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# Pluralistic coaching? An exploration of the potential for a pluralistic approach to coaching

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## Abstract

The pluralistic approach to counselling and psychotherapy (Cooper & McLeod, 2011) has created controversy in the therapy world but has yet to be explored as a coaching approach. This paper examines coaches' attitudes towards its potential for coaching. Practicing coaches were given a stepped introduction to the approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Findings suggested that there is a case to be made for the introduction of pluralistic coaching but that a number of modifications should be considered in how the approach is presented.

**Keywords:** Coaching, Psychotherapy, Schoolism, Pluralism, Collaboration

## Introduction

The problematic nature of defining coaching is well noted (Cox, 2013; du Toit, 2014). For the purposes of this article the definition by Bachkirova, Cox and Clutterbuck of coaching as “a human development process that involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools and techniques” (2014, p.1) is helpful in focusing on both the nature of the interaction and the strategies used. Psychotherapy is recognised as one of the primary fields influencing coaching, (e.g. Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2009; Palmer & Whybrow, 2007; Wildflower, 2013). It is common for text books on coaching to have individual chapters that focus on different approaches which spring from the different psychotherapeutic orientations. A scan of these volumes often reveals the same authors reappearing in different volumes as they build reputations for specialisation in particular therapy-based approaches. Against this background it is possible that the coaching world will see the emergence of what commentators term ‘schoolism’. In psychotherapy this is marked by dogmatic theoretical adherence to a particular approach, destructive competition with other schools and an insistence that one-size-fits-all when it comes to working with clients. It has been referred to as a “battle of the brands” (Duncan et al., 2004, p.31) and an “ideological cold war” (Norcross, 2005, p.3). Lane, Stelter and Rostron, (2014) argue that the future pursuit of professionalisation in coaching is likely to be hampered by such schoolism.

It is possible that the pluralistic approach to counselling and psychotherapy (Cooper & McLeod, 2011) has the potential to offer coaching a way forward in addressing these issues. The pluralistic approach is based on three foundations. The first is the pluralistic perspective closely associated with postmodernism which challenges the notion of single, definitive truths (McLellan, 1995). The second is greater collaboration with clients particularly in regard to choosing which approaches and interventions to use in the work, thus drawing on the different (often competing) schools of therapy. Finally it employs a structure to the work based on goals, tasks and methods. In offering both a philosophical foundation and a structural framework within which to organise interventions it enables the practitioner

to avoid both schoolism and “wild eclecticism” which can be characterised as “flying by the seat of your pants, grabbing wildly at whatever comes to hand” (Hollanders, 2000, p.38). The potential of an approach that attempts to address these issues is clearly of interest to those concerned with the future development of the coaching profession. This would include trainers, academics, researchers and professional organisations. What follows is a review of some relevant literature and then an explanation of the methodology employed. The findings are discussed and tentative suggestions are made for further research.

## Literature

The connections between psychotherapy and coaching are not hard to establish. It has been noted that Gallwey’s *Inner Game of Tennis* (1974) had “resonances with various approaches to therapy” (Garvey, 2011, p.14). The dissemination of the GROW model by Whitmore (2009) cemented the connection between therapy and coaching due to Whitmore’s background in a number of therapeutic approaches such as gestalt (Perls, 1969), encounter groups (Rogers, 1973) and transpersonal (Rowan, 1993). Coaching has in the past been referred to by sympathetic therapists as a “counselling cousin” (Feltham, 1995) or “the new kid on the block”, (Carroll, 2003). A scan through the contents page of the handbook-style coaching manuals provides plentiful evidence of these connections with such brands of coaching as solution-focused (O’Connell & Palmer, 2007), Cognitive Behavioural (Neenan, 2010), Person-Centred (Joseph, 2014) and Gestalt (Bluckert, 2014) being written about by coaches that specialise in these therapeutically based approaches. Given the propensity for therapeutic approaches to be re-envisioned as coaching approaches it could be questioned whether the pluralistic approach has this type of potential and what advantages such a relocation could bring.

However opinions in the coaching world on alignment with psychotherapy are diverse. Stober (2006) suggests that the whole of coaching comes out of the humanistic psychology paradigm. This alliance of coaching and psychotherapy is taken even further by Berglass (2002) who argues that only trained therapists should be able to coach. Dean and Meyer (2002) are supportive of this and argue that therapeutic training will give the coach knowledge to support coachees achieving goals and objectives. A more moderate perspective is offered by Lee (2003) who simply argues that coaches should possess psychological mindedness. Garvey (2011) whilst respectful of the input of psychotherapeutic theories effectively affirms the possibility of division within coaching by arguing that the different types of coaching that come out of therapy are “branded products” (p.79). Filipczak (1998) has argued against psychological training for coaches believing that such practitioners are likely to have a very limited or even a non-existent understanding of the business environment and perceive a business as “another dysfunctional family that needs to be fixed” (p.34).

Whilst it is unlikely that the still emergent coaching sector will exactly mirror the culture of psychotherapy it would be naive to ignore the potential relevance of the history of therapy. Schoolism is a term used by commentators to describe a common mind-set in psychotherapy that is characterised by allegiance to one approach and disdain for all others. It is characterised as “the result of passionately held convictions being right whatever the facts” (Clarkson, 2000). The pluralistic approach, by contrast, comes out of a counter-movement that values integrative and/or eclectic practice. It is likely that this counter-tendency has gained credibility through increasing awareness of the “dodo bird conjecture” (Rosenzweig, 1936) in which an increasing body of evidence (e.g. Stiles, Barkham, Twigg, Mellor-Clark & Cooper, 2006) supports the existence of an equivalence of outcomes amongst the different approaches.

Coaching has not been immune to this schoolism vs. integration/eclecticism debate. Kilburg (2004) argues for a move from modernist/positivist research in coaching to a narrative/constructivist one. He writes how “practitioners of executive coaching have become more or less permanent residents of the

empirical realms of Dodoville ... because it appears that the studies done to date demonstrate positive, nonspecific effects regardless of the conceptual foundations espoused by practitioners”(p.207).

Lane et al, (2014) argue that the pursuit of professionalisation in coaching is likely to be hampered by schoolism as the emerging competition between alternative professional organisations will prevent a common voice being found. De Haan, (2008) calls for a move from "sectarian" to integrative coaching in order to address schoolism. Similarly Bachkirova, Cox and Clutterbuck (2014) recommend coaches seek a personal integration over a single approach and reject “absolutist claims for the exclusivity of any of them” (p.6). Garvey (2011) suggests an approach to coaching based on alethic pluralism that is characterised by a repertoire approach to coach and mentor development. He proposes a situation where coaches and mentors are able to draw from more than one discourse (e.g. sports coaching, philosophy, sociology).

However the integrative and eclectic models currently available to coaches appear to differ from the pluralistic approach in terms of qualities such as the extent of collaboration or lack of a coherent approach. It is beyond the scope of this review to detail them in any depth but some examples might demonstrate this point. De Haan (2008) has conceptualised an integrationist approach. Although emphasising its relational nature, agency seems to remain with the coach. He calls it a playing field for the coach and refers to the choices the coach may make at any point. The Personal Consultancy approach (Popovich & Bonniwell, 2007) whilst allowing for switching approaches within sessions again seems to privilege the “personal consultant” in making those choices. Clutterbuck and Megginson’s hierarchy of coaching (2011) focuses on styles of coaching rather than approaches. Interestingly Cox (2011) has referred to issues raised here and championed a pragmatic approach to coaching stating that “It justifies an initial eclectic approach, appeases calls for integration, overrides a top-down single school approach and gets us away from an emphasis on the individual coaches’ values and beliefs” (Cox, 2011, p.61).

Although the research base for the pluralistic approach is limited, of interest to this study are findings that the approach has been helpful in working with HIV-positive clients because of the creation of a "shared understanding" that valued the clients' "knowledge, expertise and resources" (Miller & Willig, 2012, p.40). A study of therapists using the approach found the sample responded positively to the approach because its humanistic, egalitarian flavour chimed with the therapists own philosophy whilst they reported feeling disorientated regarding theories and interventions to use within it (Thompson & Cooper, 2012).

To summarise, on the basis that therapy approaches are often developed into coaching approaches this current project is interested in whether the pluralistic approach has this potential. A possibility that drives this interest is the suggestion that coaching is ripe for the emergence of schoolism and the pluralistic approach is perceived by its creators as a force that is counter to such a tendency. The pluralistic approach is seen as being distinct from other integrative and eclectic models currently used in coaching.

## **Methodology**

In selecting an appropriate methodology for this project the first choice to be made was between a qualitative or a quantitative methodology. A key factor in selecting the appropriate research paradigm was the unusual temporal orientation of the project. Whilst a positivist approach is able to tidy up data and produce certainty (McLeod, 2013) it is typically backward facing in time; measuring outcomes and producing statistical evidence after something has occurred. The pluralistic approach cannot have value in the world of coaching unless coaches believe in its potential future value and are willing to engage with it. Participants were tasked with gaining an understanding of a particular approach from another field and then looking forward in time and imagining the implications of it being transferred to

coaching. The speculative nature of this task does not sit easily with a quantitative approach. Whilst a Likert type questionnaire could conceivably have been created this would effectively mean that by pre-determining the possible responses this research would have been closed to the complexities and nuances of the participants responses. Therefore this research does not attempt to evaluate the pluralistic approach itself but rather to describe, interpret and understand the relevance of coaches' responses to the approach in assessing its possible future, potential value. The very qualities that have sometimes been negatively associated with qualitative research; that it is "speculative, subjective and political", (Halfpenny, 1977 cited in Silverman 2011, p.16) are the very qualities that this project seeks to engage with.

Once a qualitative approach had been selected the future-facing orientation of the project meant that a number of further methodologies could be eliminated. Case studies, session studies and other documentary research approaches were exempted. This left a selection of permissible methodologies that included grounded theory, discourse analysis, Foucauldian discourse analysis and interpretive phenomenological analysis. Due to its emphasis on phenomenological experiencing and hermeneutics IPA was seen as clearly being the preferred methodology for the current project. Its emphasis on understanding the emergent meanings that respondents have in order to create an "insider's perspective" (Fade, 2004, p.648) seemed of particular value in this instance. Given the likelihood of diverse responses to the stepped introduction by participants the double hermeneutic of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) where the researcher attempts to empathise with respondents whilst simultaneously standing alongside them questioning and interpreting their input has the potential to both enrich understanding of their experiencing whilst constructing further insight around the research question (Smith et al, 2009). Another advantage of the approach is that IPA's characteristic alignment of data interpretations with transcribed examples taken from the data allows readers to evaluate the trustworthiness of the interpretive process for themselves (Smith & Osborne, 2008).

It has been suggested that due to its idiographic nature IPA research is not able induce generalisations that extend beyond the participants. However the founders of the approach refute this (Smith et al, 2009). Although phenomenological experiencing originates in the unique experience of individuals it is also a worldly and relational process where individuals are immersed in a flow of relationships and things. Therefore, rather than eschew them, IPA locates the origins of generalisations in the individual then develops them cautiously.

### **Research Process**

A stepped introduction to the pluralistic approach was created and included in a pack that all participants were given. The pack comprised:

- \* A consent letter that explained the participants role in the project
- \* An information sheet explaining the order that participants might ideally engage with the materials provided and a suggestion that it might be helpful to keep notes regarding their responses as they engaged with the materials
- \* A USB stick containing a 10 minute video in which the researcher explained the rationale of the project, the materials provided and gave a summary of the pluralistic approach (a link to a YouTube location for the video was also included)
- \* An eight page written summary of the pluralistic approach
- \* Copies of the assessment and review forms employed in the approach
- \* A copy of the core text: *Pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy* (Cooper & McLeod, 2011)

It was explained to participants that there was no expectation they would read the entire core text. However the book formed a definitive source for understanding the pluralistic approach that they could cross-reference with other materials. The written summary tried to stay as close to the core text as possible in order not to contaminate the participants sense of the approach. However some amendments

needed to be made in order to translate the text effectively for a new audience of coaches (rather than therapists). In places where the book was clearly framed in therapeutic language, terms that were either associated with coaching or incorporated both fields were introduced. Some of the examples in the book were re-invented in less clinical, more coach-like settings. It was hoped that in supplying a number of materials along with an invitation to cross-reference them that the participants would be able to create their own experience and individualised understanding of the pluralistic approach. In the main this aspiration appears to have been met. Apart from one interviewee who did not mention the original materials, all respondents made positive comments about the clarity and user-friendly nature of the stepped approach (e.g. “the book was written for counsellors and psychotherapists and you, in your summary translated it for coaching. I thought it fitted really well”, I5). Three of the respondents described a more ‘immersive’ experience where they were moving back and forth between different materials (e.g. “I read our pack. I read elements of the book. I kind of dipped into chapters”, I3).

In keeping with IPA methodology a purposive sampling approach was taken to recruiting participants (Coolican, 2009). All participants needed to be experienced coaches practicing in a professional setting. An interviewee was recruited from a professional coaching organisation in order to run a pilot interview. Further participants were recruited following a presentation at a coaching network group. The final sample numbered five.

Following the pilot interview the written summary was amended so it more clearly explained what the interview would focus on. Transcripts were produced following the interviews. The initial analysis consisted of repeated readings of the transcripts with reflective notes on the semantic content and language being made in keeping with the process recommended by Smith et al (2009). In order to gain an overview of the emergent themes a summary table was then produced for each interview with relevant quotes and key words being identified (Willig, 2013). Superordinate themes and further sub themes were identified (see table 1 below) and a “master chart” produced that itemised the relevant sentences and passages identified across the different interviews. This in turn gave impetus for a stage of further reflection by the researcher in keeping with a more developed methodology of IPA (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006).

## Findings

In reviewing the summary tables a total of four superordinate themes emerged across the individual interviews, together with four further sub-themes. These themes are itemised in Table 1 below and then developed further.

**Table 1: Superordinate themes and sub-themes**

<p><b>1) Initial responses to the pluralistic approach</b>  Sub-theme: The boundary between coaching and therapy</p> <p><b>2) The concept of greater collaboration at odds with the practice of it</b></p> <p><b>3) Response to drawing from diverse sources</b>  Sub-theme: Absence of the pluralistic and postmodern in the participants’ responses</p> <p><b>4) Adapting the pluralistic approach for coaching</b>  Sub-theme: Structure in the pluralistic approach  Sub-theme: Possible benefits of using the approach for participants</p>
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### 1) Initial responses to the pluralistic approach



It was surprising to discover the diversity of responses from participants. Their initial responses merit being briefly included as they contribute to answering the research question.

The first interviewee (I1) felt that there was nothing new to the approach and aligned it with the Skilled Helper Model by Gerard Egan (2014): *“Because I kept thinking... that’s like Egan”*. It is worth noting however that during the interview there was a shift in her perception: *“talking about me in practice is making me think I need to go back and think about it”*.

After an initial hesitancy which arose out of the therapeutic focus of the text I2 experienced insight regarding pluralism and understood it as a philosophy that transcends particular areas of practice: *“Once I got past there, it was, well actually, it’s not really about the counselling, or like therapy, it could be about anything, but it’s actually the pluralistic approach”*. She had a sense that this aligned with her own world view: *“I’ve never been one for that kind of singular approach and believing that one is better than another, because we’re all different as human beings”*.

I3 had an attitude that could be described as positive ambiguity. She had a positive sense of drawing from diverse approaches: *“I’d use an analogy, I suppose of a potpourri, you know, all sorts of different things in a bowl”*.

I4 had a negative sense of pluralistic practice perceiving it as repackaging of other approaches but had a positive sense of the structure of the approaches framework: *“this is yet another approach repackaging all of the approaches”*.

I5 wholeheartedly embraced the approach. She felt that she saw her practice mirrored which in turn developed a deeper sense of her professional identity: *“I thought I’m a pluralistic coach, there’s a word for what I do!”*

### ***Sub-theme: The boundary between coaching and therapy***

The boundary between coaching and psychotherapy was a recurring and significant factor in participants’ responses to the pluralistic approach. It took on the qualities of a tangible presence and four of the participants perceived it to have dangerous or hazardous qualities that either needed to be concealed or avoided. I2 in particular perceived it as dangerous territory that inexperienced coaches could mistakenly wander into: *“we shouldn’t wander into the boundaries, blur the boundaries between coaching and counselling and to be wary”*. Only I5 appeared to have a more conciliatory, integrative sense of it: *“when you mentioned this project I went “aha, another way to join them up”*.

## **2) The concept of greater collaboration at odds with the practice of it**

A striking characteristic of the pluralistic approach is the extent to which it recommends close collaboration between the practitioner and the client in selecting interventions and approaches to work with. It was significant when analysing transcripts that a disjuncture existed between the concept of greater coach-coachee collaboration and the participants’ expectations around the practice of it. One of the participants (I2) expressed an aspiration to introduce greater transparency into her dialogue with coachees in this respect whilst I1, I3 and I5 openly embraced the notion with only I4 questioning it:

*I really liked the idea of that shared ownership, the shared responsibilities of the work we do (I1)*

*I loved the idea of the collaborative approach; it’s very much the ethos of how I see coaching (I3)*

However on closer reading it appears that this collaboration is something that is being embraced as an abstract principle rather than a reality. The participants variously framed it as an “idea”, an “ethos” or something “they say”. When contemplating the reality of introducing it into their coaching all the respondents questioned, amended or diluted it:

*I don't tend to get into a lot of theory with them. As much as anything because we're basically short on time (I2)*

*Sometimes you've got to take that sense of judgment or some kind of responsibility for what the right thing is to do (I3)*

### **3) Response to drawing from diverse sources**

During the course of the interviews all participants expressed clear opinions about the premise that practitioners should draw on diverse therapeutic schools (that often have irreconcilable theories). This was the area that elicited the richest discourse in terms of metaphoric content. Participants were broadly in favour of drawing from diverse approaches although I1 struggled to see how pluralism differed from integration in this respect. The other three used a range of metaphors. I2 imagined a kind of foraging activity where she would unearth tools. I3 envisaged a personalised potpourri. Only one interviewee was not in favour of drawing from diverse approaches. I4 perceived schoolism as having an inevitable quality about it, saying that: *"the idea that one is better than the other, I think is always going to exist"*. Specialisation in an approach was equated by her with expertise. The pluralistic practitioner was characterised by her as a *"jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none"*. However at one point this stance appeared to soften:

*The fact that you're offering them a menu of suggestions, I think opens up their thinking and means that they build on a path a little bit further.*

#### ***Sub-theme: Absence of the pluralistic or postmodern philosophy in reflections***

Cooper & McLeod (2011) are clear that its close association with postmodernism gives the pluralistic approach a philosophical coherence and forms the rationale for drawing from diverse approaches. It was noticeable that with the exception of I2 all participants appeared to be unaware or failed to see the significance of this. I1 described the approach as *"atheoretical"*. I5 referenced the philosophical base several times but continually equated this with the collaborative relationship and made no mention of a pluralistic world view: *"the philosophy yeah, just idealistically. Just the fact the work happens in a relationship"*. I3 and I4 made no mention of this element of the approach during their interviews.

### **4) Adapting the pluralistic approach for coaching**

All participants had thoughts on adapting the pluralistic approach for coaching with the exception of I4. A strong theme that ran through this was the necessity of adapting the language and the imagery of the core text to a more coaching-friendly form with all the other four interviewees commenting on this aspect. Implicit in this was the need for the approach to change its culture: *"I think it would probably have to sever its ties a little bit from its background and be written in a different way"* (I3). I2 imagined a volume called *Pluralistic Approach to Coaching* that brought together a number of approaches that she could effectively surf. I1 focused on the context of the coaching. Settings such as life coaching and youth coaching where people were dealing with several aspects of their life were seen as places that the approach could be effective and experienced as empowering.

#### ***Sub-theme: Structure in the pluralistic approach***

A theme commented on by all participants when considering the issue of adapting the pluralistic approach for coaching was the structure of the pluralistic approach which consisted of a goals/tasks/methods framework supported by a number of evaluation forms. Four participants explicitly referred to the framework in positive terms:

*In terms of the model, which is your goals, your tasks and your methods, that's lovely to pick up and work with (I3).*



I1 did not refer to it beyond noting it's similarity to Egan's framework. However participant 5 experienced the framework terms as counterintuitive and had to reframe them. This chimed with a comment I2 made: *"I wouldn't have identified 'tasks' in that particular way"*.

### ***Sub-theme: Possible benefits of using the pluralistic approach for participants***

Interestingly although responses to the pluralistic approach were diverse, without exception all the participants imagined benefits to their professional practice through adopting the approach. These benefits were located in two areas: their sense of professional identity and the introduction of greater structure into their practice. Some of them imagined a shifting in roles to achieve a deeper, richer and more evolved sense of their identity. This involved either an affirmation of their practice: *I found my tribe; I found my people (I5)*, or a transcending of roles:

*If I had a contract with my client to be with them as a practitioner who has no label attached, it's not a problem for me (I2).*

All but one participant (I1) imagined the approach introducing a beneficial quality of greater structure into their practice: *"As I'm getting older I thought I need more structure, I know I'm not going to be super structured, but I know I need more structure" (I4).*

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Findings will be discussed (with reference to the literature) in order to answer the research question of how coaches perceive the potential of the pluralistic approach as a coaching system. Specific themes that emerge will be considered in relation to how the pluralistic approach could be developed for coaching. The limitations of the current study will be considered before suggestions are made for future research in this area.

### ***Potential of the pluralistic approach as a coaching system***

The diverse initial responses of participants drawn from a common profession who were given identical introductory materials was initially surprising. However in view of the controversy the pluralistic approach appears to have sparked in the therapy world (Dryden, 2012, House, 2011, Molyneux, 2014) it could be suggested with hindsight that this simply mirrors the contrasting reactions that have occurred elsewhere. In view of such contrasting responses it was unforeseen that the entire cohort would unanimously envisage positive benefits in adopting the approach. Along with greater structure and an enriched sense of professional identity, a renewed energy for professional development (I2) and the desirability of blending different approaches (I3) were also named as possible gains.

Although schoolism was referenced by one participant when talking about the approach generally, none of them suggested moving beyond schoolism as a benefit they would gain from adopting the approach. It is then possible to speculate that the type of schoolism present in the therapeutic world and that De Haan (2008), Garvey (2011) and Lane et al (2010) amongst others have imagined emerging in coaching does not appear to figure prominently in participants' awareness. It would appear from this that possibly the present zeitgeist in coaching is far closer to Kilburgh's desired constructionist paradigm (2004) and Cox's vision (2011) of an eclectic, practice-based profession without an emphasis on the individual practitioners' values and beliefs. So whilst one of the premises of the current research is called into question, irrespective of this, findings suggest that the pluralistic approach does offer coaches a positive framework to organise their knowledge and interventions around along with an enhanced sense of their professional identity and greater motivation for eclectic professional development. Anecdotally it seems likely that the pluralistic approach is in the process of entering the life blood of coaching.

Since this project began a coach has trained with the founders of the pluralistic approach and is now in professional practice as a pluralistic coach (Utry, 2014). The researcher has been present at a network meeting where a coach unconnected and unaware of the current project was talking about the potential for pluralistic coaching. Two of the participants in this project expressed an intention to engage with the approach further; one of whom identified herself as a pluralistic coach as a result of participation in this project. It could be argued that it is not a question of if the pluralistic approach is going to be introduced into the coaching profession but rather how.

It is clear from the interviews that the general way the pluralistic approach is framed needs to be modified in order to make the approach more acceptable for coaches. This is especially pressing given the way that the boundary between coaching and therapy was conceptualised by interviewees. One of the interviewees was clear that anything that had a therapeutic aspect would not be welcome in the corporate world. Other interviewees named working with negative goals, the dangers of psychological projection and unclear boundaries between coach and coachee as other potential pitfalls. Irrespective of how realistic these reservations are, they are particularly pertinent when taking account of the fact that of the five interviewees one of them is a therapist-coach and two others have had substantial therapeutic training. It seems clear that the type of semi-therapeutic culture in coaching once envisaged by Berglass (2002) and Dean and Meyer (2002) does not sit easily with the interviewees and (by inference) possibly those in the wider coaching community. Any attempt to move the pluralistic approach into the coaching arena would ideally develop the work begun in the written summary used in this project where terminology, imagery and examples were clearly relocated into a coaching context. Pluralism would need to be clearly explained as being a philosophical perspective rather than a branch of therapy.

As noted in the findings it was striking that only one of the interviewees seemed to give any importance to pluralistic or postmodern philosophical perspectives. This failure by participants to engage with the philosophical foundation highlights a problematic anomaly in introducing the approach. On the one hand it can clearly be argued that the alignment with postmodern, poststructural or “messy universe” perspectives (McLellan, 1995; James, 1996; Connolly, 2005) are what gives the pluralistic approach its coherence and prevents it from being simple eclecticism. With that in mind it could be asserted that this dimension of the approach needs to be given more prominence in translating it for coaching so that its character is properly understood. However a counter-argument can be produced which suggests that if coaching is by nature a more eclectic profession with less emphasis on the practitioners’ beliefs then stressing this aspect of the approach, which is possibly of least interest to its audience, has a potentially preaching-like quality and is of questionable value. This latter argument is strengthened by the fact that the concept of drawing from diverse approaches in a pluralistic or eclectic manner was the area of the interviewees’ responses that contained the richest and most positive metaphoric content. The activity was conceptualised variously as exploring, cooking and blending. It suggests that there is an enthusiasm for this element of the approach amongst coaches who do not require it to be justified philosophically to the same extent as therapists.

Findings also suggest that coaches are open to the concept of greater collaboration with coachees in selecting interventions and approaches but less sure how this would translate in practice. Research by Miller and Willig (2012) suggests that clients in therapy respond positively to this style of collaboration and so it could be supposed that this might be mirrored in coaching. However the uncertainty of coaches about how this works in practice seems a reasonable reservation given Thompson and Cooper’s (2012) finding that therapists using the pluralistic approach experienced a sense of disorientation about which theories and interventions to employ. One suggestion might be that an emphasis on the use of the evaluation and assessment forms devised by Cooper and McLeod as the basis for dialogue with coachees could address this. However some of the sample expressed clear reservations about using these forms with some clients. Another way forward might be to recommend that coaches beginning to practice the pluralistic approach limit their focus to a small number of approaches with a clear agenda for the use of each approach. An example of this could be person-centred coaching (Joseph, 2014) for

building rapport and establishing the relationship, solution-focused coaching (O'Connell & Palmer, 2007) for creating a future-oriented focus with a view to goal setting and cognitive behavioural (Neenan, 2010) coaching for constructive challenge. Coaches new to the pluralistic approach focusing solely on a defined cluster of complementary approaches, which they could gain competence in, might also address one of the criticisms of the approach, that it encouraged a 'jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none' mindset.

### ***Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research***

As noted above the entire sample for this study was female. This was not intended to be a characteristic of the sample but simply the result of who volunteered to participate in the project. It is possible to hypothesise that the lack of male participants has impacted on the result. Coaching research suggests that some males display a greater resistance to making change in their working styles whilst women tend to be more open to collaboration and partnering (Ludeman & Erlandson 2004, 2006). Given the stress that the pluralistic approach places on collaboration alongside its uncommon method for selecting interventions it is possible that women may have been more open to the approach and that using an entirely female sample created a generally more favourable response than might otherwise have been obtained. Another element that might have biased the result is the amount of time participants had to commit to the project. The fact that potential participants were being asked to engage with the stepped introduction meant that there was a commitment on their part to several hours preparation prior to the interview familiarising themselves with the approach. It could be possible that this element of the project might have deterred those potential interviewees with a busier working schedule from taking part. It is feasible that in this way the research design prevented more "front-line" coaches from participating and sharing their perspectives.

Another limitation of this study is that the researcher had to translate the approach for participants. Inevitably the researcher's bias and individual perception of the approach will have impacted and added an interpretation to the summary that might not have been present had participants only used the core text. Whilst participants were generally favourable about the materials provided these views were expressed in dialogue with the researcher so it is possible that interviewees felt some pressure to be positive. In the final analysis, where interviewees expressed either negative or positive responses to the approach it is difficult to assess whether they are responding to something inherent in the pluralistic approach or something in the character of the summary. If the summary was being revised in the light of their responses it is likely that there would be a stronger emphasis on communicating the philosophical foundation of the pluralistic approach as well as emphasising the importance that Cooper and McLeod place on the agency of the practitioner in recommending helpful approaches and interventions to the client. Given that I2's declared approach to coaching was the GROW model it was also felt with hindsight that there was a failure to take advantage of the nature of the semi-structured interview's format and an opportunity was missed to invite the participant to compare and contrast the two approaches in detail.

Whilst limitations of the study can clearly be identified the fact that participants saw positive value in adopting the pluralistic approach for coaching, alongside the approach appearing to make inroads into coaching anyway, suggests that re-running the current project would be of limited value. Future research in this area would ideally shift its focus from how coaches perceive the approach to how the approach can be adapted for coaching. Researchers would ideally work on developing the written summary taking account of the findings of this project into something more resembling a manual; extending it, translating the style of the text to a more coach-friendly format and making clear suggestions as to which approaches the participating coaches should employ. Coincidentally these developments appear to equate broadly with the imagined volume described in I2's interview; *The Pluralistic Approach to Coaching*. This manual-style resource could then be used as the foundation for running coaching sessions with volunteer coachees. Transcripts from the sessions could be gathered and these along with subsequent semi-structured interviews with both volunteer coach and coachee

participants could be used to develop a more definitive form of the approach. This in turn would feed back into developing a more detailed and authoritative resource focused on a pluralistic approach to coaching. In this way the approach could be developed thoughtfully and introduced into coaching practice in an informed and considered way that takes into account the fine detail of differences between coaching and psychotherapy cultures.

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