

The Experience of Critical Self-Reflection by Life Coaches: A Phenomenological Study (Lynn Shaw & Michelle Glowacki-Dudka)

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AIM OF THE STUDY

As coaches we ask our clients to self-reflect on how they think, feel and act to enhance their learning and achieve transformation. How often do we though, as professionals practise self-reflection? Drawing from research in life coaching and adult learning, the current study explores the benefit of critical self-reflection activities for coaches in connecting with clients, improving skills and renewing purpose of one's work. Authors also make a case for introducing critical self-reflection as a core competency in the credentialing journey of new life coaches.

BACKGROUND

Why is critical self-reflection important for coaches?

- Mezirow et al. (2009) argue that critical self-reflection leads to transformative learning for adult learners
- Brookfield (1995) highlights how critical self-reflection plays a key role when making decisions, developing a rational for practice, and keeping perspective about one's own abilities and limits
- Kristal (2009) suggests that coaches use critical self-reflection to improve self-awareness, develop a flexible coaching approach and identify authenticity in coaching activities

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative approach was employed in the current study aiming at capturing the lived experience of the participants. Five certified coaches with a minimum of 100 coaching hours, and an active practice (including more than 5 clients weekly) took part. The study focused on the following research questions

- (1) How do reflective experiences provide meaning to the life coaching relationship?
- (2) What is the value of critical self-reflection activities within the life coach's professional development?

For the purpose of this study participants were asked to complete the *Life Coaching Critical Incident Questionnaire* (included below) after each coaching session for 8 weeks, submit a journal summary of their experience biweekly, and attend an interview at the end of the study.

Life Coaching Critical Incident Questionnaire (LCIQ)

1. At what moment in this session did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in this session did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone in the session (group member, client, you, colleague) took in this session did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action or experience in this coaching session did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about this coaching session surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.)

KEY FINDINGS

5 themes emerged highlighting how self-reflection added meaning to the coaching relationship, and improved coaching practices

Supportive structure and discipline	Coaches appreciated the opportunity to slow down, and made a deliberate effort to start-and-stop after each session. Coaches felt more focused and able to switch attention between clients
Increased self-awareness	Critical self-reflection in the form of journaling allowed coaches to be more present with clients Coaches felt more energetic, alert, and curious in the moment leading to a more positive experience for both parties Coaches felt more able to recognise the need for self-care and its impact on their practice
Renewed passion and purpose	Critical self-reflection gave coaches the space to re-evaluate their niche, approach and style as a coach Some coaches reported a renewed passion and sense of purpose
Tool for professional development	Coaches argued that completing the CIQ questionnaire got them “back to basics” in terms of skills, tools and resources they have available in their practice
Enhanced relationships with self and others	Coaches noted that critical self-reflection made them more open, accepting, and honest towards themselves and others

CONCLUSION – IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As coaches we often witness the powerful results of self-reflection with our clients. In fact the value of self-reflection has been observed and validated through evidence based research in many helping professions including coaching. Findings in this study suggest that critical reflection, on the part of the coach, can have a positive impact on the coach-client engagement. Becoming aware of their own feelings and thoughts, coaches are able to detach from self, refocus and re-engage with the clients wholeheartedly

Many coaches will argue that in some way, or form we all practise self-reflection. What is new in this study is the suggestion that self-reflection should take central stage in coaching training and professional development. It would be interesting to see whether further research will support the value of a more formal role for self-reflection and self-care in the coaching profession.