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Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcoa20

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To cite this article: Sofia Kurtsenovskaia & Julia Yates (21 Aug 2024): What defines the practice of existential coaching? A qualitative study of the perspectives of existential coaches, Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice, DOI: 10.1080/17521882.2024.2392485

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2024.2392485

Published online: 21 Aug 2024.

COACHING: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THEORY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE
https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2024.2392485

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What defines the practice of existential coaching? A qualitative study of the perspectives of existential coaches

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ABSTRACT

The coaching literature offers some definitions of existential coaching yet there is limited empirical research that describes the process of this approach. The aim of this study is to contribute to the field by exploring existential coaches' perspectives on the process and value of existential coaching. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine existential coaches and analysed thematically. We highlight three key themes. First, the coaches reported that this approach helps their clients deal with their existential questions by fostering skills such as self-reflection, and by transforming their mindset regarding freedom of choice, the human condition and finitude. Second, their main tool is their inner philosophy that is implicit in their work. Finally, the boundaries between existential coaching and existential therapy are significantly blurred. These findings serve as an initial ground for future guidelines and regulations to be established by the individual coaching practices and professional bodies.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 February 2024
Accepted 7 August 2024

KEYWORDS
Existential coaching; thematic analysis; coaching boundaries

Practice points

- Existential coaching offers valuable psycho-education, teaching clients to think philosophically, deepening their own self-awareness and leading to new perspectives on their own lives.
- Existential coaches' key tool is their own philosophical mindset.
- The boundaries between existential therapy and existential coaching are often very blurred.

Introduction

Existential coaching is defined as: 'A uniquely philosophical and deeply relational way of examining the paradoxes and challenges of human existence so as to empower clients to move forward in an authentic and reflective way' (New School of Psychotherapy & Counselling, 2023). The philosophical foundation of existential coaching provides the ground

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to work on deeper levels of the human psyche, exploring issues of existence, purpose, authenticity, fundamental beliefs about life, mortality, and finitude (van Deurzen, 2012). Existential coaching was created to transcend classical coaching approaches, inviting clients to delve into deep self-reflection and confront existential dilemmas (van Deurzen & Hanaway, 2012). As general anxiety rises among the population, attributed, to some degree, to the complexities of modern human existence, existential coaching offers a unique approach for its exploration (van Deurzen, 2012; Yalom, 2020). Yet, despite its potential to offer profound insights and transformational experiences, there is very little published academic research that explores the processes and impacts of existential coaching. This study aims to make a start on addressing this gap, offering what we believe is the first published study to explore the perceptions of nine existential coaches' on the process of this approach.

The background to existential coaching

Existential coaching has deep roots in existential therapy. Existential therapy is based on the foundational principles of existentialism that originated in the 19th and 20th centuries with philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and Frankl. It focuses on finitude, mortality, personal responsibility, and meaninglessness (Hanaway, 2020). For the last 20 years, coaches such as van Deurzen, Hanaway, Spinelli and Horner have been pioneers of promoting and educating people on their work in existential coaching, offering definitions and frameworks for existential coaching (Hanaway & Reed, 2014; Jacob, 2019; van Deurzen & Hanaway, 2012).

Identity and authenticity are key topics in existentialist philosophy. Kierkegaard (1846) introduced the notion of unconditional commitment and Heidegger (1962) developed Kierkegaard's ideas by focusing on how one can develop oneself and answer the question 'who am I?'. Drawing on these philosophical influences, existential coaching has taken authenticity and identity as core topics (Fusco et al., 2015). van Deurzen (2012) describes existential coaching, as helping people get 'in line with their best intentions, motivations and purpose' (2012, p. 19).

The links between existential coaching and authentic leadership have aroused some interest.

Fusco et al. (2015) review this literature, arguing that existential coaching fosters the development of authentic leadership by addressing key issues of values, identity, and motives. On a similar topic, Reynolds (2011) interviewed six senior leaders on the impact of coaching and noted the recurring themes of the development of identity and meaning. As newly appointed senior leaders step into a new leader identity, coaching can aid their identity development. Reynolds argues that the safe self-reflective space offered through existential coaching can help new leaders towards greater ownership of their roles and more confidence in their new identities as leaders. This can also be viewed as a transition period which is a common focus within existential coaching (Spinelli & Horner, 2018).

Mandic (2012) has provided numerous case studies of existential coaching and describes a pathway through existential coaching to authenticity, defining existence based on 'finitude, historical beings, freedom of choice and temporality' (p. 21). In his case studies, Mandic (2012) illustrates how existential coaching allows increases authenticity in coachees by enabling them to 'own up' to their lives and choices (p. 31).

De Haan argues that in classical coaching, a coach will assume a variety of positions, such as challenging, supporting, suggesting and exploring, even within a single session, depending on the needs of the client (de Haan, 2011; Hardingham, 2004). Jacob (2019) argues that due to the diversity of client personalities, needs and worldviews that an existential coach may face, the ability to switch between positions, together with active listening, presence and reflectiveness are crucial skills. Spinelli and Horner (2018) are slightly more specific in the description of existential coaching role, suggesting that in the field of existential coaching 'being' qualities are the most important. This contrasts with 'doing' skills which are focused on providing clients with specific actions. Spinelli and Horner (2018) suggest that in the nature of existentialism, coaching expertise is developed through the relational experience between the coach and the coachee's worldview constitutes the primary 'tool' (p.172). Peltier (2001) further discusses how coaches use strictly subjective tools that cannot be generalised. It is the coaches' mindset, therefore, rather than any particular tool or framework they use that influences the client's shift in perspective (Reynolds, 2011).

The published empirical literature is limited to a handful of small-scale studies but these do indicate some positive results from existential coaching. The potential outcomes of existential coaching on the clients appear to be diverse. Jopling (2012) describes how she coaches leaders from an existential perspective, and notes that she observes an improvement in authenticity in them. Le Bon and Arnaud identify the positive impact of existential coaching on key work and life decisions of clients (LeBon & Arnaud, 2012) and Krum (2012), reporting on the outcomes of an action-research project with six clients, identify improvements in work-related stress.

Spinelli and Horner (2018) believe that existential coaching allows coachees to make peace with their lived experience and thus increase their quality of life. They note that coachees who are deeply self-reflective and curious about the paradoxes of life tend to benefit from these interventions the most. Existential coaching requires the ability to be 'deeply challenged' and leads to the expansion of one's understanding of the human condition (Spinelli & Horner, 2018). Further, by providing a reflective space, existential coaching clients get an opportunity to explore their vulnerability. Reynolds' (2011) research has shown that a common theme among client stories was 'developing new capacities', achieved by allowing coachees to talk and work through their vulnerabilities. Fusco et al. (2015) consider one outcome of existential coaching to be the development of 'intellectual masters', as its philosophical foundation equips the clients to authentically evaluate their lives. Jacob (2019) notes that existential coaching clients 'tend to be resourceful', highlighting that existential coaching usually deals with non-clinical clients. Despite this, Jacob does suggest that in comparison to classical coaching, the 'existential view on mental illness includes person as a whole' (Jacob, 2013, p. 24). Thus, it remains unclear specifically what type of coachee existential coaching can best serve.

The literature has yet to reach a consensus about the relationship between existential therapy and existential coaching (Jopling, 2007), perhaps in part as a result of the therapeutic origins of existential coaching. Jacob (2019) and Hanaway (2020), whilst acknowledging that existential coaching is derived from therapy, reject the belief that the existential coaching closely resembles therapy. For Hanaway (2020) existential coaching is based on the notion of singularity or exploring only one issue or goal of a client's life. Jacob (2019) simply states that sometimes existential coaching can cross the

boundary into therapy but suggests that this is an ethical consideration that the coach should notice and address. van Deurzen and Hanaway (2012) posit that there is an overlap between the two, but offer no explicit explanation of where a line could be drawn or what the differences are. Spinelli and Horner (2018) explain that the lines are blurred because whilst classical coaching is distinct from therapy by dint of its positive and forward-looking approach, existential coaching can often tend towards difficult and negative topics that require some engagement with past traumas.

The present study

We see then that the existing literature on existential coaching raises many questions but provides few answers. Much of the literature focuses on an explanation of existential philosophy, offering limited consensus on how it works, the role of the coach, the types of clients it can benefit or the problems it can solve. Empirical evidence is limited and guidance on navigating the complex and important ethical issues of boundaries with therapy is still in contention. The present study aims to make a start on addressing some of these gaps, offering a qualitative investigation of the perspectives of existential coaches, exploring what defines their practice of existential coaching and how they feel it helps their clients.

Method

This qualitative study draws on a relativist constructionist framework, which aims to explore the meaning that the participants make of their experiences. The data in this study were analysed inductively, without trying to fit the data into pre-existing theoretical categories.

Participants

Participants were experienced existential coaches with specific existential coaching qualifications. The nine participants were comprised of six men, two women and one non-binary person. The participants had a mean of 6.3 years of experience as existential coaches, ranging from 1 to 14 years. The coaches all define themselves as existential coaches, but some focus particularly on working as executive coaches and others as life coaches. The semi-structured interviews were 45- to 60-minute long, generating a total of 8.5 h of interview data. The interviews were in-depth and the data generated were rich. The field of existential coaching itself is relatively small, with just 81 people identifying themselves as existential coaches on LinkedIn (2023) and the sample size is within the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2011), and as such was deemed sufficient for the study.

Procedure

Once ethical approval was granted from City, University of London, ethical approval number ETH2223-2160, the researchers contacted numerous psychology and coaching schools in the UK that provide training in existential coaching to request that a recruitment

flyer be shared within their Alumni groups. The researchers also reached out individually to potential participants within their networks and on LinkedIn who fulfilled the inclusion criteria. The eligible participants who expressed an interest in the research were sent a Participant Information Sheet and a Consent form which they signed and returned.

During the interviews, the participants were asked questions that focused on their context, their working approach and the techniques they used, and the impact they felt their sessions had on their clients. Specific questions included 'Could you tell me what existential coaching means to you?', 'Could you describe a typical existential coaching session?' and 'What impact do you think your existential coaching has on your clients?' Prompts such as 'tell me more about that' and 'Can you give me a specific example?' were used to enrich the data. The semi-structured nature of the interviews gave enough space for the researchers to identify and further investigate unusual points raised by participants (Kallio et al., 2016).

All interviews were held on Zoom, and the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were all given pseudonyms.

Data analysis

The data were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis is an umbrella term for a family of methods for analysing qualitative data, which look for patterns in meaning across a data set. The steps taken broadly followed those outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading it multiple times. Initial codes were given to each meaningful bit of data. Over 220 codes were generated which were then grouped and put into initial themes. The themes were reviewed and redefined and three themes with ten subthemes were developed. The first author led on the data collection and analysis but the two authors discussed the data, analysis, codes and themes frequently throughout the process. The researchers tried to minimise subjective influence by staying as close to the data as possible, by keeping reflective journals to help them identify and bracket their own opinions and expectations, and through detailed discussions throughout the process.

Results

Three main themes were developed: 'become your own philosopher', the coaches' inner philosophy, and client readiness. Table 1 shows the list of themes and sub-themes.

Theme 1: 'Become your own philosopher'

Our participants reported that the key aim and the principal benefit of existential coaching was to help their clients think in an existential way. Noah summed this up saying 'we're just trying to help people become their own philosophers'.

1.1. Existential wisdom

The participants described existential wisdom as a shift in the client's mindset, explaining that the coaching allows clients to evaluate their lives from different angles, delving

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes.

1.	**'Become your own philosopher'**
1.1.	Existential wisdom
1.2.	Experience of identity
1.3.	Freedom of choice
1.4.	A reflective space
2.	**The coaches' inner philosophy**
2.1.	Existential coaching is a mindset
2.2.	Putting life into perspective
2.3.	Absence of goals as a feature
3.	**Client readiness**
3.1.	Pre-existing personality traits
3.2.	Fear as an obstacle
3.3.	Blurred lines between therapy and coaching

deeper than classical coaching would usually allow. Oliver explained that by diving beyond the 'material world', coachees were able to explore what Max described as 'inner issues that you cannot solve immediately'. By asking clients questions that they have probably 'never had time to reflect on' (Noah), these existential coaches enable their clients to experience thinking in a new, more existential way. Max summed it up by saying 'thinking philosophically is the key skill that people take away' and Lucy went further saying 'you're teaching people how to think'.

All nine participants agreed that the resulting existential wisdom in clients is about accepting life and its paradoxes. They explained that the philosophy of existential coaching allows the discussions to delve deeper, and the participants reported that coaches also learn to, in Max's words, 'accept our complexity as a human being'. Oliver summarised it as 'accepting the uncertainties, limitations and paradoxes of life'. Some coaches specifically emphasised the duality as the most important existential feature to accept (the existentialist idea that positives cannot exist without negatives – joy comes from despair, so aiming to avoid pain leads to a life devoid of meaning); Noah noting 'being ok with the duality of life'. Whilst others like Anna went further talking about 'uncertainty of life and its paradoxes'.

1.2. Experience of identity

The participants discussed identity and authenticity as key themes in existential coaching. Lucy said that the coaching leads to clients who 'know who they are and are more excited about the future'. Nearly, all participants (8) shared stories where a client identity transformation has occurred.

Max spoke about their most transformational client story, and shared that the shift observed in their clients related to 'how tolerant they are of themselves'. Anna described an 'epidemic of negative self-talk' that she has observed in clients, which often leads to clients who struggle to understand who they are and what they want. Anna explained that the chance to 'establish a different relationship with themselves' fostered a fundamental change in her clients' identities. Max further highlighted that existential coaching for neurodivergent clients was dominated by the topic of finding and accepting their identities, explaining that the coaching helps neurodivergent clients 'to identify where you've lost that sense of self'.

A large part of the transformation of identity was attributed to the validation of their clients' experiences, feelings, and emotions. John described his experiences working as an in-house coach for a large corporation, helping leaders to become more authentic, noting the transformational impact when 'they felt acknowledged'. In that case, validation allowed the coachees to be more trusting of their own leadership styles. Charles explained that a more existential acceptance can help with 'validating the things we usually push away'. Seven participants mentioned the importance of creating a non-judgemental, accepting space for such a complicated topic as existentialism and Max explained that 'destigmatising these sorts of experiences [existential questions] gives people more tolerance of their feelings, emotions, stuckness and meaninglessness'.

1.3. Freedom of choice

A core pillar of existential philosophy is the notion of free will, and seven of the participants reported that an increased ability to make choices was a leading factor in their clients' transformation. Existential coaching teaches coachees how to develop a sense of freedom of choice. As Lucy said, as an existential coach 'you are sort of handing them this gift of the way to make decisions by themselves'.

The participants noted that philosophical dialogues within their coaching that covered the idea of freedom of choice helped clients understand their responsibility and take charge of their lives. Anna described this emphasis on free will as a 'fundamental aspect of existentialism'. Max recalled a moment from one coaching session where 'rather than just getting carried along, she was actually making a choice about it'. Lucas shared a similar story, saying that 'coachees are making choices as opposed to being driven by life'. Through existential coaching, clients seem to be able to take a proactive position towards life by being able to see the choices available to them.

Three of the coaches viewed freedom of choice and responsibility as two sides of the same coin, and explained that choice and responsibility together create authenticity. John said that he explains to his clients that 'taking responsibility for the decision that will help you sleep tonight is an authentic choice'. Two of the coaches conceptualised the freedom of choice as a more fluid construct. Henry summarised: 'it is opening up and thinking about the different direction that we go in that situation … simply being more aware'. Freedom of choice can be present both as a proactive authentic choice or simply awareness of the presence of choice.

1.4. A reflective space

A key skill that the participants felt clients could develop through existential coaching was the ability to create a space for self-reflection. Seven of the coaches emphasised their responsibility for showing clients the value of a reflective space, summed up by John who said, 'we are responsible for making a space to look at things in a more philosophical way'. Max even went as far as to say that it is their main goal as an existential coach to 'show people how to create that self-reflective space for themselves'. Lucy made a similar point saying, 'this is a psychoeducation piece of just showing people how to create an open reflective space'.

By being present and experiencing existential coaching, clients gain a glimpse into what a reflective space is and how it is created. Many coaches observed that, as Lucy said, 'it is often a jarring experience for a client', because, as Anna explained, many clients have never had the opportunity 'to actually sit and reflect without the pressure … and just feel'. Once the clients see how powerful that space is and what they can use it for, they develop the skill of creating a philosophical, self-reflective space.

The coaches emphasised that in the context of existentialism, that reflective space is an 'anxious space, uncertain space,' (John) and 'an invitation into vulnerability' (Anna). Being able to accept complexity and uncertainty as given elements of life, while not looking for an answer, or to 'open it up and play with it [the complexity]' said Max, can be transformative.

Theme 2: existential coaches' inner philosophy

During the interviews, participants were asked to identify the frameworks and tools they used in their existential coaching sessions. They all shared a sense of the importance of their own inner philosophy which most have internalised and use implicitly during their sessions.

2.1. Existential coaching is a mindset

Every one of the participants described their philosophical or existential mindset as a fundamental aspect of their existential coaching – as Max explained at the heart of this approach is 'adopting an existential attitude'. But whilst this mindset was ever-present in the coaching, it seemed to be implicit rather than explicit. Anna said 'I don't talk philosophy with the clients, it is the choices I make in the session' and Henry echoed that he would 'not explicitly discuss existentialism' with his clients.

The participants explained that only a small proportion of clients come with explicit existential dreads or worries, so raising existential issues or philosophy directly would usually be inappropriate. John said: 'people aren't coming to me with questions of fear of death … but the themes of existentialism emerge because of my mindset'. The coaches, as John explained 'translate those existential ideas into something embodied in that dialogue', so that existentialism itself can barely be identified but is present internally in the coach throughout.

2.2. Putting life into perspective

Four of the coaches mentioned what Charles described as 'death threatening questions': powerful questions that the coach uses to awaken deep insights in their clients. John asks 'What decision will help you sleep at night'; Lucy reported having a variety of such questions, including 'If you were to die in an hour, would you be happy?' and Charles said, 'What bothers you at 3 am when everyone is asleep?' and 'What would you say on your deathbed?' All these questions prompt the client to think and reflect on their life from a deeper, more existential perspective and evaluate their values. And here, in working with questions of this nature, the existential element of the coaching comes closest to being an explicit feature of the dialogue.

2.3. The absence of goals as a feature

Goal-setting is often considered a core aspect of classical coaching but half of the participants in this study explained that goals are not necessary and could even be detrimental within existential coaching, as John summarised, 'existential conversation is not about always having the eye on the end goal'. Existential coaching, according to these participants is an invitation into awareness and reflection, and that this fluid, exploratory process could be significantly hampered by a rigid focus on a goal.

Some of the coaches explained the tension between goal-setting and existential coaching by emphasising the importance of helping clients to learn to be more comfortable with and accepting of uncertainty. Max explained that a key aim of existential coaching is to encourage clients 'to be tolerant of uncertainty' and argued that the focus on goals in classical coaching is often more for the benefit of the coach than the client. Max described the whole process of goal-setting as 'very much about us [coaches] and not very much about the client'. Charles offered a similar perspective, saying that as coaches we can focus on goal setting because 'We need to know that we're actively doing something for our client'.

It was notable that the participants made no mention of using any frameworks, models or tools in their practice. We will return to this in the discussion.

Theme 3: clients' readiness

3.1. Pre-existing personality traits

The participants explained that whilst existential coaching could be of benefit to all, there were certain types of clients who were most likely to find it useful.

The client quality that participants most often identified as important for coaching was the ability to self-reflect. Max summarised it saying that 'a high propensity for self-reflection is really important'. The basis of existential coaching is self-reflection, so it is perhaps no surprise that coaches found that a pre-disposition to self-reflection in their coachees helps to make the coaching effective. Oliver defined self-reflection as a 'starting point for both us [coaches] and the clients', making a more non-directive coaching approach easier. Three participants mentioned the role of openness in clients, as Anna said 'The more open they are, the easier it is': existential coaching often focuses on the unknown, so being open to new ideas and perspectives can determine how successful the coaching is. The last personality trait, mentioned by two participants, relates to psychological stability. Lucy described the value of a client 'being in a good place' and similarly, Anna talked about the importance of clients 'being resourceful enough', to deal with difficult issues and questions. Both traits indicate the need of the client to be mentally stable and have energy and ability to cope with potential difficulties.

3.2. Fear as an obstacle

Five of the coaches described clients' fear as a barrier to successful existential coaching. Lucy explained that in existential coaching clients have to deal with 'hard questions' and John described how these difficult questions are 'challenging because there is an invitation into vulnerability'. That vulnerability touches on some of the deepest issues of human

existence and can cause a lot of negative emotions and fear in clients. John additionally observed that male clients find it more difficult than female clients as they can be more hesitant to show emotions.

As people are not used to 'working on themselves in that depth' as Lucy said, fear of working on the existential dimension is difficult to work through. Clients can 'try hard not to talk about deep issues' Anna noted, because they fear this process would not provide them with any answers. Indeed, existential questions don't have set answers and in the framework of coaching where answers are not provided, clients may find it difficult to go into such explorations. Lucy said, 'some people just don't want to work on themselves in that depth'. Similarly, Max reported that clients 'avoid thinking about things [existential issues] because they're horrible things, right?' and further emphasised that existential coaching can make clients 'anxious and uncomfortable'.

A willingness to experience discomfort in the quest for deeper self-knowledge could be important for the success of existential coaching. Lucy explained that being 'prepared to get uncomfortable' is the only way for clients to overcome those obstacles and fears. Max said that 'these things are inherently uncomfortable … that poses a challenge for us'. Client's willingness to sit in that uncertain space addressing hard questions seems to be a fundamental aspect of existential coaching.

3.3. Blurred lines between therapy and coaching

All the participants reported that the lines between therapy and existential coaching are blurred, and that existential coaching operates in what John called the 'grey area between coaching and therapy'. Some coaches described crossing the line and giving their clients therapy. Anna said that 'with some of my clients, I am more therapy based'. and John described a 'crossover with things like therapy' in his coaching. Oliver outlined that in both existential coaching and existential therapy 'the basic assumptions are the same' and Lucy explained that 'the lines can be slightly blurred because you're dealing with quite deep-rooted stuff' and that operating in the realms of existential questions inevitably involves work with past traumas. Max was the only participant who seemed to differentiate between existential coaching and existential therapy, explaining that the key difference is that coaching is 'forward moving': whilst existential coaching often needs to 'acknowledge the past', it is possible to do this without 'exploring the trauma'.

Discussion

This study aimed to offer a qualitative investigation of the perspectives of existential coaches, exploring what they feel defines the practice of existential coaching and how they feel it helps their clients. Three major themes were developed. The first theme, 'become your own philosopher', describes how coaching helps clients gain an existential perspective on life by teaching them to think philosophically. The second theme explores how coaches' inner existential philosophy is a tool in itself. The final third theme identifies the importance of client readiness to engage in an existential coaching approach.

The findings make three key contributions to the existing literature in this field. First, the findings highlight the psycho-educational nature of existential coaching – the process and value of teaching clients to be their own philosophers. Second, the study

demonstrates that existential coaching is in essence a philosophy, or mindset, rather than a more conventional coaching approach. Finally, the findings highlight the lack of a clear distinction between existential coaching and existential therapy. We will explore each of these in turn.

Existential coaching as a psycho-educational approach

The findings of this study suggest that the key aim of existential coaching is to equip clients with a new way of thinking. The philosophical basis of existentialism serves as psycho-education for coaching clients, helping them to learn to understand themselves at a deeper level and manage their mindset, identity, freedom of choice and reflexivity.

Our coaches reported that through existential coaching, their coachees gain an acceptance of the complexities of life and a deeper understanding of paradoxes and dualities, in other words, existential wisdom. This wisdom stems from experiencing the process of existential coaching that allows clients to think philosophically. That is consistent with research by Fusco et al. (2015) who identified a similarity between existential coaches and 'intellectual masters'. That is evidently one of the main elements of this approach: educating clients to a liberating deeper knowledge of the human condition.

This liberation allows clients to address important existential questions and has an impact on their sense of identity and as a consequence, their authenticity. The validating and acknowledging coaching space and this liberation allow the clients to explore their identity. This impact has been described by Jopling (2012), van Deurzen (2012), Fusco et al. (2015), Reynolds (2011) and Mandic (2012). The depth of the existential approach that includes work with values, motivation and purpose has been shown to be transformative. The clarity clients gain on their identity in both work and personal contexts teaches them to make informed and authentic choices.

Authenticity has another foundation – freedom of choice. To make authentic choices one must learn to see the options, feel the freedom one has and take responsibility (Fusco et al., 2015; Spinelli, 2004). The participants in this study reported that freedom of choice is a common mindset transformation of clients. This is consistent with DeLuca's (2008) recommendations for existential coaches to encourage choice, by educating clients about the idea of freedom of choice, and highlighting their personal responsibility. Consistent with Peltier's (2001) research these choices do shift the clients' perception of themselves and transform their lives and identities.

These transformations are fostered within the space of self-reflection in the existential coaching sessions. The participants reported that this space is often new to the clients but by simply experiencing it, coachees develop the ability to create their own reflexivity. What distinguishes this space from classical coaching is the state of anxiety and uncertainty that is inevitable in existential dialogue. Spinelli and Horner (2018) mentioned reflexivity within an uncertain space as a vital principle of this approach, emphasising the importance of an appropriate balance of reflexivity and achievement. This contrasts with some voices in classical coaching, for example, Langdridge (2012) who identifies that too much reflexivity can hinder the ability of the client to pursue their goals and change their behaviour.

Throughout the participants' narratives, the skills and mindset clients gained through existential coaching show a psycho-educational dimension that has not been explicitly identified

in the existing literature. All the participants have noted at some point that clients gain the ability to evaluate their life existentially often using the words 'we teach them'.

Existential coaching is a mindset

The existential coaching approach described by these participants seems almost entirely based on their inner philosophy. None of the participants spoke about using tools or frameworks, yet all seemed clear that their existential philosophy was fundamental to their coaching, describing the way their philosophical suppositions are translated into the ideas that arise in the coaching dialogue. It seems that, according to our participants, in practice, existential coaching is a mindset.

The foundational philosophy is emphasised in the literature, and scholars widely discuss the philosophical foundation that distinguishes this approach from the others (Jacob, 2013; Spinelli & Horner, 2018). But the existing literature does not define existential coaching as simply a mindset. Alongside the philosophical ground, the literature on existential coaching describes a number of frameworks, such as the MOVER and CREATE model by Hanaway (2020) and Jacob (2019), the Existential Authentic Leadership model by Fusco et al. (2015) and many more. This focus on frameworks in the literature echoes definitions of classical coaching which often emphasise the importance of a process (Green & Grant, 2003; Smither, 2011; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). We therefore note a disconnect between existential coaching literature and our participants' existential coaching practice. The literature indicates that existential coaching shares with classical coaching a reliance on a process, but differs in its philosophical foundation. In contrast, however, the message from the participants in this study is that existential coaching differs from classical coaching both in its underpinning philosophy and it's more free-form dialogue.

Perhaps, however, one could argue that the 'death-threatening' questions used by participants are in themselves a type of framework. The participants did not categorise their death-threatening questions as such, but arguably, they do resemble the type of tool discussed by Spinelli and Horner (2018). In their model, the Inter-Relational Realms of Discourse, questions are asked from the perspective of I, You, We, They, and the authors indicate that with this approach, coachees can gain the ability to hear themselves and gain perspective on life. The death threatening questions used by our participants perhaps indicate a new framework of existential coaching that operates as a part of coaches' inner philosophy.

Another difference between existential and classical coaching that emerged in this study is the limited focus on goal setting. We mentioned earlier that previous existential coaching literature does not present a consistent view on the importance of goal-setting in existential coaching. Spinelli and Horner (2018) highlight the absence of goal-orientated interventions, through their focus on the coaches 'being' skills rather than 'doing'. Hanaway and van Deurzen (2012) stress that the existence of end goals is quite at odds with existential philosophy, and conclude that they have no place in existential coaching. Langdridge (2012) is the only scholar who explicitly stated the necessity of a goal in this approach, saying it cannot be simply an exploration. He categorises exploration as a key phase within an existential coaching conversation yet strongly believes in clear and measurable goals within coaching sessions. Reflecting on these

positions, our participants appeared to be split: half reported that setting goals is fully against the existentialist nature of their work, whilst others said it was necessary to have identified the end goals their clients have achieved.

There is no single agreed definition of coaching, and the existential coaching described does resonate with many classic definitions of coaching including Whitmore's idea of coaching helping clients to learn and Bachkirova and Baker (2018) who indicate that coaching should incorporate appropriate strategies, tools, and techniques, but don't specify the nature of these approaches nor the need for a framework. It is not, however, in line with other definitions of coaching which focus more explicitly on process (Grant & Palmer, 2002, for example, defined coaching as underpinned by models of coaching) or goals (Green & Grant, 2003, described coaching as being outcome focused and relying on collaborative goal setting, and Smither, 2011, who describe a goal-focused relationship).

The findings in this study therefore raise questions about the best way to categorise an existential coaching intervention, and how existential coaching aligns with traditional definitions of coaching.

Distinctions between existential coaching and existential therapy

The final area for discussion is the distinction between existential coaching and existential therapy. The participants in this study all discussed the blurred boundaries between existential coaching and existential therapy. Only one participant offered a clear definition of the difference, highlighting that existential coaching differs from existential therapy in that it is future-orientated. The other participants, in contrast, all described their coaching delving deep into difficult topics and explicitly noted that their conversations were at times indistinguishable from therapy. Existential coaching has its roots in therapy it seems that its very nature and the depth of the work has an impact on its scope.

The debate about the nature of the distinction between coaching and therapy is not new, and the idea, echoed by Max in this study, that coaching is defined by its exclusive future focus, is widely noted (for example Hart et al., 2001). Coaches do not need to be qualified counsellors, and coach training does not aim to equip practitioners to deal with the kind of deep issues that are common in therapeutic conversations. There is wide agreement that the boundaries between coaching and counselling are sometimes tricky to identify and navigate (Spinelli, 2008), but ethical practice is core to good coaching and a sensitivity to clear boundaries is mentioned in coaching codes of ethics such as that of the BPS, the AC and the EMCC. Coaches know that coaching is not therapy, and are sensitive to the ethical limits of their practice.

The question of the boundaries between existential coaching and existential therapy has been raised in previous literature. Van Deurzen and Hanaway's definition of existential coaching (2012) aligns with traditional definitions of classical coaching describing it as future-facing, explaining that an existential coaching intervention should not explore the past. Jacob (2013) puts forward a different view, positing that existential coaching in the UK is a synthesis of counselling, therapy and coaching, and arguing that rigid borders for coaching can be toxic to the abilities of the coach. Langdridge (2012) describes existential coaching as indistinguishable from therapy. The existential coaching that our participants described would be hard to distinguish from therapy, in that, for all but one of the coaches, their conversations are not always future-facing.

This raises some interesting ethical questions. Existential coaches do not need to be qualified counsellors, and can become qualified and accredited with the key professional bodies without therapeutic training, but the participants' narratives in this study raise questions about this. Arguably, if coaches are regularly straying into therapeutic territories, then having a therapeutic qualification is perhaps an ethical thing to do.

Practical implications of the research

The findings of this study suggest that some clearer guidelines should be offered to existential coaches. First, it could be helpful for the scholarship and practice of existential coaching to be more closely aligned. The findings from this small study indicate that there may be a mismatch between the descriptions of the process of existential coaching in the literature, with its emphasis on frameworks, and the process of existential coaching described by these coaches, who define their practice in terms of an inner mindset and a set of powerful questions. Second, the findings from this study suggest that guidelines on the boundaries between existential therapy and coaching should be clearer to ensure the ethical credibility of the profession and the safety of the clients.

Limitations and directions for future research

There are a number of limitations to this study which must be acknowledged and which point to areas for future research. The sample size is small. Qualitative studies are not intended to be generalisable, but further qualitative or quantitative research with a more substantial population of existential coaches would add to the robustness of these findings. Qualitative research is inevitably subjective. This study incorporates two levels of subjectivity – the participants' subjectivity, as they describe the process and outcomes of their own coaching, and the researchers' subjectivity as they interpret the narratives. In addition, the participants had all attended UK universities; coaching will vary by context and it may be that coaches trained or working elsewhere may have different experiences and perceptions. Further research involving different participants and conducted by other researchers could add new dimensions to these findings, and studies that explore the experiences of the clients of existential coaching would offer a valuable alternative perspective. Finally, observation studies that analyse the existential coaching process could add a third lens to the body of literature.

Conclusion

This study aimed to shed some light on the practice of existential coaching. Existential coaching appears to offer valuable psycho-education, teaching clients to think, deepening their own self-awareness and leading to new perspectives on their own lives. The coaching is informed by the coaches' inner mindset which underpins the dialogue, supplemented by some powerful 'death-threatening' questions which compel clients to think more deeply. In general, the existential coaching described is not always aligned with key elements of classical coaching, including the traditional focus on goal-setting, which was rare in the practice described, and the exclusive focus on the future, which most participants felt was at odds with much of their purpose as existential coaches, and clear

boundaries between existential coaching and therapy. We recommend that some of these issues be clarified to enhance the credibility of the profession and to protect the interests of existential coaching clients.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [JY], upon reasonable request.

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