Experiences of cognitive coaching
A qualitative study

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Objectives: *Cognitive coaching and cognitive behavioural coaching are approaches practiced by many coaching psychologists (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). However, there is a lack of qualitative studies evaluating these approaches. The main objective of/with the present study was to investigate a number of participants' experiences of cognitive coaching.*

Design: *As the study aimed to explore individuals' experiences of cognitive coaching, a qualitative design was used. In particular, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003) was used to analyse the data.*

Methods: *The study took place in Sweden and 10 individuals, who had participated in cognitive coaching in the workplace, were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data.* **Results**: *Four main themes emerged from the analysis, and one of these 'new cognitive and emotional knowledge' will be discussed in this article. This main theme had two sub-themes, 'working with thoughts' and 'regulate emotions'.*

Conclusions: *The study found that cognitive coaching helped participants to change unhelpful thinking and regulate difficult emotions, and these findings support the continuing development of cognitive/cognitive behavioural coaching.*

Keywords: *Cognitive coaching; cognitive behavioural coaching; new cognitive and emotional knowledge; qualitative research; IPA.*

THERE ARE many different theories of coaching within the field of coaching psychology. Cognitive coaching aims to stimulate and develop a person's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours and offer methods and strategies that the person can use when the coach is no longer around (Oestrich & Johansen, 2005). Cognitive behavioural coaching has been defined in a similar manner. Palmer and Szymanska (2007, p.86) describe cognitive behavioural coaching as 'an integrative approach which combines the use of cognitive, behavioural, imaginal and problem-solving techniques and strategies within a cognitive behavioural framework to enable coaches to achieve realistic goals'[1]. Annual surveys of coaching psychologists' views and experiences have been

conducted in the UK since 2003. In a recent survey it was found that over 40 per cent used a cognitive approach and 61 per cent used a cognitive behavioural approach (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). As described previously, cognitive coaching and cognitive behavioural coaching focuses on the relationship between a client's cognitions, emotions, behaviour and physiological reactions. In addition, the social context is also important to consider. Specific situations, that illustrate what the coachee wants to improve, are analysed using these five factors (cognitions, emotions, behaviour, physiology, social context) (Palmer & Gyllensten, in press). A number of techniques are used to help the coachee reach their goals. The techniques can be cognitive (i.e. focusing on thoughts and images), behavioural, or focusing on emotions or physiology. Examples of cognitive techniques include identifying PITS (performance interfering thoughts) and PETS (performance enhancing thoughts) or imagery exercises. Behavioural techniques can include time management strategies, assertion training, and behavioural experiments (Palmer & Szymanska, 2007). Techniques regulating emotion and physiology include psychoeducation, exposure, and relaxation.

There is an increase in research into coaching psychology. However, more studies are needed that specifically investigate the effectiveness of cognitive or cognitive behavioural coaching. Nevertheless, a number of studies have been conducted, for example, a study by Grant (2001) investigated the effects of cognitive, behavioural, and cognitive behavioural coaching approaches in a sample of students. Grant found that all three coaching approaches significantly reduced test anxiety. Depression, anxiety and stress were also measured in the study and only the cognitive coaching was found to significantly reduce levels of depression and anxiety. Another study by Grant (2003) found that a life coaching group programme based on a cognitive behavioural and solution focused approach reduced participants' levels of depression, anxiety, and stress following the coaching. Interestingly, the coaching did not target mental health specifically. In a similar study, Green, Oades and Grant (2006) investigated the effects of a cognitive-behavioural, solution-focused life coaching group programme. Participation in the life coaching group programme was associated with significant increases in goal striving, well-being, and hope. The effects of a stress self-help manual based on a cognitive

behavioural self-coaching approach were investigated by Grbcic and Palmer (2006). The participants, middle managers, were randomly assigned to the coaching or control group. It was found that post-coaching levels of psychological problems and symptoms had decreased significantly in the coaching group. Interestingly the intervention appeared effective regardless of the fact that frequency of work stressors and lack of organisational support remained unchanged. Kearns, Forbes and Gardiner (2007) investigated the effectiveness of cognitive behavioural coaching in reducing levels of perfectionism and self-handicapping in a group of research higher degree students. It was found that levels of perfectionism had fallen significantly after the coaching intervention and that levels of self-handicapping had fallen significantly by the follow-up. A further study randomly allocated students to cognitive behavioural and solution focused coaching or to a wait-list control group. It was found that the coaching was associated with significant increases in levels of cognitive hardiness and hope, and significant decreases in levels of depression (Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007). Another study by Grant (2008) investigated the effects of cognitive behavioural and solution focused coaching, on student coaches. Grant found that participation in coaching reduced anxiety, increased goal attainment, and enhanced cognitive hardiness. Finally, Grant, Curtayne and Burton (2009) conducted a randomised controlled study where once again a cognitive behavioural solution focused coaching approach was investigated. This study used both a quantitative and qualitative approach and the participants were 41 executives in a public health agency. In the quantitative part of the study it was found that the coaching intervention enhanced goal attainment, resilience, workplace well-being and reduced depression and stress. According to the qualitative data the coaching had helped the participants to increase personal insight, self-confidence, improve management skills and handle organisational change. These studies reported positive results for coaching, based on/ partly based on cognitive and behavioural approaches. However, these are almost all quantitative studies, apart from the last one by Grant et al. (2009), which are unable to get rich descriptions of the coachees' experiences of cognitive coaching.

In the emerging field of coaching research there are a limited number of qualitative studies pub-

lished, especially using Interpretative Phenom-enological Analysis (IPA) that was the method of analysis in the current study. However, we have previously published two studies investigating the coachee's experience of coaching using IPA (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006; Gyllensten & Palm-er, 2007). A limitation of these two studies was that they did not investigate a specific coaching approach and the aim of the current qualitative study was to investigate the participants' experi-ence of cognitive coaching.

Methods

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The present study used IPA to analyse the data from the semi-structured interviews. IPA is a qualitative methodology developed for psychology and the 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 investigating vary-ing topics such as experiences of chronic pain, ad-diction and pregnancy. According to Smith and Osborn (2004) IPA could be appropriate for a number of topics if the aim of the study is to ex-plore individuals' experiences and the meaning of these experiences. Phenomenology relates to the person's individual view of an event rather than an objective statement about the event (Smith, 1996). Consequently, IPA attempts to explore the partici-pant's perceptions and insider views of an event. Via interpretation of the data the researcher takes an active role in attempting to get an insider's per-spective of the participant's experience. However, it is recognised that it is impossible for the researcher to get a complete insiders perspective (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In contrast to some other qualita-tive approaches IPA assumes that there is a link be-tween what participants say and what they think and feel. Nevertheless, it is recognised that the rela-tionship is complicated and participants could find it difficult to verbalise their experiences or they may not want to do so (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Participants

Studies using IPA often involve small numbers of participants as the goal is to present a detailed picture of the participants' individual experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2004). IPA studies do not attempt to obtain a random sample of participants rather, IPA researchers aim to find a homogenous sample

Table 1: Demographics of the participants.

Gender	
Men	4
Women	6
Age	
Mean	43
Range	31-53
Sector	
Private company	3
Government body	2
School	5
Levels of management	
Middle management	3
Senior management	2
School principals	5
Number of coaching sessions*	
One participant	4 sessions
One participant	4–5 sessions
Two participants	5 sessions
One participant	5–6 sessions
Two participants	6–7 sessions
Two participants	10 sessions
One participant	10–15 sessions

*As some of the participants only gave an approximate number no mean value is presented.

of participants that are suitable for the research question (Smith & Osborn, 2004). Consequently, the participants (N=10) in the current study were selected on the basis of having participated in cognitive coaching at the workplace and thereby being able to contribute to the research question. All were recruited via personal contacts of the re-searchers. The participants were in management positions ranging from middle to senior manage-ment. The participants had not received cognitive coaching prior to the coaching investigated in the study. Each participant had volunteered to attend coaching in the workplace and the reasons for do-ing so varied. It was up to the participants to decide the focus and goals of their coaching. Examples of areas the participants had worked on in coaching included improving confidence in board meetings, learning to prioritise work tasks, improving com-munication with more senior staff and employees, improving ability to handle pressure. Idiosyncratic

measures of goal attainment were allowed, as goal attainment was not the particular focus of this study. Moreover, goal attainment data was not being collected in a systematic fashion.

Coachees and their coaches determined how best to measure goal attainment. Quantitative goal attainment data is not reported in this paper. All the coaching sessions were face-to-face and varied in length.

The coaches and coaching

Four different coaches had met the participants and all had experience of working with coaching in the workplace and had extensive training in cognitive therapy. At this point in time there were no longer-term training courses in cognitive coaching in Sweden so the coaches did not have any official coaching qualifications, but they had attended cognitive coaching workshops and had over two years experience of working with coaching in industry and also had experience from organisational consultancy work. All coaches received supervision in cognitive therapy but not coaching. The coaches took particular care to ensure that the coaching conversation stayed focused on coaching rather than therapeutic issues. All contracts between the coachees and coaches stated that the participants should receive coaching, thus the coachees were buying coaching and not therapy. Moreover, reading the interviews it became clear that the participants had received coaching and not therapy. The coaching was goal-directed, based on cognitive principles and used a variety cognitive and behavioural techniques including modifying un-helpful thoughts, visualisation, time-management techniques, relaxation and behavioural experiments.

Interview schedule

It is useful to prepare an interview schedule prior to the interview as this helps the researcher to have a loose agenda for the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The interview schedule (Appendix) was developed on the basis on the main research question. The main research question was 'How did you experience cognitive coaching'? Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest that the schedule should consist of a number of topics, with possible prompts, that will help to answer, the often abstract, research question. The main topics included in the schedule were, the coaching process, effectiveness, and the alliance between the coach and the coachee. Sev-

eral prompts were included in the schedule. The interviews were carried out by three of the authors (K.G, A-K.N, A.M.R) at the participants' offices or homes and were tape recorded and transcribed in their entirety. Lines in the transcripts were numbered for ease of reference and participants were assigned a number from 1 to 10 in the transcripts.

Analysis

The analysis followed Smith and Osborn's (2003) step-by step approach to doing IPA. As suggested by Smith and Osborn (2003) an ideographic approach to analysis was used, this means that the analysis begins with a detailed investigation of specific cases before the other cases are incorporated and a more general categorisation emerges. The analysis was carried out by three of the authors (K.G, A-K.N, A.M.R) and two of the researchers analysed three cases each and one analysed four cases. Each transcript was read a number of times and notes of anything significant or interesting were made in the left-hand margin. In the next step of the analysis the transcript was read again and possible theme titles were recorded in the right-hand margin. A higher level of abstraction and psychological terminology is introduced in the analysis at this stage (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The emerging themes were listed and connections between themes and superodinate concepts were noted. Number of the line on the page, page number and keyword were recorded indicating where examples of the theme could be found in the transcript. Finally, the themes were ordered coherently and a table of themes was produced. This process of analysis was repeated for each of the transcripts, thus a table of themes were produced for each participant. During this process the researchers met a number of times to discuss the emerging themes. Thus, all researchers read all transcripts but only conducted the analysis on three or four of the transcripts. But all three researchers had to come to an agreement of all the themes for all the transcripts. Once all transcripts had been analysed the researchers met to create a final table of superordinate themes for the whole group. This meant looking for connections between the themes and creating new general themes that better represented the data. It is important to note that this lengthy process involved reduction and prioritising of the data and themes were selected on the basis of several factors such as richness of text, ability to explain

aspects of the interviews, and prevalence in the data (Smith, Jaraman & Osborn, 1999). Overall the researchers met eight times to check the emerging analysis of each interview and to create an overall analysis. Finally four main themes with related subthemes were identified in the study. The four main themes were the role of the coach, increased awareness, increased cognitive and emotional knowledge, and doing things in a new way. The list of main themes was consequently translated into a narrative account with quotes to support the analysis. However, due to the large amount of data for

each theme the current article will focus on one of the main themes – increased cognitive and emotional knowledge.

Results

Four main themes were found in the analysis, these being: the role of the coach, increased awareness, increased cognitive and emotional knowledge, and doing things in a new way. In addition, the main themes consisted of a number of sub-themes. These main themes and sub-themes are presented in Figure 1 'Experiences
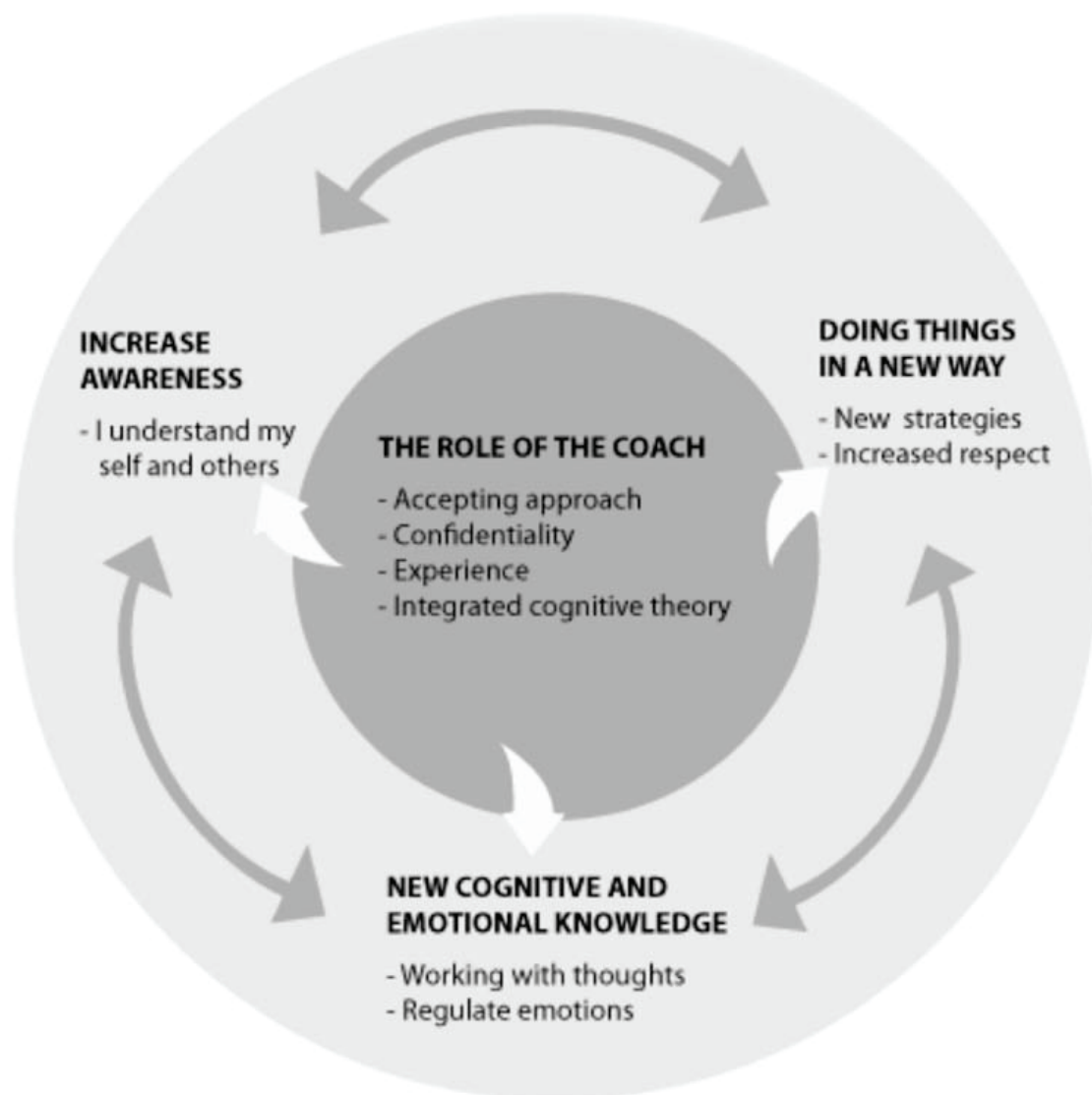

Figure 1: Experiences of cognitive coaching.

of cognitive coaching'. The figure illustrates that the role of the coach is important in order for the coachee to benefit from the coaching. Benefits include increased awareness, increased cognitive and emotional knowledge, and doing things in a new way. Importantly, the model highlights how the different themes influence each other. For example, increased awareness helpful thinking and increased ability to handle emotions helped participants to act in work situations where they had been previously passive, to prioritise work better, and to be more assertive with superiors. This article will focus on the main theme 'New cognitive and emotional knowledge'. Only one of the main themes has been selected due to the large amount of data for each theme. It was judged that this main theme would be interesting to present as it highlights the process of cognitive and emotional change in cognitive coaching.

New cognitive and emotional knowledge

The main theme cognitive and emotional knowledge consisted of two sub-themes. These were working with thoughts and regulate emotions. These two themes highlighted how the clients were able to identify and modify both unhelpful thoughts and difficult emotions. Examples of verbatim will be presented in order to illustrate and support the theme and sub-themes. The numbers in brackets after every quote refer to the participants, who were each assigned a number in the transcripts, and line numbers from the interviews.

Working with thoughts

To identify and to modify cognitions are two important facets of cognitive coaching. The participants reported that the coaching had helped them to revise unhelpful thinking. In cognitive coaching it is useful to identify cognitive distortions/thinking errors (Beck, 1976; Palmer, Cooper & Thomas, 2003). Several of the participants reported that they had become better at challenging cognitive distortions and think more realistically. The following quote illustrates how a participant got insight into his/her tendency to 'catastrophise'.

> **I had a way of imagining the worst-case scenario, now the whole world is falling down, but that was just my own image, no one else's image. It is useful to get some insight into how I think. (8: 104–106)**

'Mind reading' was another cognitive distortion that participants became aware of in coaching.

> **You can never know what someone else is thinking, although you think that you know, and you let that idea control your thoughts. It is better to find out what the other person is thinking before you react. It is so obvious when you think about it. (8: 37–41)**

The coaching also helped some participants to identify that they were using the distortion 'personalisation' (a tendency to take things personally). This insight had helped them to think in a different way and thereby decrease their stress levels.

> **I am better at viewing things from a different perspective and not take everything personally, and that is one way of decreasing stress. To not take everything personally is a responsibility. (3: 147–150)**

Another effect of the coaching was the increased ability to challenge 'musts'. A consequence of this was an increased ability to save some tasks until tomorrow and feel ok about it.

> **My ability to handle 'musts' have probably increased, there are levels of 'musts' and some things would have been good to get done today, but it is ok to wait until tomorrow. (6: 147–148)**

Another example of a change in thinking was an increased ability to stop rumination. Being able to do this had a positive effect on the ability to relax and thereby become more effective.

> **I carefully think through everything back and forth, and remind myself that I can let go. Your brain does not have to work all the time, you can relax once in a while. Perhaps you will not save any time doing this, but you will save your energy and that helps you to become more effective. (9: 226–229)**

Identifying and modifying unhelpful thinking was a central part of the coaching as described above. But participants also reported that once they had identified a more helpful way of thinking it was important to continue to practise the new thinking in order to maintain it.

It is like a football team, you got to practise. It is not always about physical training or improving project management, it is about taking care of your mind, that is where it begins. (8: 359–362)

Regulate emotions

In addition to changing thoughts, the coaching appeared to help the participants to identify, accept and modify difficult emotions. One of the participants expressed this ability in the following manner.

Not to deny the emotion, 'ok you feel this way, don't deny it try to find out what it is about and how serious it is and don't over interpret'. This may help to decrease this intense feeling. (6: 176–179)

Similarly, the following quote highlights how the coaching helped a participant to control his/her emotions when someone was having a different opinion.

When someone says something I don't like during a meeting I can now take it in, a controlled manner and not let my emotions run wild. (1: 262–264)

The participant described how they learned to recognise it when they were entering an emotional state and also understand what that emotion meant in that situation. This ability, to reason with oneself, made the situation easier to accept.

When I can feel that emotion in the body I say to myself 'now you start, now you end up in an emotional state, now you are that little boy who cannot handle being questioned'. You have to have a dialogue with yourself and then it is easier to accept'. (1: 266–268)

Being able to analyse difficult emotions helped the participants to evaluate the situation and make a decision about whether to take action or not.

It was last week when something did not go my way and then I felt …'what do I do now?' And instead of just pushing it away I thought 'ok, this is how it feels, accept it and try to analyse why it feels this way, what is the effect,

can I live with it, do I have to do something else'. (6: 169–172)

The coaching appeared to have helped to increase the ability to take a step back and reason, instead of reacting directly.

… I show more clearly who I am and what I think, and I try to think before I react. (7:218)

It appeared that the increased ability to regulate emotions had different consequences. One of the participants reported that an increased ability to control emotions increased their self-acceptance and self-respect.

…I have also learned to notice when that emotion starts to rise which means I have to kill it in time. This has helped me to accept myself, and respect myself. (2: 279–280)

Discussion

One of the main themes in the study, 'new cognitive and emotional knowledge', was outlined in the results section. This main theme had two sub-themes – 'working with thoughts' and 'regulate emotions'. Under the theme 'working with thoughts' participants reported that the coaching had helped them to identify and challenge cognitive distortions, let go of rumination, and practice their new way of thinking. Under the sub-theme 'regulate emotions' it was described how the participants became aware of their emotions and how they became better at regulating emotions in situations they previously found this difficult to do. These changes were linked to behavioural changes as highlighted in Figure 1. For example, the participants explained that they had become better at prioritising work tasks, been more active, and more assertive with superiors.

As highlighted in the introduction there are few studies investigating cognitive/cognitive behavioural coaching. However, the findings from the studies that have been conducted are in accordance with the findings of the current study. A finding in the current study was that cognitive coaching appeared to increase the participants' ability to modify their thinking which in some cases helped to decrease stress. This is similar to the findings reported by Grbcic and Palmer (2006) who found that self-help cognitive behavioural coaching significantly

decreased stress. Furthermore, Grant (2001) found that cognitive coaching significantly reduced test anxiety, and depression, and anxiety (not test related). Similarly, a later study by Grant (2003), with coaching based on cognitive behavioural and solution focused approach, found that levels of depression, anxiety, and stress significantly decreased after the coaching. Moreover, the study by Grant et al. (2009) also found that the coaching intervention reduced depression and stress.

The findings in the current study, relating to regulating emotion, fit well with model of emotional intelligence presented by Salovey and Mayer (1990). In this model the authors state that emotional intelligence '... *involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions*' (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p.189). It is further suggested that individuals with emotional intelligence are said to have a form of positive mental health. They are open to positive and negative internal experiences and are aware both of their own and other peoples' feelings. They can label and regulate their own feelings and communicate them when needed. Similarly, in the current study the participants explained that they had become better at both recognising and regulating their emotions. This change appeared to have had a positive effect on the participants.

There are several limitations with the current study. The participants reported very positive experiences of coaching, although they were asked about negative experiences as well. It is possible that the participants felt uncomfortable talking about negative experiences of their coaching as they knew that the interviewer had some contact with their coach. In order to minimize this risk the interviewers emphasised the confidentiality and the fact that their responses would not have an effect on any future coaching. Moreover, Chapman (2002) pointed out that there is a risk of selection bias in small studies. Indeed, it is possible that individuals with more negative experiences of coaching were not recommended for the study. However, the researchers were aware of this risk and asked for participants that had not necessarily had a positive experience of the coaching. Another limitation was that the analysis was not checked by an independent audit as suggested by, for example, Baker, Pistrang and Elliot (2002). However, the researchers discussed the analysis in different stages during

eight occasions and it was judged that this was a sufficient method to check the analysis. A further issue that needs to be discussed is the generalisability of the results. The qualitative analysis is a subjective process and different researchers may have arrived at different conclusions. Indeed, In IPA the researcher's personal frame of reference influences the analysis (Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001). Regarding generalisablity and IPA it has been suggested that it should be possible to say a great deal about the actual group of participants and it should be possible to say something about the wider group represented by the participants in IPA research (Smith & Osborn, 2004). Thus it is possible that the study has helped to highlight some of the changes that can occur in cognitive coaching.

Regarding future research larger quantitative studies could compare cognitive coaching with other approaches. Such studies could also look at specific problems or issues like stress or procrastination, etc. Follow-up studies would also be very interesting. Future qualitative studies could focus more specifically on the themes we found, for instance regulate emotions. In summary the current study found that cognitive coaching helped participants to change unhelpful thinking and regulate difficult emotions. This is only a small qualitative study but it supports the continuing development of cognitive/cognitive behavioural coaching.

Endnotes

[1] In the current study the term cognitive coaching has been used rather than the term cognitive behavioural coaching. This was the case because in Sweden the latter term has been used for what could be described as behavioural coaching. However, since the study was conducted, cognitive behavioural coaching has become more integrated and today the term cognitive behavioural coaching would have been used to describe the coaching used in the study. Nevertheless, as the questions in the study referred to cognitive coaching, this term will be used when describing the study. Moreover, it is important to note that this article does not refer to Cognitive Coaching[SM] developed in the US by Costa and Garmston (Palmer & Szymanska, 2007).

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