Ethics in coaching: An ethical decision making framework for coaching psychologists

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Abstract

Objectives: This paper explores the process of ethical decision making in coaching psychology. The paper seeks to develop a suitable model for application in coaching psychology to complement existing codes of practice. The model of course can be adjusted for use by coaching practitioners.
Design: The study used a semi-structured interview design within a qualitative approach, which was complemented by a focus group.
Methods: Grounded theory was employed to analyse interview transcripts and to build a series of descriptive and conceptual codes. The model was discussed and further developed through a focus group of experienced coaching psychologists.
Results: The study identified the key elements used by coaching psychologists in making decisions which include ethical principles such as those presented in professional codes and relevant literature, personal ethics and moral values, duty to society, standards of practice, the law, conversations with others such as supervisors, experience, respected others' views, implicit and explicit contract with clients along with boundaries and implications involved with a situation. These elements were used to build firstly descriptive and later conceptual codes and from these a decision making framework was developed and tested on coaching psychologists. This model offers a sequential but non-linear model to decision making with six core stages. In addition, the research identified the value in building ethical maturity. Ethical maturity is the capacity to make ethical decisions. This can be enhanced by engaging in regular supervision in which hypothetical testing of dilemmas can be utilised, by recurrent ethical thinking, engaging in activities associated with coach training and pursuing wider continual professional development.
Conclusions: The study offers a model for ethical decision making in coaching for use by coaching psychologists and in coach training.

Introduction

"The job of a coach is to help employees understand how their behaviours may be going out of bounds and to illuminate appropriate alternative behaviours" (Clegg, Rhodes, Kornberger & Stilin, 2005). We would argue that ethics offer a similar role for coaches, and specifically to prevent dangerous practice from harming clients, the public, or the coach. In formal terms, ethics is defined as the systematic study of the nature and science of morality (Bailey & Schwartzberg, 1995). In short, ethics is the practice that determines good or bad, right or wrong, in social relations (de Jong, 2006).

The first person to use the term 'professional ethics' was Thomas Percival (1740-1804), who produced the prototype of all codes of medical ethics (Tribe & Morrissey, 2005). This marked a significant change in how ethics were viewed and implemented and has contributed to ethics codes which guide the work of psychologists such as the APA and BPS codes.

Although there are a small number of decision making models in psychology (e.g. Kitchener, 1984; Carroll, 2010; Forester-Miller and Davis, 1996) the literature on ethical decision making in psychology is limited (Passmore & Mortimer, In Press). Academic literature on coaching also remains limited, despite a growth in coaching research over the past decade (Grant, et al 2010). Much of the literature on ethics in coaching focuses on the published professional codes and their use in respect of core themes such as confidentiality, boundaries and consent (examples include Peltier, 2001; Brennan & Wildflower, 2010). Ethical frameworks for coaching, like scaffolding, offer support to, without controlling every aspect of, the profession (Bond, 2000). However such codes, while useful and important in helping coaches understand the high level principles of ethical conduct, fail to offer practical guidance for coaching psychologists in resolving the everyday ethical dilemmas which practitioners face working with organizations and clients. Given the limited research on coaching ethics, it seems reasonable to turn to other disciplines to review how these domains have sought to build suitable decision making models.

Sport coaching, like business coaching, shares a concern for goal attainment and performance (Passmore, 2009). There exist codes of conduct for sport coaches. One such code, the 'Code of Ethics and Conduct for Sports Coaches' outlines a number of ethical standards with which sports coaches are expected to comply. The code offers guidance in the areas of competence, safety, abuse of privilege, confidentiality, advertising, integrity, co-operation, commitment, relationships and humanity. This gives sports coaches a very clear set of statements with regard to what is right or wrong. However, dangers of such codes offering a higher detailed frameworks are that they may close down options and such standards cannot cover all eventualities. In a study of Canadian sports coaches Haney, Long and Howell-Jones obtained coaches' concerns from descriptions of first hand experiences (Haney et al., 1998). With this it was possible to establish the extent to which these concerns were addressed by the standards and principles of the Canadian Professional Coaching Association (CPCA). They noted that while the code covered many of the concerns, they failed to cover all of the issues which emerged during their research with coaches.

Like psychology, medicine has very strict ethical guidelines and associated legal obligations. No universal code has been established for medical practice, but four main principles most commonly arise in the clinical literature; justice, autonomy, non-malfeasance and beneficence. Justice refers to the impartial and fair treatment of clients; autonomy to respect for client's right to self-determination; nonmaleficence to the avoidance of harm to the client; and beneficence to the promotion of the client's best interests.

The study of ethical concepts in counselling illustrates a further problem with codes of practice - discrepancies. The British Association for Counselling (BAC), the Confederation of Scottish Counselling Agencies (COSCA) (both of which exclusively deal with counselling), the British Psychological Society (BPS), and the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) (both of which include counselling as one of many positions) all offer codes of practice and many counsellors belong to more than one body. In reviewing these codes Bond notes the BAC

prioritises the principle of autonomy, with the exception of possible situations of self or public harm. The BPS gives priority to fidelity, whereas UKCP and COSCA give precedence to the principle of beneficence (Bond, 2000). This leads potentially to confusion and differences in power relations experienced by the client. A greater prominence placed on the respect for client autonomy is likely to result in the sharing of power, whereas a more controlling relationship exists when beneficence is exercised. These discrepancies between bodies are hardly ideal and reflect the difficulties when codes are used as the sole means of resolving ethical dilemmas.

To deal with these discrepancies, we would argue that practitioners must devise a strategy for ethical decision making. Forester-Miller and Davis (1996) attempted to do this for counselling by incorporating the work of Sileo and Kopala (1993), Forester-Miller and Rubenstein (1992), Haas and Malouf (1983), Stadler (1986), Kitchener (1984) and Van Hoose and Paradise (1979) to create a seven step model of ethical decision making for counsellors. According to Forester-Miller and Davis' model, ethical decisions may be made if one follows these steps sequentially. The first step involves problem identification; the second involves reviewing the codes; step three involves determining the scope and nature of the problem; step four entails generating prospective courses of action; followed by determining the course of action; step six involves reviewing the course of action; and the final step is of implementation.

Although useful to assist one in remembering all steps, a sequential linear series of steps greatly oversimplifies the complex process of solving an ethical dilemma and has its own weaknesses. Such an approach is in danger of seeing dilemmas as simple decisions in contrast with complex or chaotic issues (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Snowden and Boone offer a four zone model to guide decision makers in resolving decisions.

They suggests that organizations often see problems as either simple, with a direct link between cause and effect, or complicated, where the relation between cause and effect can be identified with extra help. In coaching this help maybe the guidance of a supervisor. However, real dilemmas have the features which are akin to complex or chaotic spaces in Snowden's model. Complex problems are ones in which the relationship between cause and effect can only be perceived in retrospect and as a result the practitioner needs to use emergent practice to test the impact of their decisions and be able to step back into the problem to identify a different course of action. Chaotic problems, in contrast are ones where there is no relationship between cause and effect. Human behaviour, particularly of those who maybe unwell or suffering mental illness, may fall into this category and the consequences of actions can be impossible to accurately judge.

Carroll (2010) too devised a framework for use in counselling. This has very similar stages. Stage one involves creating ethical sensitivity. Stage two involves formulating an ethical course of action. Stage three entails implementing an ethical decision and stage four involves living with the ambiguities after making a decision.

As with Forester-Miller and Rubenstein model, Carroll's model offers a linear approach. The implication is that dilemmas are simple problems solved through the application of a series of ingredients, or through external input as a complicated problem. We would however view ethical dilemmas as complex problems, where the relationship between cause and effect is often difficult to identify.

As psychologists, both counselling and coaching psychologists are bound by strict legal and ethical obligations, which arguably have been enhanced since the registration of psychologists in the UK through the HPC. However, while operating within this framework it is important to remember that coaching is a distinct field with its own challenges and complexity (Passmore, 2009a). One distinction is the series of dyadic relationships that exist between a business coach and stakeholders of the coaching relationship such as the coachee, director, senior manager etc. Law (2005a) outlines the kinds of ethical issues the coach may be faced with as a result. These include the need to establish who the clients are, which stakeholders have priority, whose interests the coach should be serving, ethical duties, how different values and interests may be managed, issues of confidentiality, the potential for abuse of power, and implications of vicarious liability (Law, 2005a). Further,

coaching psychology is an emerging discipline and to establish itself, it needs to develop its own theories and models which are grounded in coaching practice and coaching research, as opposed to borrowing models from counselling or business. Svaleng & Grant (2010) note that coaching still has some way to go before coaching can consider itself a mature profession. In addition, business coaching is unique in that it is required of the coach to have a working knowledge of the business in which he/she coaches (Passmore, 2008). Such business knowledge is now becoming more widely accepted, as the coaching market matures, as one of the key differentials which mark the excellent coach from the competent coach (Marsden & Passmore, Unpublished). Furthermore, coaching psychology rightly places importance on confidentiality, however in other domains such as sports coaching, this is less of an issue.

We have argued that codes may assist the coaching psychologist in their work, but are far from infallible. Codes may not cover all important concerns (Haney et al., 1998), may be seen as overly prescriptive (Passmore, 2009b), display discrepancies between professional bodies (Bond, 2000), are valid in a limited number of situations and certain principles contradict each other when applied to certain dilemmas (e.g. one may not be able to always uphold confidentiality if trying to ensure the safety of others). In addition, one may not be a member of any professional body with which these codes are published, however this, one may argue, is in itself unethical, as clients have no independent body to refer complaints. One way forward is to supplement codes of practice with frameworks to aid practitioners in making ethical decisions in the moment.

Ethical decision making is an extremely complicated process that becomes more intricate when one considers issues with duty of care (Spence et al., 2006), human rights legislation (Law, 2005b), legal matters (Katter, 1999), overlap between fields such as coaching and counselling (Summerfield, 2006; Spence et al., 2006), the series of dyadic relationships between the coach and stakeholders in an organisation (Law, 2005a), and sources of ethical thinking, such as moral thinking (Bond, 2000), which change over time.

This study sought to explore how experienced coaching psychologists resolved dilemmas they had encountered and from this to build a model specifically for coaching psychology.

Method

A grounded theory qualitative methodology was used to explore data gathered from participants using a semi structured interview. Grounded theory is an inductive approach to research by which coding the qualitative data into categories, and higher order categories, the theory emerges from the data. The objective was to ascertain the experiences and ethical practices of experienced coaches. Grounded theory was used due to its dual role of ascertaining the grounded individual experiences and encouragement of the researcher to actively engage with the data. As it was a small sample, it was thought an ideal qualitative method to use (Charmaz, 2006). While a number of alternative methods have been offered, the present study followed the original methodology offered by Glaser & Strauss (1967) as a framework.

Participants

All participants were experienced coaching psychologists, with at least ten years work experience and all but one had some experience as supervisors. In total, five coaching psychologists were used to collect the original data; three females and two males, four white European and one Asian. The age range of participants was from 40 to 55. All were academics (teaching and researching) in the field of coaching psychology and all except for one also acted as coaching supervisors.

In the second phase of the study a focus group was used. This consisted of six practicing coaching psychologists' five women and one man, all were white European and were experienced coaches.

Data Collection
In the first phase a semi-structured approach was used as it enabled the building of rapport, facilitated flexibility and allowed the researcher to probe novel areas with the intention of acquiring rich data.
The final protocol for the interview centred on these six themes:
• Background in coaching
• The perception of meaning and impact of ethics in coaching
• Resolving dilemmas presented in practice
• Impact of decisions on self regard
• Helping to resolve dilemmas presented by peers or subordinates
• Advisory ethical practices.

The method of transcription drew upon the Jefferson system (Jefferson, 1985) and a detailed coding system was used to interpret this information. Data collection, coding and analysis were conducted concurrently, necessary for theoretical sampling. In this way, data collection was controlled by the emergent theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).
In the second phase using the focus group, notes were taken of the discussion relating to comments on the outline framework and to suggested changes or additions.

Data Analysis
To ensure a thorough and detailed interaction with the data and full saturation, themes were created manually instead of using coding software. A six stage process was used. The first stage involved the collection and storage of data from which the initial codes were generated. The second stage involved reviewing and altering the descriptive codes. This involved memo writing, identifying links between items and refining the coding system. The third stage entailed grouping the descriptive codes into conceptual codes and revising these such that they composed a conceptual theory. The fourth stage concerned designing a framework based on the revised coding structure. It was important to the researcher that this analysis was interpretative rather than descriptive and that the final framework may be easily understood and thought to coaches.
Thus, for the fifth stage, the provisional model was compared with findings from the relevant literature before being arranged into easily understandable and remember-able chunks. This was reviewed by an independent researcher. The final stage entailed building a conceptual diagram based on this framework.
This was an iterative process as data collection, coding and analysis were conducted jointly with the purpose of seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in the emergent theory, a requisite of theoretical sampling. A fuller statement of the approach is described in Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009, including a diagramatical representation of the method – Appendix A.

Results

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In this section the results from the semi structured interviews are considered and presented in initial descriptive clusters.

Sources of Dilemmas
The first focus of the study was on the sources of ethical dilemmas in coaching. Participants suggested that dilemmas stemmed from four areas; issues with the coachee, issues with the coach, boundary issues and issues stemming from multiple dyadic relationships. However, when a dilemma presents itself it is likely to cross between different source categories.

(i) Issues with coachee & stakeholders
These may be emotional, personality or behavioural issues. Each of which may be a precursor to the client being a danger to oneself, those around them and the organisation within which they work. When this is the case a coach must decide how to act upon it, if at all. Emotional issues of the client may happen when the client may not necessarily have a disposition, as with personality issues, but may experience distress etc due to their environment. This was found to be a common source, particularly in areas where work hours and task demands are great.
"I met the client who was very very stressed and not sleeping and he was very concerned at the time and that, in the process of having some sort of breakdown." (B36).
"And in that case, and in those cases, I can think of at least three times it has happened…" (B40).
Coaches often find these particular instances difficult to deal with.
"I find those instances quite difficult." (D42).
Often the coach is presented with the dilemma of how to act upon a coachee behaving in a damaging manner.
"…because I felt it was potentially very damaging, not only for the organisation but for himself." (B25i).

(ii) Issues with coach
These may be personal, emotional or behavioural. The coach may have the personal problem of finding it difficult to cease coaching when it seems it may be the correct step to take.*"I find it very hard to break up in that way,.." (A39).*
Through their actions they may bring the profession into disrepute. Behavioural activities of the coach that may lead to a dilemma are endless and are usually because they cross a certain boundary.

(iii) Boundary issues
Boundaries may be crossed by anyone in the coaching relationship or by activities while conducting research. These boundaries may be written explicitly in the form of professional codes or may be presented as standards of practice implicit within coaching. The dilemmas faced as a result of someone crossing certain boundaries are further exacerbated by the fact that there is a large degree of uncertainty in the new field of coaching. Guidelines often prove inadequate and regulations are weak.
"…some of them are… kind of give doubt in the here and now in the supervision session." (C11i).
"Because all the regulations which are currently there are relatively weak,…" (C35i).

(iv) Multiple-dyadic & dual relationships
These dilemmas present themselves as a result of the coach working for many individuals/bodies at the same time.

"…and there are so many nuances like working for organisations and individuals at the same time,…" (C9).
The coach may also be put in a position where they are expected to have more than one relationship with a client.
"I have an example of a coach, who was working in a dual role in relation to a coachee,…" (A30).
Often, as was found in this study, the coach may be asked to partake in something ethically questionable by favouring one particular stakeholder.

Ethical decision making
Following a detailed analysis of transcripts it was possible to decipher the elements which inform a coach's ethical decision making. This encompasses ethical principles such as those presented in professional codes and relevant literature, personal ethics and moral values, duty to society, standards of practice, the law, conversations with others such as supervisors, experience, respected others' views, implicit and explicit contract with clients along with boundaries and implications involved with a situation.

(i) Ethical awareness
The capacity to make ethical decisions may be further developed by engaging in hypothetical testing of dilemmas, recurrent ethical thinking and engaging in activities associated with continual professional development. Participants believed that coaches should immerse themselves in the field and engage in continuous professional development activities. Such immersion will help the coach become more ethically aware. As one participant points out, ethical mindfulness is essential for the operation of ethics. This can be achieved by joining professional organizations and for members to be aware of the professional codes that these organizations set for coaching practice.
"…they need to join and belong to a particular, relevant, professional organisation or society,…" (E57).
All of these organisations publish their own professional codes which members must abide by in order to retain member. Coaches need to read and consider these codes and how they relate to their practice in general or in specific cases.
"I will look at and take on the BPS Code of Ethics and standards which has a number of ethical principles." (E33).
In parallel with awareness about the professional bodies' ethical codes, participants highlighted the importance of being aware of one's own ethical code and how personal values and beliefs can be used as a guide to informing ethical decisions. *"To expose themselves regularly to lots of ideas around the ethics of coaching which are in books, papers conferences and so on,…" (A60).*
"I would drive them to spend some time exploring their own ethical principles." (A57).
A further sub theme was the value in exploring ethical dilemmas during training or CPD. This may be accomplished by reading literature on ethical dilemmas, by asking ethical questions of oneself, by foreseeing ethical dilemmas, thinking about dilemmas past, asking about dilemmas others have faced and engaging in the hypothetical testing of such dilemmas.
"…what difficulties do you foresee if you take on this particular assignment?" (C27).
"…they should ask themselves those questions that really explore how they are made up ethically." (A58).
"…explore from a number of ethical dilemmas so they would begin to fine tune their ethical thinking." (A58).
"…so to have tested somebody in your own mind if not in practice." (B49).
Not surprisingly supervision was also seen as a useful aid in developing a stronger ethical awareness.
"And of course I would advise them to have a very good supervisor themselves." (A59).

One participant suggested that change needed to happen at the very start of coaching education. This could be achieved by a greater debate during teaching and supervision, but may widen into a wider public debate about ethics in the professions. "I think we should do it through our teaching in our courses because that's what we should do, not just to feed information to our students but to raise awareness, to discuss the most difficult issues, to expose ourselves as we teach them and how difficult the dilemmas are. That's one area, in training. Another important area, of course supervision, and a third area because I think it should be down to public debate and should be down to conferences, through journals, academic journals in particular, not just magazines which tend to be a little bit superficial but proper discussion with people who have something to say and openly prepared to debate this issue." (D54-57).

(ii) A personal ethical code
Participants in the previous section highlighted the importance of awareness. They moved on to note that this needed to be captured in some way, with coaching psychologists developing their own principles by mapping their own values and beliefs onto the ethical codes and published literature.
"…mapping upon explicit principles out there." (E50).
This may be carried out by assessing the principles in the codes and identifying which principles take precedence and in what situations. If his work is done in advance of an issue arising the coach is in a stronger place to consider the ethical matter in question.

(iii) Particulars of situation to be identified
It is impossible to understand a dilemma without factoring in all contextual matters. The exact same labeled dilemma may necessitate a different resolution depending upon the context; such as the organization, individuals involved and where the work is taking place. A thorough identification of situation particulars is necessary. One must identify the client and other stakeholders. In addition, legal matters, boundaries/standards involved, the coaching contract agreed at the start and the tacit contract, implicit in the coaching relationship.*"…and also what would have been implied, e.g. I agree confidentiality explicitly but I think even when that hasn't happened coachees behave as if there were confidentiality so I don't think it would be an adequate defense to say 'I never promised that it was confidential'…" (A21).*
Other factors may include the rights, responsibilities, welfare and mental or emotional state of the clients and stakeholders.
"…an individual who it became clear that he had some very profound personality problems such that he became subject to emotional distress…" (A10).

(iv) Peer coaching, supervision and consulting significant others
Participants identified the important role played by significant others, such as supervisors and peers, in helping coaches resolve dilemmas.
"…to talk about the boundaries around the work she had done with the other individual in the group." (B59).
"…explore it with the supervisor or suitable person who is in a position to help." (C37).
Peers, supervisors and significant others may assist with discussing options, the implications/consequences of each option and how to act.
"…first of all is to identify all the potential implications of the action or the decision made by the coach of what to do and how to act". (C39).
This resource may necessitate revisiting as new queries arise.

(v) Reflection & journal entry

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Ethical decision making is a cognitive process. It is important that the coach find time to reflect on the situation. Participants suggested that reflection and thinking were an important part of the process, to avoid hasty or rushed decisions which had not been thought through.
"Because it seems to me that ethical thinking and ethical decision making is really a cognitive process". (E25).
"Then, also I don't like to make an immediate decision, I like to spend some time thinking about it." (B51)
"Well the main thing is to have a bit of time to think about it if you can…" (D29).
This may be carried out with the assistance of a coach/supervisor.
"…maybe reflect in supervision and so on" (D30).

(vi) Assess options
As in all good decision making models, including coaching models such as GROW, participants highlighted the value of exploring options and the risks and benefits associated with each course of action. In doing so the coach provides themselves with the opportunity to become more choiceful in the course of action.
"….What are the options?" (E28).
"…..What are the causes or responses and actions?" (E28).
"There would be a whole range of possible actions in response to a particular situation which, usually, are quite complex." (E28).
One may assess the consequences and implications of each and examine where boundaries lie.*"Then I tend to think about what the pros are, what the cons are, what are the consequences of doing something and doing nothing are…" (B49).*
"and what lines you're overstepping by doing something and doing nothing." (B50).
Weigh up the benefits against the cost of each option.

(vii) Evaluate process and outcome
Participants highlighted evaluation as an important part of the process and involves assessing, and learning from the entire process undertaken and the consequences of one's actions, feeding back into the process of continual professional development. Some participants reported learning aspects about themselves.
"…I have always been stronger on the nurturing side that the discipline side but I realized that it was quite such a strong aspect of my personality." A42

Iterative process
Participants noted that the process of making a decision needed not to be linear, but to be iterative. The iterative process allows for the coach to step back and forward between stages, which in reality is what happens as new information or deeper reflection occurs.
"Well it's not so much step by step, really, because if you look around at the professional societies, about ethics … and codes of ethics and conduct or standards of practice, very rarely, you will find that they will provide you with any step by step of situations." (E23).

Discussion

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With a series of conceptual codes the aim was to take the data and review this against the literature and from this to build a framework which could be used in coaching psychology to help practitioners, particularly novices, improve the way in which they managed ethical decisions. The aim was to build a short process which could guide ethical decisions of practitioners, and which could also be taught to coaching psychologists as a useful heuristic to guide ethical considerations when dilemmas arose in their work. An initial model was tested on practitioners and subsequently refined to the model which is presented below.

Drawing on the descriptive themes in the data, a conceptual model was built which consisted of six stages. In contrast to previous models which have been largely linear, the model aims to both offer iteration and also flexibility for coaches to incorporate their own values and beliefs as part of the decision process and for the coach to be able to step back and forth through the model. The six stages of the ACTION model is set are set out in Figure 1. The stages are summarized below.

Stage 1: *Awareness*. The process starts with awareness of the ethical code of the professional body that the coach is affiliated with. This is likely to be the BPS code for coaching psychologists in the UK, or the APA for American psychologists; however for other practitioners it may include other non-psychological trade bodies such as the International Coaching Federation (ICF) or Association for Coaching (AC). Secondly, it involves awareness of one's own personal values and beliefs. Thirdly, reflection on how these different codes fit together is necessary.

Stage 2: Classify. This stage involves the identification of the issue as it emerges in practice and the ability to classify the issue as a 'dilemma'. Key issues within this will be the individuals, organizations and context in which the issue is emerging.

Stage 3: Time for reflection, support and advice. At this stage the coach takes time to personally reflect on the issue. During this period, which maybe a few seconds, but is better if this is several hours or days if the situation allows, the coach may draw on a combination of experience, peer support networks, their supervisor and previous personal reflections in learning journals and diaries. We recognise that different coaches will use different approaches to suit their own personal styles and needs, and the selection of methods will also depend on the stage of development of the coach. One difference is the route taken by experienced coaches versus novices or coaches in training. The experienced coach is likely to have a wide network of support; they may have a co-coaching relationship in place or be a member of a peer network. For the novice coach, and those in training, the role of the supervisor is more important and the coach is likely to discuss the issue with their supervisor as part of their training.

Stage 4: Initiate. During this stage the coach will build a number of solution options to the ethical dilemma.

Stage 5: Option evaluation. With each option the coach will consider the risks and benefits associated with them and how each option may fit with personal and professional codes, as well as legal requirements and contracts. The coach may discuss these further with their peers, supervisor or others before selecting a final course of action to implement.

Stage 6: Novate. Once the appropriate course of action has been selected, the coach will incorporate this new approach into their ethical journal / experiences. It may also be prudent to share such a scenario (in a confidential manner), with those within one's own network or coaching body, so that colleagues can benefit from the situation and the learning associated with real dilemmas.

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The framework (Appendix A) offered is a starting point. As ethical dilemmas come from a diverse range of sources, with no two situations being exactly the same, this necessitates different methods of intervention. It is easily put to use and can easily be applied by novices. However, ideally a custom made framework should be created by each coach to reflect their own personal ethical position and the values of the professional bodies to which they belong.

Conclusions

This is a small scale study, drawn from a sample of UK coaching psychologists. With the use of grounded theory research methods, the key elements used by coaching psychologists in ethical decision making were identified. These were used to design an ethical decision making framework, the ACTION model, and a conceptual diagram based on this framework was devised. The paper offers a practical conceptual diagram that is easily understood and taught to others. It may be used to assist coaching psychologists, particularly novices, in making decisions of ethical concern and in solving ethical dilemmas. It may provide more structure or a starting point to an otherwise unfeasible task. Importantly, it may augment training courses and assist novice coaches in becoming more effective ethical thinkers. Further research is required to test the value of the model in real decision making scenarios and compare its value with other models which have been developed in parallel domains such as counselling, sports or business.
There is a general absence of rigorous evaluation of ethical decision making models in the literature and more work is required to deepen our understanding (Passmore & Mortimer, In Press).
A further area for development is the need for a greater debate about the role of ethics in coaching psychology. Such a debate should not be the preserve of a few, but draw those engaged in coaching work in the variety of different contexts which coaching psychology has spread. In addition, although coaching is largely unregulated, coaching psychologists must adhere to strict legal obligations as psychologists. Perhaps a debate in the wider field of coaching is needed as to the value of regulation, although the diverse voices and vested interests in the sector may make this a difficult process. Further, we would argue that coaching ethics needs to form an important part of all coach training.

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Appendix A: Figure 1: ACTION ethical decision making model for coaching

Future complex cases	Reflection & learning

Awareness of professional ethical codes

Initiate

Supervision	Peer coaching
Journal	Personal reflection

Check with law

Iteration 2

Ethical dilemma

Option 1
Option 2
Option 3
Option 4

Check with professional ethical code	Check with personal ethical code

Ethical action plan

Ethical action/s

Check with organisational contract	Check with client contract

Awareness of personal ethical codes

Stakeholders in process

Supervisor

Iteration 1

Stage 1: Aware

Stage 2: Classify

Stage 3: Reflect

Stage 4: Initiate

Stage 5: Option evaluation

Stage 6: Novate

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