

# Critical moments of clients and coaches: A direct-comparison study

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*'I don't understand. I just don't understand. (...)  
I don't understand it at all. I just don't understand.'  
'What's wrong? What don't you understand?'  
'I've never heard such a strange story.'  
'Why don't you tell me about it?'*

Opening lines of *Rashomon* (1950), Akira Kurosawa.

**Purpose:** *In this study descriptions of critical moments of coaching as experienced by both executive coaches and their clients are analysed and compared, to find out more about what works in coaching conversations.*

**Design/Methodology:** *This is a real-time direct-comparison study of coaches' and clients' critical-moment experiences with data collected straight after mutual coaching conversations. Eighty-six critical-moments descriptions were collected by independent researchers (not the authors) from measurements straight after independent coaching conversations (not with the authors). Exactly half of these descriptions were taken from clients and the other half from their coaches. They are analysed with reference to the full dataset of 352 critical-moment descriptions (102 by clients and 250 by executive coaches).*

**Results:** *Both coaches and clients report new realisations and insights as most critical in their direct experience of coaching, and they are also in substantial agreement about the specific moments that were critical in the sessions and why. Hence we find no evidence for the so-called 'Rashomon experience' in executive coaching. Differences with earlier coach data which showed a completely different picture could be explained by drawing attention to the fact that those earlier data were biased towards moments of exceptional tension experienced by the coach, verging on 'ruptures' within the coaching relationship.*

**Conclusions:** *This study has produced both a confirmation of earlier work when studying critical moments in executive coaching as well as a connection between the various diverging results hitherto found. The findings help us to understand better: (1) why clients' and coaches' descriptions in earlier studies were so different; and (2) how descriptions from clients and coaches coming out of coaching sessions can be extremely similar, as was the case here. The main conclusion is that coaches need to be prepared for quite different circumstances in 'run-of-the-mill' coaching and in the presence of exceptional tensions and ruptures.*

**E**XECUTIVE COACHING – the professional development of executives through one-to-one conversations with a qualified coach – is a discipline within the broader field of organisation development (OD) which is comparatively amenable to research. Executive coaching conversations are usually explicitly contracted, and bounded in both time and space (fixed duration, similar intervals, quiet and dependable space, away from the client's organisation, etc.). Most coaching manuals suggest

keeping the space for conversation as much as possible neutral, uncluttered and comfortable, without interference or distraction (Hawkins & Smith, 2006; Starr, 2003). Coach and client may spend some 10 to 20 hours in this same environment, in addition to sporadic email and telephone exchanges. The executive coach does not normally have a lot of contact with others in the client's organisation, unless there are additional coaching clients in that organisation or the coaching is part of a larger-scale consulting

intervention. This relative simplicity and the underlying unities of space, time, action and actors, create a relatively bounded *laboratory* in which consulting interventions can be studied. This is what makes executive coaching particularly exciting to investigate.

In order to understand the impact and contribution of executive coaching and other organisational consulting interventions, it is not enough to just understand general effectiveness or outcome. One also has to inquire into and create an understanding of the underlying coaching processes themselves, from the perspectives of both clients and coaches. The executive coaching profession is still young and although there are several studies on coaching outcome (e.g. Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000; Smither et al., 2003; Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2006), all rigorous quantitative research papers can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand. For recent overview studies that together cover some 20 serious coaching outcome research papers, see Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001), Feldman and Lankau (2005) and Greif (2007). However, much pioneering work has been done in recent years, there is really no comparison with the related but much more established field of psychotherapy which boasts many hundreds of solid research papers (for an overview of outcome research in psychotherapy see Wampold, 2001).

Outcome or effectiveness research reduces the whole of the coaching intervention to only one number, or perhaps a set of numbers, for example, averages of psychometric instruments or client ratings. Outcome research has to be silent on what happens *within* a coaching relationship: the many gestures, speech acts and attempts at sense-making that make up the whole of the intervention. At best it can tell us in a statistical manner how the full sum of all those conversations taken together may contribute to a digit on a Likert scale, at worst it may not even tell us that. What interests us in this study is how outcomes are achieved *within*

the coaching intervention, i.e. within and between individual coaching conversations. This is the realm of so-called *suboutcome* (Rice & Greenberg, 1984): outcome achieved in moments or sessions of coaching.

Research into coaching *process* is not as straightforward as research into coaching *outcome*. Whilst reducing the whole of a coaching relationship to one or a few quantifiable 'outcomes' (e.g. a rating by the coach, the client, the client's boss, an independent observer, etc.) allows a clear-cut and specific definition of that variable, when it comes to process one has to deal with manifold 'suboutcomes' (Rice & Greenberg, 1984). Moreover, studying an ongoing process will influence that process, which makes it harder to study.

Notwithstanding the difficulties with process research, it is of vital importance for coaching practitioners to understand better what happens in their conversations, what both partners in the conversations pay attention to and what they think is achieved through engaging in conversation. This article sets out to find some preliminary answers to the following main research questions:

1. What is the nature of 'key moments' that clients and coaches report immediately after their session together?
2. In what ways and to what degree are the reports by coaches and their clients different?
3. How do the results obtained with this new sample of real-time 'key moments' compare with findings from earlier studies?

Although to the best of our knowledge of the executive coaching literature, comparison studies into coaches' and clients' experiences of coaching have not been undertaken before, they are not without important precursors in psychotherapy. Admittedly, psychotherapy has distinctive professional qualifications, different ways of working and a different knowledge base (Spinelli, 2008). However, there is enough similarity in terms of one-to-one conversations with a profes-

sional helper to be interested in similar research findings from that field. Yalom and Elkin (1974) famously wrote up their two-year therapy journey, so that for some 75 sessions we have a first-person account from both therapist and client written up independently and shortly after each session. For an overview of more quantitative studies it seems appropriate to start with Feifel and Eells' early (1964) account of therapy outcomes as reported by both patients and therapists. They report 'a thought-provoking contrast in the patients' accent on insight changes compared with those of symptom relief and behaviours by therapists' (Feifel & Eells, 1964, p.317). In a more extensive study where patient and therapist reports after single sessions were compared (Orlinsky & Howard, 1975), 'patients and therapists agreed in rating insight and problem-resolution as the dominant goal of the patients, with relief as a prominent although secondary, goal' (p.66). Stiles (1980) did a direct-comparison study of sessions, by comparing clients' and therapists' ratings of sessions that they had together. By correlating ratings, he was able to show that clients' positive feelings after sessions were strongly associated with perceived 'smoothness/ease' of the sessions, whilst therapists' positive feelings were associated with 'depth/value' of the sessions. Broadly, clients and therapists tended to agree in their characterisations of sessions. Caskey, Barker and Elliott (1984) have compared patients' and therapists' perceptions of pre-selected individual therapist responses and they found reasonable agreement between patients and therapists on therapists' impact and intentions, as well.

Particularly relevant from the perspective of this inquiry is the direct-comparison study of *key moments* of therapy by Llewelyn (1988). She interviewed 40 patient-therapist pairs and collected 1076 'critical events' (both helpful and unhelpful) from 399 sessions (an average of 2.7 per session). She found highly significant differences between the selection and description of the events by therapists

and by patients. These differences turned out to be greater when the outcome of the psychotherapy was relatively less helpful. Llewelyn used Elliott's (1985) taxonomy to classify the events, and found that:

- Patients valued 'reassurance/relief' and 'problem solutions' more highly, whilst
- Therapists valued 'gaining of cognitive/affective insight' highest, whilst
- Both patients and therapists valued 'personal contact' highly.

Llewelyn (1988) concludes that patients seem to be more concerned with solutions to their problems, and that they place higher value on advice and solutions, provided they feel free to reject them. Therapists, on the other hand, seem more concerned with the aetiology of the problems and potential transformation through the patient's insight.

Earlier research of critical moments of coaching conversations followed a narrative and retrospective approach. De Haan and associates (2008a, 2008b, 2010) and Day and associates (2008) asked three groups of coaches and one group of clients of executive coaches to describe briefly one critical moment (an exciting, tense, or significant moment) from their coaching journeys. See Table 1 for a brief overview of all five inquiries into critical moments of executive coaching from 2002.

The studies to date have found quite divergent material with coaches and clients clearly submitting different descriptions and also placing a different emphasis within the descriptions (see De Haan et al., 2010). The results of previous investigations prompted the present direct-comparison study as a way to explore and clarify some of the differences and also to test the conclusions from earlier papers, with the help of a new dataset. Direct-comparison in real-time is of course not possible without seriously interfering with the executive-coaching sessions themselves. In order to minimise interference, coach and client were interviewed only once and directly after a session. Other than logistical issues, potential relational difficulties were anticipated as the research would

**Table 1.**

The five datasets of Critical Moments Descriptions that we have gathered over the years 2002–2009. Please note that the number of critical moments in the first study (De Haan, 2008a) is lower (56). This is because we have extended this dataset beyond the work for that publication.

Dataset	Who has provided the the descriptions?	Number of critical-moment descriptions	Main conclusions	Publication
1	Inexperienced executive coaches: approximately 75 per cent were (internal and external) consultants who had recently completed a full-year programme in management consulting and about 25% independent coaches.	80	All critical moments could be expressed as <i>doubts</i> of coaches. Critical moments were seen as important sources of information and potential breakthrough moments.	De Haan (2008a)
2	Experienced executive coaches: at least eight years' experience.	78	All critical moments could be expressed as <i>anxieties</i> of coaches. Experienced coaches grapple with recurring struggles in their client work.	De Haan (2008b)
3	New sample of very experienced executive coaches (on average 11.3 years' experience) who were interviewed in depth.	49	An experienced <i>rupture</i> in the relationship (e.g. misunderstanding, anger, re-contracting and referral, withdrawal and termination) was found around every critical moment. Critical to the outcome of that process was whether continued and shared reflection was possible after the critical moment.	Day et al. (2008)
4	Clients of executive coaching.	59	What clients report as most helpful from their experience of coaching are new realisations and insights.	De Haan et al. (2010)
5	Direct comparison of experienced coaches with their clients.	86	Both coaches and clients report new realisations and insights as most critical in their direct experience of coaching, and they are also in substantial agreement about the specific moments that were critical in the sessions and why.	This study.

impinge on very sensitive, private and confidential relationships. To quote Elton Wilson and Syme's (2006) pertinent book *Objectives and Outcomes* (p.82): 'Asking clients for their opinion is a process fraught with controversy, with many therapists asserting the possibility of harm to the therapeutic alliance or, conversely, affecting the transference. In addition, clients may wish to please or praise their therapists or even to covertly attack their therapist. Unfortunately, a practitioner's own observations may be laden with assumption and a defensive need to prove their own worth or the effectiveness of their own theoretical and methodological approach.' The same can very well be true for asking coaches and their clients about their findings whilst they are still engaged in a long-term coaching intervention. One would expect the reports of key moments from their recent conversation to be influenced by what they think of the over-all quality of the work and the relationship, by what they expect us as researchers to be looking for, or even by their relationships with us and our institution.

Following De Haan and associates (2010), the main hypothesis for this study was that the perspectives of clients and coaches will be significantly different, as is also the case for critical-event studies in psycho-therapy (see, for example, Caskey et al., 1984; Llewelyn, 1988). We were expecting not only substantial differences in the moments that were selected for recall, but also in terms of the emphasis within the moment descriptions. To our surprise we actually found that clients' and coaches' data in this study were very similar, that in more than 50 per cent of cases the same moment, event or topic was described, and that there were substantial similarities in emphases between the coaches and their clients.

### **Method**

Since 2002, we have opted for the study of so-called 'critical-moment descriptions' as a way of understanding the impact of executive coaching engagements, following similar

methods as pioneered by Flanagan (1954), Elliott and associates (1985) and Llewelyn (1988). Critical moments are remembered as exciting, tense, and/or significant moments after coaching conversations. They can be assumed to be a reflection of change through executive coaching as it happens in conversation. Descriptions allow pattern analysis, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and they afford comparison procedures between different datasets. As a comparison with the previous research on critical moments in executive coaching conversations, a setting was devised that allows as much as possible to directly compare clients' and coaches' perceptions of key moments in their sessions, in such a way that the distortions of memory (Goodman et al., 2006) would be minimised by gathering the critical moment descriptions as quickly after the session as possible. We contacted directly and personally about 20 executive coaches of our acquaintance and agreed with 14 to work with us on this research programme. Each of these coaches agreed to be interviewed and selected a client who would also be interviewed straight after the coaching session they had together, for a maximum of 30 minutes. Two of the 14 coaches contributed two client sessions, and one contributed seven client sessions (all different clients). The coach who contributed seven sessions with seven clients, did not pre-select and just offered us data from all her clients within one particular organisation. All interviews were recorded, and in one case the recording equipment did not work so that this data had to be discarded. All in all, the sample size was 21 coaching conversations, yielding 42 recorded interviews.

Of the 14 coaches participating in this inquiry, two were Ashridge staff, five Ashridge associated coaches who do a lot of executive coaching work for Ashridge, three belonged to a wider network and four were in the second year of their MSc in Executive Coaching at Ashridge. Nine of the coaches had been accredited by Ashridge, and all

had over two years' experience as an executive coach, with an average experience level of more than 10 years. The coaches selected client, coaching conversation and interview day – the researchers worked as much as possible around their requirements and preferences. Three of the participating coaches were male and 11 were female. Of the 21 participating clients six were female and 15 were male. Most clients and coaches were white and British/Irish; there was one Israeli and one Australian coach and one South African client. The average number of sessions that coach and client had already had with each other was 5.4 – with a minimum of two and a maximum of 15. On average coach and client had worked with each other for almost 10 months.

As the authors have developed their thinking about critical moments in executive coaching over the years, they decided not to participate in the study as coaches, or as clients, or even as interviewers. Two MSc-students in Organisational Behaviour at Birkbeck University, Heather Reekie and Monica Stroink, were willing to run all the interviews, as they collected material for their own Masters dissertations. All interviews were conducted in private rooms, mostly close to the location where the coaching had taken place. Some interviews were over the telephone. The interviews with client and coach were done as much as possible by both students to avoid potential biases. Logistically, this was not possible in three cases as the client and coach were promised an interview straight after the coaching session so there would be least memory loss. Also, in four (~10 per cent) of the client interviews a member of the author group stepped in and conducted the interview.

Unexpected logistical challenges occurred because for every pair of interviews two different researchers had to travel to the right location or telephone in at the right time. This sometimes meant hiring a second consulting room. Even with the logistics under control, the interviewees were subjected to detailed questioning having just

come out of presumably intensive and exhausting coaching encounters. Nevertheless, 42 interviews with clients and coaches took place shortly after their sessions, which generated 86 descriptions of key moments of interest.

All interviews had the same structure and they were all transcribed (except one). The core questions about the critical moments were as follows:

1. Looking back on the session, what seems to be the important or key or critical moment(s) of your time together? What happened? Please can you provide a brief description of the moment(s).
2. What tells you that this was a critical moment?
3. What was your role in that moment?
4. What was your partner's role in that moment?
5. How do you think this moment will impact on the future (i.e. the future of these conversations or what you take from the coaching)?

In this way the interviewers were able to obtain 86 critical moments from 21 sessions, i.e. an average of just over two per interview and 4.1 per coaching session. Exactly 43 of these moments were obtained from clients and another 43 were obtained from coaches. This article reports on the descriptions of key moments as they are found in the transcripts, i.e. mainly answers to questions 1 and 2 above, and occasionally more data were taken from answers to the other questions, when this yielded additional clarity.

From this dataset the inquiry proceeded as follows:

1. Using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) we came up with 30 short codes describing critical aspects in the critical moment descriptions.
2. Five in the research team (the four authors and one MSc-student) coded the dataset using as many of these codes as they wanted per critical moment. The four codings were correlated for inter-rater consistency and first conclusions were drawn from the frequencies of codes.

3. The same method of grounded theory was again followed to come up with a much smaller code set, containing only 12 more disparate and mutually exclusive codes, which could be used for this dataset but also for all four previous datasets (De Haan 2008a, 2008b; Day et al., 2008; De Haan et al., 2010).
4. All five sets of critical moments, totalling 352 critical moments, were coded on the new codes using a sort method (exclusive coding of only one code per critical moment), by two of the authors (CB and EH) and by one outsider, a colleague not previously introduced to this research (AC).

### **Results**

#### *First impressions on reading through the dataset*

The following features of this new dataset, some of which clearly different from earlier research data, stand out:

- Both clients and coaches found it easy to come up with critical or key moments. Contrary to earlier research into the experiences of clients of coaching (De Haan et al., 2010) there were no 'no' responses. In fact, there was at least one critical-moment description from every interview and the total amount of key moment descriptions volunteered by clients exactly equals the number of those volunteered by coaches (43, i.e. on average 2.05 key moment descriptions per interview). There is, however, one client who says 'There's nothing really that sticks out, obviously it's always a very casual conversation – I think that the biggest thing is that it's always very thought provoking, it makes you look at yourself quite a lot', but he then continues to volunteer one key moment.
- There was a clear and sustained focus on the client throughout the descriptions: only one of the 43 coach descriptions referred exclusively to the coach's internal process (this one description still referred three times briefly to the client, by name) and only one of the client described exclusively what the coach was doing. Fifty-three per cent of coaches' descriptions referred to themselves and their interventions, and 44 per cent of clients' descriptions referred explicitly to the coach and to what the coach had done.
- The coding of the content of the critical moments with 30 codes similar to those in De Haan and associates (2010) showed that the most prevalent codes were again those about personal realisations (both about issues and about self) and those that are about specific behaviours of the coach (both directive and facilitative interventions). Together these four of the 30 codes make up almost 50 per cent of the coded content. When client and coach descriptions are compared there are two clusters of codes which are strongly skewed towards the coach critical-moment descriptions: (1) the coach's emotional reactions which made up five codes but only six per cent of the content; and (2) physiological reactions of the client (such as skin tone, agitation and breathing), a single code which covered two per cent of the content.
- A lot of clients and coaches comment on the same moment or situation, and they talk about those moments and situations in similar terms. In fact 46 of the 86 key moment descriptions (53 per cent) were clearly about the same moment or event (examples below are the pairs 3co9 and 3cl10 and 14co51 and 14cl52).
- The descriptions are narrative in nature, and seemed to all four authors less exciting or engaging compared with the previous research. They seem to be lower risk and of less immediate impact. At the same time they can be seen as an illustration of the straightforward, helpful and practice-based character of our own experience of 'everyday coaching'.
- The nature of the descriptions is broadly positive and constructive; there was only one moment approximating a rupture in the relationship (see key moment 4co13,

below, and compare with Day et al., 2008, which found evidence of ruptures in the relationship in most critical-moment descriptions). So, in summary with the previous conclusion, there seems to be an absence of tension, struggle and strong emotion. There are three occasions where clients express interest in their coaches, see, for example, critical moment 8cl30 below. We assumed this was partly because of an implicit psychological contract between the participants, and between the participants and us, to be appreciative and gentle towards one another, which in turn may be due to the pre-selection and the ongoing nature of all relationships.

- The only differences initially found between clients' and coaches' accounts were that coaches place more emphasis on their own actions and they use more jargon and psychological terms to describe what went on compared with their clients. This reminded us of Yalom's (Yalom & Elkin, 1974, p.79) statement that his own observations seemed more sophomoric than his client's writing.
- There was a high number of references by coaches (17 out of 43 moments) to clients' physiological responses (frowning, posture, note taking, agitation, breathing, etc.), see, for example, vignettes 3co9 and 5co17, below), whilst clients never referred to these matters.

#### *Vignettes of the 86 real-life critical moments*

To help the reader gain a better connection with the full dataset we have chosen 17 vignettes from the 86 key moment descriptions. We have chosen this dataset purposefully, to give an indication of the range of data and also to show two occasions where coach and client comment on the same moment in the session (the pairs 3co9 and 3cl10 and 4co51 and 4cl52). Rather than showing a random selection here, we have deliberately chosen a more meaningful and engaging range of vignettes. The numbering

of these vignettes follows the chronological order of the interviews, i.e. conversation number, 'co' for 'coach moment' and 'cl' for 'client moment', and then key moment number. We have not edited these fragments. These are just 1285 words. The full dataset is over 27,000 words long.

[1cl2] 'I suppose really for me it's through the process of discussion it's the realisation on my part that there's something that I have to do. So it's the sort of the processes of opening my eyes to you know, ooh hang on there's something I need to do here that you know wouldn't otherwise. So the you know it's the what helps me realise is the point that I get the light bulbs going off to like, hey hang on why haven't I thought about this?'

[1cl4] 'So the feeling for me is really say its sort of a ... it's a point that I recognise that there's something that's needed. It's sort of highlighting it. So it's almost a feeling of surprise and realisation around there's something there that I'm able to see it's just that I haven't previously been able to.'

[3co9] 'And that was the tipping point I think, when he recognised that he could use one thing to do the other, he thinks in a very linear way. And he was thinking about I've got to do the projects, I've got to be more approachable but really by linking the two together he was able to see that ... I think he recognised that actually I can do both of these together and one will help the other. And that was the ... that was the ... the key I think. It was partly his erm ... he was clearly doing some visualising sitting there in thought, looking up at the ceiling. So erm ... And a period of silence after when he said 'erm yeah I hadn't thought of looking at it like that.' Erm what else did he say? 'I think I've crossed a bridge,' that's what he said.'

[3cl10] 'I'd written it down as an action to do, which is kind of respectful of my style. It's because it's ... I describe it as opening my eyes to a blind spot really it's easy with hind-



sight to say that's a good way of approaching it but prior to the conversation or prior to today I would not have thought of trying to do the project in that particular direction. So it's a change in direction to what I would have done otherwise.'

[4co13] 'He was asking me to raise an issue outside of the coaching relationship. Erm you know to show I was sort of agreeing with him a form of words that he was ... that he would be happy with, for me to sort of try and get something fed back into the organisation that he thought was important. So that was quite an important ... erm an interesting part of the conversation. Erm well this was an issue about the person's boss ... erm and the person's boss is being coached by erm one of my colleagues ... so is it was a sort of a 'can you use your influence with the other Coach?'

[5co17] 'Er, he started to make notes ... actually he started to make notes and started to get more animated in how he was talking about it.'

[5co19] 'That he began drawing on my pad. And the adult to adult was his meeting. The meetings that he controlled. That was his meeting. The big circle was his meeting.'

[6co23] 'He sat back and thought about it rather than being accused by it.'

[8cl30] 'I think the key moment might have been that I asked him what he felt about the work we'd been doing and he said that he was pleased that the report he'd done had led to substantial change and efficiencies and he seemed to take some pleasure in it. (...) I think it was good to hear that he'd taken some pleasure from it himself and felt that ... taken some pleasure out of the fact that he'd been effective.'

[9cl32] 'It's basically stating the obvious, but I didn't see it, it was staring me right in the face.'

[11cl40] 'Not a lot of other people know about it – I have a limited amount of contact with people to let them know about it and not feel bad and embarrassed about it. It felt like the right thing to do rather than waffle around the edges.'

[13cl50] 'Organising our future sessions that definitely was and also you know another bit was maybe time to talk about some other issues you know that are going around you know what we do and I had an opportunity to talk to someone who's not involved as well. So that was probably the important part of it.'

[14co51] 'It was a bit odd the way that we started off because he thought that he'd sent me some information and I...I'm perfect you see ... I knew that I was thinking, I did check all of my e-mails but I don't recollect what you've sent me you know and I looked through I'm sure I printed everything off that folk had sent me. So we had a kind of a 20-minute forage around whether we could find this information. So it's kind of like erm, it felt like a weird start to the session and I did say to him given that we haven't got the information can you talk to me about what was important to you and what you'd written through and we can cover it here and now. (...) So it's really important to him about appearances and again being professional, doing the right thing, you know doing what he says he's going to do. So it was a real ... I was really noticing how I was getting hooked into, well I haven't got the information you know we're looking on computers, I was searching my Blackberry thinking this is bizarre really because we don't need it. So it was this bizarre start to him (...) It really linked into how he wants to get things done and wants to get things right and look good to other people. That's really, really important to him. Erm, so links from that.'

[14cl52] 'It's important that we got sorted today, the mix up we had at the beginning so we knew where we were going. That was

important and I must say within two or three minutes we had it sorted. We realised there'd been a mistake and agreed appropriate action and it got resolved very easily. It wasn't confrontational in any way, don't think that, just a mix up but a few negotiation skills on both our parts we could resolve it, so we didn't lose anything out of those five minutes of the hour-and-a-half session, so it was very important that we could speak our way round it to recover the situation.'

[21cl83] 'It was really the characterisation. It was just kind of that makes perfect sense to me. I've been thinking, reflecting about this at various levels for a long time. Occasionally you have those moments of realisation, you forget them and then when you're reminded it not only provides clarity it provides comfort to the person who's being coached.'

[21co84] 'My hunch is it's probably more important to my client than it was to me. He can tell you for himself but my hunch was that was new and interesting information that he was quite intrigued by.'

[21co86] 'I was surprised. So I suppose I was monitoring my own reactions and my own reactions were well that feels like something important and new so I guess it felt like it meant something. Whether it's just because I was worried I missed it I don't know but it was something about this is new and feels significant. My client was very animated in talking about it.'

#### *Content-analysis of the critical moments*

All critical-moment descriptions were coded to identify recurrent themes, with similar codes as in our previous research (see, for example, De Haan et al., 2010). The coding did not show a large or consistent difference between coach and client moment descriptions, and it showed less consistency among markers than before (Cohen's Kappa was only 0.34 on average), which can be explained by the fact that the fragments are longer (on average 316 words per descrip-

tion) so there is more information conveyed in every key moment description. Because of the failure of the existing set of codes to divulge distinctive patterns in the dataset, and because of the striking differences with earlier datasets, a new more succinct set of codes was drawn up and tested, which would capture all critical aspects across all five datasets. There were four broad categories in these 12 codes: a moment of learning (codes 1 and 2), a moment of relational change (codes 3 and 4), a moment of significant action (codes 5 and 6) and a moment of significant emotional experience (codes 7 to 12). To provide help with the emotional codes (7 to 12) a table with the full range of emotions, based on a tree structure built on six primary emotions (three positive and three negative) by Parrot (2001) was provided to the coders. For brief descriptions of the 12 codes, see Table 2.

Two of the authors (EH and CB) and one colleague who was not an executive coach (AC) coded the full dataset of 352 critical moments with these codes. All codes were at least used three times by every coder, though there were four codes that were used for less than three per cent of the dataset: 6, 7, 8, 11. We had anticipated this when drawing up the set of 12 codes, but we kept these codes in to keep a balanced and structurally complete set. Figure 1 shows the frequency of use of the codes, for all three observers and the full dataset of 352 moments.

To determine inter-rater reliability, Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960) was computed between all coders and found an average Kappa of 0.44 which seems a reasonable figure given the number of codes: it is more than thirty times chance level. In any case, the coding of individual moment descriptions will not be reported: all conclusions will be based only on the totals of codes used for each of five datasets – see Table 1. These sets of totals correlate 0.77 on average between the three coders. High reliability between raters of 'helpful events' was also reported in psychotherapy research (Llewelyn, 1988; Elliott et al., 1985).

Table 2.

The 12 codes that have been used to analyse all five datasets in Table 1.

Code number	Short description of the code
1	A moment of learning: a moment in which new insight was created for coach and – particularly – client.
2	A moment of learning: a moment of working through, reflecting, gaining new perspectives and/or making sense of existing material.
3	A change in the relationship in the moment (positive).
4	A change in the relationship in the moment (negative).
5	Significant action in the moment (coach-led): applying oneself to a unique scripted process such as drawing, visualisation, role-play, GROW, ...
6	Significant action in the moment (client-led): organising future sessions, negotiating the session, taking away action points, making notes, ...
7	Significant emotional experience in the moment: joy (client); heightened positive emotion.
8	Significant emotional experience in the moment: joy (coach); heightened positive emotion.
9	Significant emotional experience in the moment: anxiety (client); heightened negative emotion.
10	Significant emotional experience in the moment: anxiety (coach); heightened negative emotion.
11	Significant emotional experience in the moment: doubt (client); fundamental not-knowing, often a starting point for reflection.
12	Significant emotional experience in the moment: doubt (coach); fundamental not-knowing, often a starting point for reflection.

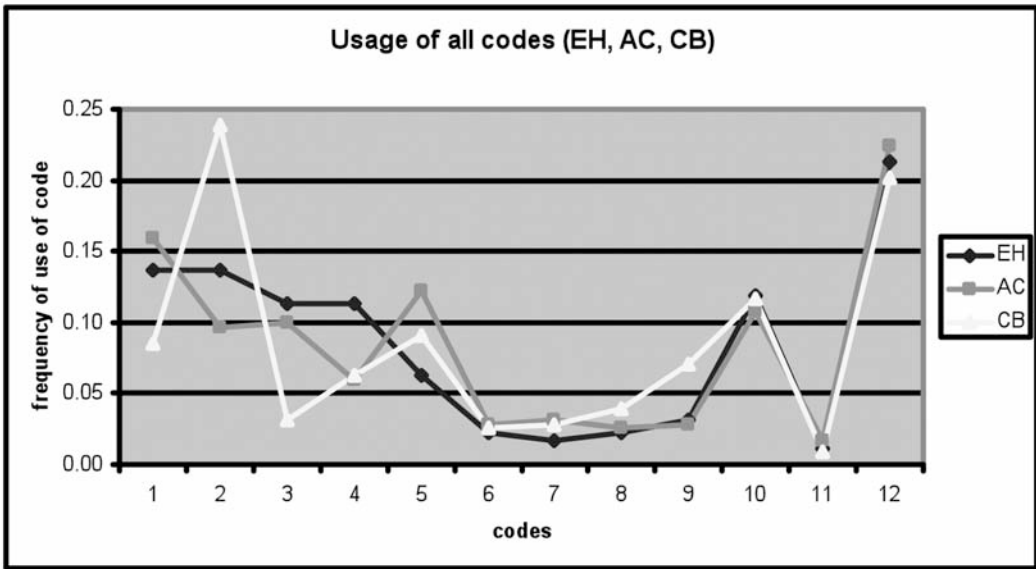
Biases between the three coders were small (see Figure 1). EH codes more negative changes in the relationship (code 4; 40 in total against 21/22 for the other coders) and AC codes more coach-led significance in doing (code 5; 43 in total against 22 for EH), whilst CB codes more anxieties of clients (code 9; 25 in total against 10/11 for the other coders). The only boundary between codes which seems to have been interpreted differently is the one between codes 1 and 2, which are both ‘moments of learning’ – code 1 describes a sudden realisation and code 2 a more reflective working through. In truth, these forms of learning probably do not have a sharp boundary anyway. All coders use codes 1 and 2 in just over a quarter of their coding (mainly in datasets 4 and 5), but AC

uses code 1 in 62 per cent of those and CB uses code 1 in only 26 per cent of those, with EH in the middle: 50 per cent.

Figure 2 shows an overview of the coding of all datasets, by one of the coders (CB). From the figure, the following conclusions are immediately apparent:

- Dataset 1 (critical moments of less experienced coaches) contains a disproportionate amount of ‘doubts of coaches’ (code 12) and ‘negative changes in the relationship’ (code 4). This confirms the main conclusions of De Haan (2008a).
- Datasets 2 and 3 (critical moments of experienced coaches) share with Dataset 1 a high proportion of ‘anxieties of coaches’ (code 10) whilst they contain

Figure 1: An overview of the frequency of the use of all codes by all three coders, for the full dataset of 352 critical moment descriptions from coaching conversations. For the definition of the 12 codes, see Table 2.



significantly less ‘doubts of coaches’. This confirms the main conclusions of De Haan (2008b) and Day and associates (2008).

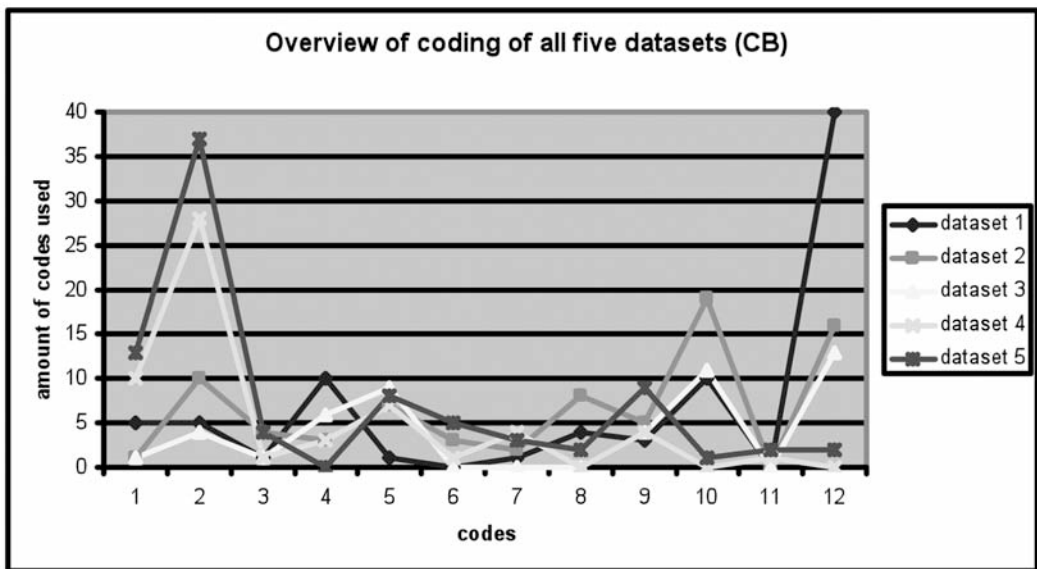
- Dataset 4 (critical moments of clients of coaching) shows an altogether different profile, with a much higher proportion of ‘moments of learning’ (codes 1 and 2). This confirms the main conclusions of De Haan and associates (2010).
- Dataset 5 (critical moments of coaches and clients, directly compared) is overall much more similar to Dataset 4 than to any of the three datasets of executive coaches.
- From Datasets 1 to 4 one can observe that both clients and coaches report more on their own emotions and sensations than on their counterparts’ emotions and sensations, i.e. descriptions from coaches (Datasets 1, 2 and 3) lead to more perceived codes 8, 10 and 12 (coaches’ emotions and doubts) than the equivalent 7, 9 and 11 (clients’ emotions and doubts) and this is reversed in the clients’ descriptions (Dataset 4). This was

also reported in De Haan and associates (2010).

A more in-depth comparison between the five datasets, distinguishing between the 43 ‘client moments’ and the 43 ‘coach moments’ in Dataset 5, yields the following:

- The clients’ critical-moment Dataset 4 and the new clients’ critical moment descriptions in Dataset 5 follow a very similar pattern (see Figure 3 in the case of coder AC), both having a very high proportion of ‘moments of learning’ (codes 1 and 2). On average the correlation between the coding of Dataset 4 and of the client moments in Dataset 5 of AC, CB and EH was 0.92, which is remarkably high and gives a strong confirmation of the conclusions from a rather disparate set of client moment descriptions in De Haan and associates (2010).
- Surprisingly, there is also a high correlation between Dataset 4 and the coach moments in Dataset 5 (see again Figure 3, for coder AC). On average this correlation is 0.58 among the three

Figure 2: A graph showing the distribution of codes selected by coder CB for all five datasets. 1: less experienced coaches; 2: experienced coaches; 3: very experienced coaches (phone interviews); 4: clients of coaching; 5: coaches and clients direct comparison (interviews). For the definition of the 12 codes, see Table 2.



coders, whereas the correlations between Datasets 1, 2 and 3 and the coach moments in Dataset 5 is 0.003: negligible. We will come back to this surprising finding in the Discussion section.

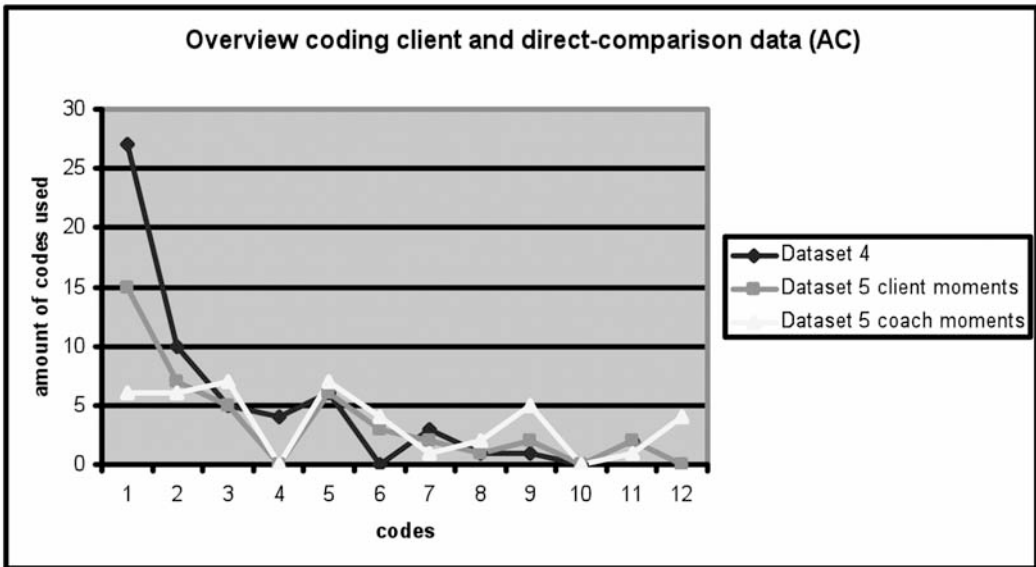
- The coders found an absence of negative changes in the relationship (code 4) in Dataset 5, confirming what was concluded more informally at the beginning of the Results section, above, namely that descriptions in the new dataset seem positive and constructive, as if celebrating or protecting the ongoing relationships.
- Remarkably in Dataset 5 we have for the first time a higher occurrence of one's partner's emotions than one's own: coaches in Dataset 5 come up with more anxieties of the client (code 9; see Figure 3 for coder AC) than of themselves.
- Coaches still report a significant number of doubts (code 12), consistent with earlier research (De Haan 2008a, 2000b; Day et al., 2008).

These conclusions are true for all three coders.

Finally, having this rather unique Dataset 5 which allows a direct comparison of coaches' and their clients' views on the same coaching conversation, also affords the analysis of those descriptions where coach and client seem to be speaking about the very same moment or event within the coaching conversation. Surprisingly, there are 46 key moment descriptions, more than half of the dataset, which are obviously relating to the same event or moment within the conversations. Bear in mind that the duration of these conversations was on average, about two hours.

The usage of codes on these particular descriptions were analysed by computing Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960) for this new dataset, Kappa being the standard measure for correlations between independent coding processes. Cohen's Kappas were computed for the coder's choice of code for the 'coach moment' compared with the coder's choice of code for the corresponding 'client moment'. It is a relatively small dataset of only 23 measurements, but Kappas

Figure 3: A graph showing the distribution of codes selected by coder AC for Dataset 4 and for the coaches' and clients' descriptions of critical moments in the comparison study, separately. For the definition of the 12 codes, see Table 2.



can be reliably computed. Cohen's Kappas were: 0.29 (AC), 0.38 (CB) and 0.47 (EH), each much higher than chance levels which are around 0.02. With the caveat that this conclusion is based only on a small dataset of 46 codes, we can provisionally conclude that these coaches and clients did not only agree in more than 50 per cent of key moments on the particular event or subject matter they described, but they also seem to agree on the nature of those events, which seems a strong agreement between the two partners, particularly if one takes into account the low agreement sometimes reported in psychotherapy (e.g. Tallman & Bohart, 1999; however, Weiss, Rabinowitz & Spiro, 1996, report variability in the agreement between clients' and therapists' qualitative reports).

**Discussion**

In summary, the direct comparison data contributed by coaches and clients of coaching (Dataset 5) suggests the following:

- Clients' and coaches' experiences of coaching conversations are not as different as would have been thought,

based on the earlier studies, neither in the nature of selected events (coaches' and clients' descriptions are coded in similar distributions across a fixed set of 12 codes) nor in their specific choice of events (46 of 86 descriptions refer to an event also described by the partner in conversation), nor even in the emphases within their event descriptions (those 46 'shared event' descriptions were coded in a manner correlating about 20 times chance level, for all three observers).

- Clients and coaches use similar language and apart from one reported rupture in the relationship all 86 descriptions were broadly positive and indicated learning, progress, accomplishment. Partly this may be due to the fact that for 14 of the 21 sessions the client and conversation was chosen by the coach and they will have chosen positive client relationships as they had to invite their client to the research.

Comparing this dataset explicitly with all of the earlier datasets of clients' and coaches' descriptions of critical moments of executive coaching led to the following results:

- Overall a strong endorsement of the main conclusions in the earlier articles. Although the new dataset correlates strongly only with Dataset 4, the new dataset does also replicate some of the trends found in the other previous datasets. Sixty-two per cent of clients' moments in the Dataset 5 were coded as 1 or 2 ('moments of learning'), and 40 per cent of coaches' moments; in Datasets 1 to 4 these numbers had been 59 per cent for clients' moments and nine per cent for coaches' moments. Another interesting example is the occurrence of coaches' doubts: 56 per cent for inexperienced coaches (Dataset 1), 18 per cent/27 per cent for experienced coaches (Dataset 2/Dataset 3 respectively), nought per cent for clients of coaching (Dataset 4) and now in Dataset 5: nought per cent for clients and five per cent for coaches.
- A high correlation between the coding of these direct-comparison client data and the earlier client critical-moments dataset (Dataset 4, correlations consistently over 0.90).
- No correlation at all between the coding of the new dataset (Dataset 5) and the earlier coach data (Datasets 1, 2 and 3), to the extent that the average correlation between the coaches' descriptions from Datasets 1 to 3 and from Dataset 5 was exactly zero.

We think that these findings can be understood best from the realisation that this direct-comparison study contains a fair representation of straightforward, 'run-of-the-mill', successful and everyday executive coaching, with client and coach being in broad agreement, not only about the goals and outcomes of their sessions but also about their coaching process and coaching relationship. We can assume that this type of 'run-of-the-mill' coaching is exactly what the clients in Dataset 4 also reported on, as many studies have shown executive coaching to be satisfactory and successful in most cases (see, for example, McGovern et al., 2001; De Haan,

Culpin & Curd, in press). On the other hand, Datasets 1, 2 and 3 were drawn from a much broader and deeper experience of executive coaching and have probably included rarer and more extreme examples of transformation, resistance or ruptures in the working alliance. In other words, whilst Datasets 4 and 5 focus on the everyday learning that takes place in generally positive coaching relationships, Dataset 1, 2 and 3 take their inspiration from special occurrences in coaching, moments and events that may occur only a few times in the lifetime of an executive coach – and in particular at the beginning of a coaches' career when there are still great insecurities and doubts (De Haan, 2008a).

We cannot rule out the possibility that there are other qualitative differences between what coaches and clients associate with the term 'critical moment' when it applies to the session they have just had today (Dataset 5), as compared to when 'critical moment' applies to a whole coaching relationship (Dataset 4) or to a career of coaching experience, however short in some cases (Datasets 1, 2 and 3). It may well be that the term 'critical moment' does not apply in the same way to the past hour as to a lifetime of work.

Both run-of-the-mill and exceptional circumstances are part of coaching practice, so all various datasets have something to teach executive coaching practitioners. Studies like these can provide crucial information for the training and development of executive coaches, whilst they may also help to inform and manage the expectations of clients of executive coaching. Here is a short summary of what we believe these data can teach us:

- Datasets 1, 2 and 3 give an indication that in the careers of most executive coaches there are such things as exceptional moments where the relationship is tested or ruptured and where coaches experience strong doubts and anxieties. Generally, the levels of anxiety of coaches in such events remain high, whilst the degree of doubting abates over time (De Haan, 2008b).

- Datasets 4 and 5 give an indication that what clients are most looking for in coaching conversations are moments of realisation and emerging insight, i.e. learning of some form that they can bring to use in their own practice. Coaches can and do work in such a way that they seem in agreement with their clients about which are the events that matter and the nature of those events. Under exceptional circumstances a different picture may emerge, where disruptions to the relationship between coach and client become more figural, and then we are back in the realm of Datasets 1, 2 and 3.

In summary, more agreement than disagreement was found between clients and coaches:

- Forty-six of 86 moments or events were selected by both clients and coaches (53 per cent);
- The critical-moment descriptions from clients and coaches were similar (see Figure 3) and they use similar language apart from a few occurrences of jargon in the language of the executive coaches.
- Clients and coaches place similar emphases within their description of those events, witnessed by the substantial correlations between the coding of these pairs of moments.
- For the first time one can even notice that the anxieties that both partners in the conversation attend to are in a way similar: they are predominantly the anxieties of the client (see Figure 3), as one would hope in executive coaching.

In psychotherapy research there are some indications that clients and therapists are looking for quite different events and moments, and that they have incommensurate memories of the sessions themselves (Elliott, 1983, 1990; Llewelyn 1988; Rennie, 1990; Elliott & Shapiro, 1992; Tallman & Bohart, 1999); however, one review study investigating all publications to date on agreement between clients and therapists

found a high variability (Weiss et al., 1996). One interpretation worth noting is that therapists will address perceived weaknesses more than coaches, and will, therefore, have more emphasis on challenging, disruptive and even corrective interventions, which may result in less agreement between therapist and client than between coach and client.

## Conclusion

This direct-comparison study of coaches' and clients' critical moment descriptions that were gathered straight after mutual executive-coaching conversations, has produced both a confirmation of earlier conclusions when studying critical moments in executive coaching and a linkage between the various disparate studies hitherto undertaken. We think we now understand better why clients' and coaches' descriptions in earlier studies were so different, and we are beginning to understand how descriptions from clients and coaches coming out of coaching sessions can also be extremely similar, as was the case here.

Interestingly, the results of this direct-comparison study connect with an old debate in psychotherapy process research (Mintz et al., 1973) which seeks to clarify to what degree the experiences and accounts of both parties in helping conversations are similar versus different. On the one hand, coach and client are essentially similar being both 21st century professionals with an interest in leadership and development. Moreover, during the conversation they attend to the same 'reality' of the conversation as it emerges between them. On the other hand one can argue they take up entirely different and complementary roles in the same conversation, with one focusing on own issues and the other focusing on the progress and development of the partner in conversation. So clearly, in the accounts of coaching one would expect *both* a reasonable consensus *and* the 'Rashomon experience' named after Akira Kurosawa's classic 1950 Japanese movie *Rashomon*, where four partic-



ipants re-tell a single event and come up with equally plausible but totally different and incompatible accounts. Most process research in psychotherapy has confirmed the ‘Rashomon-side’ of the debate, showing that clients and therapists do indeed place an entirely different emphasis in recall, selection and interpretation of significant events of therapy (Mintz et al., 1973, Weiss et al., 1996). Here is how Yalom (Yalom & Elkin, 1974; p.222) formulates that side of the argument: ‘I am struck by (...) the obvious discrepancies in perspective between Ginny and me. Often she values one part of the hour, I another. I press home an interpretation with much determination and pride. To humour me and to hasten our move to more important areas she ‘accepts’ the interpretation. To permit us to move to ‘work areas’, I on the other hand humour her by granting her silent requests for advice, suggestions, exhortations, or admonitions. I value my thoughtful clarifications; with one masterful stroke I make sense out of a number of disparate, seemingly unrelated facts. She rarely ever acknowledges, much less values my labours, and instead seems to profit from my simple human acts: I chuckle at her satire, I notice her clothes, I call her buxom, I tease her when we role play.’ These present results seem to favour the other side of the debate, with a surprising degree of overlap between coach and client accounts, both in their recall/selection and in their emphasis/interpretation. However, given the originality of the design and the limited scope of the dataset, it may be too early to argue that coach-client pairs have more in common than therapist-patient pairs.

From the point of view of education and professional development for coaches, the following recommendations can be drawn from this research:

1. Coaches need to be prepared for quite different circumstances in run-of-the-mill coaching and in the presence of real dramatic moments and ruptures. In ordinary coaching they need to keep the focus with what clients are interested in

most: realisations, emerging insight, and reflection. In extraordinary conversations, they need to be able to deal with their own substantive doubt and anxiety, and also with strong emotions in their clients.

2. More effort can be put into preparing coaches for what they can expect in ordinary, successful conversations. The results of this inquiry have shown that coaches need to help clients to look beyond their current solutions and mindset, to achieve new realisations and insight. They need to remain focused on new learning and how they can support their clients to achieve that. Epiphanies are not necessarily what is needed. Sometimes creating a sense of support and reflection is adequate. As concluded before (De Haan et al., 2010), coaches need awareness of the fact that clients seem to be focused on changing their thoughts and reflections – rather than on pure space for reflection, reassurance or new actions. Coaches should ensure they have the skills to facilitate the emergence of new learning, reflection, realisation and insight.
3. When teaching the important findings of outcome research, for example, the so-called *common factors* that in psychotherapy have so often been shown to be significantly related to outcome and which teach us the importance of the relationship, expectancy and personality when it comes to effectiveness (Wampold 2001), it is important to consider also what *suboutcome* research (Rice & Greenberg, 1984) may teach in terms of, for example, what a practicing coach can expect in terms of their own doubts and anxieties, or clients’ expectations of session-by-session learning outcomes (realisations, changing perspectives, etc.). When aspects such as the above find their way into coach training and development programmes, this would help in making a more clear-cut case for executive coaching for the benefit of purchasers of coaching,

including more information on expected benefits and limitations of working with an executive coach.

We would suggest there is a great need for further investigation in this area, particularly in the following domains:

1. Critical moments research, if only to assemble larger datasets upon which firmer conclusions can be based. A larger dataset can also be used to (dis-)confirm the more tentative conclusions in both this and other articles.
2. Direct-comparison studies such as the present one should be extended into longitudinal studies of coach-client relationships, which could study the progress of the intervention through the evolving reported critical moments. In such research, more care should be taken to minimise interference with the coaching intervention as a whole.
3. We would be most interested in finding out about critical moments and the coaching process from the perspective of the oft-neglected (indirect) clients of coaching which are the direct colleagues, managers and reports of the coaching client within the organisation of the client. It would be fascinating to investigate what they believe were the critical moments of their colleague's coaching journey.

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