



## Editorial

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## Integrating coaching and positive psychology: concepts and practice

Welcome to *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*. As usual, the articles in this issue are thought-provoking, insightful and focused on practice. Most of the articles published in this Journal over the last few years have originated from questions about what works in coaching, and more recently, how it works. Our intention as a Journal is to develop a robust evidence base for the field and also to drive forward new thinking and practices that build on what we are learning. In this editorial, written with invited co-authors, Dr Tim Lomas and Dr Jolanta Burke, we explore the emerging possibilities of integrating coaching and positive psychology (PP).

Coaching psychology (CP) is an academic field and a professional activity that aims to enhance the wellbeing and performance of people. It is 'underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established adult and child learning or psychological approaches' (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007, p. 2). PP, on the other hand, has been described as the scientific study of optimal human functioning (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006). Due to a shared interest in human potential, growth and wellbeing, there have been numerous calls for the integration of the two fields (e.g., Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2010; Grant & Spence, 2010; Kauffman, 2006; van Nieuwerburgh & Green, 2014; Green & Palmer, *in press*).

## Conceptualising the integration of coaching and positive psychology

There are various ways of conceptualising the integration of coaching and PP. These can be differentiated into 'conventional' and 'unconventional' perspectives. From the conventional perspective, PP is conceived primarily as a theoretical discipline and coaching as an applied discipline. Each brings its strengths to the partnership, with PP focusing on scientific theory and empirical rigour, and coaching specialising in applied practices and proficiencies. For instance, Kauffman (2006) describes PP as the 'science at the heart of coaching' (p. 219), while Biswas-Diener and Dean (2010) celebrate coaching as 'the natural choice for being the applied arm of positive psychology' (p. 5). However, this way of framing the integration has its issues (Lomas, Tunariu, & Stopforth, *forthcoming*). For example, it implies that PP has exclusive access to, or ownership of, scientific theory and research to which CP does not. Conversely, coaching might be seen to lay exclusive claim to specific applied practices. One could argue that it is limiting to see PP as purely theoretical or to consider CP as focused only on practice. Therefore, an alternative, less conventional perspective would recognise that there is a vast corpus of psychological theories, evidence-bases, and applied practices – developed across psychology and other allied disciplines – that belong neither to PP nor CP, but can be harnessed by both. When considered in this way, *both* are seen to have theoretical and empirical dimensions, and *both* draw upon applied techniques. In this way, it is possible to consider PP and CP as two overlapping but not coterminous fields of endeavour. Each has its own particular concerns, practices and applications, but there is also a significant area of overlap. This integrative space is worthy of further exploration and research.

## Practising in the integrative space

One of the paradigms that exists within this integrative space is 'positive psychology coaching' (PPC) (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2010). In the early stages of integration, coaching practitioners adopted a 'pick-and-mix' approach, selecting PP theories and interventions to apply within their practice. For example, practitioners have been advised to use PP interventions such as gratitude and random acts of kindness (Passmore & Oades, 2015; 2016a, 2016b), or apply PP theories and measures (Boniwell, Osin, & Sircova, 2014; Foster & Lloyd, 2007; Susing, Green, & Grant, 2011), or use strength-based models to facilitate change (Linley, Biswas-Diener, & Trenier, 2011). As a result, the term 'positive psychology coaching' has been used to refer to a wide range of differing interventions, some of which had only a tenuous connection to PP.

To minimise the risk of misinterpretation, one of us (Burke, 2018) has proposed a Conceptual Framework for PPC. According to this framework, six elements are required for effective PPC practice: (1) in-depth knowledge of PP on the part of the coach (2) the application of strength-based models during the coaching, (3) the use of positive diagnosis, (4) the co-creation of optimal-functioning goals, (5) the application of positive psychology interventions, and (6) the evaluation of the coaching using positive measures. While the intention of this framework is to clearly define the term 'positive psychology coaching' and guide practice, we recognise that it is just one aspect of the integration. In this case, the integration takes the form of PP theories and interventions being incorporated into coaching practice. There are many other aspects of the integration, and we believe that the field of CP can inform PP interventions and theories (Trom & Burke, *Forthcoming*).

Working in the dynamic space between coaching and positive psychology, we can see opportunities for closer integration in order to strengthen our conceptual and practical understanding of how to best support human flourishing and wellbeing. Both coaching and PP are fundamentally committed to growth and development. Both argue strongly against deficit-based models of improvement, proposing instead that it is more helpful to identify strengths and build on existing resources. What we see emerging is the possibility of developing integrative, research-informed concepts, techniques and interventions that will support individuals, groups, organisations and societies to grow and develop in subjectively meaningful ways. This new integrative endeavour must be considered an applied discipline with 'a shared focus on unlocking potential, building on people's strengths, enhancing subjective wellbeing and supporting sustainable optimal functioning' (van Nieuwerburgh & Oades, 2017).

At *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, we are committed to driving forward the research agenda in ways that will support the profession of coaching. For this reason, we are keen to receive submissions that will help us to better understand the benefits, opportunities and implications of integrating coaching and positive psychology.

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