Business HDR Student Conference 2010-13

Aug 7th, 11:30 AM - 12:15 PM

Coaching for targeted intentional personality change

Lesley Sue Martin
University of Wollongong

Martin, Lesley Sue, "Coaching for targeted intentional personality change" (2012). *Business HDR Student Conference 2010-13*. 4.
https://ro.uow.edu.au/sbshdr/2012/papers/4

Description

Intentional targeted personality change is a relatively unexplored research area. Related literature, however, suggests that personality change is likely to be both feasible and desirable in a coaching context, in clients without major psychopathology. This study examines the effects of a 10 week personality change coaching program. Participants were randomly assigned to a personality change coaching group (n=26) or a waitlist control group (n=26). One to one weekly coaching was conducted by psychologists, trained in personality change coaching processes, using resources developed in a previous phase of this research. Participation in the personality coaching program was associated with significant change in client chosen personality facets/sub-traits F(1,9.533, p<.01). The study suggests that intentional targeted personality change can be achieved over a 10 week period.

Location

Innovation Campus, Mike Codd Building, 1st floor, Room 102

Note: I have formatted this in accordance with psychology journal styles (APS) as this report will be further developed into an article for submission to a personality psychology journal.

Coaching for targeted intentional personality change

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Abstract

Intentional targeted personality change is a relatively unexplored research area. Related literature, however, suggests that personality change is likely to be both feasible and desirable in a coaching context, in clients without major psychopathology. This study examines the effects of a 10 week personality change coaching program. Participants were randomly assigned to a personality change coaching group (n=26) or a waitlist control group (n=26). One to one weekly coaching was conducted by psychologists, trained in personality change coaching processes, using resources developed in a previous phase of this research. Participation in the personality coaching program was associated with significant change in client chosen personality facets/sub-traits F(1,9.533, p<.01). The study suggests that intentional targeted personality change can be achieved over a 10 week period.

1.0   Introduction

A decade ago, a dominant paradigm within psychology was that personality traits were resistant to change, without long-term intensive interventions (McCrae & Costa, 2003). However more recent literature suggests that personality change may be possible and desirable within a one-to-one coaching context, where client motivation exists. The literature supporting this proposition is presented through responses to the following questions, discussed in turn: (a) Is personality amenable to change? (b) Is change desirable? (c) If it appears both possible and desirable, how does this fit with coaching? (d) What personality model and inventory would suit this process?

1.1   Is personality change possible?

As intentional and targeted personality change through coaching (i.e., where the client selects and endeavours to change specific traits or facets (sub-traits) has not been systematically studied, some indication of its likely success can be ascertained by reviewing the literature around personality change versus stability: (a) in response to life events; (b) in different social contexts, and; (c) in response to medical, therapy and coaching interventions.

A recent study by Robinson (2009) found that personality changes occurred on each of the five Big-Five traits as people moved between different social contexts, (e.g., parents, friends and work colleagues). Roberts and Mroczek (2008) found individual differences in patterns of trait change in response to a range of life experiences (e.g., significant career and relationship events). These findings led the authors to conclude, "that personality is not set like plaster at any point in the life course" (p.33).

The limited literature on targeted trait change to date has focused on the impact of psychological interventions on problematic traits in individuals with personality disorders. Although this is a different population to coaching, focusing on limited types of traits, it nevertheless provides evidence in support of the plasticity of personality. A 12 week study of 681 depressed individuals found that therapy for depression benefitted individuals with three separate diagnosed personality disorders as much as it benefited those without these dispositions (contrary to the study's hypothesis) and that it ameliorated the dysfunctional personality traits in the process (Maddux et al., 2009). This

study suggest that even more extreme dysfunctional personality traits respond to psychological interventions, and that meaningful changes in problematic traits (e.g., depression) can be achieved in as little of 12 weeks.

A number of studies suggest that shorter-term psychological and drug interventions result in personality change, even when personality change is not the focus of the interventions. For example, trait changes were evident during a six-week outpatient drug rehabilitation program study (Piedmont & Ciarrocchi, 1999), and in both an eight week cognitive therapy group and an eight week anti-depressant treatment group for depression (Tang et al., 2009). A coaching study (Spence & Grant, 2005) found that the openness-to-experience trait increased during 10 weekly coaching sessions (for both peer and professional coaching group participants), while it reduced for control group participants.

Finally, a longitudinal study of 8,625 Australians using data collected in 2005 and 2009 explored whether individuals' personalities changed significantly during this period, and whether such change was meaningful, in terms of life satisfaction (Boyce, Wood, & Powdthavee, in press). The authors concluded that although personality was traditionally considered as stable and non-changing, it did in fact change over time, and that such change was at least as great as changes in external influences on life satisfaction (e.g., getting married, being employed, and earning more money).

In combination these studies provide support for the concept that personality can change in response to a range of variables, over relatively short periods of time. Although only one study of personality change in a coaching context was identified (Spence & Grant, 2005), the body of related research suggests that intentional targeted change via coaching is likely to be achievable. As these findings suggest that personality is likely to be amenable to targeted change, it is useful to consider whether such change is important enough to warrant research exploration. In other words, is changing personality likely to lead to significant benefits?

1.2   Is personality change desirable?

A meta-analysis conducted by Ozer and Benet-Martinez (2006) suggested the answer to this question is affirmative. The authors found that even small changes on any of the Big-Five personality traits were associated with widespread impacts across life domains. For example, higher levels of the trait extraversion were associated with positive changes in subjective well-being, existential well-being, gratitude, inspiration, longevity, coping, resilience, depression (-), personality disorder (-), and majority cultural identity at an individual level; peer acceptance and friendship, dating variety, attractiveness, and satisfaction with romantic relationships at an interpersonal level; social and enterprising interests, satisfaction, commitment and involvement at an occupational/performance level; and volunteerism and leadership at a community level. This suggests that if coaching interventions could increase this trait in motivated to change individuals with low scores on extraversion, then benefits are likely to accrue across a range of life domains.

Possibly the trait with the largest potential impact, not only for individuals, but for wider society, is emotionality (neuroticism). An analysis of the economic costs of high emotionality was published in the Archives of General Psychiatry (Cuijpers et al., 2010), based on data from over 7,000 participants in a Netherlands Mental Health Survey and Incidence Study. The study found that those individuals with high scores on emotionality were more vulnerable to a host of mental disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders and personality disorders) and physical disorders (e.g., medically unfounded physical complaints, cardiovascular disease, asthma, and irritable bowel syndrome) resulting in an enormous impact on (and economic costs to) the health system. Their analysis found that the incremental costs (per 1 million people) of the highest 25% of scorers on emotionality resulted in US$1.393 billion in health care costs. This was 2.5 times the incremental cost of diagnosed mental health disorders (US$585 million). The study concluded:

The economic costs of neuroticism are enormous and exceed those of common mental disorders. We should start thinking about interventions that focus not on each of the specific negative outcomes of neuroticism, but rather on the starting point itself" (p. 1086).

Research findings on each of the other broad traits, especially conscientiousness, similarly suggest that huge benefits would accrue from identifying processes and interventions that can positively change client chosen personality traits (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006).

A number of studies have explored personality in terms of life-satisfaction, a topic of interest to many coaches. Diener and Lucas (1999) found that personality had a major influence on subjective well-being. Consistent with this theme, Wood, Joseph and Maltby (2008) found that changes in personality accounted for 35% of between-person variance in life satisfaction. More recently, a longitudinal study by Boyce et al., (in press) found that "personality can change and that such change is important and meaningful", and that "personality is the strongest and most consistent predictor of high subjective well-being" (p.2). Boyce further proposes that identifying ways of changing personality traits is likely to be more productive in terms of improving life satisfaction and well-being than endeavouring to change individuals demographic characteristics (e.g., earning more money, getting a job or getting married).

In combination these studies provide strong support for the benefits of exploring personality change interventions. They suggest that if problematic traits (as perceived by the client) can be identified and changed, then widespread benefits can be achieved. More specifically, individuals are likely to be more satisfied with life, have better relationships, contribute more to their community, have better employment outcomes, and have better mental and physical health (Boyce, et al., in press; Diener & Lucas, 1999; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Wood, et al., 2008). The proposition that personality change is both possible and desirable raises the question of how this fits with coaching.

1.3   How does personality change "fit" with coaching?

This section explores, firstly, what personality change coaching would logically involve, and how this would extend the current personality coaching literature and practice. Secondly, it explores the relative fit of coaching versus counselling/therapy for personality change interventions, and the merits of one-to-one versus group processes?

1.3.1   What is personality change coaching?

The concept of personality change coaching would involve taking a measure of the client's personality and discussing the profile with the client, with a view to identifying problematic traits or facets that the client wishes to change. For example, a client may wish to reduce facet Anger or increase facet Assertiveness, in order to improve relationships and work prospects.

The personality coaching literature to date has focused primarily around understanding and ameliorating problematic behaviours, rather than changing facets/traits themselves. For example McCormick and Burch (2008) proposed that personality is a predictor of behaviour, and that profiling of personality provides, "a useful framework for behavioural change in executive coaching" (p. 267). However they suggest the aim is not to change personality. Hicks and McCracken (2009) similarly discuss problematic behaviours that can flow from dysfunctional personality traits, and suggested a range of strategies to coach the "abrasive personality".

Sperry (1997) explored the relationship between temperament, character and personality in a leadership context, and the practical application of such measures to assist executive coaching of individuals with difficult temperaments (based on a psychobiological model of temperament and character developed by Cloninger, Svrakic and Pryzbeck (1993). Judge, Piccolo and Kosalka (2009)

reviewed the literature on personality traits and leadership, and proposed extending the consideration of personality to include the positive and negative aspects of both "bright side" and "dark side" traits. Hughes (2002) discussed strategies used by 14 psychologists to coach clients with narcissistic personality features. In this study she concluded that shorter-term coaching of such clients would rely on behavioural strategies, and would realistically aim for more "superficial" change, rather than enduring trait change.

Typically, the assumption underlying these personality coaching approaches is that personality predicts behaviour and that through understanding personality we can more effectively understand and target changes in behaviours (rather than personality itself). No empirical literature was identified that systematically explored intentional personality change itself, in a coaching context.

1.3.2 *Coaching versus counselling/therapy for change processes?*

If personality change appears to be a worthwhile endeavour, then the most appropriate approach for facilitating this goal needs evaluation. The following section proposes that (a) both coaching and counselling/therapy have a strong evidence base as effective change mechanisms, (b) the boundaries between coaching and counselling/therapy are not clear cut, (c) that personality change could arguably fit with either, and (d) whether coaching or counselling/therapy is utilized will be influenced by the nature of the client/research participant, and the intervention style adopted. It suggests that for clients without major psychopathology, personality change interventions may be more consistent with coaching, and a "coaching" approach may offer certain advantages. These arguments are presented in turn.

Evidence base for coaching and counselling/therapy. Findings of coaching outcome studies suggest that coaching is an effective change mechanism in a range of different formats and contexts (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010; Greif, 2007; Spence & Grant, 2005). However counselling/therapy also has an impressive body of research validating its efficacy in change processes (Lambert & Ogles, 2004; Newnham & Page, 2010). These findings suggest that coaching or counselling/therapy could potentially be effective professions for facilitating personality change.

Boundaries between coaching and counselling/therapy. The literature proposes that the boundaries between coaching and counselling/therapy are unclear, and that there is a high level of overlap between the approaches used (Grant, et al., 2010; Griffiths & Campbell, 2008; Maxwell, 2009). Nevertheless it is widely recognised that coaching is not the treatment of choice for major psychopathology, and disorders requiring longer-term treatment (e.g., Axis II disorders, significant current alcohol and drug abuse, active psychosis or bipolar disorder). This indicates that this group would not be suitable candidates for shorter-term personality change coaching. However, a number of studies propose that lesser levels of psychological dysfunction or distress are commonly dealt with in coaching, and that this practice enhances the coaching process (Cavanagh & Grant, 2004; Griffiths & Campbell, 2008; Maxwell, 2009). This suggests that personality change could be facilitated in a coaching or counselling/therapy setting, even if goals focus on emotionality facets, provided longer-term major psychopathology is excluded.

Factors suggesting a coaching relationship: Determining where to locate personality change interventions is therefore not clear cut. Nevertheless, Williams (2003) suggested that the following factors help differential coaching from counselling/therapy: (a) goal achievement focus versus psychopathology focus, (b) a learning/development model focus versus a diagnostic medical model focus, and (c) the degree of collaboration in the process. The personality change processes that emerged from phase one of this research on balance suggest a coaching relationship, as (a) major psychopathology is excluded; (b) processes are strongly goal oriented (i.e., increasing or decreasing specific facets); (c) interventions lean more towards a learning/development approach and processes

include a high degree of collaboration. Therefore the differentiating factors, noted by Williams (2003), suggest a coaching relationship may be preferable for clients without major psychopathology.

1.3.3 One-to-one versus group change progresses

The personal nature of personality profiles (e.g., revealing levels of depression and anxiety) suggests that group processes (e.g., peer-coaching) could be ethically problematic, as individuals may not wish to share sensitive aspects of their profile with other relatively untrained group members. Furthermore, it would be difficult to focus on the unique profile and goals of individuals in group settings. The complexity of personality profiles, and the training required in their interpretation, suggests that it would not be well suited to self-coaching or peer-coaching. However one-to-one coaching with a trained professional enables the tailoring of personality change interventions to the unique profile and goals of the individual, and provides a safer and more private environment. This suggests that one-to-one coaching would be preferable.

1.4 *Which personality model and inventory?*

A prerequisite to investigating personality change is determining what approach or theory of personality (and related measures) is to be adopted. The literature includes a host of different ways of looking at personality. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore and evaluate these alternatives. However, a comprehensive overview of this literature is provided in Funder (2007). Suffice to say coaches use a range of different personality approaches and tools to assess and work with personality, and many of these could potentially be used for exploring personality change. However, the Big-Five/Five-Factor[1] model of personality, based on the trait approach, is considered by most authors to be the most investigated and validated model of personality currently available (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Piedmont, 1998).

The Five-Factor model of personality suggests that personality can best be organised under five broad traits: Emotional Stability (or Neuroticism), Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (or similar equivalents) (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Several inventories are currently available for measuring Big Five/Five-Factor traits and facets. Piedmont (1998) proposed that the NEO PI-R (Costa, Herbst, McCrae, & Siegler, 2000)(Costa, Herbst, McCrae, & Siegler, 2000) is "rapidly becoming one of the most popular measures of normal personality in the research literature" (p. 31). He further proposed that the psychometric properties (including predictive validity) of this inventory are "uniformly favourable" (p. 31), as evidenced by empirical reviews (Botwin, 1995; Juni, 1995 & Piedmont,1997). These factors suggest that the NEO PI-R (or a sound proxy) provides a reputable measure for exploring personality change.

The NEO PI-R further divides the five broad traits into 30 facets (facets). Measurement at the more detailed facet level provides the opportunity for building up a more detailed picture of the individual's personality patterns, and allows for more accurate targeting of personality change interventions. For example, the trait Emotionality consists of the following facets; Anxiety, Anger, Depression, Self-consciousness, Impulsiveness and Vulnerability. Whereas it is useful to know the overall emotionality of an individual, it is also important to understand how the different individual facets of emotionality contribute to this, as facilitating change on individual facets is likely to require different kinds of coaching interventions. It is therefore useful if personality profiles include both trait and sub-trait measures.

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[1] The terms Big-Five and Five-Factor model are used interchangeable.

1.5   Study Aims

Although targeted intentional personality change has not been systematically studied in client without major psychopathology, the related literature suggests it is likely to be both possible and desirable, and suit a one-to-one coaching approach. The literature further suggests that the Five-Factor Model of personality and the NEO PI-R inventory would provide a suitable model and measure to explore this potential. The current study was conducted to explore the hypothesis that ten one hour, one to one coaching sessions (utilizing the Five Factor Model of personality, the NEO PI-R inventory, and resources developed in a previous phase of this research) can facilitate changes in client chosen personality facets.

2.0 Method

2.1   Participants

Total participants enrolled were 59 adults (18-62 years, 9 males and 49 females, mean age = 42.67) from a population without major psychopathology. Major psychopathology was excluded by asking those participants who had one or more emotionality facets (i.e., anxiety, anger, depression, vulnerability, impulsivity or self conscientiousness) in the very high range to also complete a Millon MCMI III (Millon, Davis, & Millon, 1997), an inventory which assesses for DSM-IV diagnoses. Those individuals with Axis II disorders, significant current alcohol and drug abuse, active psychosis or bipolar disorder were excluded from the study, and referred to other services.

At the commencement of the study, 53 participants were assigned to the Personality Coaching Group or the Waitlist Control Group using a waitlist control, matched, randomized procedure (Personality Coaching Group, *n = 26*; Waitlist Control Group, *n = 27*). Participants were firstly matched on sex (male/female) and then on age range (0-30, 31-50, 51+). At a later time in the study an additional 6 participants were recruited and assigned to the Waitlist Control Group due to higher withdrawal rates in that group. In selecting these participants, pair matching of the Personality Coaching Group and the Waitlist Control Group was achieved, (i.e., additional participants were chosen to match the two groups by gender and cohort age groupings after withdrawals).

Of the Waitlist Control Group, two participants withdrew during the waitlist period, and a further four withdrew between coaching sessions one and five (two because they did not wish to change any traits). All Waitlist Control participants that completed the ten session of coaching completed a NEO PI-R three months later. One participant from the Coaching Group did not furnish three month follow-up data. At the conclusion of the coaching sessions, 26 Personality Coaching Group participants and 27 Waitlist Control Group participants remained in the study. Gender and age breakdown of the participants that completed the 10 sessions of coaching is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Age and gender of participants who completed 10 weeks of coaching.

Age	Female - Immediate	Female - Waitlist	Male - Immediate	Male - Waitlist	Total
18-29	4	5	1	1	11
30-49	10	10	2	1	23
50+	8	8	1	2	19
Total	22	23	4	4	53

2.2   Experimental design

Table 2 illustrates the design of the current study, including data collection timing and key research stages for the two groups for the NEO PI-R. (Other inventories were completed to assist coaching processes, but changes in these were not measured over time). NEO PI-Rs were completed by the PCG at weeks 1, 5, 10 and 22. NEO PI-Rs were completed by the WCG at weeks 1, 10, 15, 20 and 32. Initially a between-subjects waitlist control design was employed. Raw scores on targeted client selected traits were assessed for both groups at week 1 and week ten.

A within-participants design was then used to explore targeted client selected traits over time (a) from week 1 to week ten for the PCG and (b) from week 10 to week 20 for the WCG.

Table 2. Experimental design of study: Data collection timing and stages of research.

Time	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
PCG data	■				■					■												■										
PCG Stages	10 week coaching period.										12 week follow up period																					
WLG data	■									■					■					■												
WLG Stages	Waitlist period										10 week coaching period										12 week follow up period											

2.3   Procedure

A media release seeking participants was sent to local media in the Illawarra Region, NSW, Australia. Participants were assigned to enter the PCG or the WCG using a waitlist control, matched, randomization procedure. Participants were first matched on sex (male/female) and then on age (18-29, 30-49, 50+). Participants assigned to the PCG completed the 10 weeks personality coaching program while those participants assigned to the WCG completed a 10-week waiting period.

2.4   Coaching programme

During the first coaching session, the client was provided with their personality profile, which included a description and graphing of their five broad traits and 30 facets against population norms. The coach facilitated discussion on whether the client would like to increase or decrease a limited number of facets. This discussion took into account client values, motivational factors, and consideration of how facets helped or hindered them in everyday life. If the client chose to increase or decrease one or more traits, they continued in the program, and changing those facets became the over-riding goal of the ten sessions of coaching. Increasing or decreasing raw NEO PI-R scores on the client chosen traits provided the measurable outcomes of the coaching.

The coaching programme consisted of ten one-hour weekly sessions. The processes and coaching interventions were developed during *Phase One* of the research, and documented in a structured training manual. These resources were developed by the researcher, working with a panel of experts (i.e., psychologists/coaches). The coaching interventions primarily reflected the following approaches; solution focused coaching, positive psychology, acceptance and commitment principles and cognitive behavioural techniques.

Coaching was conducted by 10 registered or provisionally registered psychologists who received training in personality coaching by (a) attendance at a one day workshop, (b) provision of a training manual and a training video, (c) completion of a research fidelity checklist after coaching sessions, and (d) weekly one hour one-to-one supervision, which included review of videoed coaching sessions. The majority of the coaches (seven) were Master of Psychology (Clinical) students at the University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia, and coaching was conducted as a placement. The students were all in their fifth year of full time training in psychology, and had a minimum of 60 hours of face-to-face client contact.

2.5   Measures

Participants in the PCG completed a values inventory and a NEO PI-R directly before coaching commenced, and completed additional NEO PI-Rs at session five (week 5), session 10 (week 10) and again three months later (week 22). Participants in the WCG completed a values inventory and a NEO PI-R 10 weeks before coaching commenced, and completed additional NEO PI-Rs directly before session one (week 10), session five (week 15), session 10 (week 20) and again three months later (week 32).

The 240 item NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) is a well established personality assessment tool, which includes statements such as "When I do things, I do them vigorously", "I often feel tense and jittery" and "I'm not know for my generosity". Participants responded on a 5-point scale (0 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). The NEO assesses five broad traits based on the Five Factor Model of Personality, (i.e., emotionality, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness)(Costa & McCrae, 1998). These five factors provide a more general description of personality, whilst 30 facets allow for a more detailed analysis.

The NEO PI-R has been validated against a variety of other personality assessment tools and has high levels of internal consistency (ranging from .86 to .95) and reliability (ranging from .56 to .90)(Piedmont, 1998).

3.0 Results

Hypothesis 1 was that the personality change coaching processes developed in Phase 1 of the research will facilitate change in participant chosen facets, in the direction desired by the participant. Group significantly predicted personality change, $F(1, 9.533, p<.01)$. Allowing the slopes to vary across participants significantly improved the model. Factoring in subtracts did not significantly improve the model. (*This section is yet to be completed as final data is still to come in*).

4.0 Discussion

Results of the initial analysis of the waitlist control study indicated that the personality coaching interventions (developed in phase I of this study) were effective in changing client chosen facets, in the direction chosen by the client.

There are a number of limitations that should be considered in interpreting these results. Firstly, participants were self selected and may not be representation of the general population. Secondly, personality measures and changes were based on self reported personality change. Potential issues of self report measures include social desirability bias and faking good. For example, participant may have a general tendency to respond positively to items linked to chosen personality change goals. Future research could benefit from more observable behavioural measures to collaborate reported change. (*This section will be completed when all data is in and analysed*).

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