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# Defining Coaching Psychology: Debating coaching and coaching psychology definitions.

Jonathan Passmore, Marie Stopforth & Yi-Ling Lai

## Abstract

SGCP has been reviewing its standards. As part of this journey, we have also taken the opportunity to revisit the nature of coaching psychology. What is '*coaching*'? How does it differ from '*coaching psychology*'? We explore these in a longer paper within ICPR. In this paper we aim to provide a short review of definitions and offer thoughts on a new definition for coaching psychology.

**Keywords:** *Definition of coaching, definition of coaching psychology, definition of health coaching, definition of executive coaching, Thomas Leonard, Laura Brock, John Whitmore.*

## Introduction

Definitions of coaching have been part of the debate in coaching for the last thirty years, since coaching started to take off in the 1990's and coaching started on its journey of development as a discipline (Passmore & Theeboom, 2015). While there has been broad agreement over these years, different writers have adopted different perspectives, emphasising different aspects of coaching in their definitions.

One might suggest that a search for a definition is an academic pursuit. Grant (2011) argued that a clear definition is needed before an agenda for the teaching coaching psychology can be developed. We would go further to argue that marking the boundaries of a domain is vital for three reasons: Firstly, it is essential for practice, making it clear to clients what they can expect from a service provider (their coach). Secondly, it's vital for research. We need to clearly delineate the domain to understand what the phenomena is which is being studied. Only by defining the intervention can it be clearly differentiated from other interventions, and thus can we clearly make the claim 'coaching works' as opposed to 'having a conversation with people' works (what ever 'works' may be in the circumstances). Thirdly, a definition is vital for teaching; what needs to be included in a course entitled 'coaching psychology. What distinct body of knowledge marks 'coaching psychology' out from 'coaching', 'mentoring' 'change conversations' or even just 'purposeful conversations'.

The purpose of this short piece is therefore to prompt coaching psychologists to consider whether current definitions of coaching psychology need to be further developed in line with the evolution of the profession. What definitions are used? How can coaching psychologists more clearly delineate their domain?

## Defining Coaching

Let's start by exploring the term 'coaching'. A detailed literature review has revealed the first reference to coaching in the workplace dates back to 1937 (Gordy, 1937). The author of this research paper offered little in the way of a formal definition of coaching.

As the literature has moved on, Whitmore's seminal book placed a marker in the sand, suggesting that coaching was about *"unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them – a facilitation approach"* (Whitmore, 1992, p8). However at the heart of the definition for Whitmore was a belief that coaching was essentially about developing self-awareness and personal responsibility (Whitmore, Personal communication, 2009). Other writers have offered other definitions. Laura Whitworth (Kimsee-House et al, 2011), one of the pioneers in the US, along with Thomas Leonard (Brook, 2009), developed co-active coaching which defines coaching as *"a relationship of possibilities....based on trust, confidentiality"* .

Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) offer a more process based definition in an attempt to differentiate coaching from mentoring, counselling and other conversation based approaches to change. They suggested coaching involved *"a Socratic based dialogue between a facilitator (coach) and a participant (client) where the majority of interventions used by the facilitator are open questions which are aimed at stimulating the self awareness and personal responsibility of the participant"*.

As coaching has grown, definitions have split into a series of sub-sets of coaching, which have included executive coaching, health coaching, life coaching, safety coaching or coaching as a management style. We offer a selection of definitions here:

Executive coaching is *"a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and, consequently, to improve the effectiveness of the client's organization within a formally defined coaching agreement"* (Kilburg, 2000, p142)

Health coaching has been defined as: *"the practice of health education and health promotion within a coaching context, to enhance the wellbeing of individuals and to facilitate the achievement of their health-related goals"* (Palmer, Stubbs & Whybrow, 2003).

Key themes in these definitions are the facilitative nature of coaching. The role of the agent (the coach) is not to guide, direct or instruct, but to 'facilitate' the client (coachee) towards their own discoveries, insights and goals. A second observation from reviewing these multiple definitions over the past thirty years, is that coaching has been refined and

redefined continually over this period, as it has changed, developed and spread into new areas of application. As Palmer and Whybrow note “definitions seldom stay static, unless the area has stagnated” (2007, p. 3). The situation has been less fluid in coaching psychology. While there have been various definitions of coaching psychology offered since the turn of the millennium, the variety and volume of change has been markedly different.

## **Defining Coaching Psychology**

One topical and important consideration is the question of what the difference is between coaching and coaching psychology. Most definitions highlight a distinction, with coaching psychology said to involve the application of psychological approaches, interventions and processes to coaching practice (e.g. Grant & Palmer, 2002, APS, 2007, Lai, 2014). However, Passmore (2010) has countered this academic perspective and argued that the reality is that many coaches draw upon psychological models in their practice as coach training over the past two decades has shifted from less evidenced based approaches, such as NLP, to more evidenced based approaches, such as cognitive behavioural coaching. Does this make all evidenced based coaches psychologists? Maybe the answer is yes if we share George Kelly’s view that we are all psychologists. However, this perspective fails the test that coaching psychology is something distinctive.

A further challenge arises from research. This suggests that coaching practice appears to be little different between registered psychologists and non-psychologist coaches in terms of their behaviours (Jenkins, Passmore, Palmer & Short, 2012), or in the coaching models they use with their coachees (Passmore, Brown & Csigas, 2017).

In contrast to focussing on psychological approaches, Passmore sought to recast coaching psychology as a separate domain of study, parallel to occupational, health or forensic psychology. He defined coaching psychology as “*the scientific study of behaviour, cognitive and emotion within coaching practice to deepen our understanding and enhance our practice within coaching*” (Passmore, 2010, p. 4).

Passmore suggests that while there are few observable differences between coaching and coaching psychology, the study of psychology can enhance practice, and may lead to materially different outcomes. However the evidence to support this view remains the subject of current research. We might go further to suggest that through this study, coaching psychologists may be able to more clearly articulate what they do and the underpinning theory, and as a result of the robust ethical standards set by the BPS and other psychological bodies, they may act to higher ethical standards when working with coaching clients. This last point of course is highly contentious, given the complex, and diverse nature of ethics and what is ethical.

We believe an open a discussion between psychologists will help us move this debate forward: What is your definition? How do you think coaching psychology differs from coaching? How should coaching psychologists differentiate themselves in the market place with clients? Do clients care? We will be collecting these views together for a follow-up paper to this in the next edition of the *International Coaching Psychology Review*.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have briefly explored the nature of coaching and of coaching psychology through the lens of coaching writers, and the definitions they have offered over the past three decades. We have suggested that a focus on psychological approaches is inadequate given the shift toward evidence-based approaches. We have offered thoughts on definitions for coaching psychology and its boundaries with coaching. We hope by doing so we will stimulate a debate which will help coaching psychologists reconsider the nature and boundaries of coaching psychology and continue the journey of development.

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