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Bridging The Coaching/Therapy Divide: What Co-Active Coaches Can Learn From ACT (Acceptance And Commitment Therapy)

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Abstract

This paper situates the coaching/therapy divide within the context of new regulations in Ontario, Canada, that limit the use of the term 'psychotherapy,' and the practice of psychotherapy. Taking Co-Active Coaching and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as representative examples of coaching and therapy respectively, I examine each in turn, showing that Co-Active Coaching and ACT, as they are described by their founders, overlap in important ways, to the point they are almost indistinguishable in practice. I conclude that artificially distinguishing between coaching and therapy is unhelpful for therapists and coaches, as well as the client populations they serve.

Keywords: Co-Active coaching, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Ontario psychotherapy act

Distinctions are difficult, and nowhere is this more true than with the distinction between psychotherapy and coaching. I've been looking for clarity around this for as long as I've been a coach, and the more I explore the problem the more difficult it becomes.

In this paper I look at some of the problems that arise when attempting to distinguish between therapy and coaching. In particular, I address this distinction personally, attempting to answer, once and for all, the question 'What it is that I do - is it coaching, is it therapy, or is it some combination of the two?' In particular, I address this question within the context of regulation restricting the use of the term 'psychotherapy' and the practice thereof in Ontario, Canada, where I live and work.

The ICF distinguishes between therapy and coaching in the following way:

Therapy deals with healing pain, dysfunction and conflict within an individual or in relationships. The focus is often on resolving difficulties

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arising from the past that hamper an individual's emotional functioning in the present, improving overall psychological functioning, and dealing with the present in more emotionally healthy ways. Coaching, on the other hand, supports personal and professional growth based on self-initiated change in pursuit of specific actionable outcomes. These outcomes are linked to personal or professional success. Coaching is future focused. While positive feelings/emotions may be a natural outcome of coaching, the primary focus is on creating actionable strategies for achieving specific goals in one's work or personal life. The emphases in a coaching relationship are on action, accountability, and follow through. (ICF, 2016)

This distinction is of considerable consequence because, where I live, in Toronto, Ontario, the provincial government is in the process of making it illegal to practice psychotherapy if you are not a registered member of the College of Psychotherapy. The College of Psychotherapy defines psychotherapy as the “treating, by means of psychotherapy technique, delivered through a therapeutic relationship, an individual’s serious disorder of thought, cognition, mood, emotional regulation, perception or memory that may seriously impair the individual’s judgement, insight, behaviour, communication or social functioning” (OACCPP, 2016).

There is a great deal of ambiguity in this definition. What, for instance, is ‘psychotherapy technique’? What is a ‘therapeutic relationship’? When is a disorder of thought, cognition, mood, emotional regulation, perception or memory ‘serious’? And how do you know when such a disorder ‘may seriously impair the individual’s judgment, insight, behaviour, combination or social functioning?’

The ambiguity was great enough for some Ontario coaches to feel threatened by this new Act, believing they could soon find themselves on the wrong side of the law, simply for doing what they were trained to do. This in turn led to the ICF commissioning a legal opinion from the firm Crawley, Mackewn, Brush LLC, which concluded that there was indeed ambiguity in the Act’s wording but that “based on the information currently available, it appears that the proposed amendments could be interpreted to prohibit coaches from working with clients with a serious mental disorder for the purpose of correcting the disorder,” but that “it is our understanding that ICF members do not provide such services” (Crawley, Mackewn, Brush LLC, 2016).

In other words, so long as coaches are not trying to correct serious mental disorders, they may continue doing what they were trained to do.

This seems like a happy conclusion on the surface, but philosophically it's unsatisfying because it doesn't say enough about the essential differences between psychotherapy and coaching such that psychotherapists are in a position to deal with serious mental disorders, while coaches aren't.

Many essential differences between therapy and coaching have been proposed. Some of the most common, reflected in the ICF paragraph cited above, are:

1. Coaching is future-oriented, psychotherapy is past-oriented
2. Coaching is about action, psychotherapy is about healing
3. Coaching is based in positive psychology, psychotherapy is based in 'traditional' psychology (psychodynamic, behavioral, cognitive)
4. Psychotherapy gets you to normal, coaching gets you to optimal
5. Coaching deals with 'surface' change, psychotherapy deals with 'deep' change
6. Coaching holds people 'naturally creative, resourceful and whole,' psychotherapy treats people as 'broken' or 'deficient'
7. Coaching embraces intuition, psychotherapy doesn't
8. Coaching is interdisciplinary/spiritual, psychotherapy is medical/scientific

These 'essential differences' are for the most part based on stereotypes of both coaching and psychotherapy. Indeed, the terms 'coaching' and 'psychotherapy' by themselves are too broad – they encompass too many different kinds of theories and practices – to be usefully compared and/or contrasted. What I intend to do instead in the remainder of this paper is to show that the distinction between coaching and psychotherapy is unsupportable in at least one instance. In other words, I will argue that there is one type of coaching and one type of psychotherapy that are so similar in practice that they are almost indistinguishable, and hence the distinction between coaching and psychotherapy, at least in this one instance, doesn't hold. And I conclude by arguing that if these two modalities are indeed almost indistinguishable, then coaches and psychotherapists do themselves a disservice by maintaining an artificial distinction that limits the cross-pollination and mutual development of these two complimentary means of supporting personal and professional growth and development.

The two methodologies I compare and contrast are Co-Active Coaching, as developed and taught by its originators, the Coaches Training Institute, and ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy), as developed and taught by its originator, Steve Hayes of the University of Nevada. I will begin by outlining the Co-Active model, as it is presented in CTI's training materials, and ACT, as it is presented in academic articles and books. I should also say that I have been trained in both approaches, and consequently am supplementing the published materials with my own understanding as developed through these in-person trainings.

Co-Active coaching

Co-Active Coaching is taught experientially, and has no coherent underlying philosophy.¹ Instead it consists of a number of ideas that are grouped into categories labelled Cornerstones, Principles, Contexts, Tools and Skills, that together make up the Co-Active model.

Perhaps the best way to understand the priorities embedded in the Co-Active Model is through the Group Supervision Review form, a form used by trainers to assess the extent to which trainee Co-Active Coaches are adhering to the model i.e. to determine how Co-Active their coaching is.

The form is divided into two parts – items that appear above the line, that are expected to be present in any and all Co-Active Coaching, and those that appear below the line, that need not be present in any particular moment of a Co-Active Coaching session, but which are nonetheless an intrinsic part of the practice of Co-Active Coaching.

Above the line

Above the line items include the Cornerstones, Contexts, Empowered Relationship, and Principles of the model, and I will describe these in some detail.

The four cornerstones are:

1. People are naturally creative, resourceful and whole
2. Coaching addresses the whole person

¹ By 'coherent philosophy' I mean a set of principles and/or beliefs that are historically situated and rationally defensible (recognizing, of course, that 'rational' is a contested term).

3. Coaching evokes transformation
4. Dance in THIS moment (capitalization is in the original)

These cornerstone assumptions are just that – assumptions. They are not the result of empirical research. Indeed, Karen Kimsey-House, one of the founders of the Coaches Training Institute, in a webinar with Ann Betz, claimed the Co-Active Model was originally developed through intuition and only later found to align with the latest research findings in neuroscience (Betz & Kimsey-House, 2016).

The model's lack of an underlying research base or coherent philosophical position is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. On the one hand it leaves Co-Active Coaches somewhat adrift, unable to provide a grounded explanation for why they do what they do in the way that they do it; and on the other hand, like a *Zen koan*, it allows for a more meditative engagement with the question of what it means to be a great coach.

Sitting atop the four cornerstones are the five 'contexts' of Co-Active Coaching. These are

- Curiosity
- Forward the action/Deepen the learning
- Intuition
- Listening
- Self-Management

Again, these are stipulated rather than derived from a research base. Notably different from other therapeutic models is the emphasis on intuition. Coaches are encouraged to use their intuition, so long as they are unattached to their intuition being 'right.' Indeed, sharing their intuition is seen as an important way of forwarding the action and deepening the learning, another one of the five contexts.

Listening in the Co-Active model is broken down into three different 'levels'. Level 1 is listening within the coach's own range of concerns, level 2 is listening from within the client's range of concerns, and level 3 is listening more globally, within the larger, almost spiritual, range of concerns that embraces both coach and client and the world around them.

If the cornerstones are core assumptions brought to the coaching, and the contexts are ways of being with the client, the Empowered Relationship is the partnership co-created by both coach and client for the sake of delivering value to the client. The key driver of an Empowered Relationship in the Co-Active Model is a Designed Alliance – a consciously negotiated partnership that serves as a ‘container’ for the coaching. Implicit to the design/negotiation of this alliance/partnership is the asking for permission – permission to be bold, take risks, make mistakes, use intuition, and anything else that the coach and/or client believe will empower the relationship to deliver superior results to the client.

Finally, at the core of the model are the three Principles. It is emphasized in the training and certification of Co-Active Coaches that at any given point in any coaching session the coach is expected to be consciously operating within one of the three principles. Those principles are:

- Fulfillment
- Balance
- Process

The language is somewhat misleading here. The three principles are not, as one might expect, three moral principles on which the coaching is based. Indeed, the four cornerstones come closer to being principles of Co-Active Coaching in this sense of the word. Instead, the three principles of Co-Active Coaching are the three primary emphases given to the coaching, no matter what purpose the coaching may be oriented toward.

In other words, again with no research base or underlying coherent philosophy, the model assumes that at any given moment a human life is “moving toward [or away from] more fulfillment, more balance and more effective process”, and the purpose of coaching, no matter what issue the client presents with, is to create more fulfillment, balance and process.

Fulfillment, in practical terms, consists of values-clarification coaching, best-self coaching (using the Captain and Crew exercise), and saboteur awareness coaching (saboteurs are thoughts that hinder rather than help you in the pursuit of your stated goals).

Balance coaching, meanwhile, uncovers and generates new, often creative, perspectives on a given topic, before calling on clients to commit to

one or more perspectives that they believe will best serve them in the pursuit of their stated goals.

And process coaching is the exploration and resolution of emotional blocks that stand in the way of clients achieving their stated goals.

While fulfillment and balance coaching are fairly self-explanatory, process coaching may be less so.

Here is how CTI describes Process coaching:

The coach's job with process coaching is to be with clients wherever they are in the river of their life: whether it's the fast-moving axis of the current, or the swampy backwater. The coach's job is to help clients go through the process so they can get to the other side. When clients avoid or deny where they are — it simply prolongs the stalemate. It's like trying to hold back the river. It brings to mind the old adage, "the things we resist, persist." Instead of fighting it... or wishing it would be different... go with it and flow with it. (CTI, 2011)

In other words, process coaching is about 'being with' clients as they explore difficult emotions that they would rather – and normally do – avoid. The assumption here is that there is a cost to avoiding difficult emotions. "Emotion has powerful energy in it. When that emotion is blocked, the energy builds and is sometimes driven down and controlled. Process coaching unblocks that stuck energy and allows the energy of the emotion to serve the client" (Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2011, p. 147). Moving toward and through difficult emotions, rather than away from and out of them, prevents difficult emotions being 'processed.' As a result, clients are less able to access the inner resources they need to make significant changes in their lives.

It is important to note that Co-Active Coaches do not interpret or work with emotions as a psychodynamic therapist might. One of the ways CTI distinguishes coaching from therapy is that therapy 'encourages transference as a therapy tool' while coaching 'discourages transference as inappropriate' (CTI, 2011b). Co-Active Coaches are instead called to see emotion as a legitimate form of expression,

like words, music, and dance. Don't be a detective about it. Don't look at why the client is hurt or angry – which is the typical response. The cause itself is not important; accepting the feeling is important. Nor is it up to the coach to try to heal it or stop it – another typical response.

Just explore it and acknowledge it: “That’s a powerful feeling. There’s some pain in there, I can tell.” (Kimsey-House et. al, 2011, p. 149)

Co-Active Coaches are discouraged from dealing with the “psychological antecedent to the emotion – that is the realm of therapy” (CTI, 2011b). Instead, they are encouraged to simply “be with” clients as they experience difficult or extreme emotions, where “being with” is itself integrative for clients.

Below the line

If above the line items identify the basic orientation of the Co-Active Coach, based on assumptions about who and how coaches need to be in order to best serve their clients’ change efforts, below the line items are more practical tools and skills that support this basic orientation. Some of these tools are step-by-step procedures (balance formula), some are techniques (metaphor, intrude, championing, name it, request/challenge, acknowledgment), while some are more amorphous and diffuse strategies (build resonance, saboteur awareness, powerful questions, witness/be with). Although each of these can be identified by an external observer (otherwise, presumably, they wouldn’t be on the Supervision Review form), they are a constantly revolving and evolving set of practices that show up in often subtly different ways in practice.

For instance, ‘balance formula’ is essentially a rule-based procedure for clients to explore different perspectives on a given topic, commit to one, and move forward with clarity and purpose based on that commitment. In its classic formulation the client embodies different positions around a physical object in the center of the room. And in the commitment phase of the formula the client steps over a real or imagined line to embody their commitment. In practice, however, this procedure becomes a lot more fluid and subtle, if only to avoid the repetitiveness of this same procedure being executed every time different perspectives need to be explored. In other words, the tools and skills of Co-Active Coaching become increasingly integrated into a unique coaching style as individual coaches become more familiar with their underlying purpose and function and more adept in their use.

Essentials of Co-Active Coaching

So what, then, are the essential characteristics of Co-Active Coaching, without which Co-Active Coaching could no longer be considered Co-Active?

1. A designed alliance
2. An assumption that people are naturally creative, resourceful and whole
3. A focus on the whole person, in the present moment
4. A respect for intuition (that of both coach and client)
5. A commitment to transformative change (as opposed to linear change)
6. A commitment to action
7. A commitment to learning
8. A commitment to fulfillment (values clarification, self-awareness), balance (perspective-taking and committed action), and process (emotional honesty and self-acceptance)

It should also be noted, once again, that these essential characteristics did not arise out of a coherent philosophy, theoretical orientation, or empirical research base. They were, rather, developed intuitively and through pragmatic experimentation, with empirical support for the effectiveness of the model coming only after the fact, along with a deeper understanding of *why* the model is effective. As Karen Kimsey-House, one of the founders of CTI, puts it

We've known intuitively and by watching results for two decades that the Co-Active Model is an effective approach to coaching and personal and professional growth, and now we can offer scientific studies that support it. (CTI, 2012)

These scientific studies are ongoing, as are efforts to situate Co-Active Coaching within a broader theoretical frame. (Candidate theories include Social Cognitive Theory, the Theory of Reasoned Action, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Ken Wilber's 'Spectrum of Consciousness' model, Motivational Interviewing, and Egan's Skilled Helper Model (Liu, Irwin, & Morrow, 2015).

ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy)

I began this paper by claiming that Co-Active Coaching and ACT are, in practice, almost indistinguishable, and consequently the clear distinction between coaching and psychotherapy that the ICF and other institutions uphold is unsustainable. In this section I outline some of the central features

of ACT, including its model, tools, underlying philosophy and theory, in order to be in a position to usefully compare Co-Active Coaching with ACT.

ACT was founded by Steve Hayes of the University of Nevada, and has been used to address workplace stress, nicotine addiction, opiate addiction, panic disorders, anxiety, psychosis, self-harm, chronic pain (Vilardaga, Hayes, & Schelin, 2007, pp. 124-126) and many other disorders that the Ontario Psychotherapy Act likely considers ‘serious.’

It is considered a ‘third wave’ therapy, which includes other contextually-oriented therapies such as Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

Unlike Co-Active Coaching, which is not grounded in a coherent underlying philosophy or explicit theory of human development, ACT is explicitly grounded in a philosophy called Functional Contextualism and a theory of human development called Relational Frame Theory. I will describe each in turn, before describing ACT as a practice.

Functional Contextualism is firmly rooted in the tradition of William James’ pragmatism, and holds that a discrete act – be it verbal or behavioral – can never be considered true or false outside of a given context. In other words, what is ‘true’ is simply what works, and what works is itself context-dependent. That is to say, in order to make a claim about what works, “one must know what one is working toward; there must be the clear *a priori* statement of an analytic goal” (Hayes, 2004, p. 646). In the case of functional contextualism, that goal is the ability to predict and influence behavior.

This underlying pragmatic philosophy has implications for how ACT therapists interact with clients. In ACT neither therapist nor client is interested in what is objectively true or real. Clients are encouraged to “abandon any interest in the literal truth of their own thoughts or evaluations; instead they are encouraged to embrace a passionate and ongoing interest in how to live according to their values” (Hayes, 2004, p. 647). In other words, the values of the client serve as the contextual ground for the therapy; there is no greater good, outside of the client’s values, toward which the therapy is oriented, no objective measure of success or failure, health or disease.

This ability for clients to hold their thoughts as neither true nor false is made difficult by the fact that we suffer from a particularly human affliction.

Relational Frame Theory, the theory of human development and cognition underlying ACT, offers an empirically-supported explanation for the origin and cause of this affliction.

According to Relational Frame Theory, we learn as infants, thanks to the power of language, to form arbitrary relationships between objects in the world. Arbitrary relationships differ from non-arbitrary ones insofar as they are conceptual, rather than sensory. For example, a dime is smaller than a nickel – this we know from our direct sense-experience of the two coins – and as a result we form in our own minds a relationship between these two objects in the world – a relationship that includes the comparison smaller-bigger. This is a non-arbitrary relationship, as it is derived from our direct experience of the formal properties of the coins.

As we grow older, however, we learn to think of a dime as bigger than a nickel, insofar as it is worth more. In other words, the physical size of the coin is no longer its most salient feature, because we are seeing it within the frame of a social convention that has arbitrarily determined that the smaller coin is worth more than the larger coin. In other words, a conceptual understanding of money has replaced our more direct sense-experience of money.

Empirical research suggests these ‘relational frames’ are structured in such a way that, over time, a rich network of conceptual understanding is built up that in turn determines how conceptual understanding happens. “When we think, reason, speak with meaning, or listen with understanding, we do so by deriving relations among events – among words and events, words and words, events and events” (Hayes, 2004, p. 649). This process is ongoing and self-referential, such that the conceptual map that we have created as a result of our experience in the world in turn determines our experience of the world and the future development of that conceptual map.

Importantly, we are for the most part unaware of how our conceptual maps impact our experience, and consequently we often find ourselves making interpretations and holding beliefs that we believe to be true, even when they are, according to Functional Contextualism, neither true nor false and don’t necessarily work for us. As these beliefs are the product of our thoughts, and our thoughts are the product of our conceptual maps, it makes sense to redesign our conceptual maps so they serve us better. But conceptual maps, unfortunately, are highly resistant to change.

For this reason, ACT focuses less on redesigning conceptual maps (changing beliefs), as cognitive therapies do, and more on changing our relationship to our beliefs as they arise in the form of thoughts. It terms this ability to be at choice in relation to our thoughts ‘psychological flexibility,’ and the ACT model is designed to support the development of psychological flexibility.

The Act Model

The six components of the ACT model, which I will address in turn, are:

1. Cognitive defusion
2. Experiential acceptance
3. Self as Context
4. Present Moment Awareness
5. Values
6. Committed Action

Like Process coaching in the Co-Active model, ACT is premised on the idea that if you move toward and through emotional pain, you are better able to live a life of meaning and value. As Steve Hayes, the founder of ACT put it in a workshop delivered in Toronto in April 2016, “a pivot toward pain and suffering is a pivot toward meaning and purpose.”

What prevents us moving toward pain and suffering is an over-reliance and over-dependence on our thinking brains. We are cognitively fused – we believe our thoughts *are* us, rather than simply *one part* of us; and a potentially unreliable part at that. As Emo Philips, the American comedian, put it, “I used to think that the brain was the most wonderful organ in my body. Then I realized who was telling me this” (as quoted by Hayes).

Our minds, as we saw in the discussion above, are formed in the crucible of language, and language is inherently distancing. So long as we see the world through the lens of language (which we find it almost impossible *not* to do) we are not seeing things as they really are. And so long as we are not seeing things as they really are we are subject to pain and suffering that is, in large part, a consequence of trying to avoid pain and suffering.

Consequently, ACT not only seeks to disrupt cognitive fusion by turning language into a lens that we 'have' rather than are 'had by,' it also encourages the full embrace of private experiences. "For example, anxiety patients are taught to feel anxiety, as a feeling, fully and without defense; pain patients are given methods that encourage them to let go of a struggle with pain, and so on" (Hayes et al., 2006, pp. 7-8).

This process in Co-Active Coaching is in the service of releasing energies, otherwise blocked, that can serve the client. And similarly in ACT, 'Acceptance (and defusion) in ACT is not an end in itself. Rather acceptance is fostered as a method of increasing values-based action" (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 8).

As a result of cognitive defusion and experiential acceptance, ACT clients are better able to engage with the present moment, free of the distorting lens of language and the fear of pain and suffering. They are emotionally open to the world, and can meet the world on its own terms. They are no longer focused on a problem that needs to be solved (anxiety, depression, eating disorders, etc.) but rather on the process of living in which they are engaged. Thus the presenting problem of a client in ACT is disrupted, reconceived, reimagined. As Hayes put it in a workshop delivered in Toronto on April 14th, 2016: "When a client tells you their problem, the story *is* the problem! It's stopping them seeing their life as a process."

In other words, the self is expanded through ACT to accommodate more of what it lives, non-judgmentally and without attachment. In this respect ACT is similar to other mindfulness-based cognitive therapies, which also support the development of a 'layer' of consciousness that is both present to the flow of experience while at the same time not caught up in it. The ACT model calls this more mindful self 'self as context,' and unlike other mindfulness-based cognitive therapies it does not rely solely on meditation as a means to develop mindfulness.

From this expanded sense of self comes the ability to engage in purposive action aligned with individual values. Values are the ground of being, insofar as they exist in the present moment and inform goal-oriented action. They are not something to be achieved, but something to be lived, in each moment, through purposive action. "In ACT, acceptance, defusion, being present, and so on are not ends in themselves; rather they clear the path for a more vital, values consistent life" (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 8). In other

words, the goal of building psychological flexibility through ACT is to support the development of a more meaningful, purposeful, fulfilling life.

Finally, it is not enough for ACT clients to simply *know* their values – they must live their values through committed action. Thus, “ACT protocols almost always involve therapy work and homework linked to short, medium, and long-term behavior change goals” (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 9). These homework assignments may in turn create greater awareness of how cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance inhibit the development of psychological flexibility, such that the six components of the ACT model are not sequential but mutually reinforcing.

Tools of ACT

The model is supported in practice with a number of tools and techniques aimed at developing cognitive defusion, experiential acceptance, present-moment awareness and an understanding of self as context. Two classic exercises are:

1. Milk, milk, milk

In this exercise the client is asked to repeat the word milk multiple times, up to 30-45 seconds, until the relationship between the word ‘milk’ and the substance to which it refers, which is normally ‘fused,’ is disrupted. The client is then able to perform the same exercise with a word that has significant emotional power – be it the name of a person or a thing – until the word and the object to which it refers are no longer identified. As a result not only does the word lose its negative emotional charge, but also the client is better able to experience the object to which it refers more completely, ‘the thing itself,’ without the bias imposed by viewing it through the lens of language.

2. Passengers on the bus

In this exercise clients are asked to imagine themselves in the role of a bus driver heading toward a destination they are committed to going to (this is a metaphor for taking committed action aligned with values.) On the bus are various passengers who are in the business of thwarting the driver’s plans. They have much to say about why the destination is not a good one, where the bus should be heading instead, and many other things besides. Clients, as they drive the bus, need to fend off these unruly passengers, and have various strategies

available to them to do so. They can refuse to listen to the passengers (experiential avoidance), argue with the passengers (cognitive fusion), obsessively focus on the destination (avoid the present for the sake of a conceptualized future), only to discover that none of these strategies are ultimately successful.

They are then in a position to experiment with alternatives – seeing the unruly passengers as just that (experiential acceptance), hearing the passengers but not necessarily believing what they are saying (cognitive defusion), staying present to the moment as it unfolds (present moment awareness), which in turn leads to a self-as-context ability to have the passengers be unruly, without ‘being had’ by the unruly passengers. In other words, clients continue to drive calmly toward their destination, despite the unruly passengers.

There are many other tools and techniques for building psychological flexibility, including labeling thoughts as thoughts, vocalizing thoughts in different ways, choosing whether or not to believe thoughts – anything that *builds a relationship with mind*, as opposed to *simply being mind*. And while it should be noted that this ability to have thoughts rather than be had by them is characteristic of all mindfulness-based interventions, ACT does not require the development of a meditation practice, nor does it owe a direct debt to Buddhism (as, for instance, MBCT does). Instead, its origins, as we saw in the discussion above, are in the pragmatic philosophy of William James, and in a reconceived theory of behavior with roots in the radical behaviorism of B.F. Skinner.

Essentials of ACT

Just as I concluded the description of Co-Active Coaching with a list of essential characteristics without which Co-Active Coaching would not be Co-Active Coaching, so I would like now to identify the essential characteristics of ACT, without which ACT could no longer be considered ACT? For ACT to be ACT the ACT therapist must help clients:

1. Open themselves up to the full range of their experience, including difficult emotions
2. See thoughts as just that – thoughts – and not necessarily true beliefs
3. Become more fully present to the here and now

4. See themselves as a container for thoughts and feelings, not the thoughts and feelings themselves
5. Develop a clear understanding of their values
6. Get into the habit of living their values on a daily basis

Comparing Co-Active Coaching and ACT

On the surface the essentials of Co-Active Coaching and ACT do not seem to have much in common. But take a closer look and the similarities become apparent.

Here’s how I see the two models overlapping.

Co-Active Coaching	ACT
Fulfillment Coaching (in particular Captain and Crew and Saboteur Awareness, insofar as these build a more nuanced understanding of the mind as a system, made up of multiple, often competing ‘voices,’ empowering the client to actively choose among them); Balance Coaching (insofar as this develops the ability to hold multiple, often competing perspectives and choose freely among them)	Cognitive Defusion
Process Coaching	Experiential Acceptance
Balance Coaching Naturally Creative, Resourceful and Whole Cornerstone	Self as Context

Dance in This Moment Cornerstone Embodiment tools	Present Moment Awareness
Fulfillment Coaching (in particular Values Clarification)	Values
Forwarding the Action, Deepening the Learning Cornerstone Accountability tools	Action

There are no doubt differences in emphasis and terminology between the two models, but these need not translate into substantial differences in practice. Both interventions ultimately seek to move people toward more values-aligned living by increasing self-understanding, self-acceptance and present moment awareness.

This would not be interesting or surprising – after all, it is nearly always the case that innovations, be they social, political, or technological, arise in different ways and in different communities at the same time – were it not for the fact that the coaching community so resolutely denies any overlap between coaching and therapy.

This not only unfairly characterizes both coaching and therapy, but also limits the possibility of productive engagement, by coaches and therapists, in the other’s domain of expertise. My own practice as a coach has been improved as a result of training in ACT. The more I understand Functional Contextualism and Relational Frame Theory, the better I am able to not just practice Co-Active Coaching, but know *why* I am practicing Co-Active Coaching in the way that I am. This is an issue that many Co-Active coaches struggle with. They know *what* to do. They may even know, from empirical studies and from their own experience, that what they do works. But they don’t have a clear sense of *why* what they do works. As a result, they are less grounded in their own sense of efficacy and have difficulty articulating, in their marketing materials and in person, what they do and why they do it with enough depth and rigor that potential clients take them seriously.

Conclusion

I began this paper with the intention of not only comparing Co-Active Coaching and ACT but also answering the more personal question, 'What is it that I do - is it coaching, is it therapy, or is it some combination of the two?' In conclusion, I believe that what I do is Co-Active Coaching, enhanced by an understanding of ACT and its associated philosophy and theory. But I could equally well say that what I do is ACT, supported by my training as a Co-Active Coach. Because ultimately these two modalities are not sufficiently distinct in my mind to warrant a definitive allegiance to either one.

Yet, with the new Psychotherapy Act being developed by the Ontario government, I am forced to choose, on seemingly arbitrary grounds. While I understand the imperative driving the new Act – to ensure vulnerable people in Ontario do not fall victim to exploitative vendors of psychotherapy services – it is disappointing to see rigid boundaries developing between coaching and psychotherapy on an institutional level, at a time when those boundaries are increasingly porous in practice. It is particularly galling to see psychotherapists calling themselves coaches, despite not having any coach training, at a time when the psychotherapeutic community is institutionalizing overreaching protections of their own category of service.

It is my hope that, as a result of reading this paper, coaches resist the easy categorization of coaching as distinct from therapy, and explore the edges and boundaries of their profession, just as I hope therapists explore the boundaries of their profession by learning more about coaching and what it means to call yourself a coach. The distinction is not as simple as it appears, and artificial distinctions, buttressed by ambiguously-worded laws, do not help the development of either profession, nor those they exist to serve.

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