OVER the past twenty years there has been a paradigm shift in many of the helping professions. We have witnessed a significant change in emphasis away from a reductionist diagnostic medical approach that primarily aims to treat or rectify dysfunctionality, towards an approach that primarily aims to help people create the conditions that will allow them to flourish, develop and attain personally meaningful goals in their work and personal lives. Although some may argue that the differences between these two aims are a mere matter of semantics, we posit that the holding of one or other of these positions has a significant impact on how helping professionals engage with their clients, the mindset or frame of reference of the helping professional, and most importantly the impact on the client themselves.

In this paper we argue that the time has come for counselling psychology to more explicitly engage with the knowledge and skill sets found in both positive psychology and coaching psychology in order to develop more flexible and effective evidence-based ways to help their counselling clients improve their psychological functioning and wellbeing and help them attain meaningful goals.

The key questions here are: How can counselling psychologists better work with clients to help them to flourish? How can we better facilitate the growth and development of our clients? We argue that the disciplines of positive and coaching psychology have much to contribute here.

Engaging with coaching and positive psychology
Positive psychology focuses on the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005), and similarly, coaching psychology primarily aims to enhance goal attainment, wellbeing and performance in clients’ personal lives and work domains (adapted from Grant & Palmer, 2002). Both of these approaches have now been shown to be effective means of helping clients improve their wellbeing, resolve mental health programmes and attain their goals (Grant et al., 2010).

The public have a clear thirst for evidence-based methodologies that enhance wellbeing and help them reach personal and business goals. Yet counselling psychology as an academic and applied discipline has traditionally failed to effectively engage with these issues, leaving the door open for other, arguably less qualified individuals to meet the public’s quest for personal development. In short, there is considerable and growing demand from the public for qualified applied psychologists, such as counselling...
psychologists, to deliver positive psychological and coaching services.

Of course, many counselling psychologists already draw on aspects of positive and coaching psychology in their practice (Lopez & Edwards, 2008) and are interested in well-being. Indeed, the call for such an integration is long standing (Gelso & Woodhouse, 2003) and overseas professional psychology associations such as the Society of Counseling Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association have already embraced this shift (APA, 2015). Nevertheless are we yet to see a significant shift towards this paradigm within the British Psychological Society?

**Wellbeing goes beyond the public interest**

It’s not just members of the public interested in wellbeing as governments are also keen to focus on this issue. For example, in the UK, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing has been launched, and it is funded by government and non-government sources including the Economic and Social Research Council and the Big Lottery Fund. Its mission is to understand what national and local governments, alongside voluntary and business partners, can do to increase wellbeing (see www.whatworkswellbeing.org/about). In contrast to counselling psychology, positive psychology research can inform this process as it focuses on individual, group, organisation and community levels.

**Barriers to change: Theoretical tensions and integration issues**

One potential objection from counselling psychologists is that coaching and positive psychology are frequently conceptualised within a solution-focused, cognitive-behavioural framework (Grant, et al., 2010), and because they work within a different theoretical framework, they cannot explicitly incorporate positive psychology or coaching methodologies into their counselling practice.

It is true that the most common theoretical framework for coaching is solution-focused, cognitive-behavioural. However, coaching psychology is informed by and practised within a wide range of theoretical perspectives including person-centred (Joseph, 2006), Adlerian (Sperry, 1993), Gestalt (Allan & Whybrow, 2007), psychodynamic (Kilburg, 2004) and systems approaches (O’Neill, 2011), amongst others (Whybrow & Palmer, 2006). There has been much work done already within the coaching psychology literature on how it utilises different theoretical perspectives in coaching, and much of this existing scholarship can usefully inform counselling psychologists who wish to integrate coaching and positive psychology into their existing counselling approaches (for more information see Palmer & Whybrow 2007; Stober & Grant, 2006).

Similarly, there may be perceived tensions between the goal-focused and strengths-based approaches inherent in coaching and positive psychology, and the diagnostic medical approach articulated in a British Psychological Society definition of counselling psychology (BPS, 2014, p.18), which states:

*Counselling psychologists deal with a wide range of mental health problems concerning life issues including bereavement, domestic violence, sexual abuse, traumas and relationship issues. They understand diagnosis and the medical context to mental health problems…*

Despite this emphasis on pathology, recent formulations of counselling psychology have tended to place more emphasis on strengths and more holistic formulations of counselling (BPS, 2014, p.18):

*Counselling psychologists focus on working with a tailored psychological formulation to improve psychological functioning and well-being, working collaboratively with people across a diverse range of disciplines.*

The paradigm shift is already happening. We need to formalise that.
The way forward
As we asserted over a decade ago (Grant & Palmer, 2002), counselling psychologists are ideally placed to deliver the positive psychology and coaching psychology services sought by the public. We suggest that the time has come for counselling psychology as an academic and applied discipline to develop specific guidelines that focus on developing positive and coaching psychology related knowledge and skills.

Just as we encourage our clients to grow, adapt and develop in the face of their changing life circumstances, counselling psychology could adapt and change as new ideas and methodologies emerge and the professional landscape changes. In this way counselling psychologists can better position themselves to provide a more complete and holistic psychological service to their clients, as well as better positioning themselves in crowded and highly competitive human services marketplace, whilst bringing their valued helping skills to a broader range of clients. One useful route that may be worth considering is for suitably experienced and qualified counselling psychologists to more fully engage with other psychological professionals who are interested and practising in this burgeoning field of applied psychology by joining the Society’s Special Group in Coaching Psychology Register of Coaching Psychologists (www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/developing-profession/register-coaching-psychologists/register-coaching-psychologists). In this way the profession of psychology can be more fully represented in this important area, and in doing so we can all better serve the interests of our clients, our profession and society as a whole.

References

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Integrating positive psychology and coaching psychology into counselling psychology


