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## Academic Paper

# The role of courage in the development and practice of coaches

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## Abstract

This study seeks to understand the role that courage plays in the development and practice of coaches. Courage is mentioned frequently in the coaching literature, but this research is the first study to investigate its significance. Within the precepts of constructivist grounded theory, which is appropriate for the investigation of under-represented topics, the perspectives of 12 coaches of varying levels of experience revealed that courage is required throughout a coaching career. It was found that courage enables coaches to deliver their best work and is integral to an ongoing cycle of increasing self-awareness and professional development.

## Keywords

coaching, grounded theory, coaching development, coaching skills,

## Article history

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## Introduction

While courage is regularly referred to in the coaching literature as a desirable attribute for coaches, the current study is the first to explore the coach's experience of courage as a factor in their development and practice. Such in-depth research into the courage of the practitioner is evident in other interventionist fields: courage is fundamental to the work of experienced psychotherapists, helping them to be authentic, vulnerable and present with clients (Lyman, 2016). The courage of clients can help psychotherapists become more courageous (Hatcher et al., 2012) and courage enables group psychotherapists to persevere, cope with unexpected clinical events, recognise negative emotions and deviate from standard practice (Shapiro & Gans, 2008). Social workers lacking moral courage would not be able to fulfil their duties (Banks, 2011) and the same quality contributes to the professional excellence of nurses, helping decision-making and peace of mind (Sadooghiasl, Parvizy & Ebadi, 2018). A psychometric test has also been developed to test the moral courage of nurses, in order that its presence can be measured and specific training and behavioural programmes developed (Numminen, Katajisto & Leino-Kilipi, 2019).

The present research is designed to contribute to a similar understanding of the role of courage in coaching. It is guided by this question: to what extent is courage a factor in the development and ongoing practice of coaches? Accordingly, this paper reviews existing literature on the subject, before outlining its constructivist grounded theory methodology, disclosing findings and then moving on to a discussion and conclusion.

## Literature Review

This review outlines definitions of courage and its application within coaching, and identifies potential areas for investigation regarding the coach's relationship with courage.

### Defining Courage

Courage and bravery are commonly used as interchangeable synonyms but the literature makes clear that this is not the case. Whereas bravery enables people to withstand pain and embrace danger, courage is the emotional and cognitive process that precipitates those brave actions, with bravery understood to be the external manifestation of courage's internal process (McLaughlin & Cox, 2015, p.3). Their observation that over time our understanding of bravery has become more associated with organisational, economic and societal issues than the battlefield tallies with Peterson and Seligman (2004, p.199), who suggest that for most people bravery will be called upon not to wage war to but to navigate social encounters such as giving voice to potentially unpopular opinions or defying peer pressure.

Courage is perceived by Jiang (2012) to be a moral strength that enables people to risk the things they most value, and gives them the agency to act according to conscience. From the standpoint of positive psychology, Peterson and Seligman (2004, p.29) state that courage is a virtue that facilitates the accomplishment of goals via the exercise of will in the face of internal or external opposition and comprises the psychological ingredients of bravery, integrity, persistence and vitality. This view of courage is corroborated by Pury and Starkey (2010), who also link it to the character strength of hope.

Acts of courage are not necessarily spontaneous responses to random events. Comer and Sekerka (2018) posit that within organisations, an individual's ability to act courageously is determined by their moral efficacy, their hardiness and their long-term self-care. Grit, proactive personality styles and leadership tendencies have been shown to be antecedents of courage (Howard & Cogswell, 2019). There is an important distinction between general courage, where courageous acts are benchmarked against what might be generally expected in a given situation, and personal courage, where an individual's responses are understood within their personal context (Pury & Kowalski, 2007). Given the present study's focus on the role of courage in the development and practice of coaches, where general expectations have yet to be normalised, the focus here will be on the personal courage of the coach.

### Courage in the Context of Coaching

The degree to which coaching can help coachees become more courageous is considered at length within the literature by authors including Brady (2011), Curtis and Kelly (2013), Jarosz (2017), Kaufman (2006), Madden, Green and Grant (2011), McLaughlin (2012), McLaughlin and Cox (2015), and Robertson and Lovett (2016). Academic consideration of the coach's experience of courage falls into two categories. There are direct but fleeting references, and indirect references that are made within wider discussions about a coach's desired attributes.

The direct but fleeting references to courage combine to suggest that courage is a significant factor in successful coaching. The ability to confront a client is a core coaching competence that requires

skill as well as courage (Hardingham, 2004, p.52) and courage is required to draw the client's attention to the reality of their situation and to cast light upon their inner turmoils (Brotman, Liberi & Wasylyshyn, 1998). This challenging of a client's world-view sees courage deployed alongside skills and understanding (Bluckert, 2006, p.83) and a successful coach must have backbone, which means "knowing and clearly stating your position, whether it is popular or not" (O'Neill, 2007, p.14). The courage of the coach helps to facilitate the coachee's progressive learning (Kilburg 2001) and is important in helping them to find their own reserves of courage. Positive client outcomes are in part due to the coach courageously sharing their observations (de Haan, 2008). Courageously highlighting the areas of their persona that the client has missed is central to helping them to understand their way of being within ontological coaching (Sieler, 2014, p.111) and an approach such as gestalt requires "a good deal of personal courage" (Bluckert, 2014, p.85). Courage must be shown in deciding whether to progress with a coaching assignment (Lee & Frisch, 2015) and it is required, alongside confidence, to coach at board level (Wright, 2015). Berman (2019) sees courage as the willingness to speak truth to power. Courage is a component part of a coach's ethical maturity, with ethical awareness helping the coach to make courageous choices (van Nieuwerburgh, 2014, p.178) while the absence of courage might compromise effectiveness by causing the coach to mask fear and anxiety through the use of tools (Bluckert, 2006, p.16).

Examples from the literature of indirect mentions of courage made during discourses on coaching attributes tend to relate to confronting and challenging clients. Glunk and Follini (2011) outline the difficulties of maintaining the coaching space's psychological safety while giving unwelcome feedback. Nevertheless, challenge from the coach is essential for the development of trust (Alvey & Barclay, 2007) and confrontation is important to the repair of rapport (Baron, Morin & Morin, 2011). Shying away from challenge leaves the coach in the diminished role of simply being a partner in a conversation (de Haan, 2008).

## **The Emerging Research Question**

It is clear that there is breadth, but little depth, to the consideration of the coaches' courage within the coaching literature. There are also strands of discussion within the overall coaching discourse where courage is not referenced but it seems legitimate to ask whether it is playing a part. If listening, understanding and encouragement are the most helpful behaviours of an executive coach (de Haan, Culpin & Curd, 2011), might coaches feel that in certain circumstances courage is required to exhibit them? O'Broin and Palmer (2010) found that the relationship between coach and coachee is dynamic and fluid, and that at moments of potential rupture the coach's best option is to display openness. Is courage required in these moments? According to Dagley (2010), coaches best facilitate behavioural change and skills acquisition when their work is intuitive and flexible. What is it that enables coaches to work in this way? In seeking to understand the process variables in the coaching relationship Ianaro, Schermuly and Kauffeld (2013) found that a coach showing dominant behaviour in the early sessions of an assignment garners higher goal attainment scores in client feedback than those who are more submissive at the outset. Might a coach require courage to display such behaviour early in the relationship? These questions illustrate the potential of a study designed to understand the coach's perspective on courage. The literature review described above was integral in formulating the guiding question for the present research: to what extent is courage a factor in the development and ongoing practice of coaches?

# **Methodology**

## **Design**

The research used a grounded theory approach. Given that the role of courage in the development and practice of coaches is largely uncharted, qualitative research is an appropriate form of

inquiry (Smith, 2015), making possible a diversification of population and methodology (Hefferon, 2018). The present study recruited 12 coaches from a wide range of backgrounds and disciplines. They participated in intensive interviews that were carried out by Skype. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using established grounded theory protocols which, through the identification of themes and categories, culminated in the development of a conceptual framework.

## Participants

The principle of maximum variation - whereby participants must meet some of a wide list of criteria and which is particularly suited to qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2007, p.125) - guided the initial recruitment of eight qualified coaches, via London-based coaching networking groups. Participants represented a wide range of experience and sectors. Recruitment was narrowed at the theoretical sampling stage, with four practicing coaches who are also experienced in the supervision and/or training of coaches enlisted to add further insight into emerging themes. See Table 1 (below) for participant details.

**Table 1: Participant information**

	Gender	Main coaching sector	Experience (years)	Practice hours (approx.)
Participant 1	F	Corporate leadership/life transitions	20+	1,000+
Participant 2	F	Leadership	3	400
Participant 3	F	Life, health	1	60
Participant 4	M	Leadership, career	7	500
Participant 5	F	Leadership	3	900
Participant 6	F	Life	1	78
Participant 7	M	Executive, leadership, career	21	2,500
Participant 8	M	Life/career	6	300
Participant 9	F	Leadership	16	3,000
Participant 10	M	Executive	6	400
Participant 11	F	Leadership	12	1,000
Participant 12	F	Leadership, organisational development	17	5,000+

## Data Collection

The study collected data via intensive interviews, which feature frequently in grounded theory as they enable detailed exploration of the participant's perspective (Charmaz, 2014, p.56). The 12 interviews, each of about 60 minutes and conducted via Skype, were semi-structured in order to afford the participant every opportunity to reveal what mattered to them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.205). An initial list of questions focused on the participant's experience of courage in their practice and development, achieving a blend of open and theory-driven questions while leaving room for spontaneous questions based on the participant's response (Flick, 2009, p.156). All interviews were recorded and uploaded to an online transcription service within 48 hours. Transcriptions were manually checked and corrected to ensure accuracy and readiness for analysis. Identifying details were removed.

## Data Analysis

Grounded theory is popular with coaching researchers (Elston & Boniwell, 2011) and Corbin (2017) highlights its relevance to a project of this nature. Believing that human experience is influenced by language, culture and history, the researcher adopted a social constructivist stance (Charmaz, 2014, p.14) which examines psychological categories to show how realities are constructed (Willig, 2013, p.7). The notion that objective reality is reflected by knowledge is rejected by constructivism, which affords primacy to the lived experience (Flick, 2009, p.70). Similarly, the study maintains a critical relativist position, accepting the mutual influence upon each other of researcher and

participants (Anderson, 1986) and acknowledging the contribution of the researcher's own experience to insightful comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.5; Gough, 2016).

Grounded theorists prefer construction to description, and develop new concepts rather than seeking to apply received theories (Charmaz, 2017). The flexible constructivist approach advocated by Charmaz (2014, p.13) allowed the researcher to embrace both the sample's multiplicity of views and their active involvement in the process. In line with the precepts of constructivist grounded theory, analysis continued throughout the project and the author facilitated the development of new ideas by scouring the data for responses that did not align with received preconceptions (McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007).

Transcriptions were imported into software that allowed the coding process, which is at the heart of grounded theory, to begin. Initial coding, or line-by-line labelling of data, embedded the study in the empirical world and created a robust framework for analysis (Charmaz, 2014, p.113) as well as facilitating the linking of data to ideas and back again (Saldana, 2009, p.8). Subsequently focused coding, along with the identification and capturing of differences and similarities in diagrams and memos, enabled the emergence of themes and categories which could be distilled in to a theory. Memos were written as and when anything significant related to the analysis came to mind (Saldana, 2009, p.33), and helped the researcher to identify potential gaps in the emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2014, p.162). Grounded theory is driven by the development of a conceptual framework within which to house the ideas that emerge from data analysis, and creating a visual representation, showing the relationship between categories, is intrinsic to the work of many grounded theorists (Charmaz, 2014, p.218). Such a diagram is included within this paper (see Figure 1, below).

## **Ethical Framework**

The present study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of East London, in accordance with its Code of Practice for Research (2013). It also adheres to the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2018). Participants were aware that the research was about the role of courage in coaching and so no deception was required. The informed and voluntary consent of participants was secured via e-mail invitations and the return of signed consent forms. All data, the storage of which complies with data protection protocols, has been fully anonymised.

## **Findings**

Grounded theory research continues until theoretical saturation is reached, when all identified categories are at maximum development (Charmaz, 2014, p.213; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.61; Corbin, 2017), and the researcher can be confident of precision and density (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.212). In the current study, theoretical saturation was reached in the twelfth interview, which was within the likely range of more than ten and less than 30 participants outlined by Thomson (2010). Six theoretical categories emerged during the research. Table 2 (below) shows the prevalence of each category and indicates that three of the six categories were experienced by all 12 of the participants and three by 11 participants. The categories are investigated in turn throughout this section.

**Table 2: categories and prevalence**

Category (themes)	Participant files	References
Becoming a Coach (Learning the ropes; overcoming doubts; making the commitment; facing business pressures.)	11	104
Developing Self-awareness (Finding authenticity; clarifying purpose and values; identifying strengths.)	12	122
Developing Skills (building the relationship; holding the space; naming and challenging.)	12	207
Standing at the Crossroads (Getting stuck; knowing intuitively; connecting to my heart.)	11	114
Taking the Jump (Accepting risk and vulnerability; stepping into my best self; transforming the conversation; getting it wrong.)	12	306
Turning Back (Losing my nerve; seeing potential harm; reducing impact; emotional hangover.)	11	97

## Becoming a Coach

Four themes emerged within this category: making the commitment; learning the ropes; overcoming doubts; and facing financial pressures.

Courage was first required when participants switched from a previous career to make the commitment to coaching. There was strong evidence of seeking purpose and meaning in life, with courage required to break away from a structured corporate environment and overcome the skepticism of colleagues and acquaintances. Making the commitment helped participants to focus on their work and enhanced their efficacy, with courage helping the participants to learn core coaching skills. There was a great thirst for knowledge and a sense of privilege at being allowed into the private thoughts of coachees, yet it took courage to maintain focus when there was a strong awareness of being inexperienced.

*I think the idea of courage fits in to that because...when we're setting out on coaching, we're quite tentative.* Participant 8.

Early in their coaching career, participants required courage to overcome personal doubt. They felt that they were dealing with their own issues, while trying to help clients with theirs. Feelings of overwhelm and inadequacy were evident and the fear of failure loomed large. Participant 4 feared returning to her previous employer with "my tail between my legs." Courage was required to help participants face up to the reality of setting up a coaching business. There was time pressure during the overlap between careers, financial pressures as income became uncertain and the challenge of accepting that newly acquired coaching skills might not be helpful in establishing a business in a competitive market, particularly with regard to sales and marketing.

*Most courageous I think is to just let people know that you're up and running, your business is here and I've got slots for clients.* Participant 3.

## Developing Self-awareness

Three themes crystallised within this category: finding authenticity; clarifying purpose and values; identifying strengths.

Finding authenticity was foremost here, as participants learned to understand and accommodate their own psychological triggers. They courageously developed a clear sense of self in which they could be comfortable in practice and which was free of any 'expert' positioning. Participant 12 referenced her perception of a development phase in which coaches establish "what feels authentic for them, becoming an authentic coach." Clarifying purpose and values were closely linked to authenticity. Purpose tended to be around helping others. Values such as humility, integrity, spirituality and honesty featured prominently and values were to be recognised, protected and acted upon. For Participant 1, "being true to your core values" was of paramount importance. Identifying personal strengths and inner resources included qualities such as self-confidence, self-



discipline, maintaining a positive mindset and being open-minded in order to be able to practice in a non-judgmental fashion.

*the courageousness of me has really been about focusing on what are the strengths that I'm bringing to this.* Participant 4.

## Developing Skills

The category of developing skills broke down into three themes: building the relationship; holding the space; naming and challenging.

Within building the relationship, the creation and maintenance of rapport was prominent. Courage was required in building trust over time, calibrating with the client, helping the client to feel safe and waiting for the right time to pursue a new direction. Contracting with the client could be courageous when establishing ways of working and permissions and boundaries within the relationship. There was also courage in deciding when to end an assignment and in declining others – *"I would be courageous to push potential income away,"* said Participant 1.

Holding the space involved courage because it necessitated the coach deploying complete presence whatever the circumstance and subject matter, and there was courage in resisting any client desire for the coach to be active in raising suggestions or giving advice. The use of silence in coaching required both skill and courage to ensure a positive outcome and a deepening of the relationship:

*I think sometimes it takes courage to not say anything at all and to allow it to play out.* Participant 5.

Conversely, offering challenge to clients and naming what's happening in the session was also viewed as a courageous act. The stimulus here might be the client's words or body language, or their side-stepping of a question. But courageous coaches acted not only upon what they had seen and heard, they were prepared to give both credence and voice to what they noticed bodily, via sense and feeling.

*It's gone to a deeper level that something from somewhere is making sense. So it's like you're making sense at a body level.* Participant 11.

## Standing at the Crossroads

The data suggest that Becoming a Coach, Developing Self-Awareness and Developing Skills are categories that build over time and accommodate multiple personal and professional reflections. The three themes within Standing at the Crossroads (getting stuck, knowing intuitively, connecting to my heart) relate to the real-time dynamic between coach and coachee.

Getting stuck in the process related to those times when coaching became very tactical. Progress was at best slow, and an issue was being avoided as the coach "skirts around it because it feels like it might be a little bit difficult," said Participant 10. Awareness of getting stuck tends to be an iterative process rather than a sudden realisation, with the coach being conscious of working harder than normal, but to little effect. Participants experienced a need to deal with the root cause of the client's dilemma and there was a growing awareness of having to make a decision.

*I think that's just a bit about developing that awareness of when there is a crossroads to take.* Participant 2.

The theme of intuition encompassed terms such as 'gut feeling', 'instinct' and 'inner knowing', all of which featured as the coach attempted to take the session to a different level. They had moved

from cognitive thought processes to become aware of what they felt needed to emerge in service of the client, a place where they felt attuned to a deeper knowing and used courage as the lever to access that greater perspective. "*Courage will allow me the freedom to follow my intuition,*" said Participant 8.

Courageous interventions were driven in the moment by emotion rather than cognition and listening to the heart brought reassurance that the conditions were in place for the courageous ploy to be well-received. "Sometimes it's my heart picking up on something," said Participant 7. There were also links here to spirituality and a sense of being guided by one's soul - "*connecting to your heart and soul,*" as Participant 1 observed.

## **Taking the Jump**

This category comprised four themes: accepting risk and vulnerability, stepping in to my best self, transforming the conversation and getting it wrong.

When coaches acted courageously they were aware of risks such as a rupture in the relationship or an adverse client reaction. They felt that they were stepping into a void and going beyond the norms of conventional practice. They were aware of weighing risk and consciously deciding to be courageous. Jumping metaphors were common.

*I've never done a parachute jump, but I imagine it's a similar feeling to just before you jump off, it's like your head can tell you jump now, jump now, jump now.* Participant 12.

As the jump was made, coaches were aware of their own vulnerability. They felt uncertainty and discomfort as they moved out of their comfort zone. Participant 6 reported that she had learnt "to be OK with my vulnerability" and Participant 11 stated that vulnerability was something that coaches should be "willing to explore."

As a result of acting courageously, coaches felt that they were going into a new realm, one beyond tools and techniques and evidence-based practice. They felt powerful, liberated and better able to hold paradoxes. They were conscious of expanding their capability, or crossing a new "threshold," as Participant 1 described it. As they did so, they were challenging the boundaries of coaching and acting spontaneously, dynamically creating new interventions.

*it is stepping into your best self ... leaving behind any doubts, fears and insecurities and really trusting in the moment that I'll pick up what I need to in the moment and I will be able to be equal to whatever happens.* Participant 9.

Participants found that the conversation had been transformed. Courageous interventions changed the paradigm and released pressure in the conversation. The work became more intimate and profound discussions around spirituality were not uncommon. Coaches noticed a positive shift in impact after their courageous interventions, as they created new awareness and learning opportunities for the client.

*I always think of transactional versus transformational coaching and I say transformational coaching does change people's lives.* Participant 4.

There were also times when the coach felt that they had got it wrong by acting courageously. They wondered if they had been acting to their own agenda or fulfilling their own needs. Negative outcomes included clients feeling confronted and the cancelation of contracts, as well as coaches withdrawing their services or recommending an alternative route such as therapy.



## Turning Back

The category Turning Back included the themes of losing my nerve, seeing potential harm, reducing impact and emotional hangover.

Coaches lost their nerve when experiencing fear and insecurity, and on occasion, inappropriately aggressive behaviour from the client. They became over-cautious, feeling that their own ceiling had been reached in a challenging conversation and perhaps wondering, like Participant 9 “whether I’m making something up.” The participants sometimes lost confidence in their ability to find the right words to match the situation and felt a heightened pressure to ask insightful questions and deliver results:

*That (conversation) requires courage and bravery, and I’m not able to go there.* Participant 7.

Participants also turned back from courageous interventions when they foresaw potential harm for the client or, like Participant 5, suspected “that there was something a bit fragile there.” There was a concern that the client might be destabilised by the emotional impact of the conversation. Suspecting the client was not wholeheartedly engaged in the coaching assignment and concerns that the client was becoming too dependent on the coach were also mentioned as reasons for having avoided courageous action.

The impact of coaching was reduced because the work stayed at a transactional level. “We never got below the surface,” said Participant 10. There was a sense that the energy had been drained from the relationship and the client had been allowed to avoid the issue. The principal concern was over lost opportunities:

*It feels like perhaps you’re missing an opportunity to get somewhere quicker and therefore deeper.* Participant 8.

Where coaches felt that they had shied away from a courageous route, they were left with negative feelings such as irritation, disappointment and emptiness, and the incident was often taken to supervision.

## Discussion

The present study is the first to investigate how coaches perceive the role of courage in their development and practice. It found that they view courage as being integral to development and associate it with their most effective practice. This discussion starts by investigating the author’s own reflexive relationship with the study, before presenting a conceptual framework which is scrutinised against the existing literature. Limitations and future directions are also considered.

Rennie (2012) encourages researchers to advertise their relationship with their own work and the author does so here through Wilkinson’s (1998) tiered reflexive prism. On the personal level, it required courage to leave the safety of an established corporate career to retrain as a coach. Professionally, I have worked to overcome a tendency toward introversion and so it has taken courage to skillfully manage interventions such as challenging and confronting clients. At a disciplinary level, my ontological viewpoint errs heavily towards social constructivism. Throughout the course of the research I have become aware of seeking vindication for my own experiences and to compare them with the experience of others – while seeking to maintain an adherence to process and protocol that ensures the validity of a project that has fostered a greater forthrightness in my own practice.

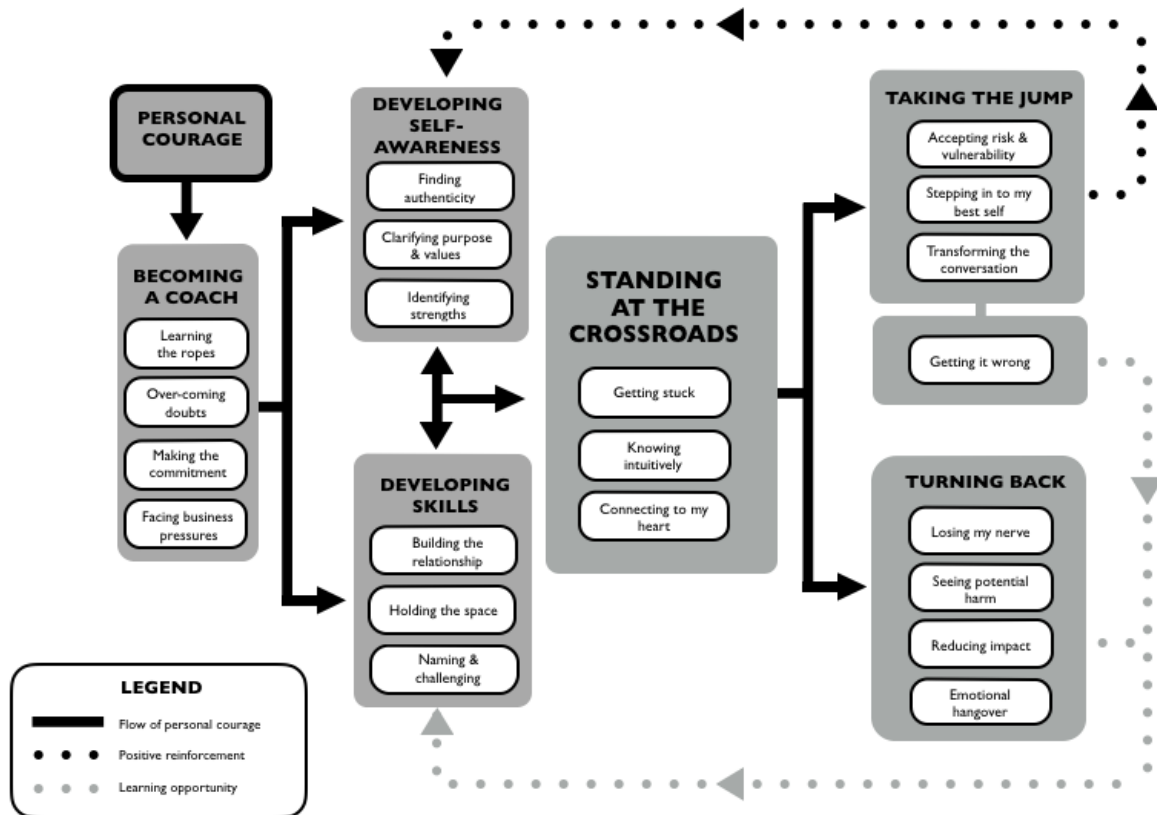
The emerging conceptual framework of the way coaches perceive the role of courage in their development and practice is represented in Figure 1. Personal courage is seen to be integral to an

ongoing cycle of increasing self-awareness and professional development. Courage is required when deciding to become a coach and then in embodying the craft via the acquisition of greater self-awareness and mastering of technical skills. Coaches at all stages of development will, in key moments, find themselves standing at a crossroads, at which they can take the jump in to a courageous intervention that might well transform the conversation, or turn back to less challenging territory. Courageous experiences enrich the coach's practice. Positive experiences reinforce authenticity and confidence and negative experiences provide learning opportunities, often via supervision. In this way, the deployment of courage, while not always successful in the moment of practice, is a catalyst in the coach's ongoing development. The experiences create greater self-awareness and are integrated into the coach's approach to practice until the cycle starts again as they inevitably encounter another coaching crossroads.

The concerns of coaches at the start of their career are well-represented in the literature. De Haan (2008) suggested that their principal tension is doubt and Eniola (2017) identified emotional currents such as anxiety, fear and overwhelm. New coaches are unlikely to feel able to cope with the unconscious dynamics of executive coaching and their difficulties are compounded by being less likely than more senior colleagues to undertake supervision (Turner 2010). The current study suggests that harnessing courage helps coaches to overcome these issues.

By highlighting the role of courage in the acquisition of self-awareness and skills, the current study offers a fresh perspective from which to view an essential phase of coaching development. Drake's (2011) model of coaching mastery emphasises the growth of personal alongside the attainment of evidence-based skills and O'Neill (2007, p. 21) underscores this duality, stating that coaches are able to differentiate themselves in the market when they can articulate technical decisions and judgments and stay emotionally connected to their clients.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the coach's perspective on the role of courage in their development and practice.



The current research suggests that courage is required not only before coaches are able to let their own self become the principal instrument in the coaching process (Bachkirova, 2016) but also to attain self-knowledge via self-reflection, supervision and continuing professional development (Bollich, Johannet and Vazire, 2011).

The current research showed that courage is required by coaches when developing new skills. The investment here is important because the more techniques a coach is able to employ, the better client perceptions of the outcome (de Haan et al., 2012). The skills most commonly used by coaches are those required for building trust in the relationship, asking open questions and clarifying and unpacking the coachee's challenges and concerns (Newson & Dent, 2011). The effectiveness of the work of more experienced coaches relies upon their ability to handle tension and analyse the coaching relationship in the critical moments when there is unpredictability and deeper emotions emerge (de Haan, 2008a). Ensuring that their skills can thrive in a non-hierarchical relationship where the coachee and the coach are equal partners (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2014a), and embracing the initial awkwardness of remaining silent in sessions (Kline, 1999, p.51) are further examples of coaching development in which this study suggests courage plays a part.

The category of Standing at the Crossroads seems to occupy the same stage of the coaching process as the critical moments identified by de Haan et al. (2010), which revealed that there are, on average, at least two critical moments in each coaching session. In such moments the coach should prepare for doubts, ruptures and strong emotions, and the present study suggests that mobilising courage is a significant element of that preparation. Yet courage need not always be deployed to push for epiphanies and grand insights, because support and reflection might be sufficient to meet the client's needs (de Haan et al., 2010). The literature endorses a courageous

reaching for intuition, which is cited as being helpful in identifying roadblocks on the client's coaching journey and "heightened intuition," which develops out of strong empathy with the client, helps the practitioner to develop insights and modify their approach to the client (Megginson & Clutterbuck, p.106; p.90). Intuition is recognised as being central to the efficacy of transpersonal coaching and emerges most effectively within a trusting relationship (Rowan, 2014, p.154). Coaches rely on their empathetic and intuitive skills and are ready to act on a hunch, with positive outcomes occurring when the coach's intuition elicits fresh perspective (Moons, 2016). The work of Kahneman and Klein (2009) might give novice coaches pause for thought before courageously giving full reign to their intuition, however. They posit that intuition, riding on skills excellence, enhances the work of experts but tends to undermine the task performance of novices.

The belief of participants that they were going beyond the use of tools when acting courageously is vindicated by Hardingham (2004, p.93). She cites the view of family therapist Salvador Minuchin that techniques are best learnt in order, ultimately, to be forgotten as the practitioner integrates them in to a bespoke and personal style that relies directly on in-the-moment interaction with the client. Similarly, Cavanagh and Lane (2012) posit that the complex adaptive systems which provide the background context for most coaching mean that assignments are unique and take place on "the edge of chaos." Previous models do not apply and new solutions, devised in the moment, are required. Coaching competencies represent scaffolding for practitioners at novice and intermediate levels but may provide less value for the optimal performance of coaches at higher levels (Drake, 2011). The courageous conversations depicted by the participants tallies with the seventh, integrative, level of coaching dialogue identified by Megginson and Clutterbuck (2012, p.34). Here, the client adopts a more holistic perspective and is better able to resolve inner conflicts and find greater balance and a clearer sense of self. Clear echoes here of Participant 9's sense of stepping into their best self. Similarly, Hardingham (2004, p.100) suggests that when themes such as spirituality are discussed, the coaching partnership has reached the deepest level of psychological rapport, which overlaps with Participant 1's connection with their heart and soul.

The present study identifies supervision as a likely route for coaches who have turned back from courageous interventions as they seek to understand and learn from their experiences. This tallies with Passmore and McGoldrick (2009) who observe that what coaches take to supervision is often based upon difficult or challenging assignments, while Bachkirova (2016) believes that courage is required to take issues to supervision and expose practice to a colleague.

## **Limitations**

While the author of the current study has advertised his own reflexivity above, it is inherent in grounded research that the outcome is inevitably influenced by the choices and decisions of the researcher (Mruck & Mey, 2007, p.519). The study's purposeful recruitment strategy deliberately adopted the principle of maximum variation in order to understand the perceptions of a wide range of coaches. However, the development of a theory necessitates the homogenisation of responses as the data are pooled and the nuances of sentiments from different perspectives, such as those between novice and more experienced coaches, are inevitably forsaken (Morse, 2007, p. 232).

## **Future directions**

The current study has identified that courage plays a part in the ongoing development and practice of coaches. Future research might seek to place courage within other characteristics that might be at play for coaches throughout their career. Future research might also investigate the apparent tension between best practice (as taught in coaching schools and required in the accreditation process) and the deployment of courage in coaching. This tension, which relates to the readiness of coaches to go beyond tools and techniques, was detected at code level, but at insufficient frequency to establish a theme. Further exploration of this area would be beneficial to the training and development of future coaches.

## Conclusion

The intention of this study was to establish a theoretical understanding of the role that courage plays in the development and practice of coaches, from the perspective of a variety of coaches from different fields. Given the scant research into this area, a grounded theory methodology was used. The research revealed that courage plays an ongoing role throughout a coaching career and is integral to a cycle of increasing self-awareness and professional development. It is needed when coaching is decided upon as a career choice and as the novice coach acquires the skills and self-knowledge of a more proficient and experienced practitioner. Coaches encounter crossroads in their practice, often finding that by following their intuition they can courageously facilitate transformative shifts in awareness for their clients. If they turn back from the crossroads, they find their effectiveness reduced and may well take the episode to supervision. The study complements and adds depth to existing research and suggests that greater awareness and understanding of, and attention to, courage might further enhance the development and practice of coaches.

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