Experience of positive psychology coaching while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of organisations attending to the wellbeing of their employees, and workplace coaching has already been shown to improve performance and enhance wellbeing. Positive psychology coaching (PPC) is an emerging intervention that considers wellbeing an integral part of the coaching intervention. There is currently a gap in our understanding of how PPC is experienced by people affected by the pandemic and its restrictions. To address this gap, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design was used to explore the lived experience of six employees of a UK-based financial services company who received PPC while working from home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study provided an insight into how PPC can lead to positive outcomes for employees, with the findings being presented through five themes: valuing opportunity for safe reflection; increasing awareness; alleviation of negative emotions; re-energised by identifying a way forward; and renewed confidence. The study contributes to our awareness of how participants experience an intervention that intentionally integrates performance improvement and the enhancement of wellbeing.

Implications for practitioners

The following practitioners may wish to reflect on the experience of the participants of this study:

- Anyone with an interest in supporting people to be effective whilst also paying attention to their wellbeing (eg human resource professionals, education, charities, government), especially during times of crisis.
- Executive coaches, internal coaches and positive psychology practitioners who are interested to learn about PPC as an expansion of their wellbeing helping repertoire.

Introduction

Meta-analytic studies by Grover and Furnham (2016), and Sonesh et al. (2015) have shown workplace coaching to increase wellbeing, and Green and Palmer (2019a) have argued for more widespread use of coaching in workplaces, as part of a broader mental health and wellbeing strategy (pp. 197-198). The importance of organisations attending to employees' wellbeing has been further highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The global public health campaign and government restrictions to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus causing the disease (World Health Organization, 2020) included a requirement to work from home (WFH) where possible, and parents being asked to home-school their children while being supported remotely by teachers. Banerjee and Rai (2020) observed a negative impact on psychological wellbeing from the pandemic, and Li et al. (2020) identified significant challenges for people WFH, such as potential feelings of isolation and disconnectedness. A range of publications about the status of WFH during the pandemic included advice both to employees (Howe, 2020; Kinman, 2020) and to organisations (Chung et al., 2020; Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2020; Skountridaki et al., 2020), illustrating the importance of mental health and wellbeing strategies for employees, especially during the pandemic. Positive psychology coaching (PPC) is a distinct coaching methodology that integrates the applied focus of coaching with key theories from positive psychology in order to ensure that wellbeing is central to the coaching intervention. Because PPC is an emerging area of interest, research into its suitability for people affected by the pandemic and its restrictions is necessary. There is currently a gap in our understanding of how PPC is experienced by people during times of crisis. To address the gap, this study explored the lived experience of employees who received PPC while WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the review of the literature, having introduced positive psychology (PP) we shall consider PPC as a positive psychology intervention (PPI) and highlight our position for PPC. After surveying the limited range of empirical studies of PPC in the workplace, we shall clarify the need for the present study.

Literature review

Positive psychology (PP) and positive psychology interventions (PPIs)

PPC is rooted in positive psychology (PP) which has experienced significant growth since Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) initiated the field by arguing that psychology should not only be about fixing illness, where it had enjoyed many successes, but also about enhancing the wellbeing of the general population. The PP scientific literature has grown rapidly (Green & Palmer, 2019b, p. 1), with scholars and practitioners offering a wide range of definitions and descriptions. In one definition, Gable and Haidt (2005) described PP as 'the science of the conditions and processes that lead to optimal human functioning' (p. 104), while Lomas et al. (2015) offered a succinct, broader definition that includes the application of PP through practice: the 'science and practice of improving wellbeing' (p. 1347). Seligman (2011) presented five 'measurable elements' of the construct of wellbeing (pp. 16–24) with the mnemonic PERMA: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. In addition, Lomas and Hefferon (2015) observed that there are in fact many interesting and influential constructs and theories relevant to PP which, while not being 'claimed' by PP, are nevertheless theories and constructs with which PP should engage. They include: flourishing (Keyes, 2002); positive and negative emotions (Carver & Scheier, 1990); broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, (Fredrickson, 2001); emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990); self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000); self-concordance in goal-setting and its impact on wellbeing (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999); motivational drivers of behaviour (Schwartz, 1994); 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986); posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004); and strengths and wellbeing (Park et al., 2004). These theories and constructs are helpful theoretical principles for the application of PP through positive psychology interventions (PPIs).

Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) defined PPIs as 'treatment methods or intentional activities that aim to cultivate positive feelings, behaviours, or cognitions' (p. 467). Parks and Layous (2016) suggested seven main categories for PPIs: savouring, gratitude, kindness, empathy, optimism, strengths, and meaning. In addition, coaching itself has been classified as a PPI in two meta-analysis studies of PPIs by Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) and Bolier et al. (2013), – whose studies included four randomised control trials of evidence-based coaching (EBC) (Grant et al., 2009; Grant, 2012; Green et al., 2006; Spence and Grant, 2007). However, Green and O'Connor (2017) have argued that 'this categorization of EBC as a PPI may be too simplistic', and they call for greater integration of EBC and PP (p. 63). While a detailed examination of the integration of positive psychology and evidence-based coaching is beyond the scope of this paper, we consider PPC to be a distinct coaching methodology that integrates the theoretical underpinnings of positive psychology with the applied focus of coaching psychology (CP).

Positive psychology coaching (PPC)

This research study used van Nieuwerburgh's and Biswas-Diener's (2021) definition of PPC as 'a managed conversational process that supports people to achieve meaningful goals in a way that enhances their wellbeing' (p. 315). The underpinning principle of their definition is that the actions taken by the coach (for example the questions asked) are informed by relevant psychological theories: Wellbeing theories (Diener, 1984; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Ryff, 1989); Strengths theories (Clifton & Anderson, 2001-02; Linley et al., 2010; Peterson & Seligman, 2004); Emotion theories (Diener et al., 2010; Fredrickson, 2001); and Future Focus theories, eg Hope (Snyder, 2002), Optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1992), Solution Focused (Berg, 1994; de Shazer, 1985) and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 2000). Van Nieuwerburgh and Biswas-Diener (2021) have observed that the empirical nature of PP means that many of the tools used in PPC have been tested widely (p. 320).

At present, there is no single agreed definition of PPC, and even the terminology varies; Lomas (2020) refers to 'positive coaching psychology' and van Zyl et al. (2020) use the term 'positive psychological coaching'. While there is potential for confusion, it could be argued that there is a richness in the ongoing discussions about the shape of PPC as it evolves and matures. Some scholars offer a conceptual framework, for example Burke's (2018) six elements: knowledge, strengths-based model, positive diagnosis, optimal-functioning goals, positive psychology interventions, and positive measures. Burke's framework, while comprehensive, is restrictive because it requires all six elements to be present for fully-integrated PPC practice to occur (p. 21). The definition and approach by van Nieuwerburgh and Biswas-Diener (2021) described above is more pragmatic and aligns with other definitions, such as Kauffman et al. (2010) who defined PPC as 'a scientifically-rooted approach to helping clients increase well-being, enhance and apply strengths, improve performance, and achieve valued goals' (p. 158). In addition, it amplifies a finding of van Zyl et al.'s (2020) systematic literature review of 24 peer-reviewed publications on PPC. In their review, van Zyl et al. identified eight core principles underpinning positive psychological coaching – work with relatively well-adjusted individuals; balanced view of clients' strengths and development areas; assumption that clients have an inherent capacity to grow and develop; empowerment of the client; based on a personal vision of ideal self, translated into specific goals and actions; coach's role is to listen actively and provide support throughout the developmental journey; and finally, a holistic approach towards development in all aspects of a client's life (p. 12). This last principle seems to be particularly relevant when coaching a client who is WFH, where work and family may be more closely linked than usual.

Positive psychology coaching (PPC) in the workplace – empirical studies

Our search of the literature found few empirical studies of workplace interventions labelled specifically as PPC. In studies where enhanced wellbeing and performance in the workplace has been found, the interventions have been classified either as PPIs, for example meta-

analysis studies by Bolier et al. (2013), Carr et al. (2020), Meyers et al. (2013) and Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009), or as coaching, for example meta-analysis studies by Grover and Furnham (2016) and Sonesh et al. (2015). However, some interesting qualitative studies of PPC in the workplace have been conducted, including the use of PPC to support clients self-identifying their character strengths (Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020); PPC as a complement to unconscious bias assessment and training (Moin & van Nieuwerburgh, 2021); and early career teachers being supported with PPC (Lucey & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020). All of these interventions contributed to the wellbeing of the research participants, and are worthy of being repeated and developed further. However, none of these studies of PPC in the workplace was conducted in the unique circumstances of WFH during a global pandemic. In fact, it is worth noting the added complexity about the term 'workplace coaching' in this context. The term 'workplace coaching' referred to above relates to coaching employees about their work whether their usual place of work is a physical space shared with other employees, or they have flexible working arrangements (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2019, p. 7). The focus of this study is on the experience of people receiving coaching who have been required to undertake their professional responsibilities *away* from their usual place of work, by WFH. Additionally, distinctions between 'workplace' and 'home space' became necessarily blurred during this pandemic as people were required to WFH while family members were present due to restrictions to movement ('lockdown') (Andrew et al., 2020, pp. 2–4; Chung et al., 2020, p. 14). To develop a better understanding of this complexity, this study focuses on participants' experience of PPC while WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research question is: 'What is the lived experience of participants receiving PPC while WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic?'

Method

Methodology

Hamling et al. (2020) have called for more qualitative research to provide positive psychology researchers with additional tools enabling them to arrive at new insights, understandings and theories of wellbeing in specific contexts (p. 673). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was considered the appropriate methodology to achieve this and unfold the experience from the participants' point of view (Smith & Osborn, 2004) of receiving PPC whilst WFH. Over twenty years, IPA has established itself as a structured approach that is versatile enough to enable researchers to gain a rich idiographic account of participants' lived experience (Smith & Eatough, 2019; Tuffour, 2017) appropriate for its philosophical assumption of phenomenology. Furthermore, the 'double hermeneutic' process of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) allows the interpreted findings to be provided in a clear, immediately applicable way to the audience, through the researcher further interpreting the

experience of participants (Langdridge, 2007). As a new area of research, the output may enable subsequent studies using other methodologies to narrow in on particular areas or nuances of the findings whilst still providing material that can be informative for use at the time of publication as well as in the future.

Participants

Six participants were recruited, consistent with Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez's (2011) recommendation of between three and ten participants for IPA (p. 757). On behalf of the research team, the Human Resources department of a UK-based financial services company whose employees were WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic emailed all employees with an explanation of the research, and an invitation to respond directly to a named researcher to express an interest in being one of the six participants sought. Interested employees received a participant invitation letter and consent form for completion, and the first six people to respond were each randomly assigned to a Masters-qualified positive psychology coach on the research team. The participants were five women and one man, all self-identifying as white British, and all working full-time. Before COVID-19, five participants' usual work environment had been an office, with two of those participants previously WFH on one or two days a week; one participant had been based in an office one day per week, otherwise travelling and meeting clients. The length of time in employment overall varied between five years and more than 30 years, and the length of service with the current employer ranged from less than a year to 17 years.

Consistency of coaching approach and procedures

The positive psychology coaches adopted van Nieuwerburgh and Biswas-Diener's (2021) definition of PPC as a 'managed conversational process that supports people to achieve meaningful goals in a way that enhances their wellbeing' (p. 315), described earlier. The three positive psychology coaches used a consistent contracting and coaching approach, emphasising client wellbeing, client-as-expert, meaningful goals to improve quality of life, and optimal functioning. The GROW conversational framework (Whitmore, 2009, pp.53–57) was used. Sessions were conducted by videoconference calls, each lasting between 75 minutes and 90 minutes. Each participant was offered a follow-up coaching session not connected to the study's data.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011, p. 757) were used for data collection. These interviews took place one week after the first coaching session and were based on the participants' experience of one session. At the time of data collection, all participants had been WFH for three months. Participants were randomly assigned to two researchers not involved in the coaching. Using recorded videoconferencing calls of up to one

hour for each participant, the interviewers conducted semi-structured interviews using a schedule prepared in consultation with the wider research team. The nondirective questions were 'Tell me about your experience of being coached', and expander questions such as 'Tell me more about that' to elicit the rich detail that IPA can produce (Smith & Osborne, 2004). Interviews were transcribed verbatim by three researchers and anonymised to maintain confidentiality.

Data analysis

The lead author and second author split the analysis, first considering individual participants, ensuring to conduct multiple rounds of analysis. As themes were identified, these were then discussed and refined in further rounds of analysis by both analysts across the data of all the participants. Initial themes were shared with the other researchers on the team as a sense check giving them the opportunity to offer any insights. Analysis continued throughout the writing phase (Smith 1995), while the themes and illustrative quotations were finalised.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of East London, UK. The British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) was followed throughout, and the study adhered to the ethical protocols in the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2014, pp.8–26).

Reflexivity

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure quality, consistency and choice of method when undertaking a phenomenological approach (Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020). The research team adhered to the guidelines of Smith et al. (2009) and regularly discussed methodology and good, clean practices. The coaching, interviewing and analysis of the data were conducted by different members of the team, supporting the researchers to bracket off their preconceptions about other elements of the research (Langdridge, 2007, pp. 21-22). Reflexivity was completed through personal reflection and team discussion.

Findings

Five overarching themes emerged from the data: valuing opportunity for safe reflection; increasing awareness; alleviation of negative emotions; re-energised by identifying a way forward; and renewed confidence.

Valuing opportunity for safe reflection

All participants valued the opportunity to take time out for reflection, and almost all explicitly mentioned feeling safe. Participant 6 observed: 'having someone to speak to in confidence…it was a safe space…' (line 114).

Participants felt positive about the coach's impartiality and independence giving them freedom to think and reflect. Participant 2 described 'having that impartial person to sort your thoughts out with' (line 392). They also perceived empathy and a non-judgemental stance from the coaches, which expanded the quality of their reflection.

> I felt there was empathy there, that she was able to easily put herself in my shoes, very quickly even though just having only just met me…made me feel reassured that…[the coach's] focus had been on…really understanding me. (participant 4, line 102).

Increasing awareness

During the coaching sessions, participants experienced increasing self-awareness and broader awareness about their environment and context. The participants who highlighted increasing self-awareness particularly valued the support of the coach in 'taking them on a journey' (participant 4, line 365), and the resulting insights about themselves. Participant 1 noticed 'a behaviour there that I hadn't quite recognised in myself, that I need to address' (line 152).

> By the time that we got to the very end of the [coaching session]…with the sort of clarity of mind that I had…I can't change other people…I can only change what is in my control…It has really helped me. (participant 6, line 69)

> …[the coach] listened, really, really listened. She put herself in my shoes and then kind of took me on a journey…with prompts. She didn't lead me. …On that journey to finding out, reaching conclusions myself…I've kind of found a new rhythm… (participant 4, line 121)

Other participants experienced a greater awareness of their environment and context. Participant 2 noted that one of the benefits of the coaching was 'understanding what's going on for you' (line 123). The key role of the coach in raising participant awareness is illustrated by the comment '…[the coach] kept challenging my views' (participant 5, line 77). For participant 2, the increasing awareness was gradual.

> I wouldn't say it was like a revelation or anything… But you definitely get a sense of clarity…just a deeper reflection on stuff…than talking to your peers or your friends or your colleagues. (participant 2, line 645)

In contrast, participant 1 experienced 'an epiphany' of increased self-awareness.

> To actually go, 'Actually it's not about that' – that was my epiphany this time. (participant 1, line 609)

Alleviation of negative emotions

This theme captures an experience reported explicitly by almost all participants – the feeling that negative emotions were being alleviated during the coaching session. Interesting metaphors were used when participants were about their experience, for example, 'a weight was lifted' (participant 1, line 458); '…getting that stuff off your chest' (participant 3, line 402); and '…the dark cloud had lifted.' (participant 6, line 279).
The confidential nature of the coaching conversation helped to alleviate participant 5's negative emotions and thoughts.

> It just allowed me to get a lot of the things that were, sort of, stuck in my head and going round my head at night if I couldn't sleep…out of my head. (participant 5, line 281)

Participant 1 reported that 'having a plan' was significant so that 'feelings of anxiety sort of subsided a bit' (line 124).

Re-energised by identifying a way forward

Participants spoke brightly to their interviewers when recalling the experience of identifying their own ways forward, describing their energy on realising they were formulating their own plan.

> … you're not really being led, and you're coming to your own conclusions. (participant 2, line 139)

> …sit down with someone and go, 'Actually this is what I'm going to do…And this is what's important here, and this is my plan'. (participant 1, line 524)

Again, some participants used metaphors when describing their renewed energy on identifying their own way forward, for example, 'spurred me on a bit' (participant 3, line 27); and 'just gave me a bit of a push up the curve…that was needed.' (participant 1, line 799).

Renewed confidence

Almost all participants reported experiencing renewed confidence, as illustrated by participant 5's comment.

> … the feeling of being motivated afterwards and feeling more confident about the work that I was doing, and more confident that…the anxiety that I was feeling, could be tackled quite easily with some small steps. (participant 5, line 209)

Participant 4 noticed 'it kind of gave me my mojo back' (line 63) and 'it helped me get back on track' (line 73). Other participants used phrases with similar sentiments, for example 'rejuvenated', and 'rebuilt my confidence'.

> …that's kind of, rejuvenated me in a way, because it feels like: 'Okay, I have something I can do'. (participant 3, line 403)

> Well I think it's…rebuilt my confidence, because… some of the challenges were making me feel less confident. (participant 4, line 59)

Participant 6 described the experience as 'almost liberating'.

> So I really found it quite, almost liberating…it was fascinating to see how, um, even during the call from the beginning to the end…checking in on how I was feeling about things, and how confident I was feeling. (participant 6, line 35)

Notably, the positivity of the coach also had an impact on confidence.

> …the positive attitude of [coach's name]…gave me confidence (participant 5, line 89)

Discussion

This discussion places the participants' experiences into the broader field of research into workplace coaching, leading to some tentative suggestions about implications for practitioners and people WFH.

Valuing opportunity for safe reflection

The experience of feeling safe to discuss thoughts, feelings and opinions openly without judgment emerged as a strong theme reported by all of the participants in this study. This sense of 'psychological safety' (Edmondson, 1999) facilitated a process of self-reflection. Participants reported feeling more positive and engaged as a result of the coaches' display of empathy—the ability to reflect back a deep and accurate understanding of the participant. Empathy from the coach is an experience strived for in the coaching relationship and the resulting trust, support and safety are often presented as central to the coaching process (Sonesh et al., 2015). Underpinning this is the practice of 'active listening'; argued to be a key component of PPC (van Zyl et al., 2020, p. 12) as well as the concept of 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1957) deemed to be an essential quality of a coach (Stober, 2006, p. 24; van Nieuwerburgh, 2020, p. 170). While the positive experience arising from this aspect of coaching is not unique to PPC, it was cited by participants as notable in their specific circumstances. As indicated by Li et al. (2020); the potential for feeling isolated or conversely, the lack of privacy meant that this 'safe space' and experience of 'freedom to be myself' during the coaching was likely a welcome change to participants' day-to-day experiences.

Increasing awareness

Participants reported experiencing an increased level of understanding and awareness about themselves and their situation. A distinction was highlighted between a process of repeated self-rumination and the constructive experience of being challenged by the coach to explore and view things from different perspectives. These increased levels of self-insight supported participants to move forward. This type of facilitative, 'managed conversation' is more likely

to lead to enhanced wellbeing according to Sheldon and Elliot (1999) who highlight the importance of self-concordance in goal-setting in supporting wellbeing.

Alleviation of negative emotions

Participants consistently referred to a reduction or alleviation of negative emotions related to their work circumstances. Some participants reported a sense of pressure being lifted. At least two previous studies have suggested that coaching can play a part in the reduction of stress (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005; Ladegård, 2011). Furthermore, the concept of 'Subjective Well-being' (Diener, 2009) relates to increases in positive affect *and decreases in negative affect,* suggesting that the PPC may have been experienced as a PPI. Given that WFH as a result of lockdowns imposed during the pandemic can have a negative impact on wellbeing (Wellbeing Lab, 2020; Li et al., 2020), further exploration of PPC as an intervention to reduce negative emotion and enhance positive emotion may be warranted.

Re-energised by identifying a way forward

A tenet of PPC is that the coach provides support for the journey while the coachee takes the lead in identifying the way forward (van Zyl et al., 2020). The feeling of energy experienced by the participants when they identified their own ways forward echoes the proposition of Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Deci and Ryan theorise that people have the innate psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence, and that if these needs are met, they will be more engaged and will grow and develop. The theme of 're-energised by identifying a way forward' may suggest that participants in this study experienced a feeling of autonomy as a result of being coached. In a study about the relationship between coaching and SDT, Spence and Oades (2011) explored the possibility that coaching can play an important role in supporting people to satisfy the innate psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence, arguing that 'coaches who possess a nuanced understanding of motivational processes can help coachees to explore issues related to their ambivalence towards change and goal ownership in ways that build readiness for change and generate energy for goal striving' (p. 41). The experiences of the participants in this study would seem to support this proposition.

Renewed confidence

Participants' experience of feeling more confident and 'rejuvenated' about managing their goals and challenges concurs with Carver and Scheier's (1990) research about self-regulatory behaviour. They posit that if a person perceives that she is moving towards her goals at a favourable rate, this will result in positive affect and action towards the goal. Thus, the experience of the previous theme (re-energised by identifying a way forward) seems to have played a part in the increase in confidence reported by participants in this study.

Inter-relationship between themes

It is possible to discern an inter-relationship between the themes identified in this study. This is being presented tentatively, acknowledging that the participants did not articulate the connections being proposed. Participants valued the safe space created with their coaches. Participants noted both the quality of the relationship with their coachees and the opportunity for focused reflection. This 'safe space' seems to have allowed for the quality thinking time that led to personal and professional insights, and therefore greater awareness about themselves and their contexts. The quality of the relationship with their coaches, the psychological safety of the sessions, and the increased awareness seem to have led to two other themes: alleviation of negative emotions and the ability to identify their own ways forward. With the alleviation of negative emotions and some self-identified strategies or ideas, the coachees experienced renewed confidence. Presented in this way, PPC emerges as an intervention that could support people to attain all three innate psychological needs of SDT: it supported participants to feel connected to others (relatedness), it built confidence in the participants' ability to be successful in their professional roles (competence) and it allowed the participants to identify their own ways forward, thereby boosting their sense of independence and resourcefulness (autonomy).

Limitations

A number of limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this research. First, the participants were the earliest six people to volunteer and complete the consent form. They may consciously or unconsciously have emphasised positive experiences over negative because of their interest in working with a positive psychology coach. Non-volunteers or people who responded more slowly to the invitation may have answered differently. Second, all researchers held professional links to a provider of Masters-level programmes in applied positive psychology and coaching psychology, leading to potential preconceptions despite scrupulous reflexivity. While not a limitation, the use of IPA is a consideration. Findings from IPA research are of interest in their own right, for example to contextualise existing quantitative research, and are not intended to be generalised. In addition, IPA can only reveal the understanding of an experience revealed by a participant and the interpretation of their words. Why someone has that experience and any cognitive elements are not captured (Tuffour, 2017). It would require alternative studies using other methodologies to look more closely at this or other nuances of the findings. The research was conducted during a global pandemic that has not been previously experienced by anyone involved. This means the data is situated in a challenging time and place, and within very new experiences for the participants. Whilst that means the study can never be replicated again in the same circumstances, it has however yielded a unique set of data that may inform future studies in different circumstances.

Implications for practice and future research

The focus of this study was to gain a deeper understanding and greater insight into the participants' experiences of PPC, adding richness to our understanding about how workplace coaching can increase wellbeing (Grover & Furnham, 2016; Sonesh et al., 2015). While the findings cannot be generalised, it is possible to consider tentatively how this deeper understanding may have implications for stakeholders. Anyone with an interest in supporting people to be effective whilst also paying attention to their wellbeing (eg organisations, schools/colleges, government departments) may consider the use of PPC, especially as the participants valued the experience and found it increased their confidence and energy. Professionals who are required to work from home might consider requesting PPC as a way to stay engaged, remain productive and protect their wellbeing. From a research perspective, in response to Holmes et al.'s (2020) call for research to address how mental health consequences for vulnerable groups could be mitigated under pandemic conditions, it would be helpful to conduct further studies of PPC with participants in the workplace who have self-identified as 'struggling' (Wellbeing Lab, 2020), rather than those who, like the participants in this study, were first to respond to the call for expressions of interest. This study has also raised further questions about what aspects of coaching are most valued by professionals WFH. As a result, large-scale, quantitative studies surveying professionals WFH about the factors that were most helpful to their engagement and wellbeing are warranted. Finally, questions remain about whether the participants in this study would have had similar experiences from traditional executive coaching conversations. Further research is needed to explore whether PPC has any advantages over traditional executive coaching in the workplace.

Conclusion

The findings of this study support the recent and increasingly insistent calls for the integration of CP and PP (Burke, 2018; Green & Palmer, 2019b; Lomas, 2020; van Nieuwerburgh & Biswas-Diener, 2021). PPC, as an intervention designed to support people to achieve goals while paying attention to psychological wellbeing, may be particularly suited to address the challenges posed to professionals by the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid changes to working environments as a result of this global pandemic and the ensuing social, professional, health and economic challenges (Bloom, 2020) mean that further research is needed into optimal ways of supporting people to work from home. Early indications from research into the efficacy of workplace coaching (Jones et al., 2016; Sonesh et al., 2015; Theeboom et al., 2014) suggest that PPC may have similar positive effects. Meanwhile, research shows that other interventions from PP can enhance subjective wellbeing (Diener, 2000), increase satisfaction with life (Diener, 2000), and build resilience (Springer et al., 2014). In their 'call for action for mental health science', Holmes et al. (2020)

identified an urgent need for research to address how mental health consequences for vulnerable groups can be mitigated under pandemic conditions, and for the research to be done together with people with lived experience. While the participants in this research study were not considered to be a vulnerable group, their experience of PPC while WFH would appear to show that PPC can help manage the broader implications of COVID-19 for certain individuals. If further studies show similar effects in larger samples, PPC may emerge as one possible intervention for counteracting the negative effects of the pandemic on the wellbeing and performance of people WFH.

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