Academic Paper

The experience of positive psychology coaching following unconscious bias training: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experience of four professionals who engaged in positive psychology coaching following an implicit association test and unconscious bias training. Unconscious bias training focuses on a human limitation, avoidance goals, and can result in defensiveness. In contrast, positive psychology coaching leverages strengths, intrinsically motivated approach goals and positive affect. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was applied to analyse data gathered via semi-structured interviews. Findings reveal that participants were self-conscious about being perceived negatively and they experienced deep introspection and reflexivity. Participants also reported increased self-efficacy, motivation to improve and feeling safe to discuss previously avoided personal issues.

Introduction

The workplace diversity training industry has been estimated to be worth almost US$8 billion per year (Lipman, 2018) and at least 35% of UK and US organisations planned to increase investment in 2018 (Jackson, 2017). Training often targets implicit bias, also known as unconscious bias (UB) which is believed to play a significant role in workplace discrimination (McGregor-Smith, 2017). UB is defined "as the views and opinions that we are unaware of; they are automatically activated and frequently operate outside conscious awareness and affect our everyday behaviour and decision making" (Equality and Human Rights Commission; EHRC, 2018, p.4). Increased investment into unconscious bias training (UBT) exists despite academic debate regarding its relevance and effectiveness (e.g. Noon, 2018).

UBT typically involves an assessment of UB such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), (see Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), and is followed by education regarding the negative impact of UB and strategies on how to reduce it (EHRC, 2018, p.5). Training is often made compulsory by the organisation and risks backfiring by inducing feelings of defensiveness (Hausmann et al., 2014). It has even been proposed that training efforts may inadvertently reinforce bias (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015; Kulik, Perry, & Bourhis, 2000). In contrast, positive psychology coaching (PPC) leverages strengths, intrinsically motivated approach goals and positive affect (Burke, 2018). PPC is underpinned by core positive psychology theories (Passmore & Oades, 2014) such as Broaden-and-Build Theory (BBT) (see Fredrickson, 2001); Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (see Ryan & Deci, 2000); and Strengths Theory (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) which emphasise the benefits of positive affect, intrinsic motivation and strengths respectively.

This study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (see Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to explore the lived experience of four professionals who received a PPC session following an IAT and online UBT ("Addressing Unconscious Bias," n.d.). The study offers insight into how individuals understand, interpret and draw meaning from these interventions. The phenomenon design was guided by two core questions:

1. What is it like to bring UB into an individual's awareness using an IAT/UBT?
2. What is the experience of bringing an approach-oriented intervention that leverages positive emotions, strengths and intrinsic motivation such as PPC, into the process?

The research fields of diversity, coaching and positive psychology have all called for more qualitative research (Farndale, Biron, Briscoe, & Raghuram, 2015; Grant, 2017; Hefferon, Ashfield, Waters, & Synard, 2017). IPA in particular is recommended when exploring "complex" and "poorly understood" phenomena (McCormack & Joseph, 2018, p.4). This guided the choice of research design for this study, which is the first of its kind to explore UBT as a phenomenon. Researchers, practitioners and potential participants interested in understanding how UBT is experienced will benefit from this research. Similarly, researchers and practitioners in coaching and positive psychology will benefit by understanding how PPC is experienced alongside an intervention that has contrasting underlying principles.

Literature Review

This literature review has two parts; the first part will review UBT, and the second part will review PPC.

Part One: Unconscious Bias Training (UBT)

UBT focuses on reducing a human limitation: automatic, subconscious bias against outgroups. Outgroups are diverse groups with demographic differences (e.g., race, gender) that are legally protected due to "a history of intergroup prejudice, stigma, discrimination, or oppression" (Ramarajan & Thomas, 2011, p. 553). Noon (2018) argues there are several problems with the underlying principles of UBT. In the case of racial bias for example, UBT only targets the aversive racist whose explicit beliefs conflict with their unconscious attitudes (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). UBT is less likely to engage the modern racist whose conscious, socially acceptable views may result in the absence of supportive behaviour towards outgroups rather than explicit prejudice (negative bias). Furthermore, a heightened awareness of bias can cause the aversive racist to worry excessively about making a mistake and result in avoidant behaviour of outgroups (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986, p.8); explained by the presence of intergroup anxiety (Stephan, 2014). This emphasises how little control one has over UB (Devine, 1989). Holding someone to account for unconsciously driven behaviour therefore, is a moral, ethical debate (Jost, 2019). Indeed, UBT is a

sensitive matter that has the potential to backfire and increase defensiveness or bias (Hausmann et al., 2014; Kulik et al., 2000).

It is also assumed that UB can be successfully measured. A primary measure, the IAT, reports mixed results for validity (Blanton & Mitchell, 2011; Jost, 2019). The question of whether implicit attitudes can be changed and what influence they have on explicit attitudes and behaviour is also difficult to answer. Several meta-analyses reveal that whilst UBT may raise awareness, only small and temporary effects on implicit bias, and limited effects on explicit attitudes and behaviour have been observed (EHRC, 2018; FitzGerald, Martin, Berner, & Hurst, 2019; Forscher et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2016). This contrasts with findings that link the IAT to behaviour (Kurdi et al., 2019). Indeed, the link between prejudice (the attitude) and discrimination (the behaviour) has long been debated (Schütz & Six, 1996).

Changing attitudes is reported to be difficult to achieve in diversity training. However, it is most likely when individuals are motivated to engage in training in organisations that truly value diversity (Kalinoski et al., 2013). Furthermore, not having bias against outgroups is not the same as allophilia; liking outgroups. Reducing disliking of outgroups may reduce discrimination but will not necessarily result in supportive behaviour towards outgroups. Allophilia is a better predictor of this and therefore, mixing the two constructs (liking and disliking) as if they were opposite ends of one continuum may contribute towards mixed or contradictory results in research. Arguably, allophilia also needs to be targeted in interventions (Pittinsky, Rosenthal, & Montoya, 2011), especially in the case of modern racism to increase supportive behaviour (Noon, 2018).

Part Two: Positive Psychology Coaching (PPC)

Coaching facilitates development through a goal-directed, self-regulatory process of planning and action that requires an intention to change, self-awareness and self-insight (Grant, 2001). Self-efficacy - believing in one's capacity to perform (Bandura, 1994) – is an integral component of the self-regulatory process (Carver & Scheier, 1998). The coach-coachee relationship is reported to be instrumental in achieving coaching outcomes and, consistent with diversity training studies, behaviour is thought to be easier to influence than attitudes (Sonesh et al., 2015). Meta-analytic studies support the effectiveness of coaching and suggest that coaching can facilitate transfer and application of learning (Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2014). Results support that coaching as a diversity intervention has the potential to promote self-regulation and target behavioural change; two aims of UBT for which evidence is weak (EHRC, 2018). The potential drawback with coaching, as with diversity training, is that it requires a motivation to engage in order to be effective. Furthermore, whilst coaching research is growing, it is limited by research design, theoretical foundations and the relatively low number of studies (Grant, Cavanagh, Parker, & Passmore, 2010).

The disciplines of positive psychology (PP) and coaching psychology (CP) naturally complement each other as both strive to support the development and potential of human-beings by focusing on what is right with individuals rather than what is wrong (Kauffman & Linley, 2007). PPC is guided by "a shared focus on unlocking potential, building on people's strengths, enhancing subjective wellbeing and supporting sustainable optimal functioning" (van Nieuwerburgh & Oades, 2017, p.100). PPC is underpinned by several theories that each contribute towards growth and wellbeing (Passmore & Oades, 2014), discussed further below:

Wellbeing Theory

An overarching aim of coaching is to enhance wellbeing and evidence suggests that it works (Theeboom et al., 2014). Theories such as PERMA™ outlining five core building blocks to wellbeing (i.e., Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment; Seligman, 2018) are leveraged in the coaching process to engage the person as a whole. Within

diversity research, a focus on the commercial benefits of diversity has detracted from a focus on wellbeing (Guillaume et al., 2014), including the impact of UBT on wellbeing.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT posits that motivation is affected by three basic psychological needs essential for wellbeing; autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Coaching can strengthen motivation by providing coachees with the freedom of choice (autonomy), making salient the coachee's inner resources to reach their potential (competence) and providing a consistently supportive relationship (relatedness) (Spence & Oades, 2011). SDT supports the theory that autonomous, intrinsic goals aligning with a person's core values results in sustained effort and satisfaction in goal attainment more so than externally reinforced goals (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998). This approach may present challenges in diversity training if a person's intrinsic needs conflict with diversity goals, however.

Strengths Theory

Strengths are considered core aspects of a person's character that feel authentic, exciting, natural, self-regulating, inevitable, invigorating and intrinsically desired (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.18). Strengths coaching supports goal achievement and wellbeing (Burke & Linley, 2007; Govindji & Linley, 2007). This study leverages Peterson and Seligman's (2004) Values-in-Action (VIA) framework that outlines twenty-four character strengths organised under six universally valued virtues. Burke (2018) endorses the use of positive psychology interventions in PPC. To facilitate participants' strengths in this study, a true-best-self written exercise was designed and incorporated into the coaching inspired by the theory of the true-self. This posits we all have an innate, intrinsic desire to behave virtuously (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014, p.1). Although there is debate regarding whether the true self actually exists or is simply a subjective, psychological concept (Strohminger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017); thinking about a true-self has been linked to reduced intergroup bias and supportive behaviour towards outgroups (De Freitas & Cikara, 2018).

Broaden-and-Build Theory (BBT)

BBT (Fredrickson, 2001) asserts that positive emotions result in broadened "thought-action repertoires" (p.218), open-mindedness and flexible thinking, thereby facilitating an ability to broaden one's perspective and take advantage of new opportunities. This results in an "upward spiral" (p.225) of positivity building from further resources such as social relationships. In contrast, people in a neutral or negative mood state are likely to narrow and focus their thinking as a survival instinct.

In relation to diversity, positive affect is linked to an increased ability to overcome difficulties in distinguishing other race faces and can nurture more inclusive social categorisations and perceived familiarity. However, the latter findings have not focused on race specifically (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005). A contrasting finding is that one is more likely to stereotype when in a positive mood than in a negative mood. Later studies revealed that a pre-condition of accessing either egalitarian goals or counter-stereotypic thoughts resulted in lower activation of stereotypes by those in a positive mood in contrast to those in a negative mood (Huntsinger, Isbell, & Clore, 2014). This suggests a more complex dynamic and emphasises the importance of both positive affect and goal orientation together.

Critique of Positive Psychology

PP has been criticised for its lack of applicability within multicultural contexts (Becker & Marecek, 2008) as well as other diverse populations such as those with disabilities (Niemiec, Shogren, & Wehmeyer, 2017). Furthermore, Ramarajan and Thomas (2011, p.560) highlighted that "a positive

approach to diversity may seem ironic, idealistic, or perhaps even misguided" by existing diversity scholars given the legacy of discrimination in society. PPC could face criticism for ignoring the problem. However, it is not suggested this approach should replace wider efforts to address discrimination or improve social systems.

Methodology

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design (Smith et al., 2009), underpinned by the theory of phenomenology (Husserl, 1970). The choice of methodology reflects our post-positivist ontological stance of critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008). Our epistemological position is that whilst a truth may exist, absolute objectivity is an ideal. In reality, this will be influenced by subjective interpretation by a person within their context (Heidegger, 1962). We consider the experience and meaning attributed to phenomena to be 'real' and of primary significance. Therefore, it is not our aim to provide conclusive data on the relationship between bias and behaviour, nor to prove whether anything can be changed meaningfully with an intervention. Rather, we turn our attention towards "the scientific analysis of subjectivity" (Feest, 2012, p.1) to explore the participants' conscious experiences.

IPA is suitable for exploring psychological phenomena that are difficult to understand (McCormack & Joseph, 2018). This study explored how the unconscious is perceived at a conscious level by individuals; what it means when they attempt to bring this into awareness and try to change beliefs, attitudes or behaviour using PPC. This can offer valuable insight unable to be obtained from randomised control trials and other quantitative research methods for which research already exists within this field. Neither method is superior, rather it is a question of which is most appropriate given what we are seeking to know (Grant, 2017). At the time of writing, only two other studies exploring the lived experience of unconscious bias were found; one of women on the receiving end of UB (Perry, Murphy, & Dovidio, 2015) and another of physicians whose behaviour was influenced by UB (Rubinstein & Bentwich, 2017). None have explored the experience of UBT.

Participants

Following ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee at the University of East London, four participants were selected by convenience sampling. The coaching was set out as an opportunity to develop inclusive behaviours as well as confidence in managing unconscious bias; with pre-requisites activities involving online UBT and completion of an IAT. Participants were a homogenous group: professional females aged 30-59 who experienced the same online diversity training and had not completed an IAT before. The sample was not intended to represent any particular social group, or specific bias, since it would have been challenging to predetermine UB and anyone can hold biases of different forms (Allport, 1954, p.xvi).

Procedure

Following a briefing and consent process, participants completed the IAT and online UBT. Each participant indicated coaching readiness through the completion of a short questionnaire before engaging in a PPC session. Coaching included the true-best-self exercise, instructions were as follows:

> *Imagine you are in a context where you are meeting and interacting with a broad range of people. Imagine there are people from all walks of life; both familiar, but also unfamiliar. There is the opportunity to approach all individuals equally. Now imagine you are your **True Best Self** in this situation. Who are you? How do you behave? How do you feel? What do you do? How do you contribute to your social interactions and relationships? What role do you play in a group,*

society or community? Establish a clear vision of your True Best Self (self-reflective written exercise – 10-15 minutes).

Coaching questions followed to support the identification of character strengths present in the vision; leveraged during coaching to achieve intrinsic, positive, socially oriented goals. Participants were asked to keep a private journal during their engagement in the phenomenon for the purpose of remembering their experience with ease during the interview. A week after the phenomenon, each participant was interviewed for 30-60 minutes, using a semi-structured interview schedule.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The IPA process (Smith et al., 2009) was followed with the exception that the interview audio was played whilst reading during the initial note-taking stage. Voice intonation assisted with grasping the intended meaning of words. Analysing the data at descriptive, linguistic and conceptual levels facilitated the double hermeneutic process through which the researcher attempted to interpret the participants' interpretation of the phenomena (Smith et al. p.21). Transcripts were uploaded into a qualitative analysis software program (NVivo) and text was grouped and categorised into themes. Each interview was analysed separately and reviewed by the second author before progressing to the next. Themes were then transferred to a spreadsheet to compare convergence and divergence. From this, six core themes were extracted and reviewed by both authors. To uphold quality and ensure themes objectively represented all participants' experience, an attempt to bracket presuppositions was made (Tufford & Newman, 2010) supported by the use of a reflexive journal (Finlay, 2002) as well as discussions between the authors.

Results

Six superordinate themes were identified detailed in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1. Summary of superordinate and subordinate themes

1. Worry about other people's perceptions	2. Introspection & reflexivity	3. Enhanced self-awareness	4. Increased self-efficacy	5. Motivation to improve self	6. Facing deeply personal issues
• Worried about test results revealing bias • Worried about 'eyes' on the Best Self writing • Worried about bias presenting in behaviour • Worried about being arrogant or grandiose if already is best self	• Assimilating assessment results with self concept • Questioning which is authentic self? • Self reflection and analysis • Re-negotiating self identity • Curiosity to learn more	• Learned about the human mind • Increased understanding and awareness of own behaviours on others • Better understanding of personal resources and strengths • Increased clarity overall on social contexts and dynamics with others	• Feelings of enjoyment, energy • Feeling of being helped and supported • Feelings of hope, pride, validation and reassurance • Feeling of increased confidence • Increased mental health and reduced anxiety	• Belief that change is possible • Desire to work on change and become best version of self • Feels like the right time to do something • Driven to improve wellbeing and reduce feelings of discomfort	• Felt safe to talk about issues that were deeply personal or therapeutic in nature • Tension between practical goals and these personal issues • Needed a brain dump before setting practical goals

1. Worry about other people's perceptions

Participants reported experiencing anxiety about their UB; specifically feeling "nervous" (P1) about having high UB and how it might influence their behaviour without their knowledge.

It's very ruminous - ruminative because they, you know, if I think I've made one error, I will go over and over and over […] so I then trip over myself in trying not to do anything wrong when I interact with somebody. (P4)

I do feel a little bit defensive about, um, …not being biased is really important to me […] I suppose that is something to do with maybe an anxiety about being judged. (P3)

Participants also reported feeling worried during the coaching; for example, two participants appeared self-conscious of "other people's eyes" (P4) on the written exercise despite being given instructions that is was not intended to be shared;

Part of me was like as I was writing it, I was like, oh but I might have to read this to [the coach] (P2)

The layers of judgment […] I want to write it nice. So should I do like a nice creative writing side of me or shall I...? (P3)

Two participants appeared conscious of not being self-critical enough when identifying potential development areas;

Oh, do you not have much development to go then [refers to self in third person]? You're like, is this the final product? (P2)

Overall, participants appeared self-conscious and worried about how others perceived them.

2. Introspection and reflexivity

All participants reported engaging in a process of deep introspection and reflexivity during which they assimilated assessment results, training knowledge and re-considered their self-concept. They found it difficult to reconcile how their UB influenced their behaviour. They appeared very curious to learn more about themselves;

And so the whole basis for which you were coaching me [inaudible] has, has also been about bias and identity […] Am I being biased or am I actually…? (P3)

This, followed by the true-best-self exercise, led to a comparison of the various selves; the unconscious, the conscious and the true. Participants reflected on their authenticity and where the "real self" lay across this spectrum:

It was kind of those contrasty bits about where is my unconscious bias and where am I, um, prompted by something I don't own almost. And then what's the real me where, where does the real me sit, where is the real response and so like when we went on then to do strengths and things. I think those were things I was thinking like what is the, what is my real strength, what is my real, um… what's the authentic me in this? (P4)

This was just the beginning of a longer thought process revealed by the metaphor of sowing seeds that two of the participants used;

It's a seed that you planted that's not finished growing. (P3)

3. Enhanced self-awareness

All participants reported an enhanced level of self-awareness. UBT provided them with valuable psycho-education and, combined with self-insights from coaching, participants were able to

rationalise both their own and others' thoughts and behaviours. The coaching helped participants to broaden their perspective and understanding of situations.

It was just like another wow, aha moment of oh my goodness […] what did come out through the coaching is really realizing how much of um, so much of what I was doing was like from the fear of failure (P2)

I guess seeing the bigger picture instead of seeing it like tunnel vision, I was actually, as the session went on, I was actually able to see it in a wider context (P1)

Three of the participants discovered unrealised strengths and re-contextualised these as personal resources;

For example, the creativity. How I'd sort of put that, put myself down for that. I was only seeing creativity in one way. It opened my mind to think, well, actually creativity is also this other, all in all different ways and how I am creative, but just different to other people. (P1)

4. Increased self-efficacy

Participants reported a range of positive experiences during the coaching such as enjoyment, openness and energy. The true-best-self exercise specifically induced feelings such as pride, hope, validation or reassurance;

Um, it made me feel proud of myself as well, that actually I do. (P1)

But then I guess the more the coaching went on and we were talking about your best self, the more I did want to reveal that, yes I do want to be like this […] But then I realised that I have those qualities and it's great. And actually that should give me hope that I'm close to kind of achieving that. (P2)

The combination of positive experiences and identifying internal strengths as resources appeared to give participants the confidence that they could achieve their goals and manage personal challenges.

5. Motivation to improve self

All participants indicated a belief that change was possible and a renewed sense of motivation to make positive changes. In determining a course of action, it seemed easier for participants to focus on what they could control; their conscious thoughts and behaviour. Despite participants indicating that they still needed to think and "unpick things" (P1), they appeared to conclude that it is the action rather than the thought that counts:

I might have this critical voice that says, oh, that person's this or that person [...] but that's just a thought. It's nothing more than a thought. And it's then like, so what does that mean for me? Does it mean I don't want to talk to them? Does it mean I don't want to? If it means that then I need to do something about it, do you know? (P4)

Three participants reported feeling like it was the right time to address this. For example, "It's time now to face it [the fear]" (P1) and that having an increased level of self-awareness meant that "'ignorance is bliss' if off the table" (P2).

As well as considering how to be more supportive of outgroups, participants seemed motivated to improve their own wellbeing and be "kinder" (P1) to themselves. This was driven by a desire to reduce feelings of discomfort in certain contexts.

6. Facing deeply personal issues

Finally, all participants raised issues of a deeply personal nature during the coaching as they attempted to understand themselves.

> *It also brought to the surface some of the, yeah, some feelings that hadn't sort of addressed before for a long time […] or, I kind of knew it was there, but I just didn't have, I didn't really want to sort of deal with it […] and I didn't, I didn't come into the session thinking that's what I want to talk about that, but just kind of, it came out.* (P1)

Three participants experienced tension in setting goals or a purpose for the coaching. For some, this was related to the tension between practical and personal issues.

> *It was almost like I needed that brain dump because I'd learned all that stuff about the unconscious bias. Um, it had prompted some thinking that was very personal and, and needed therapeutic input.* (P4)

The issues related to personal experiences that were potential underlying causes to unconscious bias or limitations in presenting as their true selves. Despite this, participants reported feeling less worry as the coaching progressed and described it as good for their mental health and wellbeing. It seems the interactive element of coaching provided a sense of support.

> *Um, so I, I think I was less anxious than I might have been […] and that was really helpful because I had a place to put it.* (P3)

> *It does help so much to speak to somebody […] in like a non-medical, I guess, you know, mental health way.* (P2)

Finally, three participants reported feeling a lack of emotionality in talking about their challenging personal issues which was uncharacteristic of them;

> *Even when I was like worrying, 'cause worrying to me is a, you know, a bad emotion. But I was kind of just, it was almost like I was tidying up, like I was filing the experience.* (P4)

Discussion

The six superordinate themes represented in Figure 1 will be discussed in relation to study aims and findings in the literature review. New references will also be introduced where relevant.

1. Worry about other people's perceptions

Concurrent with existing research, participants experienced worry about having unconscious bias. Participants likely experienced a threat of social embarrassment or exclusion in having their biases revealed (Leary, 2007; Noon, 2018). Feelings of worry pervaded the PPC session, despite the positively oriented nature of coaching. Specifically, during aspects of the coaching that might expose participants to judgment such as the content of their true-best-self writing and not being self-critical enough when identifying development opportunities.

A limitation of this study is that the coach is an ethnic minority which may have contributed towards some of the participants' worry about appearing biased (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). However, one participant was also an ethnic minority themselves and not all discussed cases of bias related to race.

Two participants reported having perfectionistic tendencies and being sensitive to criticism, suggesting a possible trait response. Another potential trigger is the research condition itself; participants might have felt worried about meeting the researcher's expectations (Rosenthal, 1966). Regardless of each participants' trigger for worry, the consistent factor was the heightened sensitivity to worry. As hypothesised, this could be explained by BBT, which posits that negative feelings associated with threat are likely to narrow focus and heighten protective and survival instincts (Fredrickson, 2001). In this case, the negative experience persisted alongside the positive experiences of PPC, concurring with evidence that positive and negative emotions are not unidimensional (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

Although worry is a negatively valenced emotion, it can be constructive and stimulate self-regulatory behaviour (Leary, 2007). This possibly supported the emergence of the fifth theme; motivation to improve self. Equally, the voluntary engagement of participants in this study suggests they were already concerned enough. An interesting question to explore is to what extent would worry present as a theme without an IAT/UBT? And what impact would this have on the emergence of other themes, particularly the motivation to improve self? It would also be useful to explore the differences in specific populations.

2. Introspection and reflexivity

Participants engaged in a process of deep introspection and reflexivity triggered by a perceived conflict between their IAT results and conscious attitudes. This could be explained by cognitive dissonance; a motivation to reduce psychological discomfort arising from the incongruence (Festinger, 1957). As participants went on to compare their unconscious and conscious selves to a true-best-self, they questioned their authenticity. For example, one participant asked "where does the real me sit?" (P4)

Concurrent with research, participants experienced difficulty identifying or controlling their unconscious thoughts (Devine, 1989). As participants attempted to establish self-concordant goals in line with SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), it was natural for them to focus on factors within their control (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998), such as their conscious values and behaviours. Participants concluded that unconscious thoughts are "just thoughts" (P4) and it is how you behave that is most important. Comparing themselves to an achievable standard such as the true-best-self is likely to have triggered a self-regulatory process (Carver & Scheier, 1998) and relates to the fifth theme; motivation to improve self.

Motivation does not necessarily equate to goal-progress, however. Self-reflection has the potential to become ruminative rather than solution-focused, obstructing a person's capacity to strive towards goals (Grant, 2001). If goal-progress is to be made, Grant (2001) argues that self-reflection will tend to decline as self-insight increases. Participants expressed a need to continue with introspection and reflexivity, reflected by the metaphors; "sowing seeds" (P4) and "young thoughts" (P1). Concurrent with Grant's (2001) findings, three out of four participants reported feeling challenged with goal-setting during this first session. Whilst self-insight did increase (refer to the next theme), there was a need to continue self-reflection. This study is limited in that only one coaching session was delivered. Beyond this, it is unclear how long participants might continue in self-reflection and whether it would be constructive or ruminative. Grant (2001) suggests that coaching could facilitate a constructive form of self-reflection which would support rather than stall goal-attainment.

3. Enhanced self-awareness

UBT appeared to enhance participants' understanding of psychosocial processes which facilitated a better understanding of their interpersonal exchanges. This aligns with findings that UBT enhances awareness (EHRC, 2018). Coaching also facilitates self-awareness, through an

actualising tendency where people naturally gravitate towards what is best for themselves so they can realise their personal potential and enhance their performance (Linley & Harrington, 2006). Theories of the true-self (Newman et al., 2014) and strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) are also based on this self-actualising tendency and likely facilitated participants' self-awareness and subsequent confidence in their social interactions. Conversely, too much self-awareness can result in overthinking and subsequent performance decline (Carver & Scheier, 1998). One example is the tendency to behave awkwardly in the presence of an outgroup member after becoming more self-aware of bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986, p.8; Stephan, 2014), as was observed in this study. This raises the question; is it necessary to use an IAT or is education on unconscious bias enough?

4. Increased self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their own capability to achieve a goal and should result in increased commitment and perseverance (Bandura, 1994). Carver and Scheier (1998) discovered that increased self-awareness supports self-regulatory behaviour only when individuals compare themselves against an achievable standard, otherwise the reverse effects can be observed. This emphasises the importance of self-efficacy in the self-regulatory process. It is likely that participants' comparison against the true-best-self supported the emergence of self-efficacy. Indeed, participants reported experiencing positive emotions such as energy, hope and pride during the strengths-based PPI and coaching. Subsequently, they experienced a broader perspective and identified internal resources that increased their confidence in achieving goals or addressing challenges. This aligns with research suggesting that strengths coaching increases positive affect, goal self-concordance and commitment (Linley & Harrington, 2006). As hypothesised, the experience of positive emotions likely resulted in the "broadened thought-action repertoires" described by BBT (Fredrickson, 2001). Whilst there is a possibility that positive emotions may lead to over-confidence and decline in self-regulatory behaviour (Huntsinger et al., 2014), there is a balance to be achieved in supporting self-efficacy and commitment to goals.

The increase in self-efficacy could also be attributed to the UBT as Kalinoski et al. (2013) report an effect size of (d = 0.55) on self-efficacy from diversity training. Furthermore, coaching likely played a role as Theeboom et al., (2014) report an effect size of g = 0.43 for coping (which includes self-efficacy) as an outcome of coaching. Finally, Grant and O'Connor, (2018) argue that it is the combination of solution-focused questions and positive affect that contributes towards the most impactful coaching outcomes, further supporting PPC as an approach.

5. Motivation to improve self

All participants indicated a motivation to improve the way they supported diverse groups and believed that change was possible. This concurs with findings that a focus on the true self increases supportive behaviour towards outgroups (De Freitas & Cikara, 2018). This result suggests a possibility that participants increased allophilia (Pittinsky et al., 2011); potentially stimulated by the virtuous nature of character strengths. Further research may reveal more. As discussed in the first theme, feelings of worry about others' perceptions could also have contributed towards this drive. Although participants could not necessarily identify with their unconscious bias, they were motivated to improve their own wellbeing by addressing feelings of discomfort relating to intergroup or social anxiety (Leary, 2007; Stephan, 2014). Another likely driver is the increased level of self-efficacy, as evidence suggests this can enhance a person's motivation to demonstrate pro-diversity behaviour following diversity training (Combs & Luthans, 2007).

6. Facing deeply personal issues

Whilst the coaching-therapy boundary was maintained, all participants felt open enough to raise deeply personal issues within the coaching. Some participants reported that they felt supported with their mental health. The preparedness to share could be attributed to a good relationship with

the coach (Sonesh et al., 2015). However, three out of four participants indicated feeling surprise at how open they were given it was the first coaching session. There is a possibility that the experience of positive emotions made participants more open to establishing an open, constructive relationship with the coach (Fredrickson, 2001). Future areas of research might explore what impact positive emotions have on the coaching relationship in PPC.

An unexpected finding is that three out of four participants reported feeling able to discuss concerns without getting emotional which was uncharacteristic of them. This could be attributed to the combination of enhanced self-awareness, self-regulation and a focus on prosocial goals arising from the coaching. These are proposed components of a mental framework that support a state of mindfulness - where the element of judgment in experience is suspended (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). This suggests that coaching (or therapy if more appropriate) that incorporates these components could support participants in managing personal issues.

Limitations and future research

The study design means that results should not be generalised. The researcher was also the coach in the phenomenon which will have influenced the experience of the phenomenon, results and interpretation. Whilst this could be viewed as a negative source of bias, it can also be embraced as offering richness to the data (Finlay, 2002). For example, it was useful to consider the dynamic between a participant and coach of differing races and how this affected coaching when discussing racial bias. The reflexive journal and supervisory conversations with the second author were thus important in managing quality.

The study revealed several potential avenues for further research:

- explore the experience/outcomes of positive psychology coaching for diversity without including an IAT or UBT
- conduct similar research with different populations (e.g., voluntary, mandatory, specific social groups)
- explore the impact of unconscious bias assessment and training on wellbeing
- explore the relationship between allophilia and character strengths

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the experience of completing an IAT and UBT followed by a PPC session. Theories that UBT can cause participants to feel threatened (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Stephan, 2014; Hausmann et al., 2014; Kulik et al., 2000) were supported by the experiences of participants in this study who demonstrated concern about their unconscious biases. Consistent with both UBT and coaching outcome research (EHRC, 2018; Linley & Harrington, 2006); self-awareness seems to have increased. The important question of how much is too much self-awareness? (Carver & Scheier, 1998) became relevant as this triggered a process of deep introspection and reflexivity which may explain why some participants found it difficult to set goals during the coaching conversations. This is consistent with Grant's (2001) observation that increased self-reflection can impede goal progress. Following an exercise that refocused participants on their strengths, participants reported experiencing positive affect that appeared to broaden their thinking and perspectives, supporting Fredrickson's BBT (2001). Participants in the study reported a clear motivation to take positive action and felt confident that they had the ability and resources to do so. These are expected outcomes of applying both SDT and strengths in the coaching approach (Linley and Harrington, 2006) as well as experiencing diversity training (Kalinoski et al., 2013). As PPC also focuses on wellbeing, part of this motivation was attributed to participants' desire to improve their own levels of wellbeing. Indeed, the findings of this study

highlight how confronting one's unconscious bias can be deep, challenging work. Participants reported the benefits of having a trusted coaching relationship in which to address these challenges and felt able to raise personal issues that had previously been avoided in a constructive manner.

Acknowledging the results from this study cannot be generalised due to the number of participants, it is nonetheless useful to consider the potential implications of the study's findings for UBT practitioners and coaches working with clients in this context. Firstly, the perceived threat of addressing UB should not be underestimated as well as the potential impact this might have on a participants' ability to move forward with constructive action. Practitioners and coaches may wish to consider whether an IAT is absolutely necessary as the heightened self-awareness could result in increased anxiety and rumination that may contribute to the stalling of progress. Where it is deemed useful in providing an impetus for change, practitioners and coaches may benefit from communicating upfront that the training (particularly that involving the use of an IAT) may be uncomfortable. Making provisions for appropriate one-on-one support (e.g. coaching, counselling) may be beneficial. Finally, organisations may wish to consider the benefits of PPC as a constructive step in diversity training where it is important to increase confidence and commitment to diversity and inclusion goals and where there is a motivation to support the wellbeing of participants as they go through the process.

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