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Super-vision, extra-vision or blind faith? A grounded theory study of the efficacy of coaching supervision.

Abstract

Objectives: Coaching supervision has become the dominant model of reflective practice in the UK. This study sought to explore coach and supervisor perceptions of supervision, and critically observe supervision practice.

Design: The study utilized an observational design and semi-structured interviews.

Methods: The study involved an observation of a coaching session, which was filmed, followed by interviews with the participants. This data was transcribed. In the second part of the study a series of semi-structured interviews were undertaken with coaches and supervisors. The data was transcribed and analyzed using Grounded Theory methodology until saturation was achieved. The transcribed data was combined in the development of a theoretical framework for coaching supervision.

Results: The study outlines a number of perceived benefits of the coaching supervision process. These outcomes include: raised awareness, coaching confidence, perseverance, sense of belonging, increased professionalism and the development of an 'internal supervisor'. The research also highlighted the need for a greater understanding of what coaching supervision involves for coaches.

Conclusions: The paper questions the dominant mindset that supervision is the only intervention for reflective practice and argues for multiple models of continuous professional development, alongside calling for further research to identify the benefits from alternative model of CPD within coaching.

Keywords: *Coaching, coaching supervision, reflective practice, grounded theory study, efficacy of supervision*.

Introduction

Coaching is fast gaining popularity and credibility and the coaching sector as a whole continues to experience significant growth. A recent estimate put this at $2 billion worldwide (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006). Given this figure the UK coaching market may be estimated to be worth approximately £150 million per annum, although such estimates are extremely difficult to substantiate given the diversity of coaching practice, and with the growth of in-house coaching. The reality is that coaching has moved from a niche to a core personal development activity within the UK and USA. This growth has been supported by a growth in the number of coaching professional bodies such as the BPS SGCP, which have acted as catalysts, stimulating research and bringing together professionals to share knowledge. This has been matched by a growth in coach training provision, from short courses over a few days or a week to the more recent development of longer accredited courses, and full-time masters programmes. Alongside this growth in coaching practice, there has been a growth in the advocacy for coaching supervision (Hawkins & Smith, 2006; Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006). This has been largely supported by the emerging professional bodies, such as Association for Coaching (AC), European Coaching & Mentoring Council (EMCC) and Association for Professional Executive Coaches & Supervisors (APECS). It has been argued that supervision is an important part of maintaining professional standards. Such calls have however been made largely without reference to any clear evidence that supervision contributes to enhanced coaching practice.

Coaching has turned to counselling practice for ideas. The models which have been discussed (Hawkins & Smith, 2006; Hawkins, 2006; Carroll; 2006) have their roots in the counselling and social work professional practice. Are these models appropriate to the work of business coaches? More importantly is supervision the most effective model to manage the challenges and continuous professional development of the coaching practitioner? In light of this, there is a need to review the efficacy of coaching supervision.

What is supervision?

The word 'supervision' has many meanings. In common terms it means 'to oversee and direct' (Oxford dictionary, 2008). However, there is more to supervision than merely overseeing another's work. Some writers talk about 'Super-vision' (Houston, 1995), while others refer to the term 'Extra-vision' (Inskipp & Proctor, 1995) in the context of nursing, social work and therapy, implying that such support and guidance is outside of the line management relationship. Carroll notes that while the term 'super' in the word 'supervision' can imply that supervisors monitor supervisees from a superior position, in practice this should not be the case (Carroll, 1996).

Supervision in coaching

In therapy and the helping professions, supervision is the dominant model for reflective practice. This contrasts with much of management practice where a hierarchical model of management has been dominant, supplemented, more recently, with 360-degree appraisal and competency frameworks.

Practitioners, while arguing in favour of supervision, have also tried to define the concept within coaching. Bluckert (2005) argues:

> *"Supervision sessions are a place for the coach to reflect on the work they are undertaking, with another more experienced coach. It has the dual purpose of supporting the continued learning and development of the coach, as well as giving a degree of protection to the person being coached."*

Other writers, such as Backkirova et al, suggest:

> *"Coaching Supervision is a formal process of professional support, which ensures continuing development of the coach and effectiveness of his/her coaching practice through interactive reflection, interpretative evaluation and the sharing of expertise."* (Bachkirova, Stevens & Willis, 2005)

The growth of coaching supervision in practice
The volume of coaching practice, and by implication the number of coaching practitioners, has grown rapidly over the past decade. Following this there has been a growth in the advocacy for coaching supervision within the UK.

Downey noted in 2003 that very few coaches had any supervision but it is a "vital ingredient" in effective coaching (Downey, 2003). More recently Hawkins & Schwenk (2006) noted, from their research of UK practice, that 88% of organisers of coaching and 86% of coaches believe that coaches should have continuous and regular supervision. However, in comparison only 44% of coaches receive continuous and regular supervision. Drawing on our own personal experience, we would question the representative nature of the sample used in the study. Our own experience in the UK coaching sector, based on coach training, coaching networks in the SGCP and Association for Coaching, we suggest the figure may actually be below 25%. Such figures however are difficult to establish and vary depending on the sample. What is clear is that a wide range exists with lower participation found among sole practitioners and those undertaking coaching work as a supplementary activity and higher participation among coaches within organisations and those seeing coaching as a professional activity in their work portfolio.

Coaches' reasons for not seeking supervision include that it is not required by organisations, it is too expensive (17%), or they can't find a supervisor (17%) (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). For organisations, the reasons for not providing supervision include that it is too expensive (19%) and they can't find supervisors (13%). While not acknowledged we believe one explanation for this gap between expressed desire and actual practice is the lack of evidence as to whether supervision is an effective tool for enhancing coaching practice. A second reason may be the lack of understanding of how supervision can enhance

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practice. However further research, with a wider sample, is needed to explore these issues, possibly through collaboration with one or more of the coaching membership bodies.

In the absence of a body of good coaching supervision research or theories, a limited amount of coaching specific training available and inadequate numbers of trained coaching supervisors, many coaches have turned to counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists for supervision (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). Given the differences between coaching and therapy which have been widely discussed elsewhere (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007; Passmore, 2006), are these individuals the most appropriate to deliver coaching supervision? These differences include the more future focused nature of coaching, the management of different boundaries when working in organisational settings and in organisational setting understanding the dynamics and complexity of organisational life.

Given the lack of research on coaching supervision, this paper explores the perceived benefits of the supervision process and build a conceptual framework for coaching supervision which could be subjected to further testing. In this respect a Grounded Theory methodology was selected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Method

Participants
This study involved a total of six participants in a two-part process. The first stage involved an observational study of a coaching supervision session. The second stage involved recorded interviews with six participants including the two participants from the observed session.

In the observed supervision session, the two participants were white British, aged 40-55, one was female, the other male. The first participant (S1) (supervisor) had more than twenty years experience of working in supervision, initially in therapy and more recently in coaching. He has been active in arguing the case for supervision. The second participant (C1) (coach) was a trained coach, with approximately 18 months post-qualification experience. She also worked as a senior HR manager, and had more than twenty years experience in HR and people management.

The second part of the study involved semi structured interviews with six participants. Five of the participants were white British and one was Black British/Caribbean. The ages of the participants ranged from 30 to 65. The two coaches (C2 & C3) were both female and were full-time self-employed coaches who had been coaching for more than three years and were receiving formal coaching supervision. One coach did most of her coaching in the

corporate environment (mainly private sector), while the other coach was mostly involved with coaching leaders and managers in the Further Education Sector. The supervisors (S2 & S3) were both male, experienced executive coaches and trained coaching supervisors who offered regular coaching supervision. Both supervisors had been practicing for more than ten years.

Data collection

The study was designed as a two-phase data collection process. The first phase, which involved the observations, aimed to offer an understanding of the supervision process, which was used to develop and refine the research questionnaires. The second phase, involving semi structured interviewers with six participants was the data collection phase.

The observation session of a coaching supervision meeting was recorded. This took place in a private interview room equipped with two-way mirrors, audio and video recording equipment.

In the second phase of data collection, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the six coaches and coaching supervisors. The interview were focused around participants' experiences of the coaching supervision process. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using a revised version of the Jefferson framework (O'Connell & Knowal, 1996; Jefferson, 1985). Both phases were conducted prior to detailed engagement in the literature, as consistent with the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as adapted by Strauss and Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Each participant provided informed consent for their session to be recorded. As part of the process, the opportunity was offered at the end for the data to be destroyed. In all cases participants agreed that the data could be used for the research study.

Data Analysis
Following the transcription of the first two interviews, margin memos and noting was used to identify themes. An initial set of themes was identified. This was used to further explore issues during the second set of four interviews. An iterative process was employed during the analysis as the researchers sought saturation of the data in the development of the descriptive codes. Following this process, the material was set to one side and after a period work undertaken to develop the conceptual categories which were used for the framework. The conceptual codes were critically reviewed by the researchers in the production of the final version.

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Results

The results of the analysis are reported using the main descriptive categories as headings and the sub-categories that make them up as sub headings. For ease of reference, the main categories and sub-categories are listed in table 1. In this paper we have selected quotes which illustrate a theme of topic, but other statements were also made in relations to these codes.

Influencing Factors

The data suggested a number of factors which influenced the supervision process. These include expectations, attitudes (of the coach) and the preceding "need" for supervision.

The first influencing factor was the expectations of the coach. These played an important role in the personal experience of supervision, and its ultimate success or failure. It is interesting to note that none of the coaches had any understanding or expectations of coaching supervision before they started it.

> *"…when I started supervision I didn't really understand what it was all about…I s'pose I just thought it was just like having a different level of coaching experience, but of course I discovered it is a whole lot more than that."* (C2:7-10)

Once the coaches were receiving regular supervision, their expectations were varied, and included expectations of the supervisor and of the environment/relationship.

Having engaged in supervision for a period of time the coaches' expectations of the process increased. They expected their supervisor to be trained and have a specific set of skills and experience.

Table 1: Table of Categories, sub-categories & themes

Main categories	Sub-categories	Themes
1. Influencing Factors	Expectations (coach/supervisor)	Of supervisor
		Of relationship/environment
		Of coach
	Coach attitudes to supervision	Proactive and positive
		Seeking out issues
		Opportunity to reflect
		Faith in supervision
	Need for supervision	Coach aware of issue
		The hidden need
2. Process of Supervision	Coach's role	Active and primary role
		Open and present
		Critical appreciation
	Supervisor's role	Facilitator
		Support and challenge
		Quality feedback
		Knowledge over time
		Awareness of coach body language
	Properties of supervision	Frequency
		Type
		Consistency of supervisor
	Relationship and environment	Safe
		Role clarity and equality
		Develops over time
		Working together
		Coach-supervisor "fit"
	Group supervision	Learning from others
		Experimentation
		Objectivity
3. Necessary Conditions	Supervisor	Trained coaching supervisors
	Knowledge, skills & experience	Contextual knowledge
		Supervision informs practice

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	Ethical practice	Ethical function of supervision Ethics training for supervisors
4. Limiting Factors	Limited understanding of supervision	
	Bringing issues to supervision	
	Coach supervisor relationship	
	Supervisor behaviour	Too directive
	Coach behaviour	Reliant on supervisor's opinion Impression Management
5. Supervision Potential	Individual	Enhanced capacity to challenge Qualitative function of supervision CPD
	Organisational	Opportunity for organisational learning and change
6. Outcomes	Individual	Difficult to quantify Raised awareness Confidence in coaching Perseverance in coaching Sense of belonging Professionalism "Internal Supervisor"

"I guess, having somebody who's been trained in supervision and is following a process and model…not just a coach who's decided to call it supervision and raise their game sort of thing, but a different skill set or set of processes." (C2:136-8)

The coaches indicated a desire for supervisors to stimulate their thinking and offer them a different perspective on their practice. Coaches expected to feel safe and comfortable in their supervision environment, and able to discuss their issues freely and openly without being judged. Particularly important was the guarantee of confidentiality in supervision and a freedom to discuss important issues.

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Supervisors also held expectations of their coaches. There was an expectation that coaches should be open to constructive challenge and open to supervision in general and be 'present' in the supervisory relationship. One supervisor said that the coach plays an active and primary role in supervision and that "*it is the coach that makes it work*" (S2: 13). The coach has a responsibility in the supervisors' eyes to be willing to stand back and reflect on their practice, reflect on themselves in the context of the coaching conversation. In essence the coach needed to be able to "*sit in a different seat in the room…and look at their work from a different angle*" (S2: 16-7).

A second theme was the coach's attitude towards supervision. Having a positive attitude towards supervision was viewed as important if the coach was to engage in an open and constructive way. The coaches reported adopting a proactive attitude towards their supervision by actively looking for issues in their coaching.

> "*I don't always bring something- sometimes there's nothing that's cropped up in the month, but I'm looking for things to bring if you see what I'm saying.*" (C2: 39-41)

In addition, the coaches saw supervision as an opportunity to reflect on their practice, and as a resource with potential benefit for their practice.

> "*…if I've got a new client, I'll be thinking about using it as an opportunity, so where do I feel least comfortable with this client, what can I ask. So I think of supervision as a resource that I can kind of latch onto and get what I can out of it.*" (C2: 24-26)

A third influencing factor was the need for supervision. The coaches in the study highlighted how the need for supervision at specific instances contributed to their practice. Such incidents were often about difficult or challenging themes within their coaching work which they were unsure of how to manage.

> "*I went to the person that ran the programme I was on and asked for a one to one supervision session, because I just felt that this was really important and I needed to do something now.*" (C3: 41-42)

The supervisors also highlighted the need for supervision, but held the view supervision should be regular rather than only at times of need. They highlighted that on occasions   there was value in discussing issues which were outside of the immediate awareness of the coach. Both supervisors expressed concern for coaches who only sought supervision when they had a particular issue to discuss. One supervisor made the interesting point that

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coaches can learn from their good practice (to find out what they are doing well) and not only from the issues/problems they seek help with. Both supervisors recommended that supervision be attended on a regular, consistent basis, and that coaches should be able to request further supervision at times when there is a particular issue they wish to address.

The Process of Coaching Supervision

Coaching supervision is a dynamic process between two people or more (for group supervision), which takes place in a wider coaching and organisational context. The themes that emerged through the data regarding the process of coaching supervision were: the coach's role, the supervisor's role, properties of coaching supervision, the supervisory relationship and environment and finally, a rather separate theme: the process of group supervision.

As previously indicated, coaches tended to take a proactive role in their supervision. It became clear from the participants that the coach's role was not limited to the actual supervision session. It involves a considerable amount of preparation in the form of active and ongoing reflection on their coaching practice. In the actual supervision session, the coaches also described taking a lead role. They described how they took responsibility for providing the supervisor with accurate and sufficient information regarding the coaching relationship. They noted that the quality of the supervision relied on the quality of information the coach brought to the supervision session, as well as their ability to reflect on their practice openly in the session with help from the supervisor.

In order that the coach is able to bring enough information to supervision, it emerged from both coach and supervisor participants that the coach should be able to be open and fully present during the session. This commitment to supervision and the ability to be open are also some of the behaviours supervisors expected from the coach. Without openness or commitment the real work of supervision could not be successfully undertaken.

Further, coaches highlighted the importance of adopting a critical stance for new insights to emerge. However, such insights were for reflection, not wholesale adoption. In this sense the coach was operating as a separate autonomous individual, influenced but not directed by the supervisor.

> *"…to be a good supervisee I think is to take on board any insights, comments and suggestions but to still have the confidence not to throw your own ideas out the window, because somebody else has suggested something different."* (C2: 161-4)

It was noted by participants that the supervisor also had an important role to play in coaching supervision. It emerged that the supervisor took a facilitative role in the process of coaching supervision by opening up the "critical reflective space" (S2: 92) for the coach. It was suggested that the supervisor should

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encourage the coach to step back and reflect on his/her practice and hold this reflective space without supplying solutions. To achieve this the supervisor drew on multiple methods; employing open questioning, stimulating the coach's thinking and exploring together the issue, including the emotions of the coach and coachee in the coaching relationship.

"So having a supervisor who's shining a light on the part of the process you haven't been aware of." (C2: 126-8)

Data from the first part of the study, (the video-taped supervision session), illustrated this. In the session the supervisor used a wide range of interventions to help the coach explore the issue from an alternative perspective. Examples of interventions from this observed coaching supervision session are summarised in Table 2.

The supervisor, in this facilitative role, was supportive of the coach, yet maintained a strong element of challenge in order to assist the coach in their reflective process. Feedback was a further aspect identified by both coaches and supervisors as an important role of the supervisor.

Coaches also highlighted the value of an on-going relationship with their supervisor. This allowed the supervisor to become more knowledgeable of the coach's approach, tendencies and behavioural patterns. This knowledge informed the practice of supervision in a way that helped the coach to raise his/her awareness of behaviours that may be affecting his/her coaching practice. As a result, it was perceived that the quality of supervision deepened over time:

"…having the same supervisor every month, so they get to know your patterns means that you'll get more insightful feedback from them." (C2: 131-33)

Supervisors noted the importance of being aware of non-verbal cues, alongside the spoken words of the coach. It was assumed that this awareness also developed over time, and what was important was not the behaviour itself but how the behaviour contrasted with the 'typical' behaviour of the coach while engaging in supervisor. One of the supervisors noted:

"…peoples' verbal version of it isn't that accurate… because how we remember… but what we do know is what a person shows you physically, in the room, what they replicate is much more accurate. If you film a coaching session and then film the supervision on it, you'd be able to pick out elements that are transferred, in terms of uh, paralleling from that one into this one." (S1: 40-44)

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Table 2: Sample questions used in the observed coaching supervision session

Supervisor questions
• How do you see that?
• And where would you sense that?
• …the statement behind those questions would be?
• What do you think he might say?
• Who would be saying this?
• And what's happening between you and your coachee?
• So how did you get that feedback then?
• What were you wanting to say to your boss?
• So what would be your challenge to him?
• How do you think he would describe you differently when you get into the six-month review than how he described you at the beginning?
• So, what would the confident, assertive you be saying to me?
• How does that feel?

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This reference to a parallel process was also found within the first part of the study. In the filmed supervision session, the supervisor picked up on the coach's closed body language. This provided a clue as to the underlying feelings of the coach and by pointing it out the supervisor opened up an avenue for exploration in the observed supervision session.

Supervisor: *"So, how are you doing with your assertiveness and confidence in here? (…) I'm just noticing that the times when we go into here, um it's like (demonstrates closed body language), is that OK, or…? If you were being confident and assertive with me, here, what would you be saying, right now? (*extract from the observed supervision session*)*

A third theme was the properties of the session which were judged to be important. The data suggests a few common elements in terms of the frequency, type of supervision and consistency of supervisor.

The strongest message related to the frequency of coaching supervision with both supervisors and coaches recommending regular scheduled supervision sessions. It is interesting to note that from the interviews, one of the coaches received monthly supervision, while the two other coaches received quarterly supervision. All considered their supervision to be 'regular', so there is a certain relativity regarding the regularity of supervision in the eyes of the coach.

"Very regular, yeah, so it's quarterly, but I will ask for supervision of I need something." (C3: 39)

One of the supervisors pointed out that the regularity of supervision was dependent on the amount of coaching done. Perhaps the most important point raised about the frequency or regularity of supervision is that it should be formal and scheduled, rather than voluntary and ad hoc arrangement for the coach. However, coaches valued the flexibility of being able to seek extra coaching supervision in addition to their scheduled sessions if there was an issue they needed to address urgently. This could be through phone contact with their supervisor or through arranging an extra session

"Because, you know, the thing with supervision is that you've got an issue now, you can't wait three months to sort it out!" (C3: 42-43)

In terms of the type of supervision, there was strong support by both coaches and supervisors for a mixed approach, rather than purely one-to-one sessions. Both coaches and supervisors valued the dynamics and learning opportunities provided by group supervision which will be discussed below.

"I have found it valuable to not just have one to one's." (C2:138-9)

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There was also support, from both sides, for having the same supervisor over time. The reason provided for this was to build up a supervisory relationship and benefit from the development of enhanced knowledge and rapport of one another over time.

> *"…having the same supervisor every month, so they get to know your patterns means that you'll get more insightful feedback from them."*
> (C2: 131-33)

Both coaches and supervisors drew attention to the relationship as a dynamic process, with roles and responsibilities on both sides and a reported sense of equality in terms of power, while retaining clarity of roles in the relationship. The issue of contracting was also noted and comparisons made to the equal importance to this within the coach – coachee relationship.

The last sub-theme mentioned in this cluster was the fit between the coach and the supervisor. It was seen as favourable by the coach to have a supervisor who stimulated his / her thinking and whose approach to supervision complemented his/her approach to coaching.

While much of the debate was about the benefits of one-to-one supervision, coaches pointed out that they enjoyed and benefited from attending group supervision in addition to their regular one-to-one sessions. One of the main reasons provided by both coaches and supervisors was the opportunity for coaches to gain a wider perspective and to learn from other coaches. One of the supervisors said that while he had "immense time for one to ones" (S3: 68), he believed that the dynamics of group supervision added value to coaching supervision, Coaches shared this view of the dual benefits from both one to one and from group supervision:

> *"I actually like having a small group environment as well…you've got more dynamics going… it's quite interesting to hear other people's case studies…the process on somebody else, being able to relate it to yourself."* (C2: 142-4)

It was noted that in a group the coach was able to learn from the experiences of other coaches and able to relate to these common issues. The result of this was a sense of belonging to the 'coaching community' and a feeling that the coach was not alone in the issues he/she was facing in his/her coaching practice.

Group supervision provided the coach with an opportunity to receive insights and opinions from other group members in an environment where experimentation was encouraged.

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"I thought it was quite experimental. I could say 'Well, I tried this and, or this happened…and I didn't feel like there was going to be any comeback really." (C3: 23-24)

Necessary conditions for coaching supervision

Participants suggested there were a number of necessary conditions that had to be in place for coaching supervision to be deemed most effective. Some of these have already been brought to light in this study, such as the creation of an open, safe, confidential and non-judgemental environment within which coaching supervision can take place. Other important factors included the supervisors training, experience and ethical maturity.

Both coaches and supervisors expected coaching supervisors to have specialist training and to use a specific model which added value to the process. The supervisors pointed out the need for coaching supervisors to have knowledge of the context in which they were supervising. For executive coaches this would be knowledge and/or experience of the dynamics present in the top tier of organisations and the pressures senior executives experience in their roles. Simply drawing on counselling experiences and transferring these to the coaching space was seen as inadequate.

"…there are many counselling supervisors who have never worked in organisations…they don't have the contextual frame or professional frame I think to do good coaching supervision."
(S2: 236-9)

Another feature raised was that supervision should inform one's practice. The supervision session should translate into a concrete course of action to which the coach commits. The environment of coaching supervision should thus be one of constant learning and change.

A further point that came over very strongly from all participants was the focus on the ethical function of coaching supervision. Although the issues that face coaches may be of a lower 'grade' than those faced in other helping professions, the ethical element in coaching supervision is one which should not be ignored. Supervisors' highlighted the ethical responsibility they held to challenge the coach when ethical issues arose. If the coach was not behaving in an ethical manner, the supervisor would intervene, challenging where appropriate. In all cases the supervisor should act to protect the best interests of the coachee.

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It was noted that this competency of ethical maturity required training and personal development on behalf of the supervisor and that the supervision process provided continuous development and learning for the supervisor as well as the coach.

Limiting Factors

The participants of the study raised a number of factors that proved limiting to the effectiveness of coaching supervision, both in terms of the supervisory relationship and the process or issues related to one or both of the involved parties. These included: the limited understanding of supervision, the issues or lack of them brought to supervision, the coach-supervisor relationship, the supervisor's behaviour and the behaviour of the coach.

As noted above, expectations can play an important part in the process and can both enhance and derail the supervision relationship. It was noted by coaches that they were aware of individuals who attended supervision with counselling supervisors due to the wider availability of such individual and the lower cost. According to one supervisor in particular, this was not advisable, as they argued that the context in which coaching takes place is fundamentally different from counselling and the failure to understand these differences can be dangerous for both the coachee and their employing organisation.

> *"…I think a lot of coaches have gone to counselling and psychotherapy supervisors…I think on the whole counselling and psychotherapy practice differs 'cause they are there to serve the client in front of them, while the coach has always got at least the client and the organisation and the performance." (S1: 156-158)*

There was also a sense that the term 'supervision' has been used too loosely when applied in the coaching community to a wide range of activities including peer support and peer coaching.

Coaches highlighted that the sometimes-rigid nature of supervision meetings could make it difficult to bring a particular issue to the scheduled supervision sessions. As a result the coach may need to have a supervisor available to deal with crisis situation rather than wait for two months to the next formal supervision meeting. Supervision contracts should provide for this flexibility to call upon the supervisor between formal meetings. Coaches must be prepared to seek out additional supervision if and when required. It was noted that such a flexible arrangement should be in addition to, rather than a replacement for, formal and regular supervision meetings.

There are dangers in the supervisory relationship that if the necessary conditions and expectations discussed above are not fulfilled, coaching supervision will not be effective. The coach needs to be comfortable to discuss his/her issues freely and openly. The features of challenge and support come into play to keep the relationship on its 'learning edge' to use the words of one of the supervisors.

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Supervisor behaviour was also highlighted as an important aspect and a potential limiting factor, if the supervisor behaved in ways which undermined the relation such as being over directive. Both supervisors warned against the potential of being too directive which they considered detracted from the learning potential of supervision. It was indicated that the supervisor should not be offering direct advice or solutions, but should allow the coach to reach these on their own, without being judged by the supervisor.

Coach behaviours also could have a negative effect. Coaches suggested that to gain the most from the process they needed to be open to the alternative perspectives in supervision, while also retaining their individuality and confidence in their ideas. It was acknowledged that the supervisor's assessment of an issue was based on the information the coach discloses, and as a result, the coach should not be too drawn to the supervisor's perspective if he/she does not feel it is accurate.

> *"Um, if you're too drawn to their assessment of the situation- because…the supervisor's assessment is still going to be based on the limited information that you've brought to the table."*
> (C3: 156-159)

A further danger was the failure by coaches to be truly open and the danger of seeking to present a particular perspective of events. This danger, it was felt increased in a group supervision session, where impression management, due to peer pressure was more present.

The potential of coaching supervision

Participants suggested that supervision offered a number of potential gains. The perceived potential benefits of coaching supervision range from enhancing the coach's capacity to challenge to enhancing the quality of coaching practice. A third theme in this cluster was the contribution that coaching supervision could make in continuing professional development (CPD). The process of coaching supervision within a group as an Action Learning Set, encourages the linkage between theory and practice. One of the supervisors stated that supervision should inform a coach's practice, another mentioned that ones' mental models should grow and change over time and this should inform practice. A fourth theme was the potential organisational benefits. For coaches based within organisations or working with a number of coachees from the same organisation, it was suggested that by increasing the coach's capacity, the coach could be more effective with individual coachees and thus contribute to wider organisational change.

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Another potential organisational benefit from supervision, based on the participant responses, is the potential ability to assess systemic patterns, through the outcomes of the multiple supervisory conversations (within clear confidentiality boundaries). By drawing on such information, and sharing the high-level themes with the organisation, the supervisor can contribute towards wider organisational cultural change.

> *"..what are the systemic patterns, what does that tell us about the current state of the culture, and how that matches the vision and strategy, and work out what the organisation can do to shift these patterns."* (S3: 78-80)

Outcomes of coaching supervision

While coaches and supervisors highlighted the potential benefits, participants in both groups found it more difficult to identify explicit benefits from coaching supervision. Coaches remarked that it was difficult to quantify how their coaching practice had changed or benefited as a direct result of coaching supervision, especially at the time, but looking back they believed they were more effective coaches as a result of supervision.

> *"I'm sure it does, um, it's very difficult to quantify, but I'm sure it makes me more effective…"* (C3: 92-93)

Coaches valued receiving a wider perspective on their coaching issues and practice. Participants claimed this reflection resulted in a raised awareness and new insights for the coach that had the potential to enhance their coaching practice. The element of surprise at the discovery of a "blind spot" (below) indicates the transformational power of supervision which is alluded to by both Hawkins (2006) and Carroll (2006).

> *"…what I find really useful about supervision is noticing my blind spots. I like to think I've looked at every possible angle, and then somebody from the outside spots something and you think 'Oh my goodness! How could I have missed that! (laughs)'"* (C3: 82-87)

However the coaches in the study were unable to identify specific instances of changes in the practice resulting from insights gained in supervision. Instead, the largest gains were less tangible. Coaches stated having increased confidence in their coaching practice. Along with the confidence to pursue issues came a reported increased ability for coaches to persevere when things become difficult in the coaching relationship.

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Both coaches and supervisors indicated support for group supervision. One of the reasons for this, from the coach's point of view, was that group supervision provided coaches with a sense of belonging to the coaching community. In a group supervision, coaches were able to listen to the issues of other coaches, relate them to themselves, and receive input on their own issues. One coach noted:

> *"…coaching is quite a lonely profession in a way, you know, going out, meeting someone, getting back, reflecting on your own. So it brings that sort of community together."* (C3: 112-3)

Group supervisions helped in the formation of what coaches described as a community. Related to the sense of community, was a raised sense of professionalism and ethical awareness in their coaching practice. The in-depth exploration and reflection on their practice raised questions of how they might conduct themselves in a professional manner. Supervision reminded coaches of their ethical duty and held their focus on professional practice.

> *"I think it helps me be professional, it keeps my professionalism up and reminds me of the ethos behind what I'm trying to do."* (C3:111)

A further theme was what may be termed the 'internal supervisor'. This related to a coach's growing ability to self supervise as a result of coaching supervision, as the coach reflected on what the supervisor might say. The supervision process thus offered a form of holding to account, not in any hierarchical sense but in the sense the coach sought to maintain the standards of practice expected of them by their supervisor.

Discussion

Reflecting on the data
The series of interviews, six in all, and the video session, provided a wealth of data on coaching supervision.

There was an indication, from the data, that coaches looked to supervision as a means of dealing with the challenges they experienced in their coaching and that both one-to-one and group supervision models offered potential benefits. However, the actual benefits were harder to quantify. Coaches held a belief that their practice was enhanced, but they were unsure about the specific benefits. There may be an echo of the process identified in coaching (De Meuse & Dai, 2009). De Meuse and Dai demonstrated through a meta-analysis that rating of coaching's positive impact given by the coachee are significantly higher than ratings given by peers of coaching's impact. This aside, it is of interest in this study that despite being unable to measure the impact of

supervision on coaching practice, coaches displayed a faith in its value of supervision in terms of confidence and being able to listen and share their experiences with others.

Both coaches and supervisors shared a common view about what factors contributed and limited the supervision relationship and the value of maintaining an ongoing relationship with the same supervisor, who was both trained and had relevant experience.

Reflecting on the literature

The results from this study provide a detailed picture of how coaches and supervisors experience coaching supervision as this field is developing within the UK. The body of literature on coaching supervision is at this stage limited and has been out paced by the development of coaching supervision practice and the race to claim that supervision is the most effective model for continuous professional development.

Carroll (2006) has identified a series of central principles which underpin coaching supervision. Carroll suggests:
- Coaching supervision is for the learning of the supervisees
- Supervisors facilitate supervisee learning
- Learning in supervision is transformational (not just transmissional)
- Supervision moves from 'I-learning' to 'we-learning'.

The results of this study echo Carroll's first point that coaching supervision is about the learning of the coach. Coaching supervision, as described by the participants, centres around the coach's individual practice with the aim of learning from this experience. The supervisor was expected to be committed to helping the coach with his/her issue, create an environment in which the coach was able to be open and honest and learn through a process of critical reflection.

The results of the study strongly supported the view that a coaching supervisor takes the role of a facilitator. Supervisors in this study cautioned against over-involvement and coaches indicated that supervision was not as effective as it might be when supervisors offered too much advice or directive solutions. Coaches noted that in order for the supervisor to be able to effectively facilitate the session, the coach had a responsibility to be open and honest, and to provide sufficient information in the session to explore the issue being presented. Coaches also noted that it was important that they retain their confidence, trust their judgement and were not too influenced by an overly directive supervisor. For them supervision was a joint and equal process rather than a hierarchical one of being held to account.

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Transformational learning as a theme came across clearly in the study, from both coaches and supervisors. For the supervisors, transformational learning was an aim, while for coaches the learning was experienced, and this experience sometimes resulted in surprise and an openness to change in their coaching approach as a result.

In both the one-to-one, and group supervision, participants raised the point that supervision created a two-way learning process. This occurred through the dialogue and feedback between supervisor and coach. In a group supervision coaches were able to learn from the experiences of other coaches. As raised by one of the participants, group coaching supervision should be seen as an Action Learning Set, where learning is necessarily experiential, and reflection informs ones' practice. Supervisions also highlighted that learning occurred for them in the process.

This learning however only took place when a good relationship existed and this depended on the supervisor being able to adapt their style to suit the needs of the coach. One participant coach, who had had a number of different supervisors over time, indicated the perceived value of coach-supervisor "fit." It was indicated that her learning experience was enhanced by having a supervisor whose approach suited hers, and a mismatch in approaches was a "turn off." Carroll (2006) also discusses this, saying that supervisors should have an understanding that one size does not fit all in learning terms. He indicates that supervisors should know the learning style and intelligence of their coach/supervisees in order to facilitate their learning. The overriding theme here is that the supervision should be a self-directed learning experience and supervisors should be able to accommodate the style and learning needs of any supervisee.

The results also appear to support Hawkins & Smith's (2006) three functions of coaching supervision: developmental, resourcing and qualitative. In terms of the developmental function, the participants indicated that supervision provided them with a regular opportunity for reflecting on their practice, to gain alternative perspective and receive feedback. In terms of the resourcing function, the participants noted that the opinions and feedback of others were valuable resources in gaining a wider perspective. While the support and challenge offered by the supervisor helped the coach address the issues openly, without fear. The qualitative function was experienced by the participants as an increased ethical capacity and confidence to persist and persevere and deliver coaching of a superior quality.

The results of the study provide support for Hawkins & Schwenk's (2006) guidelines for best practice. These guidelines include:
- Takes place regularly
- Balance of individual, group and peer supervision
- Manages ethical and confidentiality boundaries
- Generates organisational learning
- Provides support for the coach

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- Quality assures coaching provision
- Provides continuing professional development of the coach
- Focuses on the client, organisation and coach needs.

This rosy glow of support for the work of writers in the field should not however mask some interesting challenges which the research has brought to light. A significant theme that emerged from the study was that the coaches had no prior understanding or expectations of supervision. They both reported positive experiences of supervision, but there is an underlying sense that although they valued supervision, they might not have sought out supervision on their own. This echoes our view that coaching is more spoken of than practiced within the wider coaching community in the UK. This may also explain the higher profile of coaching supervision as the model of choice for CPD in the UK and its relative obscurity in other English-speaking countries such as US and Australia. Hawkins & Smith (2006) ask the question why coaching supervision is well promoted but not so well practiced.

Another dimension to lack of clarity of benefits, was a lack of understanding of the different forms of CPD ranging from one-to-one supervision, group supervision, a reflective log or journal, or formal and informal peer mentoring. The research appears to offer some insight into the different benefits from one-to-one and group supervision. However, as was anticipated there is little evidence to suggest, or understanding among coaches, about the potential benefits of one form of CPD over another. It may be that different forms may suit different coaches and may be of particular value at different stages of a coach's development. For example, we would argue that new coaches benefit greatly from group supervision, developing a sense of community and shared ethical standards and learning from each other. However later in their coaching careers, a learning log and peer mentoring may offer a more appropriate model. Further, it may be argued that most benefit can be obtained from using more than one reflective practice approach; combining for example group supervision with a reflective log.

A further issue was the assumption that supervision was a problem-solving forum. However, we would argue supervision is part of a leaning forum for new coaches and part of continuous professional development for experienced coaches.

A final theme which is worthy of mention is that of supervision training. While in Australia and US coaching supervision training is either non-existent or virtually non-existent, there has been a slow growth in the UK. The study highlighted the value of having a trained supervision, who holds to a model of practice and is also experienced in the domain of practice of the coach. The coaches in the study indicated that this was important to them. They wanted to know that the supervisor had a specific set of skills and was following a process, rather than just another coach who wanted to "raise their game." There is currently a shortage of trained coaching supervisors. We would argue that the development of additional coaching supervision training will help to address this issue, as will the recognition of accredited supervisor status by coaching bodies.

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Practical implications

The study suggests a need for formal coach supervision training within the UK if the supervision model is to be more widely adopted. Such training needs to reflect coaching rather than therapy needs.

Secondly, in selecting supervisors, we would advocate that the coach considers the match between themselves and the supervisor, as well as the supervisors experience and qualifications. Once a selection is made clear contracting to set expectations will help in making sessions more productive for both parties.

Thirdly, we would argue that a more flexible approach should be considered before the coaching profession adopts supervision as the Gold Standard for coaching CPD. There is a danger that supervision is made compulsory in ethical or professional codes. Such a move will reduce the flexibility to meet CPD needs through a variety of routes. Other CPD models are available and we would argue that these may be more appropriate at different stages of a coach's development. These may include peer mentoring, reflective logs or diaries.

Finally, this research, while one of the few supervised based studies published todate, is limited in its scope. The study drew on a limited pool of participants as a qualitative study, and a deeper understanding of the processes and efficacy of coaching supervision is required. This could be achieved by further research in this area of coaching practice.

Developing a conceptual framework

As a grounded theory study, the ultimate aim of the study was to reflect on the factors which emerged from the research and construct a framework, which both reflects the state of coaching supervision as a process in the UK, but also offers a framework which can be the subject of further testing through more focused research into supervision and supervision practices. Such a model is summarised in Diagram 1. The diagram summarises the supervision process into three core stages; context, such as which aspirations, expectations and needs inform the process. The second cluster is the supervision process. This consists of the behaviours of the coach and supervisor, along with the experience of the supervisor and the fit between the two participants in the relationship. The third stage is the outcomes stage. The complexity and intangible nature is represented by the focus on perceived benefits. However, within these may be buried specific and tangible outcomes, which may include enhanced confidence and a holding to account. These may also include

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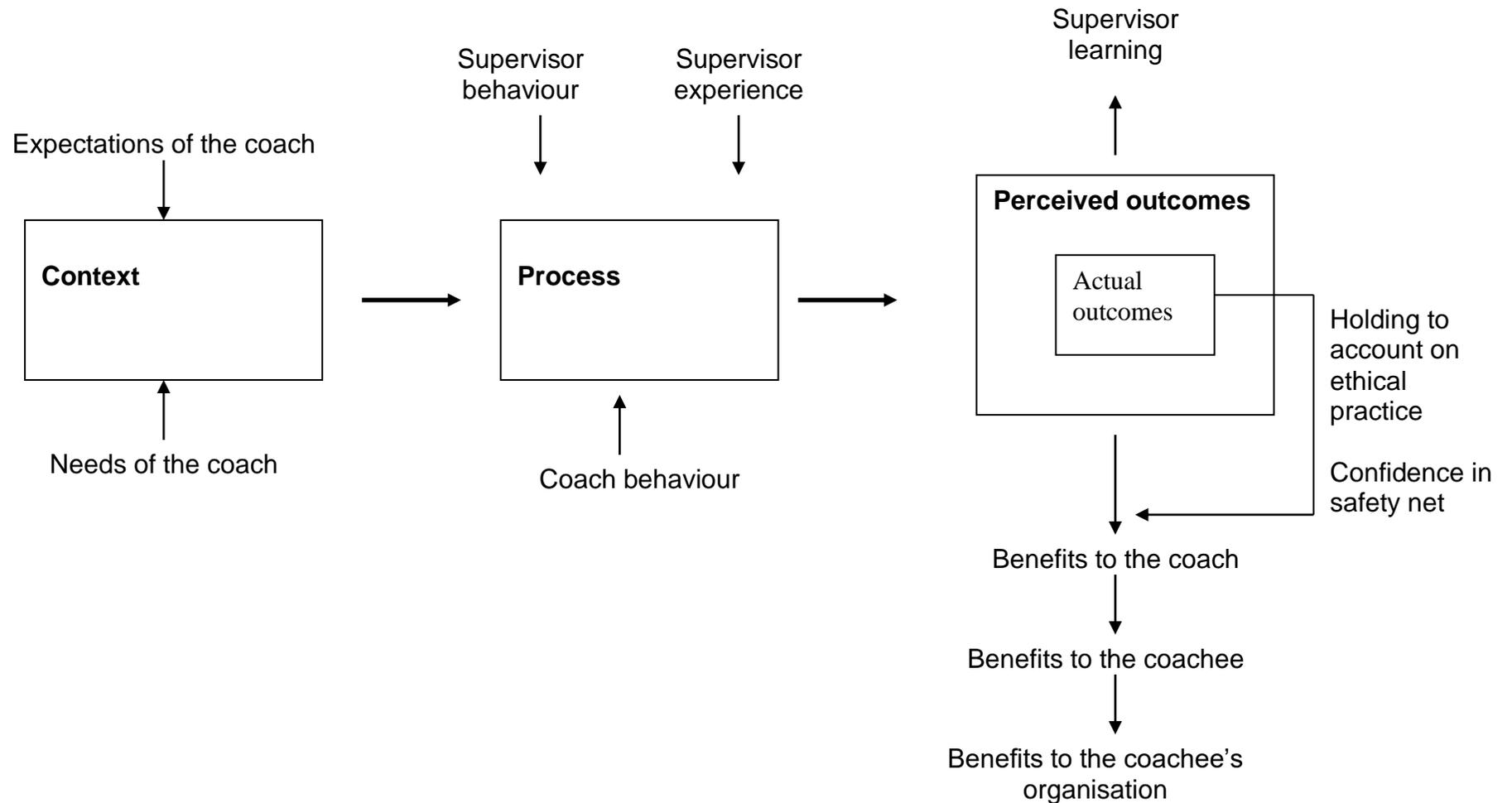
aspects such as growth in ethical maturity. It is these factors which when adopted and used by the coach may in turn shape their practice and thus the wider efficacy of coaching, offering gains to the coachee and to their coachee's organisation.

Conclusions

This study set out to develop a theoretical model of the process of coaching supervision based on the experiences of coaches and supervisors. A Grounded Theory methodology was employed. The results of the study gave rise to a theoretical framework of coaching supervision, covering aspects such as influencing factors, the process of supervision, necessary conditions, limiting factors, supervision potential and experienced outcomes. The results echoed the existing literature on coaching supervision, with coachees expressing a belief that supervision offered benefits to them in their coaching practice, including raising awareness about their practice, increasing confidence, encouraging perseverance and providing a sense of belonging. The study also highlighted the challenges that face coaching supervision as a result of the growing coaching industry and coaches in this study expressed desire for trained supervisors with relevant contextual knowledge. This places a demand for trained coaching supervisors. Further the study highlighted the importance of clearly setting expectations in the supervision process.

The study, while unique in exploring a new area of practice through a grounded theory approach, should be viewed as a starting point for wider research into the efficacy of coaching supervision. In this study participants were quick to describe perceived benefits, however, they were less able to substantiate the benefits in tangible terms. As a result, further research needs to explore this aspect comparing supervision with other forms of continuous professional development such as peer coaching and reflective logs, as well as comparing the benefits of one-to-one supervision with group supervision.

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Diagram 1: Conceptual framework: Coaching Supervision

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