not considered another coping strategy, as it can be perceived as a process or an outcome. It is essential that the individual perceives that some aspects of psychosocial or physical capacities have been exceeded pre-trauma (Kampman et al., 2015).

PTG is characterised as the rebuilding of life expectations and assumptions with a more realistic view of the world and self (Joseph, 2011). In these circumstances, an individual can move forwards with a renewed sense of who they are and create new meaning and purpose. However, this realism means the individual has understood that by being exposed to the raw intensity of a painful traumatic experience, it will always be a part of them, it will be something they will always carry.

In the transformational model of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 2018), the process is initiated due to the intrusive rumination caused by the above-mentioned challenges to one's assumptive core beliefs. Through self-analysis and self-disclosure, which could be partially facilitated by coaching, the individual is able to cope better and manage the emotional distress. Therefore, enabling more purposeful rumination. The PTG process can be also facilitated by sociocultural influences such as role models and support as well as wider societal themes around growth (e.g., Kampman, 2021). Coaching could therefore offer a unique environment to explore these themes organically at a comfortable pace. When the process of growth evolves, the rumination will turn into more deliberate practice and is constructive which facilitates schema changes and narrative revision

around the journey. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), emphasise that this is an ongoing process, not a static outcome" (p.1) and can take various shapes and forms (Tedeschi et al., 2018; Kampman, 2021).

Coaching

The concept of coaching has a broad intellectual framework drawing on the synergy and practices of many disciplines, with philosophy forming the taproot as the deepest and strongest influence on coaching (Brock, 2008). Coaching roots also spring from psychology, sociology, anthropology, science, the arts and within the field of sport pioneered by Gallwey (1974). This then sparked a movement for coaching within the workplace, where coaching has become more contextualised in its offering to executives, individuals, and teams. Coaching is now an applied field of practice rooted within a wide range of disciplines including social psychology, learning theory, theories of human and organisational development, existential and phenomenological philosophy (Cox et al., 2018). Because of the diversity of theories and practice, it becomes impossible to have a singular view of the coaching process.

Whilst there may not be a singular view the professional coaching membership bodies such as the International Coach Federation (ICF), the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) and the Association for Coaching (AC), all have a common working code of ethics and core competencies that can be demonstrated despite the directional philosophy of the coach. Duffy & Passmore (2010) view the published professional codes as ethical frameworks which are more like scaffolding, to support rather than help the coaching practitioners resolve their everyday ethical dilemmas. This is evident in the limited academic literature on the ethics of coaching practice (Passmore, 2009; Brennan & Wildflower, 2018) and is mainly drawn from allied domains of counselling and psychotherapy.

There are several definitions of coaching, which typically are in the parameters of; assisting people or teams to unlock and enhance the potential to maximise their performance. This is done through the identification of goals and helping the client to bypass their personal barriers and self-

limiting beliefs through learning and development (Biswas-Diener, 2020; Green & Palmer, 2019; Dilts, 2003; Downey, 2014; Whitmore 2009; Crowe, 2016; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2017).

One of the most important shifts in the coaching arena has been an increased synthesis between the profession of coaching and psychology (Biswas-Deiner, 2009). Although there are coaching professional governing bodies, such as the ICF, EMCC and the AC, coaching is not regulated or a licensed profession. This creates inconsistencies in how practitioners operate within the field, leading to legitimacy queries about the coaching practice (O'Broin & Palmer, 2006; Cox et al., 2018).

Several authors highlight that although coaching and psychotherapy may look similar, there is a clear demarcation of differences in the purpose and outcome in the clients who seek coaching as opposed to psychotherapy (Biswas-Diener, 2009; Arnaud, 2003; Williams, 2003; Bluckert, 2005). The obvious differences are clients who are in psychotherapy and principally focused on treatment for mental and emotional health issues which disturb functioning in daily life, which could include pathology and definable disorders. Psychotherapists are trained in the skills and equipped with the expertise to diagnose and treat the aforementioned disorders, which is not part of the coaching training.

Coaching psychology is research into the psychological practice to develop the concept of coaching. There is a larger debate by psychologists across different specialisms as to how coaching psychologists are producing 'evidenced-based' practice research methods of coaching psychology. Grant & Cavanagh (2004) identified the 'need to find a way around to establish a clear identity…by establishing what is professional coaching and what is not'.

Joseph (2006) ascertains that coaching psychology in its aim to define itself in relation to counselling and clinical psychology has inadvertently adopted the same medical model as its underlying meta-theory, even though coaching and counselling have differing intentions. The overlap is evident between coaching and other cognitive, behavioural and solution-focused therapies and the skills required to practice these. The overlap has given way to coaching theory practices including, solution-focused, gestalt, person-centred, existentialism, narrative, life and transformational

coaching. Resulting in a number of similarities between traditional therapy and coaching, which has blurred the lines even further between the two fields (Crowe 2016; Biswas-Deiner, 2009).

When a coaching client presents with trauma it could be helpful for coaches to have an understanding or knowledge of the field of psychological trauma-informed practice. This would help coaches identify individuals experiencing difficulties, creating if needed a quicker referral process to mental health professionals (Joseph, 2018). Although some coaches are often trained in other therapeutic models such as counselling (Spence & Joseph 2016), the majority are not mental health clinicians and cannot offer qualified help.

Tehrani et al (2012) posit that in some ways a coach may be better to assist someone who has gone through a traumatic event than a counsellor. Holding the space for an individual who may recount a trauma, providing a non-judgemental listening ear without a need to understand nor identify the pathology, could provide hope in bringing new meaning. These are skills required of both a counsellor and a coach (Joseph & Spence, 2016; Crowe 2016; Tehrani et al., 2012).

Where does this leave the coaching practitioner? They may be working with a client who has dealt with a traumatic situation in the past, a client who is undertaking clinical therapy in parallel to the coaching sessions, or a client whom during the process of coaching undergoes a highly stressful life event. With one in four of the UK population experiencing a mental health problem each year (McManus et al., 2009) aside of goals the client may have originally sought coaching for, it is highly likely clients will regularly present with complex and difficult lives. Life coaching was initially considered separate from other forms of executive or career coaching, but as Dr Patrick Williams (cited in Grant & Cavanagh 2018 p. 340) states 'No matter what's on your business card, if you're coaching a breathing client, your life coaching because they have a life.'

Aims of the study

Based on current research, this study uniquely delves into the world of professional coaching practice to further contribute to the debate, seeking to observe and understand from coaching practitioners if coaching can help facilitate the outcome of growth with a coaching client. As such it

provides empirical evidence for the arena of coaching psychology and positive psychology, through the concept of PTG. The study aims to explore the experiences of professional coaches who identify as having worked with individuals who are navigating personal trauma(s) and how, if at all, the process of coaching has helped to facilitate positive transformation in their clients.

Method

Design

The purpose of the study was to explore within the coaching context whether the process and outcomes of the PTG could be facilitated. The premise of the research was to understand the meaning in the experiences of the coaching practitioners; therefore, the research aligns with a subjectivist ontological position (Bonneywell, 2017), lending itself to qualitative rather than quantitative research. Thematic Analysis (TA) was chosen as the most suitable method within a critical realist ontology and epistemological position of contextualism, as it is geared towards research questions about experiences, or understanding of phenomena in particular contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The study utilised a qualitative experiential method, using semi-structured interviews and TA. Clarke et al., (2015)'s approach to TA is with a 'Big Q'. The rationale behind using this TA approach was to allow freedom in the accurate and rich depth of data within the qualitative paradigm. This approach acknowledges the active role of the researcher, and the theme development is informed by the unique standpoint of the researcher.

Participants

All participants were English-speaking professional coaches based within the UK, who held a professional coaching accreditation (Figure 1). Participants were sourced by a variety of methods, referrals within the researcher's network and professional email contacts. A longlist of participants was produced, and an interview request was emailed outlining the aims of the research and why the participant may be a suitable candidate. Participants who agreed were sent a consent form and a pre-interview questionnaire to determine suitability, finalising a shortlist of 10 professional coaches. For a small TA project, Clarke & Braun (2013) suggest keeping the sample size between six to 10 participants, for the study it gave an abundance of rich data but allowed a thorough analysis, manageable within the timeframe available.

Figure 1

Professional Coaching Experience of Participants

Coach Participant Number	Time practising as professional coach (months)	Clinical/therapeutic qualifications relevant as a coach?
2	12	Diploma Applied Psychology
3	11	None
4	60	Psychology Degree
5	96	Mental Health First Aider
6	240	Mental Health First Aider; STRAW Practitioner; Sustaining Resilience at Work
7	240	None
8	120	None
9	240	Diploma Positive Psychology and Wellbeing
10	228	Mental Health First Aider
11	24	None

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule was created, and 13 questions were devised focusing on the coach's professional experience of dealing with clients who had dealt with traumatic experiences or life-altering adverse situations. Open-ended questions were used for enquiry, formed by a review of the literature, particularly Spence & Joseph (2016) and Bachkirova (2015).

Interview questions were categorised into four areas

1. The prevalence of trauma and highly stressful life events in clients.

2. The experience of dealing with clients who have gone through highly stressful life events such as trauma.
3. The outcomes for the client as a result of dealing with their life-altering adverse event and if coaching supported the process.
4. The impact of the learning and experience of the professional coach in working with clients who have undergone life-altering adverse events.

Procedure

The study received ethical approval from the University of East London's ethics board. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken either in-person or by Zoom call and all interviews were audio-recorded using VoiceRecorder. The questions were not sent to participants ahead of the interview, to ensure participants approached the interview with an open mind. The interviews were all conducted by the researcher and were between 38 and 59 minutes in length. Following the interviews, a debrief email was sent to the participants explaining; their right to withdraw, the procedure to do so if they so wished, mental health signposting if they felt affected by the themes of the interview and thanking them for their insights and time.

Data Analysis

The TA followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) 'six phases of thematic analysis' approach, providing a solid foundation to follow and build on the analysis of the subjective experiences of the participants. This gave an opportunity for a recursive rather than linear response (Clarke et al., 2015). Themes were identified through an inductive analysis of the data (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Rance et al., 2014) meaning the data was not allocated to pre-determined codes or themes. The application of TA was semantic and descriptive, providing sophisticated and practical contributions from the data (Clarke et al., 2015). However, as a reflexive approach, the aim was to explore shared meaning-based patterns, rather than 'domain summaries' therefore 'capturing implicit ideas "beneath the surface" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 845-846).

Interview audio recordings were sent for transcribing to a third-party organisation. Whilst listening to the audio files and reading back through the transcripts the researcher made initial notes and observations, jotting in their reflective journal emerging words or phrases. The researcher manually coded all transcripts ensuring equal time spent on each interview. Codes in the first cycle ranged in magnitude, from a single word to a sentence or block of text (Saldaña, 2016), as the study was data-driven it was important to code with no question in mind. Coding involved using wide margins of the transcript, the left side was used for developing themes and the right side was used for coding.

Codes were compiled into a spreadsheet and compared back to the original transcript. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) process, a sum of 492 codes were listed which were then searched for themes by clustering codes onto post-it notes to create a plausible mapping of key patterns in the data. Post-it notes were given distinct concepts enabling them to be organised, into a group of 16 overarching themes. These overarching themes were then verified to align the codes and the full dataset (Clarke et al., 2015).

It is important to acknowledge the researcher's standpoint within the data analysis. Using a 'Big Q' approach means an organic approach to coding and theme development has been conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2014, 2019). A reflective diary was kept during the process, as the researcher is also a professional coach, as outlined by Wertz & Charmaz (2011) part of the rigour of qualitative research involves self-disclosure and reflexivity of the investigator. The first author also engaged in regular 'collaborative reflexive sessions' with the other authors (Kampman, 2021, p.85).

Results

The rigorous analysis generated three prominent themes and three distinct sub-themes (Table 1). Themes were named giving an accurate description of the context, the scope, and the ability to tell the story of the experiences of the participants in relation to the study aim.

Table 1

Master Themes, Sub-Ordinate Themes and Short Extracts

Master Themes	Subordinate Themes and Prevalence	Short Extracts to Illuminate the Themes and the Participant Number
Master Theme 1: The Complexities of Life Emerge	*1.1. Understanding the Intricacies of Defining Trauma (6/10)*	*"But that's part of the process isn't it as well? People realising that actually what they are going through is traumatic because it's all relative." (10)*
	1.2. Holding the Space After Trauma (9/10)	*"my role I believe is to do a great deal of listening, to notice signs of hope and encouragement and feed those back." (9)*
	1.1. Maintaining Self-Care as a Coaching Professional (7/10)	*"I think it was more about my skills as a coach in that moment of when something…cause I hadn't really had it before (individual with severe trauma) (7)*
Master Theme 2: Ethics and Safeguarding when Trauma Narratives Emerge	*2.1. Navigating the Edges of Knowledge When Dealing with Trauma (8/10)*	*"So whilst I have some knowledge around mental health, I'm not a clinician" (6)*
	2.2. Creating a Safe Space for Journeying Onwards After Adversities (7/10)	*"here's a gentle, gradual process here and help them find ways to do whatever they need to do to get where they want to be in ways that feel safe for them" (4)*
	2.3. Linguistic Complexity and Safety After Trauma (5/10)	*"So that safe space is around enabling somebody to say things that they need to say in the way in which they need to say them" (6)*
Master Theme 3: Transformation of the Client After Trauma	*3.1. Moving Forwards After Adversity (6/10)*	*"It's now about how you manage it, how you deal with it, how you move forward from it. And, as a coach, I'm more interested in where we're going to, rather than where we're coming from" (2)*
	3.2. The Power of Coaching as a Catalyst of Growth After Trauma (6/10)	*"if someone has experienced trauma, it's about the, specifically with coaching using coaching in order to build things and become part of their recovery so their growth following that trauma how they are more resilient etc. afterwards." (11)*
	3.3. Storytelling and Reauthoring After Adversity (4/10)	*"[a clients] transformation in the last four sessions has been quite remarkable, that… that they wouldn't have been able to have if I had said, oh I don't think I can cope – if I'd… if I'd made that call that he wasn't coachable [due to trauma]." (3)*

Master Theme 1: The Complexities of Life Emerge

All participants acknowledged that society has shifted and accelerated creating difficult and complex lives for clients. The data identified 24 different types of traumas that the participants shared from their clients' histories. Examples of trauma ranged severe financial debt, relationship breakdown, bullying at work, missing out on promotion, abuse, underperformance at work and fertility problems. Especially for those clients who have been coaching for over 96 months who only noticed more recently that wellbeing and trauma are prevalent "*whereas most of my other coaching relationships, up until more recently, have just been classic business executive coaching. So sometimes well-being comes in, but nobody's talked about trauma specifically*". There appears to be a greater need to be able to understand the concept of trauma, how to 'be' as a coach to best support the client and maintaining your own self-care in a support role.

1.1. Understanding the Intricacies of Defining Trauma

Coaches contemplated that perhaps due to the complexity and uncertainty in the world, the word trauma is evolving with a broader understanding than its original APA's definition, for example, Coach 3 said "*but you wouldn't necessarily define it in I think what that kind of classic thing of trauma…clients will say…who am I to have an issue with this because it's not… it's not rape, it's not a massive car accident, it's not these sorts of things that stereotypically people associate with being allowed to be traumatic".* Therefore, coaches expressed a longing for more understanding around the trauma, what it is and how it might be defined by people, exposing the need for further training on this area. One coach expressed this well by highlighting that her definition of trauma might differ from how their client is experiencing a particular life event:

> *"And, particularly, I think even with the word 'trauma,' what's traumatic to me, might be a walk in the park to somebody else and vice versa. And so again, really understanding and trying to work with something that I potentially can have no empathy and no understanding for because it's*

not my belief…And I find that, I think, is one of the greatest challenges that we have is breaking assumptions." (Coach 6)

The coaches were recognising that they are at times working with assumptions around trauma and further understanding of the subjectivity of trauma would be essential to safely work with clients. Breaking assumptions around trauma among clients as well as coaches appeared to be an essential need in this field and a key element to be able to safely facilitate growth in this space.

1.2. Holding the Space After Trauma

Listening to clients who had undergone traumatic experiences meant the participants placed importance to their coaching 'way of being'. Having congruence as a coach appeared to be an essential basis for being able to hold a safe, non-judgemental space for individuals navigating their trauma. Coaches highlighted that their way of being as a coach was essential, recognising that who you are as a coach is shaped by your own values and beliefs. Coach 7 expressed this when they said *"it all interweaves together it's the trust and the being ethical and being authentic, and having integrity are what makes you a good coach. As well as your skillset"*.

The coaches suggested that much like any good coaching, holding a space after trauma is not only about being skilled but also about being ethical, authentic, and working with integrity. However, holding a space after trauma requires a skill set different to for example executive coaching, and requires one to truly navigate the limitations of their knowledge and training, an aspect that perhaps without relevant education is difficult to recognise.

Furthermore, Coach 3 pondered that this space as a coach *was* "*about letting them see all of the good stuff about them that they've kind of buried down, it's just letting them get back to who they are and feel good about that.",* therefore bringing that future orientation, characteristic to coaching, into the space. However, whilst coaches contemplated that clients need support with their thoughts and experiences related to trauma, they also expressed ambiguity around who should be travelling with them (clients) on this journey: *"I mean I don't think you'd get there without – not necessarily a*

coach, but I don't think you'd get there without someone that can help you work through those thoughts and what's really going on."

This theme highlighted that due to their training, coaches are excellent at holding a safe and authentic space for individuals navigating the aftermath of trauma. However, it also revealed challenges around understanding the complexities of trauma and how fragile this space can be. Therefore, this theme was again emphasising that more training and awareness is needed among coaches to safely hold this space. Perhaps even more importantly, how to ethically navigate this space and recognise the limitations of one's knowledge.

1.3. Maintaining Self-Care as a Coaching Professional

It was important that participants knew how to manage their own self-care when dealing with clients navigating stressful or traumatic situations. Several self-care practices were evident throughout the interviews. Using reflective practice, supervision, peer support and mentors were also paramount to ensure the participants were doing the 'right thing' by their clients. Coach 6 acknowledged that when listening to stories of trauma it is important to have support as a professional if something comes up for you, *"Knowing that you have somewhere to go if something comes up for you as a result of that relationship".*

Again, this theme revealed that coaches are often navigating spaces that they are not trained for. Coaching training can offer excellent opportunities for peer coaching, and practical tools to utilise in case distressing material emerges. However, coaches regularly expressed uncertainty around what exactly to do in these situations, rendering the protocols intuitive rather than trauma-informed. For example, coach 11 expressed this by saying:

"after sessions, I always journal about it and I have set questions that I use and then write in book of that unless there is something that I am particularly kind of struggling with. I have a mentor so without breaking confidentiality I would probably just ask that with my peers or my mentor and try and figure out the way forward".

Although, coaching offers a wonderful basis for growth-oriented discussions after trauma, and several excellent frameworks, this theme suggests that coaches need and long for clearer protocols for safeguarding as well as boundaries when trauma narratives emerge.

Master Theme 2: Ethics and Safeguarding when Trauma Narratives Emerge

Although, the master theme 1 revealed some of the challenges coaches were facing in this post-trauma space, the theme of *Ethics and Safeguarding when Trauma Narratives Emerge* was also evident. The membership written guidelines that the coaches adhered to as a professional provided useful general ethics and safeguarding for the coaches. Furthermore, intuitively as well due to their training, coaches recognised the intricacies of establishing client boundaries when holding space for life complexities. Linguistic complexity and safety after trauma were also recognised by coaches within this study and seen as essential when building confidentiality in the discussions around traumatic life experiences.

2.1. Navigating the Edges of Knowledge When Dealing with Trauma

The responsibility as a professional coach was evident, Coach 8 described it as *"it's part of my responsibility and that's part of my boundaries as a coach and that's also part of my ethics".* There is a clear stance for a coach to stay within their boundaries, Coach 6 *added "you know when you're straying into territory you should not be straying into…there's a consciousness around competence and knowing at what point you call time on your own interventions".*

Conscious competence, as defined by Noel Burch's Learning Stages model was revealed, by being clear on your boundaries. The coach should know when to refer a client to another helping professional. However, several participants spoke about blurred lines in the demarcation of coaching versus therapy and what they believed sat within the coaching sphere. Coach 6 clearly expressed this by saying: *"I was acutely aware of a blurry, potentially, boundaries, and misapprehension about what*

my role was going to be and what my boundaries were and my level of expertise. So whilst I have some knowledge around mental health, I'm not a clinician."

The coach recognised that they are not a clinician, whilst also expressing that navigating these blurry boundaries was challenging. Therefore, whilst existing ethical guidelines offered some support for these coaches, there appeared to be a longing for clearer guidelines and further knowledge around trauma to enable them to navigate these situations that regularly presented themselves.

2.2. Creating a Safe Space for Journeying Onwards After Adversities

Many participants discussed the concept of creating space for clients who were dealing with stressful or adverse life situations. The notion of space was often integrated with creating trust, safe spaces, and deeper relationships. Summed up well by Coach 10 *"you can be holding a safe space in which they could fall apart without worrying they couldn't build themselves back up again*" .

Coaches appeared to be intuitively tapping into the significant role that relational practises have on trauma and growth, yet not having all the tools or needed training to support this space intentionally and with trauma-informed boundaries. There was a recognition of these blurry lines and how a coach might be comfortable holding one space which could however travel further and suddenly coaches could find themselves in uncharted territory. Coach 4 described their own ambiguity with these situations beautifully: *"The thing is though you have got your comfort zone and then you have got just outside your comfort zone and then you have got the trauma zone."*

The coaches were able to reflect on these challenges well and recognise both the benefits and challenges of creating these safe spaces. Particularly, how the lines between safe and unsafe might not be always clear and therefore safeguarding appeared as an organic thing, living, and moving according to the particular knowledge and expertise a coach has with trauma.

2.3. Linguistic Complexity and Safety After Trauma

The importance of language used within creating this safe space included the words and terminology used. This was deemed more important and added further complexity when working with clients who were dealing with difficult situations. The coaches acknowledged that the language used became more complex when working with individuals moving forwards with their post-trauma narratives. Coach 6 was highlighting how challenging these conversations can be and the importance of language within them:

"it's tricky water not, I think, not to close people down when you have that conversation, because it is a conversation that you've got to have. So, I think whatever language you're using, you need to be very clear on both sides as to what that language means."

The linguistic complexity was further appreciated by the coach 6 when they contemplated that language has power far beyond what they had imagined when working in this space:

"Language…has got a much greater impact than potentially I ever appreciated. So that safe space is around enabling somebody to say things that they need to say in the way in which they need to say them…managing my response in that relationship around what it is going on for them, to facilitate the process".

Coach 6 is recognising the importance of language to facilitate the growth process. Highlighting the need to utilise clients' own words, enabling them to author narratives around their growth journey. Managing own responses in order to carve space for the client's storytelling appeared to have an essential growth facilitative role.

Master Theme 3: Transformation of the Client After Trauma

The theme of *Transformation of the Client After Trauma* was evident through all interviews and the idea that the participant would not wish the circumstances upon their client but by working through the trauma the client has positively moved forwards.

3.1. Moving Forwards After Adversity

The theme of *Moving Forwards After Adversity* was referenced with the client putting in the hard work to see a positive outcome. The coaches used positive language to describe the feelings, emotions, and growth of their clients. Coach 6 explains the client's commitment to move forwards and how going through the journey brings about positive emotions and at times a substantial positive change: *"however, the amount of time and effort and joy, pleasure and positive stuff they get from that journey is immense. And the impact again from a breadth and depth, depends on the individual, moves their whole life to a different place"*.

The transformative potential of these coaching sessions was evident in the coaches' stories. Coaches appear to have the skills that enabled them to allow the individual to navigate their journeys at the pace and time they needed. There was also a humble appreciation among the coaches to be part of this journey with their clients as coach 9 said:

"*to have someone on your side whose not invested in any particular outcome but only wants the best for that person and wants to help them figure out what that is can make a monumental difference to somebody's life*."

Whilst some coaches were comfortable looking back and exploring the past, many also adhered firmly to the future orientation of coaching, which might have served some clients well as revisiting trauma can be highly distressing. As coach 2 very evidently put it:

"*as a coach, I'm more interested in where we're going to, rather than where we're coming from.*"

Therefore, this innate future focus of coaching might have been the key facilitator of growth when clients were personally ready to explore it, enabling clients to be the authors of their narrative revision.

3.2. The Power of Coaching as a Catalyst of Growth After Trauma

There is a clear theme linked to moving forwards that the client uses the process of coaching as their catalyst for positive change after adversity. What is insightful is that professional coaching can

facilitate that change and be the catalyst for the client, no matter whether that is a person is a coach, counsellor or therapist, Coach 9 speaks about this "*I suppose the word that springs to mind and that might be, this might be a bit grand is a catalyst…I think a coach, a good coach or counsellor, or therapist can be a catalyst…to facilitate change*" It is noticeable how Coach 9 describes the need for the coach to be a 'good coach'. Therefore, whilst it is recognised that there is a potential for positive transformation, a set of skills are needed to be a 'good coach' in this space. Coach 11 contemplates on this very aspect from the perspective of boundaries and what the role of the coach is in these situations:

"My understanding is that it is if someone has experienced trauma, it's about the, specifically with coaching using coaching in order to build things and become part of their recovery so their growth following that trauma how they are more resilient et cetera afterwards."

Again, you can hear how coach 11 is trying to navigate the linguistic complexity (see also theme 2.3.) moving from trauma, to recovery, resilience, and growth, therefore exposing that with trauma, the past, present and future can appear all tangled up. Coaching therefore whilst a potentially very powerful catalyst to positive change after trauma, needs to be entered at the fitting time when the client is psychologically ready to move forward. Otherwise, the coach could find themselves holding a space that requires clinical expertise.

3.3. Storytelling and Reauthoring After Adversity

Central to the theme of transformation is taking a journey together. The coach plays their own role in the part of the coaching process by passing the responsibility and power firmly back to the client, prompting them to question how they desire the story to unfold, Coach 4 said "*then there might be aspects of the story where you could say well okay you still get to choose what you create from now on and what, whether this is your downfall, or the making of you or something that gives you strength, or something that gives you compassion*".

It appears that the coaching process has the potential to facilitate narrative revision among clients, moving from automatic thoughts around the adversity to a more purposeful story. The above

quote is particularly powerful if the coach is picking this language from the client rather than suggesting a particular take on things. Coach 9 emphasises this by talking about the power of clients 'experiencing it themselves':

"(9) But by experiencing it themselves and getting through that they feel stronger and in a different place and they want to give back and do something that will enable other people either not to go through it all on their own."

Therefore, coaching at its best can aid the individual's self-reflection and offer a safe space for self-disclosure. Due to the nature of coaching being client-led, it also seems to facilitate the growth process by empowering the individuals to explore the future narratives that serve them, with their own words. Coaches also reported that this process can elicit benevolence in their clients, and willingness to help others after successful navigation of their journey.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the experiences of coaches who identify as having worked with individuals who are navigating personal trauma and how, if at all, the coaching has facilitated a positive transformation in their clients. It was important to explore both sides of the concepts of coaching and PTG, to gain meaning from the rich data provided by the interviews with coaching practitioners. The following section reviews core findings in relation to the literature reviewed, with a reflection of the findings on the significance and implications for both coaching psychology and coaching practice, the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

The research although focused on whether coaching could facilitate the process and outcomes of PTG, also provided an insight into the world of coaching practice from a particular lens. The data revealed how common it was for coaches to be dealing with individuals navigating trauma and severe adversities. Whilst coaching appeared to have tremendous potential in facilitating growth in clients, it also uncovered a clear need for trauma-informed knowledge and training. The latter is particularly essential in order to create safeguarding for both the coaches and clients.

The growth facilitative potential of coaching appeared to be innate due to the client-led process of coaching, future orientation, and the evident transformation of the clients which was enabled by the deep relationships developed between the coaches and clients.

The consensus among coaches in this study was that society has fundamentally changed in recent years, making lives difficult and complex. According to the data clients increasingly present with mental health issues, and the personal and professional are becoming more interwoven in the coaching conversations. This corroborates with the ‘one in four’ mental health research by McManus et al (2009). It was evident the participants with 96 months-plus experience, had noticed a significant shift from pure business coaching to a more blended style.

The finding lends to weight to Spence & Joseph (2016) that people do seek out coaching for difficult life situations, and that work, and life are fully meshed. A shift in society in relation to the perception of mental ill-health, means the definition of what is trauma has become broader, aligning

itself to the definition provided by Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004). As discussed earlier the data identified 24 different types of trauma that the coaches in this study shared from their clients' histories.

The view of being a 'good coach' at times of adversity was referenced in the results, however, the concept of a 'best practice' qualified coaching practitioner was not fully explored in this study. It would be useful to research what 'good' looks like as a coaching professional when navigating the aftermath of trauma and severe adversities. The coaching 'way of being', creating trust, safe spaces, and deeper relationships (Van Nieuwerburgh & Love, 2019) was viewed as an important factor in successfully coaching a client and facilitating growth after adversities. As part of this, the coach needs to fully appreciate and understand their role in the coaching relationship, to enable the building of trust and through relational coaching work with the client to move them forwards (Haan, 2008). However, it is essential to acknowledge that whilst coaching offers skills beneficial for facilitating growth after trauma, the training and lens of coaching is currently insufficient to truly understand the underlying complicated mental health challenges imposed by traumatic events. Therefore, coaching training would greatly benefit from trauma-informed practices (TIPs) which would help coaches to understand how common trauma is and the potential biopsychosocial implications of these experiences (Poole & Greaves, 2012; Kampman, 2021). The TIP is strengths-focused and facilitates 'safety, choice, control, and empowerment' (Record-Lemon & Buchanan, 2017, p. 288), therefore aligning well with coaching.

In addition, the premise of managing self-care, seeking supervision and support, and being fully aware of your own values and beliefs helped to ground the coaches, allowing them to be fully present for their clients. What was not explored in the interviews, was how the participants specifically built their practice of managing their mental health in order to support themselves. Joseph (2006) references the importance of training and developing yourself to become more self-aware as a coaching psychologist, yet as Tehrani et al., (2012) advise for many coaching practitioners the notion of supervision may not be fully understood. Furthermore, unlike among therapists, supervision is not a requirement of the coaching profession, only a suggestion, rendering the practice underutilised.

The theme of ethics and safeguarding for both the client and the coach was present in all interviews. The sub-themes of *Navigating the Edges of Knowledge When Dealing with Trauma*, *Creating a Safe Space for Journeying Onwards After Adversities* and *Linguistic Complexity and Safety After Trauma* encapsulated what could be described as the highest concerns for the coaches interviewed. Maxwell (2009) speculates that the coaching practitioner now has to be prepared to work with the 'whole' human, yet as this study shows it adds to the complexity of the debate, as to where coaching stops and counselling starts (Williams, 2003; Bluckert, 2005). This study did not provide data as to what a coach observed as a definitive line when it came to the boundary of coaching and therapy. However, the data clearly revealed a need for a blueprint to navigate these spaces. An essential part of this blueprint would be to understand trauma better so that the coach can create clear and safe boundaries for themselves and their clients. If the client is very much still distressed and challenged by the trauma, it is very likely that the key role of the coaching could then be to support the client to seek professional help. Furthermore, coaching supervision would have an essential role here, in supporting the coach. Trauma narratives can be immensely challenging and alarming to listen to, as well as emerge suddenly during the coaching conversations. Therefore, we need to support our coaches in navigating these spaces, with knowledge, clear guidelines, and safety protocols.

Duffy & Passmore (2010) found that even though the boundaries may be written in the form of professional ethical codes, the dilemmas faced by a coach are further exacerbated by the blurred lines. The study highlights the ever-evolving landscape of coaching, which muddies the water even more as to what constitutes psychotherapy, counselling, and coaching (Crowe, 2016). The results indicate coaching is often sought over counselling, the UK had 1.4 million new referrals to NHS mental health therapy in 2017 (NHS, 2017) yet there are many more individuals who do not access therapeutic support due to the societal stigmas attached. Therefore, coaching might be viewed as a more socially acceptable option, especially with its linkage to performance and sport. As suggested

earlier, this has implications for the coach to navigate the boundaries with insufficient knowledge and a lack of training.

The transformation of a client who had experienced a highly stressful life event such as trauma was witnessed across all interviews, with the concepts of moving forwards, using the coaching as a catalyst and the ownership by the client to reauthor their story. The data correlates with Joseph's (2018) hypothesis that the people do not need to be pushed towards PTG but will automatically move in that direction within a supportive relationship, this is evident in the coaching relationships of the participants in the study.

Moving forwards and storytelling are key principles of PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Joseph 2011) the participants felt privileged to be a part of the process in a supportive role, standing behind their clients encouragingly and supporting them with a safe space. The participants put the responsibility back to the client to reauthor their story and to accept the accountability of facing difficult decisions in difficult and hard times. The data provided by the participants gave rich examples of PTG as a catalytic outcome from the coaching process and the evidence aligns with Tehrani et al., (2012) that there is a role for a coach to facilitate recovery and meaning following traumatic events.

Implications for academia

The study demonstrates a lack of evidence-based literature within several areas of coaching psychology, firstly, how does a coach practically navigate ethical boundaries and safeguarding, with the ever-increasing shift of clients who present dealing with highly stressful life events? This finding supports Duffy & Passmore's (2010) research. Furthermore, the theme arising from the study of the importance to create space for deeper, complex and multifaceted relationships, highlights the limited research in the field of coaching-client relationships (O'Broin & Palmer, 2006).

This study emphasises a lack of understanding of what constitutes trauma, and how PTG can be an outcome of the coaching relationship, showing there are gaps in the academic field of coaching psychology and professional practice. Unless a coach has been trained within a therapeutic model, in

which half of the participants in the study had some form of qualification, a coach could find themselves navigating difficult waters, creating significant risk not only for the client but also for them as the coach. Without training, it is difficult for the coaches to recognise what is being presented in the client narratives when it comes to trauma and the magnitude and implications of those narratives can be underestimated.

Implications for practice

The research findings demonstrate how a coach must be fully aware of the relational boundaries within their own practice and align with the ethical framework provided by their registered professional body (Duffy & Passmore, 2010; Tehrani et al., 2012). The findings of the study directly support how a coach will most likely find themselves working with clients who have experienced a wide range of traumatic situations. Therefore, undertaking a form of basic trauma-informed training as a coach will equip them to effectively and confidently navigate those circumstances as they arise. Such training will provide awareness of how to be mindful and respectful when working with a client who has undergone trauma and potentially supports the move towards PTG as an part of the coaching process.

The findings highlight the huge responsibility sitting on the coach's shoulders in providing an exemplar standard or 'best practice' to the client when they have undergone trauma. The findings suggest that coaching can be growth facilitative and even a catalyst for growth after adversities, through supporting the client to move forwards and helping them reauthor their story. However, ethical support systems are required for these processes to be safe. There is a theme of the responsibility of the coach, which is not to be taken lightly and creates an implication for practice when a coach does not have a basic understanding of trauma-informed support. The requirement for a coach to attend regular supervision with individuals who are also trauma-informed is paramount, not just for their own wellbeing, but to find the space to stand back, observe and reflect on the relationship and make sense of actual client encounters. The authors wish to pose the question if this should actually be a specialised branch of coaching, helping the wider coaching community to navigate these situations with knowledge and clear boundaries.

Limitations of the study

Research findings were based on the self-reported data from a sample of 10 coach participants. The use of TA has provided a deep dive into meaningful data, which has been flexible and organic in the approach of the emerging themes (Clarke et al., 2015).

As noted in previous studies, the participants may be aware of how they are articulating their experience (Cox 2012) to the researcher, presenting themselves in a favourable light for social desirability.

The researcher's personal experience as a professional coach and an individual who has undergone PTG may have reduced the objectivity during the analysis. The researcher could be considered to provide 'theoretical sensitivity' (Glaser, 1978). The researcher kept a reflective journal, and a full audit of the TA process was recorded, however choosing to use the 'Big Q' or *reflexive* TA (Clarke et al., 2015, 2019) allows the researcher's role in knowledge production to be at the heart of the approach.

Suggestions for future research

The findings of the study have evidenced that coaching can support positive transformation in clients after adversities in certain situations (Spence & Joseph, 2016; Tehrani et al., 2012) and it provides a foundation for future research. There are very few studies within coaching psychology focusing on how coaches perceive the role of the coaching process in the experiences of posttraumatic growth in their clients. The results demonstrate that more clients are presenting with, or seeking coaching for, adverse life situations. Therefore, for the coach to navigate these situations safely, it is critical practitioners have access to research insights across all three main themes, complexities of life, ethics and safeguarding and transformation.

Suggestions for future research include how professional coaching bodies could work closely with practitioners to support the professional development of their practice when it comes to coaching those who have experienced trauma. The reasons for this are threefold: to train more

coaches to be trauma-informed supporting regular coaching sessions; to enable coaches to recognise the limitations and edges of their knowledge with appropriate boundaries; and in appropriate situations support individuals with their growth journeys.

It is even possible that there should be a specialist branch of coaching, where the traditional training is combined with therapeutic training, thus enabling the coach to utilise different skills in different situations.

Recommendations would include a preliminary framework to keep a coach up to date with trauma-informed practice including the responsibility of the coach to understand the limitations of their knowledge and acknowledge the need for professional self-care. Furthermore, there is a clear need for a trauma-informed training and support and ensuring compliance to a comprehensive ethical framework. It is emphasised here that such training nor framework does not currently exist, therefore, there is an urgent need for these blueprints. The evidence is clearly showing that coaches are already out there "working on the edge" and therefore exposed to these situations, navigating them based on individual training and experience which can be very varied.

Conclusion

The positive psychology term PTG and the field of coaching psychology were brought together in this study and provided insight into the themes a coach navigates daily with their clients, dealing with the complexities of life, ethical and safeguarding considerations, and supporting clients during their process of transformation. In bringing these themes to the forefront, this study has highlighted the lack of structure and clarity in the coaching field around trauma-informed training, continuous professional development and the compliance support for coaching practitioners on the blurred lines of boundaries.

The study has highlighted the need for further solid evidence-based research into coaching as an applied positive psychology intervention when viewing the process and outcomes of PTG. Greater focus is required outside the underlying meta-theory of a medical model, to establish how a coaching practitioner can provide a regulated safe space and confidently support a client in the aftermath of a

highly stressful or traumatic life situation. The study has revealed that coaching practitioners are out there, 'working on the edge' often supporting their clients to navigate the aftermath of traumatic events, supporting them to take ownership of their story and move forward with positive growth. There seems to be great potential for coaches to occupy this space; however, coaches also need support and further education in order to navigate the boundaries of these situations with trauma-informed lenses.

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