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Editorial: Special issue on the boundaries between coaching and other helping by talking professions

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Ever since its first appearance in academic and popular literature, coaching attempted to define itself by what it is not, the “not” encompassing training, mentoring, counselling and psychotherapy. The question of the boundaries that coaching creates with these other ‘helping by talking’ professions has remained a hot topic, mainly in view of the substantial overlaps of skills, techniques and knowledge base employed by the practitioners. This special issue of the IJECM consists of five, primarily conceptual, articles that focus on this subject.

The issue starts with articles that examine what may be perceived as more obvious distinctions between coaching and training and coaching and mentoring, and then progresses to explore the boundaries between coaching and counselling, often seen as blurred and hard to define in practice. From attempts to differentiate the articles move to attempts to integrate and beyond.

Lawton-Smith and Cox paper open the debate by investigating the confusion and the overlap between training and coaching, which is acutely evident in the field. They attempt to resolve potential problems by suggesting that whilst many techniques are shared between the two, coaching involves a process, in addition to implementing a series of techniques. They see the fundamental difference between training and coaching in that training intends to convey relatively pre-determined information, while coaching centres around creating emergent solutions.

In the second article, Jonathan Passmore explores the boundary between executive coaching and mentoring, challenging the traditional position that the mentor is able to bring career and business knowledge to the mentoring relationship, whilst the coach, on the other hand, brings an independent perspective. His paper goes on to collate existing research and opinions and argue that a sector specific knowledge may, in fact, be as important for a coach as it is for a mentor.

Andrew Buckley exposes the fallacies underlying many artificial distinctions between coaching and mental health provision, such as defining a coaching client as a “healthy client”. He proposes that rather than relying on an undefined notion of mental health in drawing the boundary, coaches need to rely on four well-defined skills in order to assess whether coaching is an appropriate solution to individual client’s needs.

The paper by Popovic and Boniwell argues that the boundaries between one-to-one practices (such as coaching and counselling) are largely artificial and the result of

ideological baggage. Personal consultancy is proposed as a way to put together existing skills used by various professionals into an integrative model. Such an

approach promises to provide a 'full package' and therefore a better value for the clients.

The final paper introduces the myth of Hestia, the Greek goddess of the centre of one's home, as an archetypal representation of executive coaching. Armstrong draws on her research findings to illustrate five aspects of this archetype. Although on the surface, it seems that Armstrong's paper has less to contribute to the theme of this special issue, its relevance becomes apparent when it is considered in depth. The myth of Hestia, as a metaphor, suggests an image of coaching as slightly undefined, fuzzy and thus somewhat boundary-less, posing an implicit question of whether attempts to draw boundaries when dealing with the human psyche is ever appropriate.