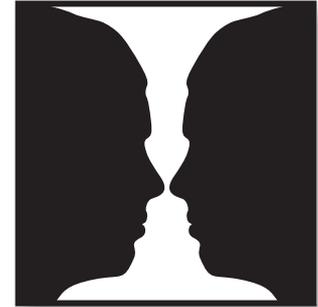


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## How is evidence to be understood in modern coaching psychology?

Af Ole Michael Spaten og Lillith Olesen Løkken

### Abstract

*The hunt for evidence in modern coaching psychology could be counter-productive, and possibly lead to a simplified approach to research, practice, searching for “definitive truths”. The article discuss a critical approach to evidence hierarchies, and the prevalent (medical) understanding of evidence, and in an overall sense the purpose of evidence in coaching psychological practice. Concepts such as “practice-based evidence” and “experienced evidence” will be argued and put in relation to the classic concept of evidence. Will it be useful to suggest a practitioner’s perspective as a wider concept of evidence applied to psychological practice? Limitations and challenges in relation to this suggestion are pinpointed in the end.*

**Keywords:** Evidence based practice, hierarchies, coaching, experienced evidence, practice-based evidence, and reflective practice.

Agreements have for some time been recognized that coaching psychology needs to be further empirical underpinned (Palmer & O’Riordan, 2012) and findings are not to be extended beyond its evidence base (Grant, 2012). But an exaggerated hunt for evidence is found to be counterproductive, and e.g. have recently empirical and conceptual links between neuro-scientific findings and actual coaching practice been said to be weak at best (Grant, 2015). Sometimes it is confused that although coaching and neuroscience can interact we have not found any convincing empirical support for a neuro-scientific foundation to coaching (ibid.). The employment of the evidence concept

and the influence of the “evidence wave” have markedly been debated (Neenan & Palmer, 2012; O’Broin & McDowall, 2014; Stewart, O’Riordan & Palmer, 2008), and are taking place at meta-theoretical, societal and individual levels as well within a wide range of subject areas and within psychology and therefore also coaching psychology (McDowall & Butterworth, 2014). It has often been stated, that a narrow-minded understanding of evidence with a focus on only one manual or only one method could lead to a simplified approach to research as well as practice (Brinkmann et al., 2012; Flyvbjerg, 2000; Larsen, 2011; Schlatter & McDowall, 2014; Stelter, 2012; Spaten et al., 2011). In this

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article we will plead for a wider – a more including – concept of evidence. First, we will shortly discuss the concept of evidence, evidence based practice. Hereafter some of the possibilities that concepts such as “*experienced evidence*” and “*practitioner perspective*” contribute with will be discussed. Last, we will present some of the challenges that need further attention.

The concept of evidence has its origin in the medical world and with a position grounded in a scientific and positivistic theory of science, evidence can be seen as an attempt to systematically evaluate, which treatments are: a) actually working, b) working better than other treatments, and c) is cost-effective (Bettinger, & Baker, 2014; Cuzzolaro, 2015).

From a critical perspective it is asked: *Is it possible (and fruitful) to try to collect knowledge about (coaching) psychological intervention with an onset in only this way of understanding treatment?*

Psychologists and other practitioners of professions are more and more frequently being asked about documentation for the effects of a given intervention. Is this only an example of a legitimate wish to gain some sort of insight into whether one intervention is to be used in opposite to another? And how can and will psychologists participate in the documentation of effects of treatments? We know the situation from the clinical practice: it is not likely that two interventions are alike: a fruitful intervention for one client is maybe “not working” for another client. If the client has been diagnosed, the appearance of this diagnose will most certainly be very different from the other client with the exact same diagnose, just as treatment of symptoms can be discussed (Holmgren, 2012). In the same way, a narrow understanding of the evidence hierarchy may lead us to ignore the unique person’s narrative and its contextual bonds, because we lean against a generalized prophecy about what usually works.

Evidence studies and evaluation studies are called “the new Gods” and can the wish for evidence become a democratic problem? (Brinkmann et al., 2012). Brinkmann asks, whether the wave of evidence and evaluation is creating a more or less safe ground for the late modern individual to know what works and what does not? Or, whether the evidence wave is trying to gather “almighty truths” in a world, where the grand stories are no longer available? The question is whether the evidence wave is actually generating any usable knowledge

for the unique context and the unique individual (the unique practitioner) in the concrete context? Or, is the evidence movement trying (mistakenly) to gather general knowledge which is not useful because general guiding lines for e.g. treatment are often shown not to be suitable in practice (Brinkmann et al., 2012)?

The concept *evidence* is by many researchers re-named as “a proof for”, “a quality assurance of” or a “plausibility for” e.g. a treatment’s effect, while in the latest 5-10 years, the concept of evidence has also become more and more prominent within psychology as Zachariae states: (...) *and in the future, there is no reason to believe, that psychological treatments will avoid demands of being subjected to quality assessment*” (Zachariae, 2007). Within both psychology in general (Cuzzolaro, 2015; Johnson, 2015) and more specific, also within coaching psychology, the demands for evidence-based research are being presented and discussed (Grant, 2015; Green, 2007; McDowall & Butterworth, 2014; Spaten, 2010).

However, how can gathering of knowledge be understood with an onset in an evidence frame? Is it fruitful to operate within the existent pyramid hierarchy of evidence structure within the psychological field? Systematic meta-analysis’ of RCT will produce the strongest documentation followed by double-blind RCT, single-blind etc. (see also Johnson, 2015; Petticrew et al., 2003; McDowall & Butterworth, 2014; Zachariae, 2007)]. The randomized controlled trial (RCT) at the very top, RCT is considered the most valid research- and evaluation-design and is referred to as “the golden standard” in research. The hierarchy of evidence is created in regard to an evaluation of the strengths of the scientific documentation. Among other things, in regard to the method that has created the basis of the evaluation. It seems relevant to ask whether there might be new and more fruitful paths to walk in the use of evidence in the (coaching) psychological field.

In the previous publication of *The Danish Journal of Coaching Psychology* ([www.coachingpsykologi.org](http://www.coachingpsykologi.org)) the chairman of the Danish psychologist association’s company for evidence-based coaching, Jens Boris Larsen, stressed, that the company is working towards an evidence-based coaching practice that is integrative in its understanding, application and study of coaching. Alternatively, with the chairperson’s own words: “*The integra-*

*tive frame also has a profound importance when you talk about evidence-based practice is all about involving 'the best available research-based knowledge'. We are not talking about a simple, unique and final rank nor is such a rank a goal to pursue. The goal is not to find interventions that the practitioner can use with unerring confidence and without asking questions towards the research. Instead, the integrative frame makes it possible to establish a dialogue based, reflexive opening of the field, where its full complexity and diversity can appear. Thereby you can open your research towards the new and unexplored which will appear during the conversations", (Larsen, 2011, p. 8).*

Hereby, a much wider perspective than the pyramidal hierarchy of evidence is presented: Instead, a whole range of designs and methods are available in the gathering of knowledge and let's talk about a spacious evidence typology. A typology, where different, not ranked, types of evidence are attached to concrete intervention- and research-forms instead. Furthermore, a more widely including perspective involves that both practitioner and researcher carries a role in the development of an evidence-based coaching psychology field. A field where not only the researcher is theorizing, but turns herself against practice and at the same time have conversations with practitioners and underscore practitioners importance for the development of knowledge. This will possibly take us towards a wider concept of evidence.

## **Evidence – a the relationship between coaching practitioner, theory and researcher**

If evidence could be reframed as a relationship between coaching practitioner, theory and researcher, the concept "experienced evidence" might be useful. It implicates that the practitioner is collecting knowledge about (here) the coaching's effect and importance for those who use coaching and for those who participate in that sort of practice. The experienced meaning in practice is therefore the focus and thereby both the practitioner and the researcher are being described as crucial producers of knowledge. All participating parties produce knowledge. Coach facilitates an ongoing reflection with coachee: The interest in recognition is concerning, what coachee experiences as helpful in the coaching intervention or in short; "does it work"

and how? We are here approaching a very concrete understanding of the perspective of *experienced evidence*.

With inspiration from Kvale (2008) the following two possible relations between practice and theory (researcher) in relations to experienced evidence and practice-based evidence are proposed (Stelter, 2012). First, the relationship can be understood as: Practice to Theory: Practice is thereby the primary component in theory development. Theoretical reflection becomes a sort of tool for the practitioner and not an absolute authority. Second, the relationship can be understood as a dialectic relationship between Theory and Practice: Theory and Practice are thereby interacting. Issues as occurs in academic research as well in the coaching psychologist's practical work.

The first point will lead to a development towards a reflexive practice (Kvale, 2007). A reflexive practice and practitioner, who worships that you cannot simply transfer knowledge from theory and research to practice. The practitioner has her own understanding of knowledge, where the reflection over practice is the reflexive practice – unfolded in practice. A further development of this understanding could lead towards so-called *practice-based evidence* (Stelter, 2012). The second point represents a dynamic and close relation between theory and practice. – Because, if the relationship is not close then: "...the talk about an evidence-based practice is a more or less empty talk in the real world" (ibid., 243).

The unique practitioner's knowledge-base is thereby reinforcing the coaching intervention's *practice-based evidence*, if we follow points above. This could "soften" the narrow evidence discourse to a reflexive, open and practice-close understanding of evidence, and it might besides reduce the classic gap between practice and theory. *Experienced evidence* and *practice-based evidence* might be seen as "new ways" within coaching-psychology in regard to gather both the increasing external but also internal demands about evidence. A classic narrow understanding of the evidence hierarchy as the only basis for solid practice and thereby fruitful experiences in practice is unnecessary and exclusive. Instead, reflections considering good practice and fruitful experiences are added and are seen as one possible fundament in increasing evidence within coaching-psychology.

## New knowledge through typological diversity

As mentioned earlier, a focus on evidence *typology* instead of evidence *hierarchy*, seems to increase the possibilities to gather nuanced knowledge about the rewarding and fruitful in (coaching) psychological intervention. The approach may lead to a larger degree of methods freedom than the classical evidence view suggests where e.g. mixed methods (Cresswell et al., 2007) and the employment of qualitative methods can expose new potential ways into gathering knowledge via the situated perspective? Let's think about both observational studies, case studies, narratives (Holmgren, 2008) and interview studies, where the last mentioned has shown to be fruitful within coaching-psychological evidence-based research (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005).

Another example could be our qualitative, longitudinal study concerning newly started student's experiences with a short term coaching psychological intervention in regard to their level of stress, depression and anxiety. Although the basic study was Scandinavia's first RCT, the qualitative part was working with a thesis about practice-based evidence instead of evidence-based practice and one of the findings from the study is, that its results can be seen as: (...) *experienced evidence of coaching as support towards identity and as a component in the creation of identity*" (Spaten et al., 2011, Spaten, 2010). However, the numbers of these studies are sparse and they are long ago demanded (Green et al., 2007). Such studies could contribute to a further development and opening of the field for several reasons:

- a) The studies will make it possible for the practitioner to become knowledge-gatherer or that the practitioner and researcher in collaboration and with an ongoing dialogue becomes knowledge-gatherers.
- b) Studies will be able to investigate concrete experiences and can therefore be said to promote the study of experienced evidence – i.e. gather evidence-based knowledge in practice among those who participate in that concrete practice (coach/coachee).
- c) Studies with qualitative methods may create narratives about what works in certain contexts and with whom. It may also capture the coaching-psychological intervention's many nuances and

differences from one intervention to another meanwhile the studies also in a systematic way collects knowledge that the unique (reflecting) practitioner can transfer to her own practice.

At the one hand, so-called "manual therapy" steps in the background and at the other hand, we do not only deduce overall and general conclusions about what works (which could have been the case if we had used only quantitative rooted methods).

## Should coaching psychology be measured?

Point three above is connected with a larger discussion concerning evidence and which role evidence shall and can play within coaching-psychology? The answer to the question about evidence is both yes and no. The debate in Psychology News (*Danish Psychologists Union magazine*) is at times quite significant and arguments from different positions are heavily forwarded: The overall critique concerns the issue, that evidence-based psychological intervention will lead to "manual therapy" (e.g. Weitemeyer, 2015). On the opposite, Hougaard pleads, that one may avoid "manual therapy" by including the psychologist's experiences as well as the client's own values and is therefore naming the evidence-based practice within psychology; *individualized evidence-based practice* (Hougaard, *ibid*). We also see a counterargument from Czartoryski, who correspond to the critique concerning "manual therapy" by emphasizing the importance of work with evidence in relation to ethics: By supporting the evidence within an academic field you are, according to Czartoryski, also supporting the intervention's quality and thereby the general ethic principals (Danish Psychologist Association, 2000) that applies for solid intervention (Czartoryski, 2009). In association with this, Czartoryski emphasizes, (like Hougaard, *ibid*.), that the psychologist (and the coach) always should/must adapt his/her practice to the unique client. The advantage of an evidence-based practice is that the intervention is supported by tested ways of using theory and not only by personal experiences and convictions. Czartoryski is therefore seeing evidence-based psychological practice as a welcome component within the work of refining and developing the psychological profession (*ibid*.). The advocates for an evidence-based coaching psychological practice will probably lean toward this sequence of thoughts.

If we turn towards the two “grand figures” within modern coaching psychology Antony Grant from Sydney University (Australia) and Stephen Palmer from City University (UK), we have – as mentioned – long seen a demand for more professionalization of the coaching psychology field. The question is: How could an increased amount of evidence-based research within the field be one of the fruitful ways to gain this professionalization? The question no longer seems to be whether or not to work towards an evidence-based practice. According to Zachariae (2007) psychology is already submitted to demands of quality in the shape of an evidence-based approach. The question is, more specified, how the concept of evidence is to be understood within a psychological context? Here, the perspective concerning the reflexive practitioner and the concepts *experienced evidence* and *practice-based evidence* may be useful. As outlined in the previous, new interesting ways are being suggested in the development towards a more solid evidence-based coaching psychological practice in Denmark and internationally. New ways that emphasizes knowledge and experience gathered in practice among those (coach and coachee) who actually experience the fruitful and developing components within coaching psychological interventions.

### Could evidence be based on local hypothesis with an onset in practice-near knowledge-gathering?

If we look back at the more general societal perspective, Brinkmann (2012), pleads, that general knowledge about e.g. an intervention's effect is not fruitful in practice. Instead of seeing evidence as a way to secure “the best method” within e.g. psychological treatments, it is specified that it is more fruitful to understand evidence in a contextual- and practice-near perspective. Such a perspective would loosen up a problem that most practitioners experience – that the view on evidence is narrow-minded and is concerned with a wish about predictions of (an unpredictable) future. Or as it is said: *“The problem is only, that our wish for security, which, among other things, is seen in an often unilaterally demand about evaluation and evidence, right now is standing in the way for evaluation and evidence as more general practice-forms may be supplied by more local, more democratic and more context-near suggestions about how each of us and all*

*of us together organize our journey into the future”* (Brinkmann et al., 2012).

From this theoretical, critical discourse, this article has tried to present local, practice-near perspective on evidence in a more concrete and specific way. Here the reflexive practitioner often contributes to a wider and more qualified understanding of what evidence is. Qualitative research, with its focus on practitioner-based evidence and experienced evidence, may e.g. elucidate a more reflexive approach in understanding evidence as a local, immediate and context-bound phenomenon. The coach and coachee are e.g. in dialogue exploring what was seen as specially fruitful and effective. Instead of focusing on data-gathering that will create “final and general solutions”, this approach can be seen as inclusive and may open the understanding of evidence to a more wide perspective?

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At psychology Ole leads the coaching psychology graduate program for master psychology students, supervises and teaches clinical skills. At the psy-

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Lillith Olesen Løkken er psykolog fra Aalborg Universitet og tilknyttet den Coaching Psykologiske forskningsenhed og psykologistudiet som ekstern lektor.

Hendes forskningsmæssige interesse ligger især indenfor særligt kvalitativ forskning, hvilket har givet sig udslag i medvirken til flere publikationer indenfor personlighedspsykologi, udviklingspsykologi og i særlig grad studier indenfor coaching psykologien. Senest har Lillith været med til at gennemføre en større længdesnitsundersøgelse af livscoaching psykologi, ligesom Lillith tidligere har været forskningsassistent på et studie omkring coaching psykologis indflydelse på nystartede studerendes velbefindende. Ud over en særlig interesse for coaching psykologi har Lillith også både på personlig og faglig basis beskæftiget sig med mindfulness i en række år.

Privat bor hun sammen med sin mand og deres to børn i Lundby Krat ved Aalborg.

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