Experiences of coaching and stress in the workplace: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Kristina Gyllensten & Stephen Palmer

Objectives: This paper will present the findings from a qualitative study exploring experiences of workplace coaching.

Design: The study adopted a qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were used and the method of analysis was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Jaraman & Osborn, 1999).

Methods: Two large organisations participated and nine individuals, who had taken part in coaching, were interviewed. The interviews focused on the participants’ experiences of coaching, and one of the topics investigated was coaching and stress.

Results: ‘Management of Stress’ was identified as a main theme which, in turn, comprised of a number of sub-themes. According to these sub-themes coaching had helped the participants to reduce stress indirectly, to cope with stressful situations, and was a resource that the participants would consider using in the future. Moreover, coaching also had the potential to cause stress.

Conclusions: It was concluded that coaching could help to reduce stress indirectly and help individuals to cope with stressful situations. However, as coaching also had the potential to cause stress it was suggested that it was important that coaches clearly explain what can be expected from coaching. In addition, limitations with the study were discussed.

Keywords: work-related stress, coaching, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, management of stress.

Coaching and stress

Workplace stress causes distress and ill health (Health and Safety Executive (HSE), 2001). There are many different definitions of stress and according to the HSE (2001) stress is ‘the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them’. Within cognitive definitions of stress there is more focus on the perceptions of the individual. Palmer, Cooper and Thomas (2003) propose that ‘stress occurs when the perceived pressure exceeds your perceived ability to cope’ (p.2).

A variety of interventions are used to tackle workplace stress (Cooper & Cartwright, 1997). One intervention that is not commonly associated with stress reduction is coaching. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that coaching can be useful in reducing stress (Busch & Steinmetz, 2002; Hearn, 2001; Jones, 1996; Meyer, 2003; Palmer, Tubbs & Whybrow, 2003). Hearn (2001) suggests that coaching can help individuals to identify stressors, develop strategies for change and maintain solutions. As well as tackling stress directly, coaching could reduce stress indirectly by helping an individual to reach their personal goals (e.g. improve performance, efficiency, or communication), and thereby decrease any stress caused by the perceived deficiency in the area targeted in coaching (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005a). However, it is also possible that coaching will increase awareness of work stressors that may or may not be tackled by the organisation. This increased awareness may lead to increased stress.

Whilst it is recognised that there is a lack of research on coaching effectiveness and on coaching and stress (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005a), the current qualitative and quantitative research in this area is reviewed below. Grant (2001, 2003) has conducted two quantitative studies investigating the effects of...
coaching that demonstrate a positive impact of coaching on mental health. Grant (2001) found that cognitive coaching significantly reduced levels of depression and anxiety. Additionally, Grant (2003) reported that participation in a life coaching programme significantly reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Compasspoint Nonprofit Services (2003) used both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the effects of coaching in a group of Executive Directors. The findings indicate that whilst there was no significant reduction of stress and burnout after coaching, coaching had helped participants to reduce stress by encouraging the coachees to take time for themselves regularly and by highlighting the importance of self care. Furthermore, the participants reported that they felt better equipped to cope with any future feelings of burnout as a result of the coaching.

Wales (2003) used a phenomenological approach to explore the experience of coaching in a group of managers. The coaching relationship provided a safe environment where the managers could share fears and anxieties, identify coping skills, and test new behaviours. Coaching was found to help the participants to reduce their experience of stress and manage their work/life balance. At the beginning of the coaching relationships, many of the participants reported that they had been experiencing high levels of stress. Following coaching the participants described themselves as more relaxed, less angry, and better able to understand and deal with work and personal pressures. Coaching had also helped the participants to become more proactive in dealing with the different roles in their lives.

Various case studies have reported that coaching was effective in reducing clients’ stress levels (Hearn, 2001; Richard, 1999). A case study describing the coaching of a Regional Drug Strategy Manager was reported by Ascentia (2005). The coaching produced a number of benefits including stress reduction. Stress levels were reduced despite the fact that stress was not specifically targeted in the coaching, and the manager was going through challenging periods of change. In addition, the stress levels had also been reduced among the members of the manager’s team.

The current study
The current study was Part III of a larger piece of research on coaching and stress. Part I of the research investigated whether coaching reduced stress. A quasi-experimental design was used and stress was measured before and after coaching. It was found that coaching did not significantly reduce stress (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005b). Part II of the research investigated whether there was a relationship between participation in coaching and levels of stress. A correlational design was used. Participation in coaching did not significantly predict levels of stress (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005c). Part III of the research used a qualitative methodology. A qualitative methodology was suitable as the aim with Part III of the research was to gain a deeper insight into the participants’ experiences of coaching and their views and experiences of coaching and stress. The qualitative research process is flexible, interested in rich descriptions of the topic, and enables the discovery of novel themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Holliday, 2002). This article will only present some of the findings from Part III of the study.

The aim of the current study
The aim of the current study was to investigate participants’ experiences and views of coaching, specifically, the process of coaching, evaluation of coaching (was the coaching beneficial or not – how, in what way) and if/how coaching impacted on stress.

Methods
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Phenomenology relates to the person’s individual view of an event rather than an objective statement about the event (Smith,
The present study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyse the data from the semi-structured interviews. IPA is a practical and systematic approach to analysing rich data (Baker, Pistrang & Elliot, 2002). The main aim of IPA is to explore and understand meanings of experiences of the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2004). IPA has been used extensively in health psychology research but according to Smith and Osborn (2004) it is appropriate for a range of psychological research questions where the aim is to investigate the meaning of the participants’ experiences. IPA recognises that the research process is dynamic, and the researcher takes an active role in attempting to get an insider’s perspective of the participant’s experience. However, this cannot be done directly or fully, but rather via a process of interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA assumes that there is a relationship between an individual’s verbal accounts and their cognitions and emotions. Nevertheless, it is recognised that the relationship is complicated and individuals may have difficulties reporting what they are thinking or/and they may not want to self-disclose (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Participants
The participants in the current study were selected on the basis of having participated in workplace coaching and thereby being able to contribute to the research question as recommended by Smith and Osborn (2003). One UK organisation from the finance sector and one Scandinavian organisation from the telecommunications sector participated in the study. Both organisations mainly focused on telephone-based work and had in excess of 3000 employees. Potential participants were selected by a contact individual at each organisation. Overall, nine participants were interviewed, six were employees of the UK organisation and three were employees of the Scandinavian organisation. Six females and three males participated and the mean age of the interviewees was 33 years with a range of 23 to 52. Four of the participants held management positions and all nine worked full-time. All participants had taken part in coaching within their organisation.

Procedure
The interview schedule was based on the aim of the research and previous literature. Main topics included details of coaching, the coaching process, evaluation of coaching, and coaching and stress. The questions were piloted prior to the research interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used as this method is flexible, enables the collection of rich data, and is suitable for IPA studies (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The interviews took between 30 to 45 minutes and were recoded and transcribed in their entirety. The lines in each transcript were numbered for ease of reference. In the transcripts participants were assigned one of the first nine letters of the alphabet. The letter 'I' was used to denote the Interviewer.

UK organisation
The interviews with the participants from the UK organisation took place at one of the organisation’s sites. Prior to the interview the participants were asked to read and sign a consent form indicating their understanding of the study and agreement to take part. The consent form stated the participants’ rights to anonymity, withdrawal and ensured security of the data. The interviewer then asked the participants for permission to switch the tape recorder on and start the interview. At the end of the study the participants were invited to ask questions and they were informed that they were welcome to contact the researcher if they had any further questions or concerns regarding the research.

Scandinavian organisation
All interviews with the participants from the Scandinavian organisation took place over the telephone. Initially, the researcher contacted these participants via e-mail. This initial e-mail outlined the aim of the research, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant’s data, and invited them to participate. They were asked to acknowledge receipt of the initial e-mail. If they did so they were then contacted by telephone. The researcher then asked the participants for permission to switch the tape recorder on and start the interview. At the end of the study the participants were invited to ask questions and they were informed that they were welcome to contact the researcher if they had any further questions or concerns regarding the research.
of the study and the right to withdrawal. If the participant replied to this e-mail and agreed to take part in the study the participants’ e-mail reply was kept as a proof of their consent (all participants allowed the researcher to print and keep the e-mail). At the beginning of the telephone conversation the researcher asked for the participants’ consent to switching the tape recorder on. Following this consent the researcher emphasised that participation was voluntary and that the participant should only agree to take part in the research if they had understood and agreed to the conditions outlined. Once the participant had given a verbal consent to taking part in the study the interview commenced. At the end of the interview the participants were invited to talk about any issues or ask questions related to the topic. They were also informed that they could contact the researcher if they wanted to discuss any questions or issues related to the interview.

Analysis
The analysis was conducted in accordance with Smith, Jarman and Osborn’s (1999) guidelines to doing IPA. As suggested by Smith and Osborn (2003) an ideographic approach to analysis was used, where the analysis begins with a detailed investigation of a specific case before the other cases are incorporated and a more general categorisation emerge. In accordance with this approach one transcript was read a number of times and notes of anything significant or interesting were made. Prevalence within the data is not the only important factor when themes are selected: richness of text passages and ability to explain other aspects of the interview are also important factors (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). The next step of the analysis involved reading the transcript again and recording the emerging themes. The themes were listed and connections between themes and superordinate concepts were noted. Finally, the themes were ordered coherently and a table of themes was produced. This process of analysis was repeated for the remaining transcripts and a final table of superordinate themes for the whole group was constructed. The main themes that emerged were: management of stress, confidence, the coaching relationship, coaching = investment in staff. As the topic of this article is coaching and stress the central focus will be on the main theme ‘management of stress’. However, there will be a brief discussion of the other main themes.

Evaluating the analysis
The qualitative analysis is a subjective process and different researchers may have arrived at different conclusions. In IPA the researcher’s personal frame of reference inevitably influences the analysis (Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001). It has been suggested that good qualitative practice involves researchers specifying their personal perspective relevant to the study, as this enable readers to interpret the researcher’s analysis (Elliot, Fisher & Rennie, 1999). In this study the researcher’s interpretative framework has been influenced by; training and practice in counselling psychology, particularly in working with issues of work stress; previous research on stress; and training in coaching psychology. As the researcher was aware of these factors from the beginning of the study much effort was made to ‘bracket’ (Baker et al., 2002) preconceived ideas and expectations in order to minimise unwarranted idiosyncratic interpretations or unwarranted selective attention in the interviews.

Various criteria have been suggested for the evaluation of qualitative studies, and the following is a summary list of published guidelines: openness of theoretical framework by researchers (Baker et al., 2002; Elliot et al., 1999); situating the sample (Elliot et al., 1999); methods described in detail to allow replication (Baker et al., 2002); grounding the data and presentation of evidence (Baker et al., 2002; Elliot et al., 1999; Popay, Rogers & Williams, 1998; Smith, 1996); providing credibility checks by the use of an independent
audit, member checks or triangulation (Baker et al., 2002; Elliot et al., 1999; Smith, 1996); internal coherence of the data-based story/narrative (Elliot et al., 1999; Popay et al., 1998; Smith, 1996); limitations of the extension of the findings are specified (Elliot et al., 1999; Popay et al., 1998). The present study has attempted to address these guidelines in the following manner. The researcher’s personal perspective has been highlighted and basic descriptive data about the participants have been presented. The methods of the study have been thoroughly described to allow replication. Examples of the data have been provided to illustrate each theme. The data has been presented in a narrative that aims to highlight the phenomenon under study in a coherent manner. Moreover, a summary of the analysis has been presented in a model that highlights the relationship between the themes. Finally, it is suggested that the findings should not be generalised to all coaching situations but only to the groups studied and possibly similar groups in similar settings. However, despite the fact that the findings are not generalisable to all coaching situations it is possible that coaches can benefit from some of the issues highlighted in the research.

Results
The management of stress
Management of stress was a main theme that emerged from the analysis. It is important to note that this theme does not only highlight the positive impact of coaching in dealing with stress but also the negative aspects including coaching causing stress. Four sub-themes emerged and these included: indirect work on stress; coping with stress; use coaching for stress in the future; and cause of stress. Their relationship is depicted in Figure 1, ‘The Management of Stress’.

Indirect work on stress
The participants had not sought coaching specifically to reduce stress. However, coaching appeared to help participants to reduce stress by helping them to manage other work-related problems that were causing them stress. Thus, it could be suggested that coaching reduced stress indirectly. One route coaching reduced stress indirectly was by helping participants to become more satisfied with their job role. Indeed, role ambiguity is a common stressor in the workplace:

![Figure 1: The Management of Stress.](image-url)
No, it definitely reduced the stress because by working on everything that we have worked on I feel happier in my role so I think it has definitely helped with stress. (B: 331–332)

Another indirect route to reduced stress was improved confidence. Confidence was one of the other main themes found in the analysis and many of the participants had sought coaching in order to increase confidence. Low confidence appeared to have a negative influence on well-being and performance. It was reported that when confidence and job-satisfaction were improved, as a result of the coaching, stress was reduced:

I didn’t necessarily go to do the coaching to reduce stress, but I suppose it has done because I feel happier in what I am doing, and more confident, and organised. (B: 338–340)

According to some participants improved confidence automatically reduced stress:

But overall yes it reduced it, because by me feeling more confident I think that automatically reduces stress… (D: 379–380)

Pressure and high workload were sources of stress for the participants. Once again coaching helped to reduce stress indirectly by helping the participants to become more confident and assertive and decline extra work. Thus, it appeared that the coaching helped the participants to increase awareness of their own limitations regarding work demands and to clearly state these limitations at the workplace:

I know now when to say ‘it is too much, we can’t take on any more’ and I feel that I will say that. Whereas previously I may have just said ‘oh yes I will do it’ and just end up worrying and getting stressed over it, so yes I do. (D: 414–417)

I used to sometimes feel that maybe I was taking on too much and ending up with too much work that I couldn’t physically do. So in my mindset I know how much work I can take on and when to start refusing things you know. I will take on as much as I feel I can cope with. (E: 334–337)

Worrying about situations at work was another source of stress. Improved confidence lead to less worry about these work situations and this lead to reduced stress:

I would get stressed about worrying about things and, you know I would sort of, I would worry about going into team meetings so that would stress me. And because of this coaching and the goal of becoming more confident then that doesn’t worry me anymore so I don’t let it effect me. So yes from an indirect point of view I am less stressed than I was when I first started. (E: 368–372)

Uncertainty over dealing with problems at work was a major source of stress according to the participants. Discussing problems and problem solving were key activities of the coaching. Highlighting and discussing problems at work and developing new solutions helped to reduce stress:

…my coaching sessions also made some things easier for me to work with afterwards. Because I found new ways to do things, I found my way out of things that I thought ‘how do I do that’. And then I discussed it… and that kind of clarity takes away the stress feeling. (J: 389–392)

You can’t just all of a sudden eliminate all your problems in life, but you got to sit down and plan how you are going to tackle those problems. If you know that then it makes it so much easier to contend with and deal with. I think that has really helped over the last couple of years. (E: 447–451)

It was also suggested that coaching could play a role in preventing future stress by providing an opportunity to discuss problems and to find solutions, the inability to solve problems being an identified cause of stress:

Because if you have like things you have to do and you don’t know how to do them I think it is
stressful. And coaching can help you to find out how to solve the problems, and in that way I think it can prevent future stress. (J: 399–401)

However, it is important to note that not all participants felt that coaching had helped them to reduce distress. It is, therefore, important to remember that stress is a complex phenomena that is influenced by a multitude of different factors:

I am not that susceptible to external factors, if I wake up in the morning feeling low that is the way it is regardless of what coaching I have done. (A: 539–540)

Coping with stress
Coaching was not always helpful in eliminating or reducing stress. Nevertheless, coaching helped some participants to cope with situations that were causing them stress:

I never doubted my ability to be competent. The thing that was always undermining me was my nervous reaction – it was something I could never ever cope with. I just hated that, and I just didn’t want to feel it. What the coaching has helped me to do is help me deal with that stress. Not to eradicate it. (A: 615–618)

It has not reduced the feeling of pain. It has helped me to cope with it. (A: 660)

In the past some participants had felt unable to remain in distressing situations and had, therefore, avoided these situations. However, with the help of coaching, the participants were able to remain in and cope with distressing situations that they had been unable to tolerate in the past:

So whereas previously I would have run away and avoided the situation and those feelings, whereas now they are still there but I feel I can cope with them and sort of manage them. That is what coaching has helped me to do. (A: 623–625)

Yes, and I am able to sort of stay in there and live with it. As uncomfortable as it (presentations) is I am finding I can cope with it now, which previously I just couldn’t have done. (A: 640–641)

Working in a new job role, that was different to the previous one, was identified as a cause of stress. The stress caused by this situation had been so serious for some employees that they had chosen to leave the organisation rather than to continue and face the new work situation. Coaching helped some participants to remain in the organisation and to cope with the new job role. Thus, coaching may have had an important organisational function in reducing staff turnover in a period of organisational change:

The job I applied for has completely changed. And quite a lot of people found that really difficult that change, because it is kind of an uncomfortable zone I suppose. And quite a few people left, but coaching has definitely helped with that. So I don’t know, maybe if I did not have that support I don’t know whether I would still be here. (B: 431–434)

Although coaching did not always manage to eliminate or even reduce stress some participants expressed hope that continuous work in coaching could help to eliminate the distress:

…I have obviously done loads of presentations in the past and just hated them, and never seeking opportunities and all the rest of it. It has helped me to be able to cope rather than eliminating my stress. So I mean you could ask me this question in 12 months time and I might have totally knocked the stress thing over. (A: 650–654)

Use coaching for stress in the future
As stated previously, the participants had not sought coaching in order to deal with what they perceived to be workplace stress. However, when discussing the usefulness of coaching in dealing with stress the participants any reported that they believed that coaching could be suitable:

I think if I did use coaching for stress, and that sort of thing, then it would help, but I think it...
definitely would help, but it not something that I have used it for before. (B: 360–362)

But I think that using the tools from the coaching could have some positive effects so I would not be so stressed. (H: 393–394)

Although they had not used coaching for stress in the past, the participants considered going to coaching for stress problems in the future, with one of the participants contemplating booking further coaching sessions in order to deal with worry that was causing stress:

I mean I don’t know whether it would be useful to book more coaching sessions, I might do it actually. I think I still could do with working on the worrying side of things, and worrying about what people think and that type of thing. I think I do put added stress and pressure on myself sometimes because of that. (D: 404–408)

Furthermore, the participants reported that they would recommend coaching to colleagues, as a means of tackling stress. Thus, increasing awareness in the workplace of the potential benefits of coaching:

But I know if any member of my team is suffering from stress I would direct them to go and see a coach. So I imagine that they would be quite good at sorting that out. (C: 395–396)

One explanation to why participants had not yet approached the coaches regarding problems with stress was because the stress problems they were facing were not viewed to be serious enough. There appeared to be a view that in order to seek coaching for stress there should be serious problems with stress:

I know that if I had a problem with it (stress) I would go to them and they would sort it out but I am not stressed above a level that I can work at. (C: 337–338)

When the participants considered where they would like to seek help if they suffered from stress it appeared that that seeing a coach was preferable to seeing a manager. This was principally for reasons of confidentiality, the participants believing a meeting with a coach as being more confidential than one with a manager:

I think most people would rather go to a coach to talk about stress than their team manager. Because once again if you talk to your team manager then it is going to go down on your file, it is just you don’t want it on your paper ‘he suffers from stress, bla, bla, bla’. (C: 390–393)

Similarly, for some participants seeing a coach was viewed as preferable to seeing a counsellor in order to deal with stress. The reason for this was that seeking help from a counsellor made the problem seem more serious. This indicates that employees may be more willing to participate in coaching than in counselling. One possible reason for this is that there may be a stigma associated with counselling:

Yes, because it if you go to a counsellor then that makes it real. If you go to a coach then that is just chatting to one of your friends about it. Do you see what I mean, if, I think actually counselling would be the next step along from a coach, but I think most people would rather go to a coach and try and sort it out that way. (C: 400–403)

However, it is important to highlight that this view, that attending coaching implied a less serious problem, was not held by all participants, some believing that coaching was very similar to counselling, and counselling psychology:

I mean, at university I did do a bit of counselling psychology and that is what coaching is at the end of the day in a way isn’t it. It is like being a counsellor to someone. (D: 179–181)

Cause of stress
As well as being able to reduce stress or help participants to cope with stress it was also reported that coaching could in fact cause
stress. It was pointed out that openness to coaching was an important factor in determining its usefulness. For those coachees who considered coaching a ‘waste of time’ it actually became a source of stress. This was based upon the perception that the time taken up by coaching could be used in a more constructive manner. The attitudes of the coachees, therefore, being vital:

But you have to get to a point where you can actually see that you get something out of the coaching. Because if you are sitting there and you think it is a waste of time you will just be a bit more stressed knowing that you could have used your time much better at work instead of being coached. So you have to have a coaching set-up that you feel will give you something otherwise it won’t help you. (H: 435–439)

Nevertheless, the skills and competence of the coach was also viewed as important. If the coach was insufficiently skilled the coaching session could be perceived as a ‘waste of time’:

Well it depends on the opinion about it. Because if you go there and you feel it is a waste of time and you keep on insisting it is a waste of time, it will be a waste of time. So somehow you have to decide that this is something I will get something good from, so you go into it with a positive mind. But also of course you need to have someone coaching you that knows what they are doing. Because otherwise I guess it could be a waste of time. (H: 444–449)

Another reason to why coaching could be perceived as unproductive, and thereby cause stress, was if there was an over emphasis on discussion that did not lead to any action. It would appear that the participants sought practical results from the coaching:

Sometimes there is too little action. (G: 452) When it takes too much time or resources. I think it tends to be when we just talk and talk and nothing happens. (G: 456–457)

The appreciation and perceived benefits of coaching did not seem to be immediate for all participants. Indeed, although participants reported that there was a risk that coaching could be unproductive, there appeared, however, to be a process in which the participants could learn to appreciate coaching after a period of time:

Well I think the first time I participated in it I was very disappointed, I did not see any meaning in it and I left with the feeling that I had spent a lot of time and didn’t get anything with me. (H: 119–121) But the following times I think it improved very much. And at the end of it, it was really good. (H: 125–126)

Coaching could also cause stress by encouraging the participants to focus on their problem(s). By focusing on the problem(s) at the beginning of the coaching the participant became more aware of the extent of the problem and this, subsequently, could cause distress:

I think my first couple of sessions in a way made me feel worse. Because it was making me focus more on the problem, so I was becoming more conscious that the problem existed and thinking ‘god yes I do, do that’, and I was focusing on my own behaviour. But once I got over that in the long run it helped definitely. (D: 157–161)

Although the coaching initially caused increased stress it did, however, eventually help to reduce stress. Once again there would appear to be a process in which the participants could derive benefit from coaching after a period of time:

I think like I say in the early stages possibly it makes you feel worse, but then once you really get to grips with everything it makes you feel a lot better. (D: 215–217)

Furthermore, participants highlighted the potential risk associated with leaving coaching before these initial feeling of stress had been worked through. Thus, there
appeared to be a risk that coachees would leave coaching feeling more distressed than when they entered:

And if they weren’t prepared to see it through it could have a negative effect. But as long as people are prepared to see it through to the end I think it definitely has a positive effect. (D: 294–296)

Overview of additional main themes
Management of stress is the central focus of this result section. However, a brief outline of the three additional themes is presented below.

The three additional themes that emerged from the analysis included: the coaching relationship, confidence, and coaching = investment in staff. It was found that the relationship between the coach and the coachee was viewed as very important and necessary for the coaching to develop. This relationship was dependent on trust and improved by transparency. Coaching also helped to increase the participants’ confidence and this lead to other benefits, including improved job performance, assertiveness, and well-being outside work. A valuable coaching relationship and increased confidence did of course have a positive impact on the management of stress.

There appeared to be some initial scepticism towards the concept of coaching, however, once the participants had attended coaching it was viewed as a sign that the organisation valued and invested in their staff.

Discussion
The participants in the current study had not sought coaching in order to tackle stress directly. Nevertheless, the participants expressed that coaching had helped them to reduce stress indirectly, for example, by helping to improve confidence and problem solving skills. However, coaching did not always help to reduce stress and it is important to recognise that stress is a complex process that can be influenced by many factors other than coaching. Coaching had helped some individuals to cope with stressful situations. Thus, the coaching had helped them to stay in stressful situations rather than avoid them. Avoidance behaviour can be a behavioural response to stress (Palmer et al., 2003). It was further found that coaching was viewed as a resource that the participants would consider using to tackle workplace stress in the future. However, coaching also had the potential to cause stress. Coaching could cause stress by being perceived as a waste of time and by not leading to any action. This could be the result of a coachee not being open to the coaching process or an unskilled coach. Some participants reported that there was a process of learning to appreciate coaching. Increased focus on the target problem was a further example of how coaching could increase stress. This could occur at the early stages of coaching and participants reported that it was important to stay in the coaching to work through this stage.

The finding that coaching helped to reduce stress was similar to the results from the Wales (2003) qualitative study with a sample of managers. According to Wales (2003) coaching had helped to reduce stress and anger and had increased awareness and capability of dealing with pressures. Similarly, Grant (2001, 2003) found that cognitive coaching and life coaching significantly improved mental health. The findings from the current qualitative study were, however, different from those in the quantitative studies conducted in Part I and Part II of the same larger piece of research. Part I of the study found that coaching did not significantly reduce stress (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005b) and Part II found that coaching was not a significant predictor of levels of stress (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005c). Similarly, stress levels were not significantly reduced after coaching in the quantitative part of CompassPoint Nonprofit Services’ (2003) study. However, the qualitative part of the same study found that coaching had helped to reduce stress. The CompassPoint Nonprofit Services’ (2003) study is particularly interesting to compare with the current
study as both found that the qualitative and quantitative methodologies produced somewhat different findings regarding stress reduction and coaching. A possible reason for this inconsistency is that there is a problem measuring reduction of stress with questionnaires. The stress process may be too complex and hold so many different meanings for individuals that a questionnaire is not the most suitable way of measuring it. On the other hand, the inconsistencies between the qualitative and quantitative approaches may reflect the fact that the individuals who were interviewed were in a minority or that they felt required to report positive aspects of coaching. Further research is needed in order to clarify this discrepancy.

Limitations

Issues relating to qualitative research designs have been discussed under ‘Evaluation of Analysis’. Nevertheless, there are some further limitations of the study that needs to be highlighted. It is always possible that recruitment bias will have an impact on the research when the sample is relatively small (Chapman, 2002). Indeed, it may be the case that only those individuals who considered that their coaching was successful agreed to take part in the study. Moreover, the contact persons, based at the organisations, may unintentionally (or intentionally) have put forward individuals who were positive towards coaching. Six of the participants worked in the UK organisation and three worked in the Scandinavian. All interviews were analysed as one sample as they had all experienced workplace coaching within their organisations and, therefore, would be able to inform the researcher about the topic under investigation. However, there is the risk that the results were consequently more representative of the experiences of coaching in the UK organisation. It would have been preferable to have a more equal amount of participants from both organisations. A further limitation was that the coaching differed between the organisations. Problem solving models were an important part of both organisations’ coaching approaches. However, the organisations also used different coaching techniques and theories.

Implications and conclusions

The current study found that coaching was helpful in reducing stress indirectly. This would suggest that it could be useful to introduce coaching in organisations that are facing problems with workplace stress. It was also found that coaching had helped participants to cope with stressful situations such as changing job roles. Thus, organisations that are planning major changes to job roles may benefit from employing coaches to help the employees through the period of change. Furthermore, the participants were positive towards using coaching for stress. Indeed, participants in both the current study and in previous research (Gyllensten, Palmer & Farrants, 2005) have reported that coaching is viewed as preferable to counselling for workplace stress. A potential reason for this being that counselling implies a more serious problem with stress and may carry a stigma. Consequently, coaching has the potential to reach the individuals who are not comfortable seeking counselling for stress at their workplace. In addition, it is important to note that the study also found that coaching can actually cause stress. Based on the participants’ views it is important that the coaching leads to some form of action. It is also important that the coach explains what the coachee can expect from coaching and highlights that excessive focus on the target problem may cause an initial increase in distress. If the coachee is aware of what to expect they can then make an informed choice regarding the suitability of coaching and thereby reduce the likelihood of it being perceived as a ‘waste of time’ for both the coachee and coach. Finally, the current study highlights the need for further qualitative and quantitative research on coaching and stress. Future research could investigate the discrepancy between qualitative and quanti-
tative approaches. Further, quantitative studies could employ larger sample sizes in order to investigate the effectiveness of coaching in reducing stress and qualitative studies could investigate the process of coaching as well as the outcome.

Authors details
Kristina Gyllensten & Stephen Palmer
City University, London, UK.

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