

Bridging Gaps – A commentary to the EMCC X Discussion Paper.

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Abstract

This article is a companion to the main article that contains extracts from the discussions in the EMCC X Bridging the Gap research group. It highlights discussions that were not concluded, viz. social constructionist interpretations; the concept of wisdom and if it applies to mentoring; and what can potentially be learnt from psychotherapy research.

Keywords: research, wisdom, mentoring, coaching, psychotherapy, paradigms

Introduction

Coaching and mentoring can be seen as social constructionist movements with a purpose to help solve problems, live better and achieve more. Service providers are situated within a larger helping profession that also includes teaching, consulting, psychology, therapy and spiritual practices; perhaps often more different in terms of the groups they serve than by the tools and techniques they use.

With a cacophony of hundred thousand or even millions of people promoting themselves as coaches and mentors, it can indeed be difficult to see what unites us. Our main research paper contains extracts from the discussions in the EMCC X Research Group, which focused on defining the gaps between academia and research.

From an ethical point of view coaching is not unproblematic. Some performance coaching is deliberately building addictive behaviours to deliver stretch goals. Like compulsive gambling and PC games, they release loads of dopamine, but there is immediate craving for more.

The EMCC X project was not able to build the perhaps impossible map. In the eMentoring conference 2014 (EMCC, 2014) we found cultural differences in the acceptance of coaching – in some cultures the Western coaching practices are simply too self-centric and not respectful enough.

The purpose of this paper is to go deeper into four important areas, viz. social construction; the wisdom paradigm, the history of mentoring; and the parallels to psychotherapy research.

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A helping profession

Because mentoring has fewer ethical issues, we shall start with the more difficult viz. coaching and its ancestors in therapy. Psychotherapy started as *a social invention* by Sigmund Freud. The first author (Paul) tried the couch as part of his doctoral training and found that speaking free associations into a room when you know somebody is listening is both fascinating and quite regressive. The paradigmatic assumption was *catharsis*: the silent analyst is a safe person and so you assemble courage to speak to your shame and guilt aloud. It was useful as a method for analysis, but inefficient for therapy and in his works Freud exaggerated his successes for the good cause (e.g. Leahey, 2012). In his defence it must have been difficult to combine ideas from biological medicine (drives, needs), Nietzsche (fatalism), Catholic absolution (catharsis) and Continental philosophy (phenomenology). Interestingly, when coaching gurus try to explain the differences between psychotherapy and coaching, it is often falsely with reference to the Freudian family tree only (i.e. psychodynamic therapy). Today, modern psychotherapy is no longer based on the Freudian family tree and has none of the earlier limitations that coaches seem to be told in their courses.

The silent analyst became a reflective co-creator of meaning and from early 1950ies psychoanalytic interpretations were split in several directions and rivalled by psychology (Skinner, Rogers, Ellis and others). It also led to NLP, the idea that you can program the brain not only through Skinnerian habit formation, but language.

Mentoring, coaching and psychotherapy are all aimed at personal growth – going back in history we see these subjects taught by Greek philosophers long before Benjamin Franklin's books about how to live a better life. Many of the 450 therapies in the Human Potential Movement had exactly the objective of coaching: personal growth and success. As a curiosity the real genius of NLP was commercial – insisting that NLP is for the healthy among us. The assumption is perhaps more wrong than dangerous, but there is no special psychology that applies to some and not others.

Will coaching last? It likely will because it taps basic human needs to learn and perform. Much of coaching in its present form seems however too much a Western cultural paradigm whereby coaches hail you as almost omnipotent if only you take personal goals seriously. It just ain't true.

The variants of coaching are many and usefully summed up by Ives (2008), who also compares different approaches (e.g. humanist, systemic, adult learning, goal-oriented) along the dichotomies of directive/non-directive, solution/development focus and therapeutic/performance. He comments:

Personal-development and learning models of coaching, in particular, seek to address deeper dimensions of personality. Parsloe and Wray (2000) state that “Coaching is a process that enables *learning and development* to occur and thus performance to improve (emphasis added).” Writing from a behavioural perspective, however, Peterson (2006) argues that insight-oriented questions are not at the heart of coaching. Grant (2006) similarly suggests that coaching supports “solution construction in preference to problem analysis,” the latter being a more therapeutic mode. (p. 106)

When Kilburg (2004) reviews whether there is specific evidence for specific approaches in executive coaching, he finds evidence that executive coaching is useful but not that any specific approach has better evidence. Instead he likens it with the Dodo Bird verdict from Alice in Wonderland when all animals have completed the race around the lake: *"Everybody has won and therefore all must have prizes!"* In executive coaching the only agreement so far is that we coach executives.

Harding (2013) looks at coaching and mentoring as providing 'transitional space' and her research has found that practitioners cannot agree on what differs between coaching and mentoring. Hawkins & Smith (2013) refer to the overlaps between coaching, mentoring and consulting; same with Schein (1998) with his thoughts about clinical consulting. The inevitable conclusion is that coaching can be any combination of skills and tools, with a need for unifying definitions such as in Parsloe (1992): *"to help and support people to manage their own learning in order to maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be."* (p.31)

So would it not be good for coaching research to re-iterate Gordon Paul's (1967) challenge for psychotherapy? *"What treatment [in this case coaching and mentoring], by whom, is most effective for this individual [or group of individuals] with that specific problem [or in this case opportunity], and under which set of circumstances?"*

Social construction as evidence

Content analysis: Books, conferences and articles

Our content analysis has provided interesting insights and the data can be analysed even more elegantly with KWIC, synonym replacements and pattern analysis. Here we cite word frequencies only:

Table 1 Word frequencies. Data marked * was subjected to formal content analysis.

	Coaching (coaching, coach, coaches)	Mentoring (mentoring, mentor, mentors)
Amazon 100 (50) lists of content *	389	20
Coaching Psychology conferences, titles 2006-2013 *	216 of which 63 for coaching psychology as a term	<5
IJMC keywords *	192	66
LinkedIn groups	16.088	8.908
Amazon title search (8 Dec 2014)	27.756	9.073

We examined the content of the Amazon 100 bestsellers in the coaching & mentoring category and concluded that 50 of them were 'misplaced', at least for our purpose, and could not be used for content analysis. In coaching psychology conferences (2006-2013) we found less than 5 titles containing mentoring (words: mentoring, mentor, mentors) as opposed to coaching (words: coaching, coach, coaches) which was used 216 times, including 63 for 'coaching psychology'. The EMCC journal

provided another interesting angle because authors can use only a few keywords to categorise an article. Which ones do they choose? The statistics showed 192 occurrences of coaching or coach vs. 44 for mentoring or mentor.

There is thus obviously more activity for coaching than mentoring as a subject for books, conferences and articles. Now the content of non-peer reviewed materials is often just the author's own experiences and advice packaged as valuable knowledge and not what it really is: the opinions of a single person. This is a post-modern, social constructionist dilemma: is it knowledge just because it was shared? When do such opinions become evidence; and under which circumstances? Such critical analysis of *'what works for whom'* was undertaken for psychotherapy by Roth & Fonagy (1996). In an analysis of assumptions behind executive coaching, Olson (2008) concludes that in order to be effective, executive coaching requires additional skills such as strategic and systems thinking; but also experience from working with diverse teams, projects and resource constraints. These are more likely (but not guaranteed) to be the result of a management career than class room teaching, which would mean that executive coaching is both mentoring and coaching. Intuitively this leads to frameworks that make sense for practice theory, while a headache if you rely on experimental protocols.

Tribes, gurus and social marketing

All professionals have a family tree leading to our identity and feeding us with impulses and new knowledge. We experience a cognitive dissonance if what we believe in is challenged (Kuhn, 1962). There is a growing body of knowledge on how to manipulate groups and build followings (e.g. Cialdini 2006; Heffernan, 2012; and Gladwell, 2000). The new trend to watch is neuro-marketing, with some very clever methods to build brand addiction. Not surprising that some coaches flock to learn, presumably for much of the same motivation as once the combo of NLP and hypnosis.

Although we as helpers can claim to work for a greater good, our professional identity is just a way to earn some money. We are selling our services often in competition with others. We are never beyond the "why you" question.

Practitioner vs. academic research

Practitioners work with unique individuals while statistics capture averages. Personality theory is a relevant illustration of this problem. Pervin (2002) discusses correlational research as concerned with grouping people into similarities (averages) and clinical research as concerned with individual cases and whole persons. The Big Five (Saucier & Goldberg, 1996) or Five-factor model (McCrae & Costa, 1999) is the dominant personality model today, yet: *"these factors may represent what is common to subjects but not what is characteristic of any one subject"* (Pervin, 2002:34).

We need experience to see individual patterns beyond the scores (e.g. Piedmont, 1998). At the EMCC 2014 Annual conference (Olson, 2014) presented practitioner action research using Holland Interest Scales as a proxy for FFM/Big5. Admittedly, such research is difficult to aggregate and would hardly

make it in meta-analyses, but should clearly not be discarded by academic research. They fill a gap. For practitioner research experimentation is often unrealistic and our only option may be case studies, questionnaires or action research (e.g. Cone, 2001).

Treasures and golden moments

As senior practitioners of coaching and mentoring we (EMCC X) wanted to explore whether we had similar literature standing out as particularly useful reading. There was little in common except a Megginson or Clutterbuck, plus one or two general handbooks. While all had a mixture of coaching and mentoring books, books from outside the field were just as likely to be valued as *treasures*.

Indeed, our backgrounds were so different that we wondered what is it that binds EMCC members as a big group of 5000+ members. A feeling of community rather than shared technique – if so how does that need to influence supervision of both practice and research? What do we want to see published?

Are mentors different?

The majority of coaches are 'solopreneurs' who might simply need the affinity provided by communities, certifications, and gurus who create followings and earn big money.

Mentors may in fact be different from coaches. While coaches profess to an identity as such, mentoring in charities, universities and larger corporations tend to be internal and voluntary programs on top of your job. It is not an identity and when asked for your job, you don't say "I'm a mentor". We therefore hypothesise that mentors update themselves in their own area of expertise, and regard techniques as secondary or implicit.

In mentoring your reputation comes from 'having been there and done that' and less because you know a particular technique such as NLP, 3D Mind or Appreciative inquiry. Because mentoring groups on LinkedIn seem more concentrated geographically, they may also be more likely to pre-exist as physical groups.

Cultural differences in social construction

Social construction is a process where practitioners interact with fads and trends. Evidence based services are always better, but not always more popular. Traditionally people have gone to physical courses and conferences to learn, or attended guru training to learn certified content. Gurus are supported by masters of web marketing to build communities and followings, a game of social influence that includes scarcity, contrast, identity, engagement and community. It can all be done from your armchair and the comfort of their home. Yet we think practitioners will still go to conferences for at least three reasons: listen to systematic reviews, network with peers and meet thought leaders, all in one place.

Gurus and tribes are social constructionist (plus they attract snake oil providers). Freud's enormous impact followed a Nietzschean *Zeitgeist* to become *a paradigm of the unconscious* that it is still part of our *common sense* even if refuted by science.

Paradigms go deeper than we usually realise (Bohm, 1996; Kuhn, 1962, Ricoeur, 1983). Paradigms and meaning is directly reflected in how we use language and talk about our practice. Words and meanings are in fact 'embrained' (Kitayama & Uskul, 2011). Strong synaptic connections (Hebb's rule) is why we can speak another language fluently and not only change tonality and vocabulary but use local metaphors, manipulate meanings and understand nuances that are difficult to translate. Intuition is another associative process, although different because it involves pattern/object recognition rather than grammar. Practitioners may therefore have correct practices not yet discovered by research – pattern recognition and treatment is incidentally how medical research uses syndromes.

A paradigmatic vocabulary builds a model of the world that is necessary for co-creation of meaning, but can easily lead to a denial of alternative perspectives and evidence. For coaching no such common paradigmatic vocabulary or family tree exists. The different paradigms have made it excessively difficult to agree coaching competencies between EMCC, AC and ICF. Some ten years ago coaching psychologists already decided to base their version on psychology and not join forces with ICF.

While in politics and common discourse you may choose to believe contrary to evidence, this is not acceptable in science. Probably supervision is for EMCC practitioners a particularly important form of reflection and our only tool to bridge the gaps between academic and practitioner theories.

Coaching as another Human Potential Movement?

Groups become movements and pyramids – much of coaching is a social construction where the money flows upwards. But perhaps it is also true that some knowledge cannot be validated? What is the science in Zen, mindfulness, NLP, art therapy, tai chi or the unconscious? We know that scientific evidence totally destroys crystal readings and scientology, yet the desire to be part of something bigger is more powerful than evidence.

Belonging protects our identity and reinforces beliefs – it provides meaningful social interaction. Some life coaches are not so far from the excesses of 1960-70ies: LSD, sensitivity groups, nude marathons and primal screams to overcome inhibitions and liberate your trapped soul. Whether it makes sense to you now is a different question entirely – the point is that such excesses continue and must be tolerated as a human right.

How much wisdom in mentoring?

For a systematic overview of mentoring the second author (Kochan) selected an excellent paper by Dominguez & Hager (2013) on the development of mentoring, to which we added Banicki's (2008) discussion of the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm.

Dominguez & Hager (2013) refer to among others Clutterbuck & Lane (2004) when they assert: "*An extremely effective strategy for addressing organizational complexity is the establishment of formal mentoring programs and relationships*". (2013: 171) In their systematic review of books and articles (1978-2012) they find three major theoretical frameworks: 1) Developmental theories; 2) Learning theories; and 3) Social theories.

Developmental theories were originally rooted in Freud, Jung and Erikson but formulated as mentoring theory in Levinson's (1978) Career Stage or Life Stage Theory: "*Most subsequent work on adult mentoring in the USA has been built on Levinson's theory. Mentoring is viewed as a practical means of support during academic, occupational and developmental transitions.*" (p. 172). Important descendants include Kram's (1985) theory of mentoring phases and more constructionist approaches to deal with diversity.

Their second major group is learning theories (more prevalent in Europe), where the goal is not to master stages but develop behaviours and achieve markers of success. This is closer to a shared base and *raison-d'être* for coaches and mentors as professionals; the expectation is much less life experience than performance coaching, action learning and behaviour modification.

Their third group is social theories. Mentoring primarily serves the organization with a strong belief in competency planning, social performance and job satisfaction. If the first group was about life span transitions and the second about learning then the third is about socialization: "*Developing competencies and amassing social networks are key components of socialization, as well as the foundation for both human capital theory and social capital theories.*" (p. 178)

Mentoring explicitly offers experience and possibly wisdom:

"All three frameworks recognize the following components as vital to individual and organizational success: development of a professional identity, mentors as role models for their mentees, transmission of knowledge and guidance, dialogue and self-reflection, goals and outcomes, and the mentor as a facilitator of progress." (p. 185)

The Berlin Wisdom Paradigm is relevant, too. It started at the Max Planck Institute in Berlin where Paul Baltes and his colleagues have studied various aspects of life-long development. The results (e.g. Baltes, 1990) have been usefully discussed by Banicki (2009), who connects wisdom generally to three traditional areas: an over-riding search for truth (*philo-sophia*), then practical wisdom and finally the body of knowledge itself (*episteme*).

For the crafts such wisdom and love for the deeper sense of a craft is transferred through apprenticeship. Yet wisdom is also culturally determined as in Kohlberg's moral development (right/wrong, caring) and Maslow's altruism. Maslow's pyramid assumes that self-realisation will be pro-social, which is obviously not true. During the eMentoring stream on Supervision 24-31 January 2014 we found cultural differences between Asia, Africa, Europa and USA.

Mentoring should be practical such as to reveal deeper stories and perspectives that are otherwise invisible to the mentee; it provides experiential and cognitive development, "*a kind of expertise in the matters of human life*". (p. 27) The Berlin Wisdom Paradigm has five qualitative criteria: Rich factual knowledge; Rich procedural knowledge; Life span contextualism; Value relativism and tolerance; and Recognition and management of uncertainty.

We should not forget religious paradigmatic beliefs. The Cartesian split between body and mind is today scientifically rejected, but Descartes' paradigmatic assumption was that God holds body and mind together. The Eastern yin-yang is similar, but here the world is held together with the concept of energy. The renaissance was made possible by Occam's razor, the irresistible hypothesis that God is ingenious and the simpler explanations would be correct. Occam's razor paved the way for natural sciences to be explored without the notion of God's hand. This fundamental assumption has a parallel in fundamentalist Islam where the Quaran is regarded as perfect (i.e. whole and sufficient) because Allah would never have given us anything less than perfect.

The reader should now have come to the same question as the EMCC X Research group: does this mean that we can only bridge gaps between compatible paradigmatic beliefs? Must we like psychotherapy perhaps build a whole new field of knowledge?

Psychotherapy and coaching psychology

The history of psychotherapy could tell us what building a whole new field of knowledge might look like. Psychotherapy research is relevant for coaching and mentoring because even sick people are more normal than otherwise, to paraphrase Harry Stack-Sullivan. No special psychology applies to sane over the sick or vice versa; and most psychotherapists should work to strengthen personal resources, personal growth and resilience.

The development of psychotherapy has gone through stages (see Barkham, 2002, 2003):

Research generation I (1950-1970) asked if psychotherapy is effective (Eysenck, 1952) and if there are objective methods for evaluating process? Coaching is beyond this point: generally we know that coaching works. In fact it has in common with psychotherapy that it can hardly fail because of the strong placebo and general factors involved.

Arguably there is no need to research whether coaching is effective – only amateurs would replicate the evidence – instead we need to reject techniques that are not much better than placebo and concentrate on those that are significantly better.

Generation II (1960-1980) asked: "Which psychotherapy is more effective?" and "What components are related to the outcome?" This was at a time when statistical packages had become more powerful and thus our curiosity changed. All psychotherapy and coaching should as a bare minimum satisfy Rogers' three core factors: congruence, unconditional regard and empathy. If an intervention makes

any sense at all, then respect, good listening and focus reliably make for happy coachees, even if life continues as never before.

Generation III research (1970 to present) is perhaps less interesting to us: "How can we make treatments more cost-effective?" and of the process "How does change occur?" This is the era of changing treatment systems and building evidence-based therapies such as cognitive-behavioural therapy – a useful antecedent for coaching and coaching research.

Generation IV (mid-eighties to present) is even more relevant to coaching as it includes topics such as subjective well-being, working with emotions, recovery and the long-term impact of interventions.

Important milestones have included Eysenck (1952) on the effects of psychotherapy; Paul (1967) on outcome research strategies; Truax & Mitchell (1971) on the effect of interpersonal skills on process and outcome; Bergin & Garfield (1971) *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change*; Smith & Glass' (1977) meta-analysis of psychotherapy outcome; and Roth & Fonagy (1996) *What Works for Whom? A Critical Review of Psychotherapy Research*.

Organisational psychology has similar milestones with Gerard Egan's (1975) *The Skilled Helper*, Kolb's (1984) *Experiential Learning*, Edgar Schein's (1988) concept of clinical consulting and Argyris & Schön's (1978) double loop learning.

Coaching psychology shows more stability than coaching and mentoring, which seem to unnecessarily vacillate between all four generations. Recent supervision handbooks (Bachkirova *et al*, 2011; Hawkins & Smith, 2014) argue for developing reflective skills across coaching, mentoring and organisational consultancy (arguably clinical supervision is different in form, content and focus).

Way forward?

Bridging the research gap in coaching and mentoring could start with Paul's challenge: "What treatment, by *whom*, is most effective for *this* individual with *this* specific problem, and under *which* set of circumstances?" (Paul, 1967:111; in Hollanders, 2003).

The EMCC X Research group set out to find bridges between academic research and field practice, but only tentative conclusions are possible and the number of followers is not evidence in science – in fact science leaps forward through disobedience and originality. Of particular interest is the difference between the research world looking for similarities and principles, and the commercial world looking for competitive advantage and usefulness.

Practice areas. Our content analysis showed a wide diversity of practices with possibly five or six practice areas: (1) Performance & goals; (2) Development and existential issues; (3) Health, stress and well-being; (4) Career navigation, student mentoring; (5) Executive and leadership; and (6) Organisational/systemic.

Each of these should be investigated separately.

What practice is about. Evidence-based practitioners often work with complex issues and get paid for delivering not knowledge, but results. Stakeholders create competitive barriers to protect their turf and intellectual property, however weak the substance. These lead to contrary behaviours: academia sharing knowledge vs. business protecting knowledge. If coaching is in the middle of an intellectual revolution, as some have it, the process is very commercial at that.

A different null hypothesis. In evaluating 'what works for whom' we need to apply the *grandmother hypothesis*: Grandmothers can be the best personal resource in the world. The null hypothesis for mentoring, coaching and supervision alike is clearly not null, because all our training and education would be useless if we cannot beat the grandmothers! We should begin with an awareness of placebo and snake oil providers.

Inclusiveness. Paradigms fail when their basic assumptions must be rejected. The belief that the Earth is flat cannot live alongside the belief that the Earth is round, but we could say that for all practical purposes we can treat it as flat. We know that some coaching is not evidence-based – which means that some practices must be rejected. Today we use the same term – coaching and mentoring – for practices that are vastly different.

Good practice. Criteria for good practice are important, but demonstrably difficult to define. For coaching there are loads of ideas and tools defended ferociously with or without evidence. Policing is impossible. For mentoring it is often assumed that listening, relating, and interventions come naturally – which is not always the case. In some countries mentoring is used primarily for people low on experience i.e. trainees, on-boarding or students – assumed to be easy but is often not. Many practitioners simply volunteer as self-perceived experts, while at the other end those more humble, nominated because of demonstrated expertise or depth of thinking. More senior mentoring is likely to overlap with consulting.

Communicating. The tools we have in developing EMCC are similar to those from very capable commercial competitors. Looking at the statistics, members strike us as more interested in the membership than in certification. Perhaps people should still want to visit conferences and read journals – to present and discuss systematic reviews, enjoy interest groups and meet with thought leaders. With the Internet and mature technology we simply have more options for continued professional development.

A possible approach. A cohesive research body seems to require more work than we are willing to commit. When coaching psychology was founded some 15 years ago it followed a decision to anchor coaching practices as applied psychology and away from other approaches. Similarly we might want to make some strategic upgrades including international interest groups for practitioners and researchers alike. With this the EMCC Research Group X draws the end.

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