Conference Paper
Supply and Demand in the Development of Coaching Professional Ethics
Hugh Breakey
Supply and Demand in the Development of Coaching Professional Ethics

Hugh Breakey¹

Presented at Ethics the Heart of Coaching: Expanding the Boundaries of Ethical Thinking & Practice Virtual Conference: www.coachingethicsforum.com
hosted by the Coaching Ethics Forum
8 & 9 December, 2023

ABSTRACT: While all business and service providers should be guided by general ethical obligations, some—professions—possess special ethical codes, supported and/or enforced by professional associations. How do professions differ from other service providers, such that their services both require, and can deliver, high ethical standards? Previous research has explored the development of professional ethics through an examination of demand-side factors (the various stakeholders whose needs drive them to demand high ethical standards of service providers) and supply-side factors (the motivational structures that empower service providers to conscientiously live up to those high ethical standards). This paper applies this framework to explore the need for special ethical standards for coaches, and the social and psychological resources coaches have for delivering on those standards.

Keywords: Professional ethics; coaching ethics; professionalism; moral motivation; stakeholders.

Session: Research-based

Does Coaching need special ethical responsibilities, and does it have the resources to deliver them?

This paper considers the extent to which coaching should be considered a profession in the ethical sense, particularly in its use of expertise and the vulnerability of those being coached, and the ways that these factors might require the development of special ethical obligations.

The special ethical obligations that bind professions include fiduciary duties (to work in their client’s ‘best interests’), duties of confidentiality, and duties of competence and expertise (often including educational requirements), as well as obligations to public institutions (such as lawyers’ duties to the

¹. Dr Hugh Breakey, Institute for Ethics, Governance & Law, Law Futures Centre, Griffith University, Nathan, Queensland, Australia, 4111. Email: h.breakey@griffith.edu.au
The great variety in different types of coaching may mean that different coaching contexts have differing needs for ethical professionalism. The paper will consider coaching with a broad brush, but the intention is to provide a template that can empower scholars and practitioners to apply to more specific coaching contexts.

Throughout, the profession of lawyering will be employed as a comparative example of a traditional profession that manifestly requires a professional ethical code and that has an array of social, cultural, and institutional resources to deliver on that code (Sampford 2017).

A first question concerns the demand for special ethical standards (Breakey 2016). Demand comes from different stakeholder groups who want the service providers to be bound by special ethical standards, and who can pressure various bodies (including the profession and professionals themselves, but also government and regulators) to implement those standards.

Three key stakeholder groups are clients, third parties and the wider public, and the service providers themselves.

Clients have reason to demand special ethical standards when:

1. The services in question are crucial necessities to important projects. For example, legal services are critical for many important life events (marriage, divorce, wills, partnerships) and for mounting a legal defence.
2. The client themselves will struggle to assess the ‘invisible quality’ (Davis 1988) of the services being provided, usually because they don't have the relevant disciplinary expertise. For example, lawyer’s clients are vulnerable insofar as they must trust their lawyer’s guidance because the client will usually have little knowledge of the law, legal institutions, and legal procedures.
3. The client exposes private parts of themselves to the service provider. For example, lawyers may come to learn many facts about the history, plans, and character of the client that the client would wish were treated confidentially.
4. The stakes of incompetent and/or unethical professional service are very high. For example,
receiving poor legal guidance and representation can have enormous personal, social and career ramifications.

All these factors drive clients to demand professionals shoulder special ethical standards of confidentiality, of competence, and of fiduciary responsibilities to the client’s best interests.

The coaches’ clients (‘coachees’) possess many of these critical factors. Though many people will not ever require a coach, coaches are nevertheless critical to many important personal and career projects. Coachees will often be vulnerable, needing to trust—and even to ‘buy in’ to—the coach’s guidance, but they will possess only limited capacity to assess the quality of that guidance. This vulnerability will be more acute with coachees that are young and/or inexperienced in the field, and more at risk when coaches’ goals come to conflict with the coachee’s best interests. Coachees may well need to expose private parts of themselves—their personal anxieties, their aspirations, their body—to the coach. Finally, the stakes of incompetent or unethical coaching can be profound, destroying a budding career and undermining a coachee’s confidence and self-efficacy.

Third-parties and the wider public will sometimes demand raised ethical standards. For example, unscrupulous lawyers can be concerning to non-clients, as everyone has a profound interest in the well-functioning of justice institutions. However, coaching will rarely implicate major stakes for third-parties.

Professionals themselves can call for improved ethical standards in their industry. They may have moral reasons for doing so. They may simply want to ensure that all vulnerable clients are protected and that coaching lives up to its ethical promise. Or, by establishing industry-wide minimum standards, they may aim to prevent employers or clients from pressuring them to lower their standards (Davis 1991). Professionals may also benefit materially from special ethical standards by heightening community trust and respect in the profession. This can increase their social status, widen the pool of potential clients eager to use their services, and weaken the need for intrusive state regulation. Both lawyers and coaches can stand to benefit in all these ways, and therefore both serve as stakeholders demanding higher ethical standards.

Summing up, there are good reasons—especially based on the needs of vulnerable coachees—to want coaches to uphold a special ethical code that includes responsibilities to act in the coachee’s best interests (which may at times conflict with the coach’s interests, or with the interests of the coach’s employer or contractor), obligations of competence (including not to take on work beyond the coach’s expertise), and duties to respect confidentiality and bodily dignity.
But having a demonstrable need for these special ethical standards does not in itself guarantee those standards can be delivered. Special educational, training, institutional and governance regimes can be constructed to encourage, empower and/or police the required ethical standards (Duffy & Passmore 2010; Breakey 2017; Smith & Clutterbuck 2023). But a crucial ingredient in the delivery of high ethical standards remains the professional’s internal psychological values (Rokeach 1976) that intrinsically motivate the desired ethical conduct. There are many different motivational structures that can support conscientious ethical conduct (Breakey 2018).

For professionals, these ‘supply-side’ motivational structures (Breakey 2016) can include:

- **Desirable role-identity:** the service providers’ felt-identification with an admired professional role. For example, for lawyers this could derive from the important purposes of the legal regime (delivering justice and the rule of law), and be bolstered through august traditions, stories and myths (such as courtroom dramas) that valorise high standards of lawyering.

- **Excellence in achievement:** practices requiring expertise possess their own excellences and ‘internal goods’ that socially and psychologically reward practitioners for attaining those excellences (MacIntyre 1981). For example, lawyers can feel a great sense of achievement when they succeed in challenging cases.

- **Common morality motives:** Almost everyone has psychological qualities of empathy, care, and moral reasoning that motivate everyday ethical conduct. These motivational structures can attach to special professional duties when those duties overlap with normal ethical concerns (such as a lawyer’s duty to support their client’s best interests).

- **Covenants, fairness, tacit contract:** Felt obligations can arise from special undertakings (like lawyers’ oaths) or be seen as an appropriate response to special rewards (like high social status, or generous remuneration).

While circumstances will vary, coaches will often partake of all these motivational resources. The purpose of coaching is itself inherently morally admirable—it involves bringing out the best in others—and there are countless stories (books, movies, television shows) that extol the profound influence coaches can have on people’s lives. Coaches may well consciously aim to live up to this desirable role identity (indeed, they may even have entered the occupation precisely on this basis).

Because of the challenges and competitive nature of many coaching contexts, there is an excellence
in coaching, and pursuing that excellence ethically can be intrinsically rewarding. However, that same competitive nature can carry its own ethical concerns—a coach seen as uniquely gifted might be given a ‘pass’ by others for ethical failures. Alternatively, in pursuing their own coaching excellence, they may be tempted to drive the coachee too hard, in a way that imperils the coachee’s overall welfare.

Common morality motives like care and empathy will often attach to coach’s duties, because of their close, ongoing engagement with particular coachees. Indeed, the worry here may be that the coach comes to care too much for the individual in their care, and that this creates boundary issues (Duffy & Passmore 2010).

Covenants and contracts may arise if there are formal contracts or tacit agreements between the parties (Duffy & Passmore 2010), and more generally coaches may respond to the trust extended to them by their charges, and feel morally called upon to rise to the faith invested in them.

In conclusion, while there will no doubt be variations across different coaching contexts, there are good reasons to think—from the ‘demand’ side—that coaches should be bound by a professional ethical code guaranteeing special protections to coachees, but that they also possess—from the ‘supply’ side—a generous compass of motivational resources that can empower them to live up to those high ethical standards.

References:


