Coaching Ethics: The story so far

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The Story So Far in Coaching Ethics: Insights from an Exploratory Enquiry

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the results of a survey conducted during the Coaching Ethics Forum (CEF) conference 2023, inviting coaches from the event, the CEF email database and LinkedIn. The survey invited participants to examine how reflecting on coaching ethics impacted on their ethical coaching practice.

There were 101 responses to four primary areas:

    A. Understanding the background and approaches of our sample.

    B. Understanding their view of supervision.

    C. Understanding their approach to reflection.

    D. Understanding their approach to ethical practice.

The survey participants came from a range of different countries but with a large majority from English-speaking countries. In addition to the data on the background, views, approaches and ethical practice of the coaches, we explored various primary and sub-themes emerging. The group were mainly experienced and trained coaches who held a wide range of prior occupations. Overall, they showed a commitment to supervision (although many did not) and engagement in ethical reflection. The breadth of experience, types of training and diversity of frameworks followed was noteworthy, implying that coaching is very broadly based as a field of practice. We identify some key themes and further questions about the relationship between ethical practice, supervision and ethical reflective practice.

Keywords: Reflection, Coaching, Ethics, Supervision, Education

Introduction

Whilst ethical dilemmas facing coaches has been an issue in the coaching field for some time, it is only relatively recently that coaching ethics has become a distinct focus for coaches, coaching researchers and professional coaching bodies. As Passmore (2009) pointed out, fifteen years ago, up until that point, there had been little written or discussed about coaching ethics specifically. Hannafey & Vitulano's

(2013) article takes up a similar theme to Passmore (2009), four years later, which raised the concept of agency within coaching ethics albeit without drawing on any empirical data. Similarly, Lane (2011) explored the relationship between ethics and professional standards in supervision. However, we start to see the beginnings of some primary data collection on coaching ethics. For example, Simon, Odendaal & Goosen (2014) explore coaching ethical dilemmas in the South African context, using a Delphi technique of interviewing. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that this increase in focus on coaching ethics has been closely related to that of the interest in coaching supervision and it is only since the Coaching Ethics Forum was created, in 2021, that there has been a real focus on this key area of coaching practice which is distinct from coaching supervision itself.

In their recent text on coaching ethics – which builds on the original CEF work, (Smith et al., 2023a & Smith et al., 2023b) explore a range of perspectives on coaching ethics such as an ethical framework for coaching, ethical codes and ethical maturity. However, there is still a significant empirical gap in terms of how coaches practice ethical reflection on their coaching as well as what informs that practice in terms of core concepts and frameworks. As a result, we decided to use the most recent conference as an opportunity to collect some survey data on where coaches were with their thinking and practice on coaching ethics. In particular, we were interested in trying to understand how the subtleties of coaching ethics were impacting their coaching practice, from their own perspective.

We see this as an initial overview of how coaching ethics are impacting on practice with a view to stimulating further dialogue. Two areas were of particular interest, the extent that coaches reflect on ethics in their practice and the role of supervision. Defining both is problematic as there are so many different approaches in the literature. Hence, we did not seek to define the terms in advance but allowed respondents to choose how they responded. The purpose of the study is to understand how our respondents use supervision and reflection to inform their approach to ethical practice.

Methods

Our team of four researchers defined a series of fixed-choice and open-ended reflective questions. The questions were created in Microsoft Forms, with our research question and abstract. The questions and outline of our study aims were made clear and shared on the questionnaire. We did not ask for the names or emails of the participants.

Microsoft forms provided percentage statistics relating to length of time coaching, gender identification,

types of coach education, frequency of supervision, time engaged in supervision, and frequency of ethical reflection.

Stages of analysis:

1. The research team met for an initial review and discussion of the findings, including the statistical summaries and graphs generated by Microsoft Forms. These visual outputs helped inform our early impressions of the data and guided the subsequent stages of analysis. The data was extracted into an excel document.

2. ChatGPT was prompted to undertake a thematic analysis of relevant columns, each column was related to a specific question. Hence the analysis outcome was defining themes and sub-themes for each question with quotes and corresponding row numbers, rather than an integrated analysis across all interview data.

3. ChatGPT was then prompted to provide counts for fixed-choice questions.

4. The research team examined the data generated by ChatGPT and used its prompts to focus a search for patterns in the survey data.

5. Each researcher then reviewed both the raw data and the ChatGPT-generated themes independently and prepared a brief summary (approximately one A4 page) outlining their interpretations, observations, and emerging insights. These individual briefs were brought to a group discussion, where shared and divergent interpretations were explored and used to refine the overall understanding of the data.

6. Through this iterative process, key patterns were identified and collaboratively interpreted, informing our conclusions about how coaches engage with ethics and ethical reflection in practice.

The use of AI (ChatGPT) in the thematic analysis raised its own ethical considerations, particularly in balancing efficiency with human oversight and interpretive responsibility. As coaching research evolves, such tools offer both opportunities and ethical tensions - reminding us that the methods we adopt should align with the principles of reflexivity, integrity, and human-centred inquiry.

Findings

We explored four primary areas:

E. Understanding the background and approaches of our sample.

F. Understanding their view of supervision.

G. Understanding their approach to reflection.

H. Understanding their approach to ethical practice.

Our sample were self-selected and were comprised of attendees of the Coaching Ethics Forum (CEF) 2023 virtual conference, and coaches on the social media platform LinkedIn and CEF email database, with 101 responses. Of those responses, 87 people identified as a woman, 13 as a man and 1 preferred not to say. The survey participants came from a range of different countries (see Table 1) but with a clear large majority from English-speaking countries. In addition to the data, we explored various primary and sub-themes emerging.

A. Understanding the background and approaches of our sample.

Coaching is an unusual field of practice in that it is a later career choice. People come to it having followed different professional paths and build upon alternative knowledge bases. Hence, the impact of that prior knowledge is a matter of interest. It is also a matter of dispute between those who take the view that it should not impact and those who believe it does or as Kauffman and Bachkirova (2009) put it "Does the coaches background make a difference?" (p 3). In terms of this paper the question also arises as to the ethical codes that informed the coaches previous practice and does that make a difference to their approach as a coach? These lead to the further question of how much engagement with ethics and ethical dilemmas did the coaches have during their coach training?

In considering the impact of the coaches background the literature is contested. (Hindle Fisher, et al, 2023). Drawing on this paper, which reviewed over 240 sources, it appears that the importance ascribed to this has changed over the last fifty years. The discourse moves from sharer of subject knowledge to expertise in coaching. Hindle Fisher et al (2023) argue that this places an emphasis on tools and techniques rather than the characteristics of the coach. (See also Jarvis, et al, 2006) This prompted us to consider how long our participants had been coaching, their prior profession, their entry into coaching and training as a coach.

Question 1: How long have you been coaching?

1. Less than a year: *5*

2. 1-2 years: 10

3. 3-5 years: 20

4. 6-10 years: 30

5. More than 10 years: *35*

This is clearly a primarily experienced group of coaches in terms of the amount of coaching that the majority of them had done. Further to this, we were also interested in what they had done before coaching. As expected, participants came to coaching from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Question 3: What did you do before you started coaching?

Participants came from a wide variety of professional backgrounds. The responses clustered into the following thematic categories:

Corporate and Organisational Roles, including human resources, project management, corporate finance, strategy, communications, and marketing.

Education Sector, such as school teaching across levels and a variety of university-based roles.

Therapeutic and Counselling Professions, including psychologists, therapists, counsellors, clinical social workers, addiction and rehabilitation specialists, and marriage and family therapists.

Entrepreneurial and Business Roles, such as business owners, consultants, analysts, and professionals in retail, marketing, and the tech industry.

Other Fields, such as the military, journalism, science, the arts, athletics, environmental activism, politics, and public service.

This range includes fields where a defined and compulsory code of ethics is in place, to voluntary codes and advisory codes to no specific code of practice. This makes it even more important to consider how coaches view ethics since many will not have worked with a code of practice previously or a potentially different code of practice. Considering this variety we reviewed codes that apply to the varied professions represented in our sample. This was a preliminary not substantial review just to

give a sense of the field. We considered different bodies within management consultancy, education, psychology, counselling and psychotherapy, marketing, human resources and business (see appendix for list of sources reviewed). There were wide differences in the codes in terms of length, detail, and extent that they were worded positively or negatively (must, must not) however, certain principles were common across codes. This is perhaps most marked in the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists (International Union of Psychological Science https://www.iupsys.net › Who We Are › Declarations). These cover:

Principle I: Respect for the Dignity of Persons and Peoples

Principle II: Competent Caring for the Well-Being of Persons and Peoples

Principle III: Integrity

Principle IV: Professional and Scientific Responsibilities to Society

In one form or another these principles are represented in other codes. The language is different. The underlying assumptions may vary, but respect, competence, integrity, and responsibility feature broadly. The research behind the IUPs code included a review of codes across time and cultures in pursuit of what they term a common moral framework. However, as Garvey and Stokes (2023) ask, "Are professional bodies behaving ethically or have they created neofeudalistic organisations with surveillance built into their policies and rules" (p 37). It also raises the issue, as they argue, that relying on written ethical codes which are largely context-free, does not necessarily help members to resolve ethical dilemmas.

External codes perhaps are less helpful when coaches need to make decisions based on their own moral compass (or ethical maturity) or in a relational process with their client (Lane, et al, 2023). If based on their prior professional career and a similar external context-free approach to understanding ethics was adopted it does raise a question about the criticality of their approach to complex dilemmas.

As both Hindle-Fisher (et al, 2023) and Cavanagh & Grant (2006) make clear given the industry is populated by coaches from a range of backgrounds and there is no common body of knowledge on which they draw this raises two further questions for us in terms of how planned was the transition into coaching and how were our participants trained.

Question 4: From which national culture do you most identify?

Table: 1

Geographic Distribution of Survey Participants

Country	Number
United States	25
United Kingdom	20
Canada	15
Australia	12
India	10
Germany	8
France	7
Italy	5
Brazil	4
Netherlands	4
South Africa	3
Japan	3
China	2
Mexico	2

Question 5: How would you describe your entry into coaching?

Participants described a variety of pathways into the coaching profession, which can be grouped into the following categories:

Smooth and Planned Transition such as; 'progression from therapy work', 'planned over a period of time', 'clear plan for training and transition'.

Sudden and Unplanned Entry such as; 'coaching found me', 'stumbled into it', 'unexpected due to life circumstances', 'unplanned', 'sudden switch having explored other options'.

Influenced by Personal Experiences these primarily included; 'having experienced coaching and found it useful' and 'wanting to help others'.

Driven by Passion and Interest these primarily include an interest in; 'personal development', 'growth', 'empowering others', 'desire to make a difference', 'self-improvement', 'passion' and 'inspired by others'.

Other pathways included; 'coaching being a natural extension of existing profession', 'transition from voluntary role', 'moved as part of exploration of different careers' and 'started coaching informally before making it a career'.

Given the breadth of the pathways of transition it raises the question of type and depth of training received to become a coach and any ongoing training undertaken.

Question 6: Which of these best describes your coach education?

Participant responses indicated a variety of training pathways:

1. Coach education / training from a private provider: 56.

2. Professional body provided course: 33

3. University based course: 18

4. Combination of all three: 1

5. CTI, Newfield, & Saybrook University: 1

6. All of the above: 1

Private providers are the main source of training. Given the wide variety that exist in the private course sector from short online training to extensive accredited schemes this does raise questions about the knowledge base upon which the field relies. Professional body approved courses also represent a substantial source followed by university courses. The later tend to have a clear philosophy and commitment to an academically sound knowledge base. We were interested in how our participants stay current.

Question 7: What if any further / advanced education/training have you completed?

1. Supervision: 41.

2. Team: 30

3. Group: 24

4. All of the above: 13

5. None of the above: 12

It was notable that supervision featured strongly. In total 32 different sources for further training were listed.

Given the wide variety in both initial and further training it is interesting to explore the coaching philosophy of our coaches.

Question 8: How would you describe your coaching philosophy/style?

A range of philosophical positions were stated. These broke into four primary themes and sub-themes within them.

Primary Theme 1: Systemic and Holistic Approaches

Sub-themes – *Systemic Coaching and Holistic and Integrative Coaching.* There was some overlap between these and it was difficult to separate why one or the other was chosen.

Areas addressed in Systemic included; 'systemic and values centred', 'adaptable to client need with a focus on transformation rather than transaction', combining person-centred, individualistic, holistic, spiritual and positive psychology, domain agnostic, taking a meta-view.

The emphasis in the sub-theme Holistic and Integrative was on bringing theories together based on integral theory, hence terms such as, ontological, developmental, holistic, shaped by adult development and integral theory, integrative - drawing on positive psychology & CBC with solutions'.

Primary Theme 2: Evidence-Based and Positive Psychology

This theme split clearly between the sub-themes of *Evidence-Based Coaching and Positive Psychology*

and Strengths-based coaching. The emphasis was primarily the idea of positive psychology with a focus on the whole person, strength-based approaches, allowing space for emergence, and incorporation of other ideas. Those focussing on evidence-based considered both humanistic and CBT approaches plus the idea of the science of coaching.

Primary Theme 3: Client-Centred and Humanistic Approaches

This split between *Client Centred Coaching and Humanistic Coaching.* The former included a range of approaches where the focus was on the client and their own resources and expertise, and the latter focused on assumptions within humanistic philosophy.

Primary Theme 4: Creative and Transformational Coaching

These two areas contained most of the detailed responses. There was a strong emphasis on humanistic ideas, transformation, creativity in approach, partnership, adaptability to client needs, it extends to integrative, spiritual, systemic and neuroscience-based interventions. The emphasis on creative coaching featured concern with being highly adaptable, combining hope and curiosity for client benefit, facilitative of a creative and reflective space, empowering and a domain agnostic approach.

Overall, and similar to the breadth of prior careers before coaching the routes to transition into it were equally varied and there were wide differences in the training received and approaches to coaching. Hence, coaches and coaching can be seen as highly diverse with no overall framework reflecting a traditional structure for a profession. It is, therefore, important to understand that once trained and given this variety, how do coaches maintain standards of practice. In particular how are they supervised and reflect on their practice to maintain an ethical approach.

B. Understanding their view of supervision.

Question 9: How often do you engage in supervision?

There were 104 responses. 55.4% reported engaging in supervision at least quarterly (including monthly and quarterly responses). Supervision is not therefore universally adopted as a way to ensure continuing education, or client protection or quality of practice.

1. Monthly: 30.

2. Quarterly: 26

3. Sporadically: 16

4. Never: 12

5. Weekly: 7

6. Yearly: 4

There were 13 other responses to this question each by just one respondent. Some do not participate at all, others at varied levels depending on frequency of client contact others just during training.

There was similar variety in how long participants had been using supervision.

Question 10: How long have you been in supervision?

26 had been in supervision more than 10 years,

13 had been in supervision between 5 and 10 years.

23 for between 1 and 4 years,

The rest gave varied answers from never (11), sporadically, to throughout their career.

This raises the question of how supervision had impacted their coaching.

Question 11: How has supervision influenced / impacted your coaching?

The Primary Theme that emerged was one of Increased Awareness. There were two sub-themes.

Sub-theme 1 was Bias awareness. This included comments such as:

'Biases, Ego and systemic effects awareness helps me reflect on my biases and improve.'

'It helps me see biases and coaching habits that I wasn't aware of.'

'Supervision has made me more conscious of my biases and how they impact my coaching.

Sub-theme 2 was its impact on Relationship Dynamics. This included comments such as:

'More awareness about coach, client, relationship dynamics.'

'It's the perfect place to reflect on your own process and understanding.'

'Enhanced understanding of the dynamics between me and my clients.'

C. Understanding their approach to reflection.

Question 12: What does reflection look like to you?

The approach adopted to reflection split into a number of sub-themes.

> **Sub-theme 1:** focussed on reflection as a process Observing and Analyzing own practice with a core emphasis on careful observation then through analysis of sessions and own thinking process.

> **Sub-theme 2:** was concerned with Creative Processes. This was interpreted very widely through deepening understandings using art, tools writing, drawing, journalling and a range of creative approaches to foster the act of reflection.

> **Sub-theme 3:** used Discussion and Writing to articulate thoughts and share with peers as well as self.

> **Sub-theme 4:** was built around the contribution to Personal and Professional Growth. It was seen as essential to both, integral to the process, journey, or self-discovery, a place to check, and the use of multiple scenarios.

This led us to consider the frequency with which ethical reflection was practiced.

Question 13: How often do you engage in ethical reflection?

1. Often: 41
2. Very often: 30
3. Sometimes: 27
4. Always: 18
5. Never: 4
6. Rarely: 2

It was heartening to see that this was a common practice among our respondents. This opened the question of how such reflection impacted on practice.

Question 14: How has your reflection influenced / impacted your coaching?

Within the Primary Theme of Impact on Coaching Practice there were two sub-themes. However, there was little detail contained in the response. We could identify changes but not how reflection had brought about those impacts.

> **Sub-theme 1:** noted the Positive Changes. Respondents indicated that it had made a difference through areas such as helping to see personal biases, changing their coaching techniques and generating a shift (180 degree) in approach.

> **Sub-theme 2:** talked of Increased Awareness and Presence. This included reduced judgement and fear, becoming more mindful and present as well as one person who said that it had increased awareness of the political context of their work.

This led us to consider the environments that best support reflective practice.

Question 15: What settings support your reflection?

Primary Theme: Supportive Environments

> **Sub-theme 1:** Natural Environments, this included, Nature, inspirational music, tai chi, being in nature, being in a group, and nature walks and outdoor activities.

> **Sub-theme 2:** Relationships and Commitments such as, my values, my family, friends, and coworkers, commitment to the employer and good relationships with the team and supportive relationships with colleagues and family. Challenges to reflection were also noted.

Alongside supportive environments, we were also interested in the obstacles that might hinder reflection.

Question 16: What are the challenges or obstacles to your reflective practice?

The Primary Theme: Obstacles to Reflection with two sub-themes.

> **Subtheme 1:** Time Management including, 'reserve a daily time to it is a challenge', 'I try to set a specific time every day but sometimes it's difficult', 'time, balancing with work demands', 'committing daily time to it is challenging and finding enough time in a busy schedule'.

Subtheme 2: Work Demands such as, 'work demands', 'finding personal time', and 'high workload makes it difficult to find time for reflection'.

Having considered the pattern of reflection we considered in the survey the areas that were the subject of reflection.

Question 17: What do you reflect on?

Participants' responses to this question highlighted the varied focus of their reflective practice. These fell broadly into two areas: self-development and attention to client progress.

Primary Theme: Reflection Topics

In this the responses again split into two sub-themes based on personal and professional growth plus client interaction and progress.

Sub-theme 1: Personal and Professional Growth was concerned with, values, biases, and coaching practices, biases, coaching practices and personal values and professional development.

Sub-theme 2: Client Interactions and Progress identified, client interactions, coaching sessions, professional growth, client progress and client feedback and session outcomes.

This led us to ask a number of questions related to what stimulated, what is present what supports and supported ethical awareness and the support systems used.

Question 18: What stimulates your ethical reflections?

When asked what stimulates ethical reflection, participants pointed to both structured learning contexts and real-world experiences, reflecting the interplay between external input and personal engagement.

The Primary Theme was: Ethical Reflection Stimulation again with two sub-themes.

Sub-theme 1: Case Studies and Supervision, including, 'cases that I read and discuss',

'supervision', 'cases', 'client feedback', 'supervisory feedback', 'peer discussions', 'discussing case studies in supervision'.

Sub-theme 2: Real-Life Scenarios and Policies, such as, 'ethical dilemmas', 'real-life scenarios', 'organizational policies', 'personal values and policies' and 'real-life ethical challenges'.

This led us to consider what conditions might be present when coaches experience heightened ethical awareness in the moment.

D. Understanding their approach to ethical practice.

Question 19: When you are at your most ethically aware what factors are present?

Participants identified a range of conditions that support heightened ethical awareness, from internal states to the intentional adoption of broader perspectives.

The Primary Theme was: Factors Enhancing Ethical Awareness with sub-themes related to:

> **Sub-theme 1:** Presence and Vulnerability, 'I'm totally present', 'I'm willing to be vulnerable all the time', 'ethics are essential and fascinating', 'being fully present and open to vulnerability'.

> **Sub-theme 2:** Diverse Perspectives, 'meta-view', 'different lenses', 'listening to body', 'humility', 'learner mindset - what can I learn and improve', 'considering multiple perspectives and lenses'.

Building on this, we wanted to understand how coaches actively support their own development of ethical sensitivity over time.

Question 20: How do you support your development of ethical sensitivity?

Responses indicated that ethical sensitivity is developed through both individual study and shared professional engagement, suggesting that both solitary and collective learning experiences are valued.

The Primary Theme was: Methods for Developing Ethical Sensitivity.

> **Sub-theme 1:** Supervision and Reading, 'supervision', 'reading', 'conferences', ''I try to read multicultural literature and find it really helpful', 'I attend conferences and discussion groups', 'read extensively', 'reading widely and engaging in supervision'.

> **Sub-theme 2:** Conferences and Events, 'lento e debatendo casos' (slowly and discussing cases) , 'participando de eventos de supervisão' (participating in supervision events), 'attend conclaves such as this one', 'participating in professional conferences and workshops'.

We then turned our attention to the social and professional contexts that support this ongoing development.

Question 21: What are your professional social supports?

In identifying their sources of professional support, participants referenced both formal affiliations and informal peer relationships, underscoring the importance of community in sustaining ethical practice.

The Primary Theme was: Professional Support Networks, with two sub-themes organisations and colleagues.

> **Sub-theme 1:** Professional Organizations including; 'professional communities', 'professional associations', 'ICF', 'EMCC', 'IOC', 'ICF', 'a women entrepreneurs mentor group and others' and 'membership in various coaching organizations'.

> **Sub-theme 2:** Colleagues and Peer Support, such as, 'my supervisor', 'my peer supervisors and colleagues', 'supervision', 'coaching colleagues', 'definitely my colleagues from other fields they provide different perspectives', 'support from peers and colleagues'.

This led us to ask about the perceived utility of these supports—what participants themselves found most helpful in practice.

Question 22: What supports do you find useful?

While the question itself presupposed a general theme—sources of ethical support—two distinct types of support were identified in participant responses   Theme 1: Ethical Codes and Committees, including, 'code and committee of ethics', 'both' (implying a combination of supports), 'ethics codes and professional guidelines'.

> **Theme 2:** Reflective Practices and Discussions, such as, 'triad practice and discussion', 'faculty discussions, people, books, reflection, exercise'.

Given the cascading nature of the questions—each inviting deeper levels of reflection—we were curious to explore whether the process of completing the questionnaire itself had any impact on impact on participants' thinking or experience.

Question 23: How did completing this survey impact you, about how you view ethics in coaching?

While responses were brief, they suggest that for some participants, the act of completing the survey served as a prompt for renewed awareness and reflection on the role of ethics in their coaching practice.

Primary Theme: Impact of Survey on Ethical Views

Sub-theme 1: Increased Awareness, noting that, 'I'm glad that ethics is becoming a popular theme in coaching', 'mind opening and it increased my awareness of ethical issues in coaching'.

Sub-theme 2: Importance of Ethics, this included, 'It reminded me how important it is to keep ethics at the forefront of coaching', 'reaffirmed the importance of ethics in every aspect of coaching'.

Data Analysis

Although our primary agenda here was to report on the findings of the survey, in order to show the story so far, we decided to analyse the responses in terms of correlations between key themes.

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was conducted to examine the relationships between coaching experience, education type, supervision, and ethical reflection (see Table 2). There was a weak positive correlation between time in supervision and time coaching, $r(99) = .27$, $p = .006$, suggesting that coaches with more experience tend to have spent slightly more time in supervision. A small negative correlation was found between education type and frequency of supervision, $r(99) = -.31$, $p = .001$, and between education type and frequency of reflection, $r(99) = -.29$, $p = .003$, indicating that certain types of coach education may be associated with less frequent engagement in both practices. No significant relationships were found between education type and time in supervision, $r(99) = -.03$, $p = .765$; time in supervision and reflection frequency, $r(99) = .05$, $p = .6195$; or between reflection frequency and supervision frequency, $r(99) = .00$, $p = 1.000$.

Table 2

Spearman's Rank Correlation Between Key Variables

Variable Pair	r	p	Interpretation
Time in Supervision and Time Coaching	.27	.006	Weak positive correlation. Longer coaching experience slightly correlates with time in supervision.
Time in Supervision and Reflection Frequency	.05	.619	Negligible correlation. Time in supervision has minimal connection to reflection frequency.
Education Type and Reflection Frequency	–.29	.003	Small negative correlation. Some education types reflect less frequently than others.
Education Type and Time in Supervision	–.03	.765	Negligible correlation. Education type does not strongly influence time spent in supervision.
Education Type and Frequency of Supervision	–.31	.001	Small negative correlation. Education types might supervise less frequently.
Reflection Frequency and Supervision Frequency	.00	1.000	No meaningful relationship between frequency of reflection and frequency of supervision.

Commentary on Survey Data

Firstly, it is interesting to note that the vast majority of respondents have more than two years of experience in coaching. This may mean that they have gone beyond the need for normative supervision of their practice and may draw more heavily on the educative and reflexive functions of supervision, as supervisees. Also, it is interesting that the respondents are mostly female; whilst this is probably broadly representative of coaching in general, this is a larger majority than we would have expected.

We wondered if there is a gendered aspect to coaching ethics / ethical reflection that we have not yet considered. Are women more likely to make ethical reflection central to their coaching practice than

men, for instance? Looking at the coach education question, we were slightly surprised to see that the percentage of those doing university-based courses was so low at 16%. We would have expected it to be a minority but probably more like 25%. Perhaps this is due to the fact that those who have completed University courses may not see ethics as something that they need to do more work on, if they have studied this at University already.

The coaching supervision question was answered how we would have expected it to be, with a range of take-up, although we were curious to know what 'Other' was here, which accounted for 15%. We wondered whether this is because respondents are reframing what they understand as supervision & ethical reflection and, therefore, do not fit in the other categories in the question. Our question, which asks 'How long have you been in supervision?' with the responses of never (16%) and other (84%,) does not seem to make sense at the moment.

In response to 'how often do you engage in ethical reflection', there is an intriguing difference in terms of the temporal adjectives used in the question. For example, what do respondents understand by the differences between often, very often and always? In particular, what does always mean to these people? Do they think it means after every coaching session, or do they think it means that this is a constant & regular feature of their practice? If it is the latter, how does this differ from very often or often, as we would have assumed that engaging in ethical reflection 'very often' would be a constant and regular feature of their practice and, hence, synonymous with 'always'. Looking at the nationalities of those who have completed the questionnaire, the balance of those who have completed the questionnaire are from English-speaking countries, i.e. USA, UK, Canada & Australia. Whilst there are also a range of other nationalities, there are relatively few from Asia and Africa which probably suggests a white bias in terms of respondents.

Responses to 'previous professions to prior to coaching' yielded quite a range of different backgrounds from corporate to education to therapy to business ownership. Our basic impression though is that the majority of them had professional / managerial roles in the service sectors of the various economies – there were relatively few respondents with engineering / manufacturing / construction backgrounds and rather more in so called helping professions in the broadest sense. This is probably to be expected from coaches and the data about their entry into coaching supports the view that for many it was a natural transition from what they were doing before, even if unplanned and unexpected in terms of when it happened.

Looking at the questions and themes about reflection, there seem to be different understandings and methods of doing this, from something more focused on the inner—solo analysis and observation of patterns and themes—through to more active and social methods. However, there seems to be a much smaller number of responses on methods of reflection than for other questions.

The questions around impact are similar in terms of volume. Looking at the positive changes and increased awareness sub-themes, respondents seem to be saying it has made a difference but, other than being able to see biases, there is not a lot there in terms of the detail of how it has made a difference; for example, one person says it has "made a 180 shift in how I approach coaching" but we do not know what that means and where they have shifted from or to. Others made some intriguing comments about "being more present and mindful during coaching sessions" and "becoming more aware of the political context of my work" but it is not clear how the ethical reflection has helped in terms of them doing this. Looking at the settings influencing reflection, nature and others seem to be the standout stimuli, which we would have expected.

Again, though, what is not clear (of course, there is only so much that a questionnaire can do in this regard) is how the respondents are interacting with these environments / contexts and what it is about that mode that enables / facilitates ethical reflection. Looking at the obstacles, predictably, time and the lack of it, is the dominant feature. However, it does raise the question for us of perceived added value; if ethical reflection is as valuable as these respondents are implying, why is it difficult to find the time to do it? It is as if they are passive recipients of the 'tyranny of the clock', almost without agency in relation to their 'busy schedules'.

A cynical interpretation of this might be that ethical reflection is something they know that they should say that they do and should do but, in reality, actually doing other work is more appealing. This possible interpretation is also supported by the number of quotes where respondents assert their various commitments to learning, improvement and insights. Responses are slightly more numerous where respondents feel able to point to reading, supervision, conference participation and ethical codes as concrete artefacts that they can engage in dialectical relationships with these processes / practices. Asking about the impact of completing the survey did not really yield any substantive insights survey – there were one or two intriguing comments about it being "mind opening" and "increasing awareness" but again it is not immediately clear how and why it has this effect.

Primary conclusions from the survey

Firstly, it is interesting to note that the vast majority of respondents have more than two years of experience in coaching. This may mean that they have gone beyond the need for normative supervision of their practice and may draw more heavily on the educative and reflexive functions of supervision, as supervisees. Also, it is interesting that the respondents are mostly female; whilst this is probably broadly representative of coaching in general, this is a larger majority than we would have expected.

1. Influence of supervision - Supervision has impacted their practice through increased awareness of their own bias and relationship dynamics.

2. Influence of reflection - Reflection is seen as a process of developing understanding of self but also through working with others to share thinking.

3. Reflection on ethical practice - This is a frequent area for most and has enabled a number to change their practice and become more mindful. Relationships, commitments and natural environments seem to be supportive of developing refection with time and work demands providing barriers. Values, biases, interactions and growth are primary reflection topics stimulated by case studies, supervision and real-life scenarios. Being able to take diverse perspectives and being fully present enhance participants ethical awareness. This is further developed by reading, conferences, events and supervision.

4. Professional support networks - Professional associations, colleagues and peers provide the main supports with engagement with ethical codes being a useful practice. Completing the survey also increased awareness for some and reminded them of the importance of ethics.

5. Point of concern - The group overall express much value on reflection in general and on ethics in particular. Yet there is limited activity, and barriers are defined yet not actively overcome.

Conclusion

Although this survey only presents a brief snapshot of a select group of coaches, we were able to gain an overall sense of where this particular group of participants were in terms of their engagement with coaching ethics. As discussed above, they were generally an experienced group of predominately female coaches from a broad range of countries. Although some found themselves in coaching suddenly, most

had a planned transition informed by experience, passion, interest and previous exposure to coaching. They are trained coaches having largely taken defined courses and have come from a wide range of previous occupations. Overall, they are committed to supervision and engage in ethical reflection. Our data analysis raised some questions—discussed above—as to how participants viewed the differences between ethical reflective practice and supervision. There are also some questions about the quality and quantity of ethical reflection.

This raises a crucial insight: ethical practice in coaching is not sustained solely through ethical codes, individual reflection, or informal learning. Rather, it requires a deliberate and ongoing commitment to both critical ethical reflection and intentional supervision—each serving a distinct yet complementary role. When supervision is thoughtfully engaged, it offers a vital relational space for surfacing bias, navigating complexity, and deepening ethical maturity. At the heart of this is ethicality—not merely ethical decision-making, but a way of being that integrates relational responsibility, self-awareness, and integrity across contexts (Smith, 2025; Smith, McCarthy, & Rosefield, 2025). As the field continues to professionalise, embedding ethicality through structured, supported practices will be essential to sustaining ethical development in coaching.

Acknowledgements

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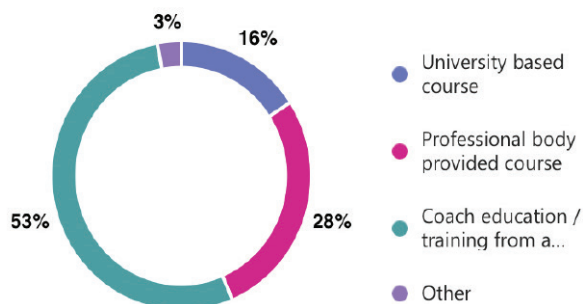## Appendix 1: Survey Data Summary

1. How long have you been coaching?
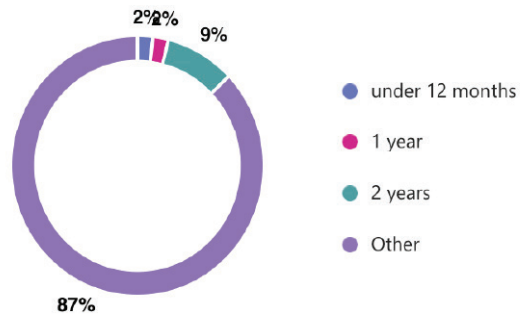
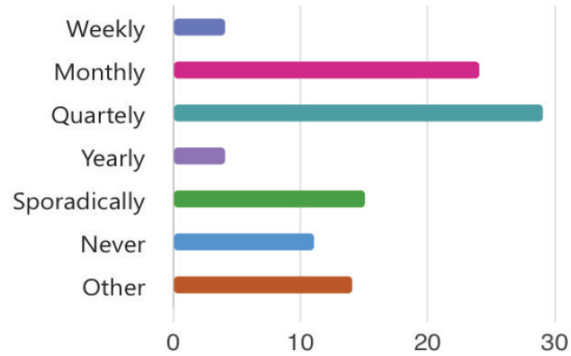2. What gender do you identify as?
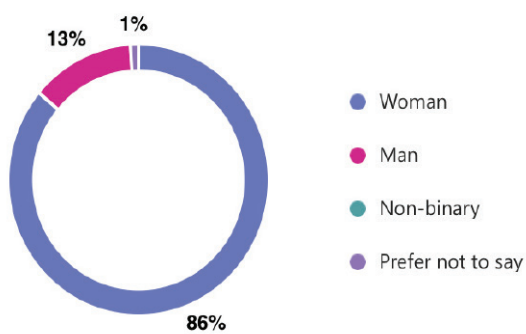
3. Which of these describes your coach education?

Other is "All of the above"

4. How often do you engage in supervision?

5. How often do you engage in ethical reflection?

Stokes, P., Smith, W.A., & Lane, D. A. (2025). The story so far in coaching ethics: Insights from an exploratory enquiry. *Journal of Coaching Ethics, 2* (3), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.62882/1mtq0s63