

Semantics or substance?

Preliminary evidence in the debate between life coaching and counselling

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The similarities and differences between life coaching and counselling are vigorously debated in the literature and among practitioners. However, to date there has been insufficient empirical evidence with extensive focus on the distinctions and significantly less acknowledgement of the similarities. This paper presents findings from in-depth interviews in Australia of five internationally trained life coaches and nine of their clients in various countries. It reviews the distinctions between coaching and counselling presented in the literature and provides qualitative evidence to support, clarify and challenge current claims that the distinction is principally definitional. In so doing, it demonstrates substantive similarities between coaching and counselling and recommends collaboration rather than competition between the two disciplines.

Introduction

In the last two decades there has been an explosion in the technical, theoretical and more recently, the evidence-base of life coaching literature. Life coaching has been described as taking a holistic approach, with clients examining their life and making desired changes with the support of a coach¹. While coaching research is still in its infancy², life coaching also remains a comparatively young profession and is still working to establish its empirical foundations³. Life coaching has grown rapidly since the late 1980s⁴ at a similar time to both the growth of the self-help genre and the positive psychology movement. Thus, academic researchers, industry advocates, journalists, and practitioners, have all debated the distinctions between life coaching and counselling⁵⁻⁸. However, there has been scant evidence for the debate and even more limited evidence of the similarities between coaching and counselling.

This paper provides some preliminary evidence to contribute to the debate on the differences between coaching and counselling. It reviews the related academic literature and presents the main similarities and differences about the nature of life

coaching in comparison to counselling. Data is then presented from a qualitative study in which five trained international life coaches with different training backgrounds and nine of their clients were interviewed. While all interviews were conducted in Australia, the coaches and clients came from a wide variety of countries. This case study data is used to discuss the validity of the current arguments. The paper concludes with recommendations to foster a mutual appreciation and collaborative alliance between the two fields.

Reviewing the debate

As the literature surrounding the debate between coaching and counselling/therapy typically treats the processes of counselling and therapy as one and the same, choosing either one term or the other, in this paper the therapeutic processes typical of counselling and/or therapy are referred to as counselling.

Similarities

There have been extensive similarities drawn theoretically between life coaching and counselling in the literature. In fact, 'those who work in the fields of psychotherapy and counselling argue that coaching is just a different brand name for what they have been doing for quite a long time'⁵. Indeed, arguments like this have created mutually competitive rivalry between counsellors and coaches. This is evident both in the field and in the literature, with suggestions of coaching 'piracy' from counselling disciplines not uncommon⁹.

Many counsellors tend to switch between counselling and coaching or practise both processes concurrently⁹⁻¹¹. However, the only known empirical study of the similarities and differences of coaching and counselling utilises such counsellors-turned-coaches as respondents. This study unsurprisingly reported a significant degree of overlap between the two fields¹⁰. It also highlighted a shared focus on awareness and developmental issues and similar methods of inquiry with both coaching and counselling being described as processes of

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discovery^{10,12}. As Williams¹² comments, ‘[c]oaching can look to the uninformed public like therapy because of its commonalities. They both seek to support the individual. They both are delivered in much the same way, through regular “face-to-face” or phone sessions. They both work to take a person from the place they are now, to a place they want to be. But the similarities stop there.’

Differences

Despite these proposed similarities there are also a variety of differences between life coaching and counselling presented in the literature. While it is not uncommon to see extensive tables detailing points of difference^{7,11,12}, to date the distinctions presented in such tables remain largely unsubstantiated. The most frequently purported difference is in the focus and intention between coaching and counselling. Hart et al’s¹⁰ study of clinically trained coaches reported that ‘therapy encourage[d] awareness of past injuries in order to promote insight and healing, whereas coaching focused on untapped present possibilities in order to link awareness to action’. A further point of difference between coaching and counselling is the distinction made between the people who seek the respective services. The literature highlights that counselling clients usually seek this service when they have a problem, crisis, trauma or dysfunction which they hope may be fixed or healed, while coaching clients seek this form of help when they are doing well but wish to do better¹¹⁻¹³.

Related to the distinction between the populations attracted to coaching or counselling, is the resulting purportedly different assumptions underpinning coaches’ and counsellors’ attitudes and expectations towards their clients. The literature suggests that coaches consider their clients as well, whole and functioning ‘normally’, in contrast to counsellors who consider their clients in terms of dysfunctions, pathology and diagnosis^{12,14}. Furthermore, coaches and counsellors also purportedly differ in their

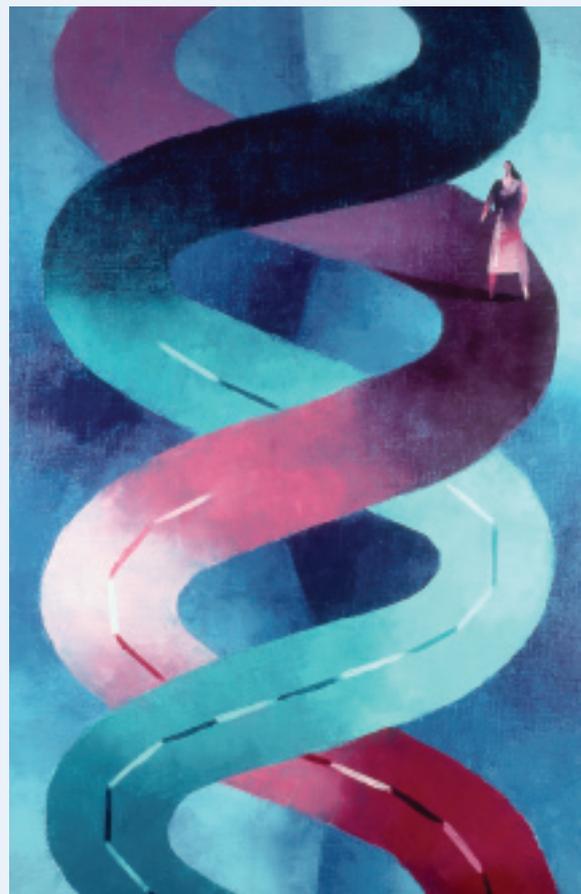


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approach to conversation and responsibility. Counselling conversations may be described as undefined, wandering processes of uncovering and discovery, while coaching conversations are typically described as more structured and task focused, often involving concrete action plans designed to move clients toward their defined goals¹⁰. In addition, although coaches tend to hold their clients responsible for outcomes, counsellors generally feel more responsibility for the outcomes of their clients^{10,12}. Differences in the relationship between coaches and their clients, and counsellors and their clients, have also been suggested in the literature. Coaching is frequently described as an equal partnership while counsellors are usually considered as the experts and in control of the relationship^{10,14,15}. Other differences which related to the relationship included differences in contracting and the logistics of sessions^{10,14}. In coaching, contracting was more formal and specific with fixed timelines for coaching and sessions, open discussions of client expectations, outcomes and payment made up front. In contrast, therapeutic relationships usually had verbal contracts or were the responsibility of insurance companies.

It is interesting that there seems to be a lack in the current literature of discussion and evidence of

the similarities between coaching and counselling. It is understandable that proponents of life coaching have sought to differentiate their product from counselling, however, this has usually entailed theoretical argument without an evidence base¹². This study therefore sought to provide some qualitative evidence for the debate.

Methods

The findings presented in this paper were drawn from a qualitative¹⁶ and phenomenological¹⁷ study of the differences between coaching and counselling. This design was chosen because elements of this type of research are helpful when working with the subjective nature of coaching and counselling. According to Van Manen¹⁸, phenomenology is the study of the world as we experience it in the present, with an emphasis on understanding the nature and meaning of everyday situations at a deeper level. Phenomenology also has been described as the study of how people make sense of their experiences¹⁹.

These findings emerged from more than 25 hours of interviews with five international coaches and nine of their respective current and past personal coaching clients in an urban Australian setting. A combination of purposeful, maximal variation and theoretical sampling was used progressively, in this order, to recruit respondents in this study. The first two coach respondents were chosen purposefully to set the parameters for maximal variation, which aims to elicit 'multiple perspectives'²⁰. These coaches were identified and approached using a form of snowball sampling, whereby recommendations and information were provided by significant others²¹. Coach training schools were purposefully identified and approached in order to locate high-calibre coaches, who employed different models of coaching, and who could identify and gain the agreement of relevant clients for participation. By combining the viewpoints of both coaches and clients from significantly different models of coaching, 'insights gained from different perspectives ... add[ed] to the richness of the understanding of the phenomenon under study'²².

All coaches had over 2,000 hours coaching experience and were recognised as either Master or Professional Certified Coaches with the International Coach Federation. The guide for the semi-structured interviews focused on two key points. The first was 'what brings clients to you?' (or 'what made you decide to see a life coach?') and 'step me through the process of life coaching'. Interviews were transcribed by the first author and systematically analysed as Miles and Huberman²³ suggest that researchers should become very familiar with the data, immersing themselves in

the information by reading and rereading the transcripts. Constant comparative analysis¹⁹ was used to uncover the themes from the interviews. Key themes and issues from the interview data are discussed next.

Findings

Similarity between the two fields

The main similarity found in this research was in the processes of coaching and counselling from both the coaches' and the clients' points of view. Respondents were neither directly nor indirectly questioned about similarities or differences between coaching and counselling. However, many respondents felt they needed to make this distinction.

Listening

Listening emerged as a major category in the process of life coaching, as it was through the process of listening that the discovery of self-knowledge was identified. The process of listening was described as *deep* as coaches listened *beyond* their clients' words, 'listening and seeing with all of their senses' (Client 7) to uncover and make meaning of clients' emergent self-knowledge. Therefore, listening involved more than simply an aural skill-set, as coaches observed, identified and made meaning. Listening was particularly emphasised by both coaches and clients alike:

Listening. Mostly listening. Listening for what's being not said. Listening for change in tone. Change in an emotional affect. Seeing where they seem to be more fired up about something. Tuning in. (Coach 4)

Really listening to what I'm saying. (Client 4)

Questioning

Questioning emerged as a key process in life coaching. Coach 1's immediate and emphatic answer to a query about how her clients came to realisations was simply, *I ask lots of questions*. Reflecting this, Client 4 commented, '[my coach is] asking the questions all the time and it's taken a lot of different questions for me to get [to where I was at that point]'. Several other clients echoed this, with Client 7 noting: 'It [learning] happened through the kinds of questions that [my coach] asked me', and Client 6 stating 'what she does is she asks me questions. And so if I say a certain thing she will ask me a probing question'.

Questioning often stemmed from the process of listening, triggered clients' process of reflection and was also used to hold clients accountable for taking action and for taking responsibility.

Furthermore, while coaches generally facilitated the process of questioning, towards the end of coaching, clients developed the ability to question themselves and with that, facilitate ongoing learning. Thus while questioning is significant in counselling it also seems equally significant in coaching.

Non-judgmental

Of all the elements within a coaching relationship, acceptance, or non-judgment, was highlighted in this study by all coaches and all except one client. When clients frequently described the coaching relationship as safe, it was often judgment that they felt safe from:

I really feel, I have, I feel I can say things to [my coach]. I feel I can say my true feelings to her without being judged (Client 4).

Because I didn't have any of the external defence mechanisms up and I didn't feel any need to protect myself with anything. It was a very safe environment (Client 8).

In this study the process of suspending judgment occurred through the inherent understanding and communication to the client that they are essentially okay, meaning that they were neither right nor wrong and they did not need to be fixed:

And I'm connecting from the heart, I'm listening from the heart and I'm not trying to fix her, I'm not trying to do anything (Coach 5).

The body of therapy and counselling literature provides greater understanding of the process of relating between coaches and clients²⁴. In particular, in her discussion of the humanist contributions to coaching, Stober²⁵ highlights the significance of acceptance, which in turn is a hallmark of Rogerian theory²⁶. Therefore, the process of coaches refraining from judging their clients appears to reflect Rogers' notion of unconditional positive regard, a crucial element in the therapist client relationship²⁷.

The process of uncovering

Despite the current literature suggesting that counselling, not coaching, involves a process of *uncovering*, this study found that both coaches and clients used uncovering as part of the coaching process:

[my coach] was able to get a crack in the shell open enough that I was able to get out of myself enough to make the discovery. And this

is some of the beauty of her technique. You make the discovery. She makes the suggestion. She helps you make the observation, but it really does become your discovery (Client 8).

Several times, uncovering was referred to directly and indirect references to the process of uncovering were frequent. Such indirect references included frequent use of words related to looking under/ underneath or below/beneath as well as deeply:

... what they're coming with, what the issue is, isn't really the main one. There's usually something underneath it (Coach 3).

... if they come up with 'I'm feeling afraid' and then I'll stay with them and say 'OK what did that feel like in your body?' ... From that place the excavation then goes deeper (Coach 4).

The response of Client 7 was typical of the cohort as coaches in this study often helped their clients to uncover and become aware of their desires. The findings of this study therefore shed some light on the counselling/coaching debate evident in the literature^{5,10} and identify similarities between the two processes. It appears that both coaches and counsellors use listening and questioning, are non-judgmental and also use the process of uncovering, the difference lying not in their process, but rather in what they seek to uncover. This is discussed further in the following section on focus and intention.

Differences

Focus and intention from the clients' perspective

Clients in the study reported distinctions between the focus and intent of coaching and that of counselling:

I also think it was important to me to realise that there's a fine line too between coaching and counselling ... When I felt it started dipping over into that, I didn't feel as comfortable ... it was important just to identify them and I felt relieved that they were being identified. We could see how they could get in the way of what I was achieving but then I think it was important to put them aside and then go back to my other goals (Client 2).

I had a lot of things and I'd had counselling and everything before but that had dealt with the issues but it hadn't really gotten in touch with myself and that was just the next step to propel me into wherever (Client 3).

The first example from Client 2 highlights that coaching in this study did not deal with counselling issues. Rather coaching identified counselling issues, clarified how they impacted on the client's goals and put them aside to focus on the goals. This client also made reference to dealing with counselling issues with someone other than her coach over a longer period. The example from Client 3 highlighted how counselling had helped her deal with issues (which included childhood abuse) but that subsequent coaching had helped to propel her. Both examples lend support to the differentiation made in the literature between the focus of coaching and counselling. Furthermore, these clients also distinguished the past healing and emotional work of counselling from the specifically present-future orientation of coaching:

[Before taking on coaching, I wanted to get] like just some basics in place before I said 'Oh I want to venture — I want someone to help me venture out' ... I didn't want this life coach to be a counsellor (Client 2).

... but all the other stuff was about repairing and healing when I had counsellors but this was actually about me. This was about 'OK that was then, where to from here?' This is a new day (Client 3).

Focus and intention from the coaches' perspective

While clients' views were similar, there was greater variation and diversity among coaches on the focus of life coaches and that of counselling. There was variation and different vocabulary used in reference to goals. But what was common in all coach and client cases was that each coaching relationship began with some kind of process which defined the desired outcomes for the client from the coaching relationship. Whether by means of goals, visions, targets, purposes, outcomes or intentions, future desired outcomes were consistently defined at the outset of a coaching relationship.

An important finding from this study was that although future desired outcomes were a significant focus in coaching relationships, other foci also emerged, which were equally significant in their contribution to the coaching process.

These foci included focusing on clients' current circumstances (which often included, but were certainly not limited to, work), their feelings, thinking and values. Thus, while the literature shows that counselling predominantly focuses on clients' feelings to create healing, this study revealed that coaching utilised a combination of foci, including a focus on feelings, to move their

clients towards their desired outcomes.

The study also highlighted how and why coaches did use brief 'visits' to the past, as presented in the literature:

... it's deep shifting. In realising it's not and I want to be really clear here, it's not therapy that's being done, all we're trying to do is get to enough of what's going on so that we can connect with it and then say what's possible now. Because coaching is more about the present and the future (Coach 4).

This example reveals how each focus, including a brief focus on the past, was utilised in the context of clients moving towards their desired outcomes. Several other participants in the study also reflected this kind of integrated focus. Finally, there was a tendency in the literature to purport that coaching focused on goals and action at the expense of other processes. Notably, one coach in this study highlighted how when one focus dominates another then the deeper processes of uncovering can be lost:

But if I'm an action focused coach, I may not see that at all. So that comes back again, that's the stuff that goes on underneath (Coach 2).

This example sheds some light on how the trend of the literature to report coaching focus on goals and action may have arisen. However, the coaching experiences examined in this study revealed a consistently balanced integration of foci within the coaching process.

Client base from the clients' perspective

Both coaches and clients in this study reported experiences showing that clients seek coaching when they are doing well but wish to do better:

Typically they're coming because they want to have – they want to get through a transition in their life or they want to create transition, like they're not happy with the way things have been, they want something more, better, different, bigger (Coach 3).

Myself I was pretty much stuck in a rut for many years and I tried everything I could think but just couldn't get out of it. I think I was basically unhappy. The main thing was I didn't enjoy my career ... and I couldn't see a way out (Client 1).

As these examples highlight, clients' unhappiness or dissatisfaction was often triggered by their job



or work, thus explaining the claims that coaching is frequently tied to business and work objectives. However, in more than one case in this study, work triggers led to the exploration of other aspects of clients' lives, thus refuting the claim that life coaching is only tied to business or work.

As some examples in this paper have already shown, several coaching clients in this study had either experienced counselling before, considered it as an option before or during coaching or pursued it as a result of coaching. This phenomenon suggests that clients in this study did not belong to one population or another. Rather, coaching or counselling was appropriate for them depending on their immediate needs. Thus, the client who had been abused as a child first engaged in counselling and later utilised coaching to propel herself forward. The reverse was also true in the case of a client who came to coaching in relation to her business:

Eventually she opened up about the real issue for coming to coaching ... her husband had several affairs and she never told anyone not even her own family ... she actually needed coaching to have the courage to actually go and see the professional that she needed to see (Coach 2).

This example highlights how coaching served the purpose of helping a client take action and see the appropriate counselling professional. In addition, it also showed how dealing with work issues in coaching can lead to clients addressing other issues in their life and further, it supported the tendency to view counselling as a process which helps people recover from past hurt.

In two cases, coaching was seen to be more beneficial than counselling and provided clarity on the coaching/counselling debate in several ways. The first example from Client 1 below reveals how he had tried counselling without success and that this may have been due to the fact that he was just 'unhappy' (as opposed to suffering or in trauma):

Myself I was pretty much stuck in a rut for many years and I tried everything I could think but just couldn't get out of it, I think I was basically unhappy (Client 1).

Thus, for this client, coaching was, as the literature would suggest, the appropriate process for him to engage in. Another example from Client 8 demonstrates how she had learnt techniques with her counsellor in the past that she had to practise, and which she could not sustain. However, in coaching she found that what came from coaching

spontaneously integrated into her. Again, this client was not experiencing trauma, deep suffering of dysfunction in any way, but rather simply wished to live her life more meaningfully.

Client base from the coaches' perspective

This study added some evidence to support the claim that coaches consider their clients as well, whole and functioning. This was particularly evident in clients' comments that their coaches made them find their own answers:

... and you get all these different things, like she really probes your mind and doesn't give me the answers, I have to look for my own answers (Client 4).

You know 'cause a coach, a coach doesn't – they don't tell you a lot of things, they get you to seek them out yourself and they ask you probing questions that make you think that you actually have the answers to but you may not have been aware of it (Client 6).

This refutes the contradictory claims made in the literature as to the tendency of coaches to give information or advice. In fact, the opposite appeared to be true, as one coach particularly highlighted the skill of a coach is to be able to hold back from providing clients with answers:

As a coach, maybe I'm observing some sort of behaviour or whatever within the client, but [it's] for the coach to hang on to that and not actually reveal that yet. Because when the client is going to try hard, you know an insight to what they're doing, it's much more powerful (Coach 5).

Similarly, coaches in this study did expect their clients to achieve specific desired outcomes and commit to planned action. In this regard, coaches holding their clients accountable emerged as a major process in this study. The term *holding clients accountable* or *accountability* was used predominantly by coaches. While some clients also referred to these words, most described the process of being held accountable as *keeping on track follow-up, check-in, review* or a *reminder*.

Implications

The findings presented in this paper have implications for practitioners, researchers and professional associations in the coaching and counselling communities. It has been shown that there is some evidence in life coaching practice that the literature is justified in reporting significant degrees of



overlap with the counselling process²⁸. While the findings of this research confirm there are specific differences, there is in fact more similarity than either coaches or counsellors may like to acknowledge. Contrary to the claims Williams¹² makes that the similarity is only in terms of supporting the individual, session delivery and taking a person from one place in their lives to another, the findings in this paper suggest that the similarity is more extensive, as coaches and counsellors share similar processes of listening, questioning, providing a non-judgmental relationship and uncovering deeper levels of awareness. For counsellors, this finding challenges their tendency to label coaching superficial and for coaches, it challenges their resistance to move to deeper levels of exploration.

The paper also provides some evidence of difference between coaching and counselling, the understanding of which may assist coaches and counsellors to improve and expand their practice (and businesses); researchers to target future examination and professional associations to better inform their members. These specific differences also serve to question unsubstantiated claims or proverbial myths about coaching. The focus and intention of coaching emerged as desired outcome oriented, rather than only explicitly goal oriented. In this way, coaches showed an underlying focus on their clients' desires, rather than fixed goals. Thus, while the past was used, it was used only to the point that it assisted clients in moving towards their desired outcomes. Therefore, coaches, who are often reluctant to enquire about the past experiences of their clients, may see the value in using brief 'visits' to inform their clients' current movement towards their future desired outcomes. In addition, coaching focus was integrated with other levels of focus including their current conditions, feelings, thinking and values. Thus, coaching was shown to operate on multiple levels of awareness and may not be singularly goal or action-oriented as much of the literature suggests.

One of the most controversial topics is the demarcation of the 'mental health' boundary between life coaching and counselling²⁹. This is translated by practical disputes over professional boundaries, whatever the theoretical or empirical presumptions. The client group base of life coaches is supposedly 'normal' or mentally healthy, while the client base of counsellors is clinically pathological³⁰. However, mental health or illness is usually conceptualised as a continuum, in addition to people's mental health needs fluctuating at different times. The results of the study revealed that these clients did not belong to either a coaching or counselling population, but rather

Coaches and counsellors share similar processes of listening, questioning, providing a non-judgmental relationship and uncovering deeper levels awareness

they moved between the two. It showed how coaching may assist clients in seeking counsellors: *and it was obvious that she needed therapy but she needed coaching to get the courage to take that step* (Coach 2), but also revealed that counselling may not be successful, if clients come with coaching-type motivations or needs. Thus, this paper suggests that it is in the best interests of coaches and counsellors to understand why clients come to seek their services, so that they may better serve their clients and also maintain the efficacy of their practice as Buckley³¹ asserts.

Limitations

There were several limitations associated with this study, which may also inform future research. First, like many studies of coaching, findings were based on data gathered from interviews, rather than observation. Although coach and client perspectives were correlated to discover whether what coaches said they were doing, was indeed what they were doing, future studies which incorporate observation of coaching sessions would enhance the reliability and authenticity of the findings. Second, because this was a qualitative study, in comparison to quantitative studies, only a relatively small participant set was used. The findings presented in this paper may be used to inform the variables of future quantitative studies that utilise larger participant sets.

Conclusion

The debate between coaching and counselling or therapy has been heated, and, at times, divisive both for practitioners and for potential clients deciding on the type of service they should access. This discussion is similar to the debate between counselling and mentoring, which Stokes³² asserted should not be 'to resolve these tensions but, instead, to put them forward as issues worthy of attention, debate and empirical investigation'. The case studies here have provided empirical support for numerous claims made to date and clarified others through the presentation of findings. The paper suggests, as Stone³³ did, that the confusion goes deeper than simple disputes over definition. Notably, the

development of the coaching process was built upon that of counselling. In fact, much of the confusion surrounding the coaching and counselling debate has more than likely arisen, due to the fact that coaching 'hit the market' before it was significantly recognised on the research radar. As a result, the development of coaching theory was largely unacknowledged, and perceivably pirated during its explosive decades. However, given the recently strong push for coaching to become evidence-based, the debate no longer needs to be a competition between the two fields. Indeed, the preliminary evidence presented in this paper suggests that there is depth and substance to the debate. Thus, by working together to promote understanding rather than competition, the debate may be reconciled to allow both fields to advance collaboratively and better serve their clients. ■

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