Creating the Conditions for *Reflethical Practice*: Exploring the potential for creativity and arts-based approaches to support the development and evolution of ethical awareness in coaching practice

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Abstract

Using creativity and arts-based approaches in coaching is both emergent and experimental, with a limited body of research to support the safe development and implementation of this novel way of working as a coach or supervisor. This paper aims to challenge the creation and sharing of creative and arts-based coaching approaches without an accompanying and integrated discussion on ethical practice. Exploring the current landscape of ethical support for coaches reveals that it is complex and fragmented, and the individual coach has to use an idiosyncratic approach to ethical decision-making. In response, consideration of the role that creativity and arts-based approaches might play in supporting the evolution of our collective ethical awareness, particularly when working with experimental ideas, is offered, followed by the proposal of a new term, *reflethical practice*, and a corresponding model for its application.

Keywords: coaching, ethics, creativity, reflective practice, arts-based approaches.

Introduction

In response to a growing interest in the use of arts-based and creative approaches in coaching practice among coaches and supervisors (e.g., Sheather, 2019; Watts, 2022; Turner, 2023), researchers (e.g., Humphrey and Tomlinson, 2020; McManus and Giraldez-Hayes, 2021), and professional coaching bodies (The Association for Coaching, 2024; see also: Bell, 2022; Wheeler and Leyman, 2023), the authors propose a challenge to the development, sharing, and practice of such methods among coaches without an accompanying discussion about their ethical implementation. Our intention is not to act as gatekeepers of this emergent field of exploration and practice, but to highlight our belief that whilst the coaching industry is becoming increasingly proficient at sharing exciting new practices, it appears to be less skilled at supporting coaches to develop, implement, and evaluate these experimental ideas with due care.

Our motivation to develop our thinking on applied ethics is founded in a curiosity around the mixture of responses we have experienced during our endeavours to incorporate ethical reflection into discussions with other coaches about the potential and development of arts-based and creative approaches in coaching. Although some are enthusiastic and engaged, broaching the topics of ethics and safety has sometimes evoked responses at one extreme (complacency - 'of course I'm ethical') to the other (antipathy - 'why do we need this?'). The

reasons for this lack of interest in critical engagement with ethics may be multifaceted, with suggestions from the literature that this could be due to:

1. a naive belief in the positive intention and potential of the chosen coaching approach leading to a failure to question if this work might actually cause harm to clients (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2020)

2. coaches underestimating their level of ethical vulnerability (de Haan and Bienfait, 2022); or

3. the potential role of self-deception in our individual practice, leading practitioners to overlook ethical dilemmas in their work (Bachkirova, 2015).

There is also a common narrative of ethics being less engaging, joyful, or appealing than other topics (Smith and Arnold, 2023), particularly when contrasted with creativity, which represents a more playful and enticing topic of exploration to many.

A short review of the current landscape of ethical practice in coaching will be presented, along with contemporary challenges associated with incorporating creative and arts-based techniques into coaching practice. A new relational model of reflective ethical practice, specifically designed to address the current challenges and opportunities associated with exploring experimental ways of working in coaching, will be proposed.

Coaching with creativity through an ethical lens: the current landscape

Ethics has been described as "a reflective practice that facilitates alignment of human behaviours with a sense of rightness or appropriateness," and as an "open door inviting ongoing reflexivity" (Fatien and Clutterbuck, 2023, p. 23). However, the landscape of ethical guidance for coaches and coaching psychologists is currently fragmented (Iordanou and Williams, 2017), with multiple codes of ethics provided by different coaching bodies, for example, the Global Code of Ethics (2021), the ICF Code of Ethics (International Coaching Federation, 2020), and the Code of Ethics and Conduct, (British Psychological Society, 2021). While these codes contain a number of themes in common with each other and with the ethical codes of other disciplines, there is currently no requirement for coaches to be accredited by any body, or to subscribe to any code, and conversely, the opportunity also exists for a coach to sign up to more than one, potentially conflicting, code of ethics (Brennan et al., 2024). Further, arguments have been made that the breadth and complexity of ethical decisions encountered by coaches cannot, in reality, be reflected adequately in a code (Smith and Bretherton, 2023). To complicate this picture further still, ethical practice in coaching is seen both as something that represents a chance to *develop* coach maturity (Iordanou and Williams, 2017) but that equally *requires* coach maturity (Brennan et al., 2024). Approaches to ethical decision-making by coaches have been described as "idiosyncratic and self-imposed" (Iordanou and Williams, 2017, p. 696). With terrain as complex as this, how could they be anything but?

Despite the growing interest in incorporating creativity into coaching practice, the literature specifically situating the work in a coaching context is limited. Practitioners seeking to work and experiment in this space in an evidence-based way are highly reliant on a small number of papers (e.g., Palus, 2006; Wasylyshyn, 2020) and books (e.g., Gash, 2016; Sheather, 2019) which largely focus on the development and application of creative tools, and on the potential for the development of coaching practice that utilises creative methods. Historically, explorations of creativity in dialogic work have been situated in therapeutic

contexts (e.g., Jones, 2020; Gutterman and Aafjes Van-Doorn, 2022). Art therapy, a psychotherapeutic practice using artistic materials to support clients' personal growth in a safe environment (British Association of Art Therapists, n.d), and creative arts-based interventions (Morison, 2022), an emergent but distinct practice within the therapeutic space that incorporates specific types of art therapy (e.g., music therapy; drama therapy) alongside other creative interventions (e.g., dance; movement), can offer us some insights, but the role of the therapeutic practitioner, the general length of their client relationships, and the purpose of their work are fundamentally different to that of the coach (Passmore and Lai, 2019). Additionally, the established literature from the therapeutic space can be helpful, but does not allow for the nuance or complexity that coaches must navigate at the therapy/coaching boundary (Gebhardt, 2016; Sime and Jacob, 2018), a border which can be particularly difficult to discern where coaching has a strong psychological integration (Biswas-Diener, 2009).

In a recently published guide to ethical practice in coaching with creativity (Waters and McManus, 2024), the use of creativity in coaching is explored as a complex and sometimes unpredictable way of working, which leads to the potential for it to be considered as an advanced coaching practice (see Passmore, 2014; van Nieuwerburgh and Love, 2019). Understood as such, the application of creativity and arts-based methods in coaching requires additional consideration and preparation from the practitioner, utilising scientific knowledge and experience in choosing whether to use something inherently experimental in their practice. Megginson and Clutterbuck (2009) explored the differing levels of coach maturity, positioning this construct as a process by which coaches pass through four different stages of practice (models-based; process-based; philosophy-based; and managed eclectic), the journey through essential in order for the coach to "understand and encompass the next" stage of development (p. 5). This framework can be helpful when considering introducing creative practice into coaching work, starting from a place of questioning and adaptation of the tool, and developing towards a questioning of whether a technique or process is required at all in service of the client and the work.

In seeking to bring creative techniques into their practice, then, and to do so with a firmly ethical lens, coaches face multiple challenges: a landscape of ethical support that may be insufficient to pre-empt or offer specific guidance amidst the multitude of scenarios that may be faced in practice, leaving coaches more or less on their own; the integration of creative approaches likely constituting advanced coaching practice; scant coaching-specific empirical studies upon which to base their practice; and a body of established literature from therapeutic contexts from which they may borrow, but that cannot be implemented wholesale in a coaching context due to key differentials between coaching and therapy. Already experimental, there is a risk that using creativity in coaching may also become unethical. And herein lies our collective opportunity: to develop our understanding and awareness of ethics as living process in our work alongside developing our understanding and awareness of the impact of applied creativity in coaching. In doing so, we can allow this advanced and experimental practice to be created and utilised safely, with full consideration of its potential impact: both positive and problematic.

Reflethical Practice: a new term and model to guide the ethical integration of creativity in coaching

For coaches, reflection - the deliberate practice of examining and challenging ourselves, our beliefs, our actions, reactions and interactions, and our responses (see Schön, 2017;

Bolton and Delderfield, 2018) - is a valuable tool to ensure our practice is "physically, ethically, and psychologically safe" (James, 2021, p. 403). In an investigation of the current territory of reflective practice in coaching, Butler (2023) explores the potential for coaches to develop *reflective* maturity in their practice, and in turn, van Nieuwerburgh and Love (2020) consider reflective practice to be an essential ingredient in the development of *ethical* maturity for coaches. And whilst recent developments, such as the creation of the Coaching Ethics Forum in 2020 (Coaching Ethics Forum, 2024) and the Journal of Coaching Ethics in 2024 (Smith, 2024), alongside the increasing number of books and chapters looking specifically at ethics in coaching (Smith et al., 2023a; see also Iordanou and Williams, 2017; Iordanou and Hawley, 2020; Smith et al., 2023b; Mayhead, 2024), are encouraging, we believe to truly ensure ethical awareness is prioritised in coaching with creativity and other exploratory methods, we need to go beyond academia. Brennan et al., (2024) position the idea of an ethical community of coaches, which could offer a container that encourages and enables more accessible, regular, and engaging ethical reflection as active and applied practice. By working together to create and promote a shared understanding of ethical standards, we can collectively work towards an intention of beneficence, or doing good, rather than the avoidance of maleficence, or doing harm, in our practice (Roache et al., 2023).

We propose a new term, *Reflethical Practice*, as a signpost for this territory, and a new relational model to guide its application (see Figure 1). By conjoining the words 'reflective' and 'ethical', *reflethical* practice places ethics at the heart of reflection for coaches. Rather than only reviewing past events with an ethical lens, and placing ethics solely in the realm of the individual (Garvey and Stokes, 2023), the *reflethical practice* model positions ethics as an alive process that is core to the ongoing act of coaching and being a coach, and gives equal weight to the individual and coach-system levels. This model was developed as a response to the current situation with the use of creative techniques in coaching, but could equally be applied to any experimental and exploratory area of coaching practice. It positions three existing foundational elements as essential for *reflethical practice* to occur: Coach Training and Qualification; Coaching Bodies and Accreditation; and Coaching Supervision and Individual Development.

In addition to engaging with what exists, our suggestion is that embracing and successfully integrating Creative and Arts-Based Approaches into coaching and reflective practice allows for the evolution of our individual and collective ethical capacity. This might occur, for example, through enhancing our capacity for self-reflection by tapping into our somatic experience alongside our cognitive experience (Rigg, 2018), or offering modalities to explore our experience of practice that can support our well-being and professional self-care (Pryma and Briegel, 2024). Furthermore, utilising imagination and curiosity may encourage coaches to explore ethical dilemmas using novel approaches, in turn creating innovative solutions. Our earlier observation that some practitioners find ethics dull or feel disengaged could be countered here by the opportunity for engaging and accessible ethical development. Where all elements are engaged with at the individual or collective level, *reflethical practice* emerges at the heart, offering a balance of constraint and freedom.

Figure 1: The Relational Model of Reflethical Practice
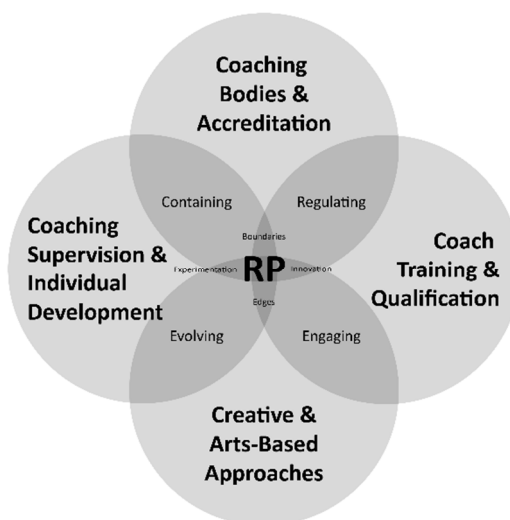
To create the conditions for successful *reflethical practice*, each element in the **Relational Model of *Reflethical Practice*** is active and exists in relationship to the other elements. At the intersection of each pair of elements sit the resulting conditions that these partnerships represent for the individual practitioner and the wider field - containing and regulating, which act as *constraints*; and engaging and evolving, which represent *opportunities* (see Table 1).

Table 1

Resulting Conditions formed at the intersection of the four foundational elements of reflethical practice

Resulting Condition	Intersection of Elements
Containing	The intersection of **Coaching Bodies and Accreditation** and **Coaching Supervision and Individual Development** offers practical and theoretical resources to practitioners, creating the container for ethical practice
Regulating	The intersection of **Coaching Bodies and Accreditation** and **Coach Training and Qualification** provides frameworks of practice, competence, and ethics, creating our understanding of safe practice.
Engaging	The intersection of **Coach Training and Qualification** and **Creative and Arts-Based Approaches** offers coaching bodies new ways for engagement with ethical frameworks, creating a connection to ethical considerations
Evolving	The intersection of **Coaching Supervision and Individual Development** and **Creative and Arts-Based Approaches** offers supervision safe ways to advance our practice, creating a curiosity about ethical boundaries.

At the intersection of each triad of components is the enabling condition they create:

- Beginning with the intersection of the three established spheres of Coaching Supervision and Individual Development, Coaching Bodies and Accreditation, and Coach Training and Qualification, the enabling condition of **boundaries** is created. The intersection of these three elements allows for the creation and maintenance of the boundaries of coaching practice, and supports the individual coach's understanding of these, enabling safe practice to take place.

- The enabling condition at the intersection of Coaching Supervision and Individual Development, Coach Training and Qualification, and Creative and Arts-Based Approaches is **edges**. Here the tensions between challenge and ease, safety and risk, can be examined, enabling expansions of coaching at the fringe of existing knowledge and practice.

- Where Coaching Bodies and Accreditation, Coaching Supervision and Individual Development, and Creative and Arts-Based Approaches overlap, the enabling condition is **experimentation**. Here, coaches can investigate new ways of working with clients and in reflective practice, enabling pioneering approaches at the forefront of the field.

- Finally, **innovation** is the enabling condition created by the intersection of Coaching Bodies and Accreditation, Coach Training and Qualification, and Creative and Arts-Based Approaches. Innovation enables the creation of advancements and ways of

understanding coaching work, in turn enabling progression and transformation that informs our collective understanding of what's possible in the field.

Towards *reflethical practice*: suggestions for future development

In this short article, we have made what we hope is a strong challenge to the sharing of creative techniques with coaches without an accompanying discussion about their safe use, and with consideration of ethics more broadly as best practice. However, we have paired this challenge with a proposed solution: a new term, *reflethical practice*, and a corresponding model, which together aim to make experimental practices in coaching practical, accessible and safer to utilise. We are not calling for a new formalised ethical framework, and indeed others are already creating thought-provoking work in this space (e.g., Jarden et al., 2021), but for a collective effort and shift towards the kind of *ethical community* that Brennan et al., (2024) talk about. It is our belief that this community of practice is only possible where individuals are resourced and supported, enabling them in turn to offer and receive from others in service of heightened collective ethical awareness.

We do not place responsibility for *reflethical practice* solely at the feet of the individual coach and their supervisor, although it is worth noting that the current status quo largely positions ethics as an individual issue (Garvey and Stokes, 2023). Rather we are highlighting the role we can each play, within the right conditions, in embodying *reflethical practice*, both in and outside of our relational client work. As individuals, we do not cease to be coaches and supervisors when we are no longer in a client session, and indeed our responsibility extends beyond our own development and into supporting and challenging the behaviour we see and experience within the field. However, bringing criticality to our own ethical practice and understanding provides a strong foundation for our collective growth. Alongside the individual practitioner, we invite coaching bodies, training providers, and supervisors to consider the role of reflection on ethics in their practice, and to embrace the potential for creative and arts-based approaches to develop alongside and in partnership with this elevation of our ethical awareness. We offer some suggestions for development below:

For **coaching bodies**, enabling *reflethical practice* might look like: ensuring ethical guidelines are regularly updated and reflect the evolving nature of best practices in the field; the formation of special interest groups focused on ethical practice; encouraging and hosting ongoing and engaging dialogues specifically around our ethical development and awareness as practitioners; or in supporting the development of resources, such as evidence-based and practitioner-led guidelines for safe practice within novel and experimental ways of working.

For **coach training providers and educators**, enabling *reflethical practice* could include: supporting firmer regulation of practice and ensuring routes to qualification and accreditation are made more accessible, whilst upholding high standards of practice by placing ethics at the heart of coach training and development; or incorporating reflection on ethics with a purpose of beneficence into their core curriculum, going beyond the typical case studies and ethical dilemmas that populate our learning spaces.

For coaching **supervisors**, enabling *reflethical practice* could be multifaceted: encouraging coaches to try out novel ideas and experimental methods within the safety of supervision as a starting point; or role-modelling contracting and boundaries within arts-based approaches to support coaches in considering how they might position this type of work with their own clients. Supervisors also have an important role in encouraging coaches to explore their development outside of client work, and support in finding appropriate

resources and reflective prompts to explore and develop their understanding of the complex nature of their work.

Finally, as **coaches and coaching psychologists**, we believe that we share a collective responsibility to offer each other, and encourage reflexion on, our experiences and ideas of what might constitute ethical practice in the context of coaching with creativity. Alongside coach supervisors, coaching educators and training providers, and coaching bodies, we each have an equal and important role to play in this model. Bringing active reflection on ethics into the centre of our work allows us to move away from simply avoiding unethical practice, and towards a cohesive and consistent standard of highly ethical professional practice with the pursuit of beneficence, rather than the avoidance of maleficence, at its heart. Creative and arts-based approaches are creating new challenges to ethical practice, but we position that they can equally provide part of the solution: it is our belief that explorations in the emergent space of coaching with arts-based and creative approaches can provide individuals and the coaching industry with a rich playground for the development of *reflethical practice*, and we are excited for the potential this represents for the future.

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