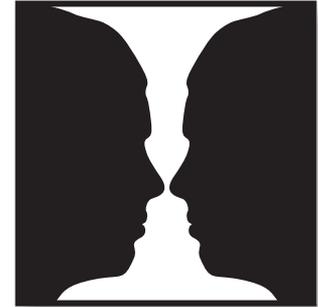


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Ecopsychology informed coaching psychology practice.

Beyond the Coaching Room into Blue Space

By Stephen Palmer & Siobhain O’Riordan

Abstract

Ecopsychology interventions may offer creative and helpful ways of supporting coachees with wellbeing, stress management and psychological restoration. There is growing evidence to suggest that being with nature can positively influence our wellbeing and health. In light of this, coaching psychologists, coaches and healthcare professionals have begun to place more emphasis upon understanding the ways in which ecopsychology can inform our practice. This paper reports the findings from two studies based on outdoor coaching formats. Drawing on insights from an ecopsychology informed coaching psychology approach, participants were encouraged to undertake a short ‘walk and talk’ coaching session involving blue space outdoor-based activity. The findings from both studies showed that participants self-reported wellbeing and vitality scores improved following coaching in a natural setting. This has implications for the work of coaching psychologists and coaches and suggests there may be a possible over-reliance on more traditional coaching formats based on seated and indoor face-to-face or online coaching.

Keywords: coaching, coaching psychology, positive psychology, ecopsychology, bluespace, blue exercise

There has been an increasing focus within psychology and the allied professions seeking to understand the range of possible positive health benefits that can be drawn from spending time in our natural environment. Palmer (2014, p.12) asserted that “Ecopsychology applies ecological and psychological theories and research methodology to study the relationship between people and the natural world”. In parallel, the Society for Environmental Population and Conversation Psychology states that ecopsychology “... explores humans’ psycho-

logical interdependence with the rest of nature and the implications for identity, health and well-being” (American Psychological Association, 2019).

The broader literature highlights that spending time in the natural environment enhances wellbeing (e.g. Pretty et al, 2006) and this is an important insight for coaching psychologists, coaches and the allied professions. Indeed, a nature-based approach could be beneficial in improving cognitive resourcefulness and supporting coachees to develop ‘self-coaching’

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strategies focused on outdoor activities (e.g. Palmer, 2015). Within therapy, outdoor work has been described as a multidirectional “tripartite therapeutic partnership between the client, therapist and beneficent nature” (Hegarty, 2010, p.66), this notion can be applied within an ecopsychology coaching psychology context.

Ecopsychology informed practice can introduce people to interventions such as ‘walk and talk’ coaching, seeking out opportunities to spend more time outdoors to engage with the natural world, participating in green or blue exercise and even some types of Animal Assisted Activities (AAAs). Green activity or exercise refers to being outdoors with nature generally in green environments and engaging in physical action such as walking, rambling, jogging, boarding, AAAs (e.g. horse-riding, dog walking).

Blue activity or exercise refers to being in outdoor water environments such as the sea, coast, canals, lakes and rivers and being active which can include walking by the water, swimming, canoeing, and AAAs (e.g. fish, marine life).

Evidence is now gathering to support the case for nature-based interventions.

A systematic review concluded that ‘... natural environments may have direct and positive impacts on well-being’ (Bowler, Buyung-Ali, Knight and Pullin, 2010, p.1). Further to this, a multi-study analysis looking at short-term experiences of facilitated green exercise concluded that five minutes exposure showed most change in both self-esteem and mood (Barton and Pretty, 2010). A large-scale study also found that group walks in nature were associated with enhanced positive affect and mental wellbeing (Marselle, Irvine and Warber, 2014). More recently, a pilot study on executive ecopsychology coaching examining the effects of ‘sit and talk’ versus ‘walk and talk’ coaching sessions in ‘managers-as-coaches’, found coaching significantly decreased negative affect and increased self-esteem (Di Blasi, McCall, Twomey and Palmer, 2018). There were also large effect sizes reported for coaching and perceived management care, self-efficacy, positive affect and stress. This was the first study to explore the effects of walking with sitting coaching in an organisational setting. In a systematic review of blue space interventions for health

and wellbeing, Britton, Kindermann, Domegan and Carlin (2018) found that the studies suggested that blue care can benefit health, in particular, psycho-social wellbeing and mental health. In a study focusing on recreational nature contact, White et al., (2019, p.6) found that individuals who reported spending ≥ 120 mins in nature in the last seven day period had consistently higher levels of both wellbeing and health than those who reported no exposure.

Based on the existing literature, there appears to be a rationale for further exploring the extent to which an ecopsychology approach can inform coaching practice. This paper reports the findings of two studies in which the researchers predicted that engaging in a ‘walk and talk’ blue space coaching activity would lead to an increase in participants self-reported wellbeing and vitality scores.

Study One - England (UK)

Method

Design

This research design tested the same participant twice, on self-reported scores for ‘vitality’ and ‘wellbeing’, using 5-point Likert scales. These measures were taken at pre and post timepoints to explore the effects of a ‘walk and talk’ blue space coaching activity. Due to the real-world and naturalistic setting of this study it was not possible to control against possible confounding variables and no control group was included. A possible extraneous variable was the warm and dry weather during the outdoor activity. Ethical considerations included right to withdraw, informed consent and anonymity prior to participants submitting their score sheets at the end of the study.

Participants

Participants were drawn from an opportunity sample of delegates attending an Ecopsychology and Coaching Psychology workshop as part of an International Coaching Psychology conference in England (UK), held during October 2018. Delegates were invited to participate in blue space coaching exercises ‘on the move’ during this conference session.

In total, 45 delegates submitted their responses to the Likert scales at the end of the session rating their levels of vitality and wellbeing. Based on the themes



Figure 1 is a photograph of the Regent's Canal, London, which was taken during the Study 1 coaching exercise, and highlights the weather and blue space environment.

of the conference, participants were a mix of psychologists, psychology students and those with an interest in coaching psychology and positive psychology. No participant details were collected.

Materials

Participants were asked to complete Likert scales (where 1 is low and 5 is high) at two stages of the study, pre and post the coaching activity. This information was recorded by each participant on a sheet of paper given out at the start of the session.

The researchers also used timing devices to navigate the outdoor activity.

Procedure

To orientate those wishing to attend this conference session, the abstract outlined the following details: "... this interactive session aims to offer insights and experiences on key themes relating to help-

ing coachees through Ecopsychology and Positive Psychology. To illustrate the approach in practice, delegates will be invited to participate in Green and Blue Coaching Exercises 'on the move' during this conference session (weather dependent). So, if you are planning on joining us please do bring appropriate footwear/clothing for a short outdoor walking-based activity and perhaps an umbrella!"

The two researchers were the facilitators of this conference session and article authors. The planned outdoor route was rehearsed the day before by the researchers and scoped out for considerations such as health and safety, timings and the tasks involved in navigating the walk and group.

At the start of the conference session, participants were told about key themes relating to helping coachees through Ecopsychology and Positive Psychology. The group was then briefed that they would be walking along a Canal for 30 min-

utes and the activity involved working in pairs as coach/coachee.

They were asked to:

- Agree to confidentiality between them
- Choose areal coaching issue/topic to discuss
- Listen to the session leads (researchers) who would inform them when it was time to swap roles at the mid-point (e.g. the return journey)
- That the choice of coaching framework was theirs
- To check their timings
- Come back to the room on return
- Health & safety points included:
 - Look where you are going
 - Avoid looking at each other when walking and talking unless it is safe to do so
 - As there may be other coaching pairs behind you, don't stop without warning!

Before commencing the exercise, participants were asked to rate their wellbeing and vitality using a 5-point Likert scale. Participants were then asked to find a pair-work partner and meet outside at the front of the building where the group would gather before being asked to start the walk by following the first researcher, who led the group. The second researcher waited behind and stayed at the tail of the group. At the 15-minute mark, the researchers communicated via mobile telephone and it was indicated to the group to turn around, swapping coach/ coachee roles. Returning to the room, participants were asked once again to rate their wellbeing and vitality using the same 5-point Likert scale.

A short debrief was undertaken with participants sharing reflections with the group. Participants were then asked to hand in their anonymous rating sheets if they wished to participate in the study. In total 45 sheets were handed in at the end of the session.

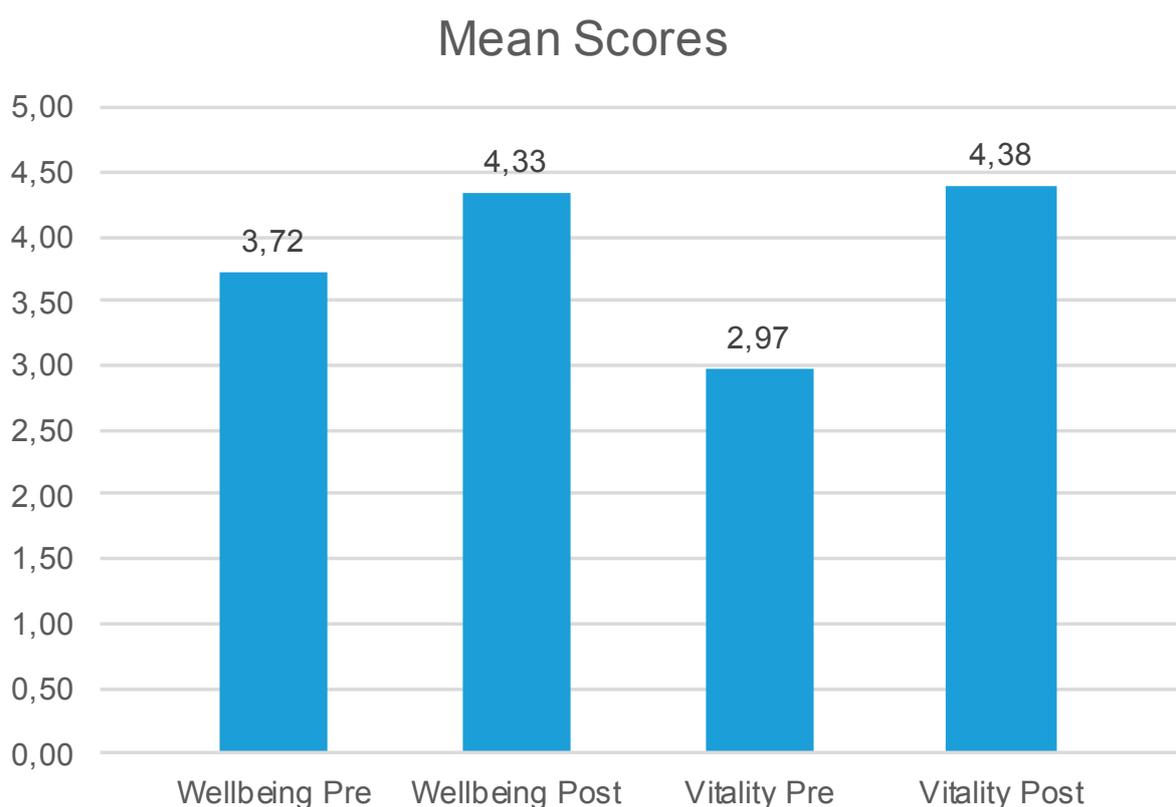


Figure 2: Mean scores pre and post time points for Wellbeing and Vitality

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Results

The prediction of this study was that engaging in a 'walk and talk' blue space coaching activity would lead to an increase in participants ($n=45$) perceived wellbeing and vitality scores using a 5-point Likert scale¹.

Some participants also included qualitative comments on their sheets, providing some interesting additional insights including:

"Given the choice I will always prefer to be outside than indoors, although I did feel there were many distractions"

"As a coachee I found it relaxing; I was not distracted by anything around me. I loved the sun and fresh air on my face. Really enjoyed looking at the river/canal, would have preferred the sea if possible. My mood lifted and I feel more positive. If the weather was not as good though, I would have struggled to have gone out in the cold"

"As coach: Better active listening, really focused on client. As coachee: really enjoyed the flow of the conversation"

As shown in Figure 2 (previous page), the descriptive statistics suggest that the mean scores for wellbeing increased between the time points of the pre (3.72) and post (4.33) 'walk and talk' activity. A similar direction of mean scores was reported for vitality pre (2.97) and post (4.38). To see if these differences in pre and post scores are likely to be significant, paired two sample t-tests for means were conducted for wellbeing

($t(44) = 5.787, p < .01$, one-tailed) and vitality ($t(44) = 12.445, p < .01$, one-tailed).

Thus, supporting the prediction of the study that wellbeing and vitality scores would increase between the time-points pre and post the 'walk and talk' activity.

Discussion: Study One

There are a number of possible limitations of this research approach. There is a lack of evidence regarding the influence of outdoor activity on the therapeutic relationship (Harris, 2018) or coaching alliance. However, it is not possible to discriminate between the effects on wellbeing or vitality of being in the coach or coachee role here as participants spent 15 minutes in each role and completed the Likert ratings represent this

combined activity. The pleasant weather could in itself also have contributed to the reported scores. It might also be argued that the study would benefit from a control group so an independent variable of coaching environment could be included in the study, although this would be difficult to include within the conference environment of this research study.

Study Two - Wales (UK)

Method

Design

This was a follow on from study one, drawing upon the same methodological approach and ethical considerations.

However, during this study, participants only undertook one role as either coach or coachee and did not swap at the mid-point of the coaching activity. A possible extraneous variable was the windier and wetter weather during the outdoor activity.

Materials

The same materials were used as in study one, other than participants were asked to note if they had completed the activity as the coach or coachee on the participant form handed in at the end of the session.

Participants

Participants were drawn from an opportunity sample of delegates attending a Coaching and Mentoring conference as part of a University-based conference in Wales (UK), held during November 2018. Delegates were invited to participate in blue space coaching exercises 'on the move' during this conference session.

In total, 20 delegates submitted their responses to Likert scales at the end of the session, rating their levels of vitality and wellbeing. Based on the nature of the conference,

participants were a mix of coaches, mentors, psychologists, students and those with an interest in coaching, mentoring and psychology. No participant details were collected.

Procedure

The same procedure was followed here as in study one, other than following steps:

- the group was briefed that they would be walking along a Waterfront for 30 minutes

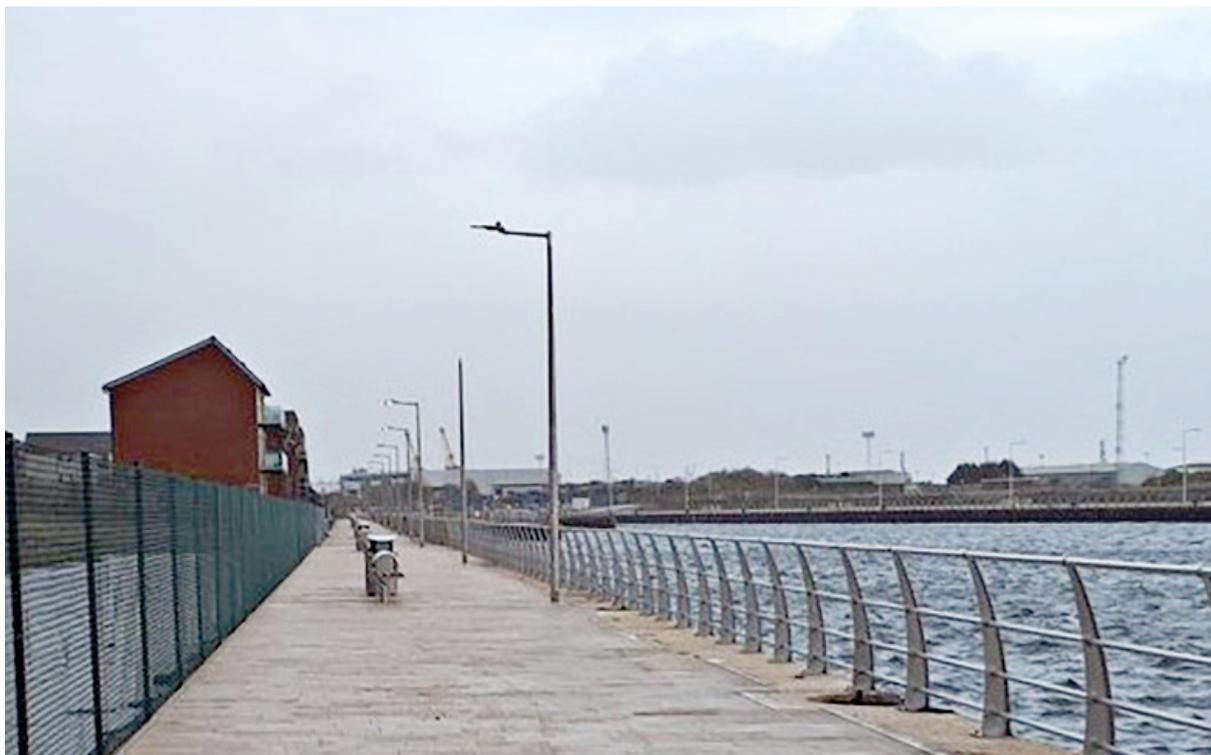


Figure 3 is a photograph of the waterfront in Swansea, Wales, which was taken during the study two coaching exercise, and highlights the weather and bluespace environment.

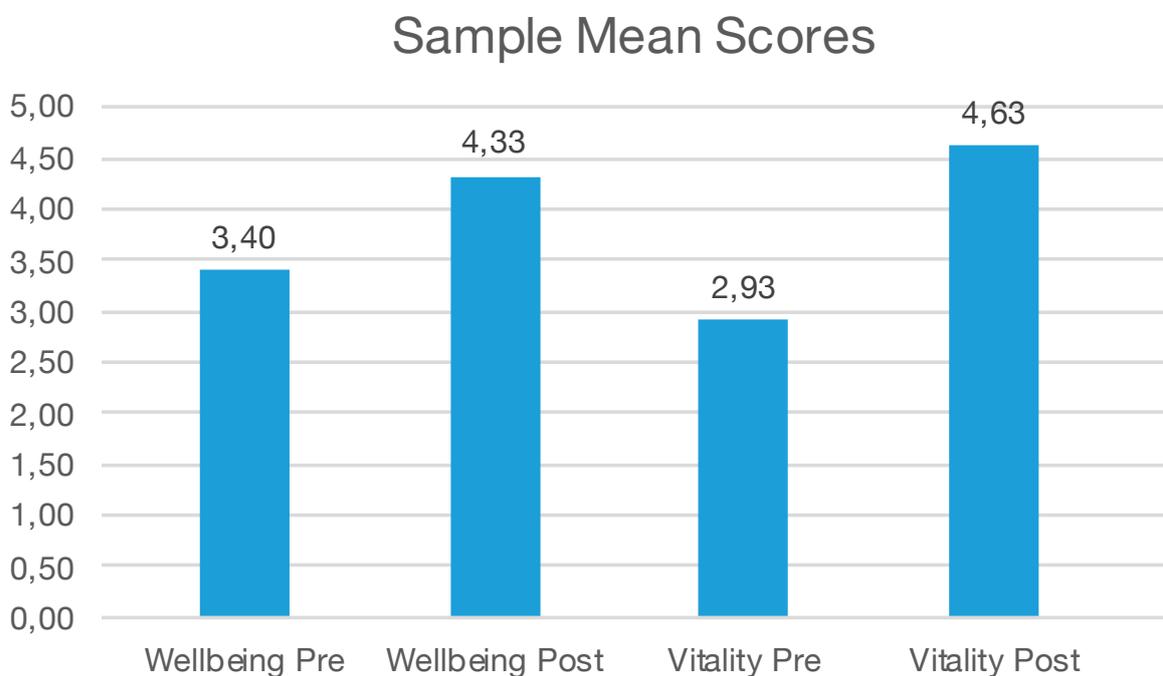


Figure 4: Mean scores pre and post time points for Wellbeing and Vitality

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- the activity involved working in pairs as coach or coachee. At the 15-minute mark, the researchers communicated via mobile telephone and the group was asked to turn around.
- Participants were not asked to swap roles at this turning midpoint.

Results

The prediction of this study was that engaging in a 'walk and talk' blue space coaching activity would lead to an increase in participants (n=20) perceived wellbeing and vitality scores using a 5-point Likert scale.

As shown in Figure 4, the descriptive statistics suggest that the mean scores for wellbeing increased between the time points of the pre (3.40) and post (4.33) 'walk and talk' activity. A similar direction of mean scores was reported for vitality pre (2.93) and post (4.63).

To see if these differences in pre and post scores are likely to be significant, paired two sample t-tests for means were run for wellbeing ($t(18)=3.155$, $p<.01$, one-tailed) and vitality ($t(18)=7.65$, $p<.01$, one-tailed). These findings supported the prediction that wellbeing and vitality scores would increase between the timepoints pre and post the 'walk and talk' activity.

As participants were not asked to swap roles during this study, the mean scores by role (coach (n=8), or coachee (n=10)) can be examined as shown in Figure 5 and 6 (p.16). There were two participant sheets where the participants did not indicate their role, so these scores are excluded for this aspect of the analysis.

For the coaches the mean wellbeing scores increased between pre (3.75) and post (4.25) also for vitality pre (3.31) and post (4.81).

A similar direction of findings was shown for the mean scores for coachees on wellbeing pre (3.10) and post (4.45) also for vitality pre (2.80) and post (4.70).

Due to the smaller sample sizes further analysis is not reported on this data.

Discussion: Study Two

General limitations of this study remain consistent with study one. However, on this occasion it was possible to discriminate between the effects on being in the coach or coachee role. A review of the mean scores suggests that wellbeing and vitality scores increased in both roles across the two timepoints of the study, although this observation is reported tentatively given the lack of controls and small sample size. This paper was

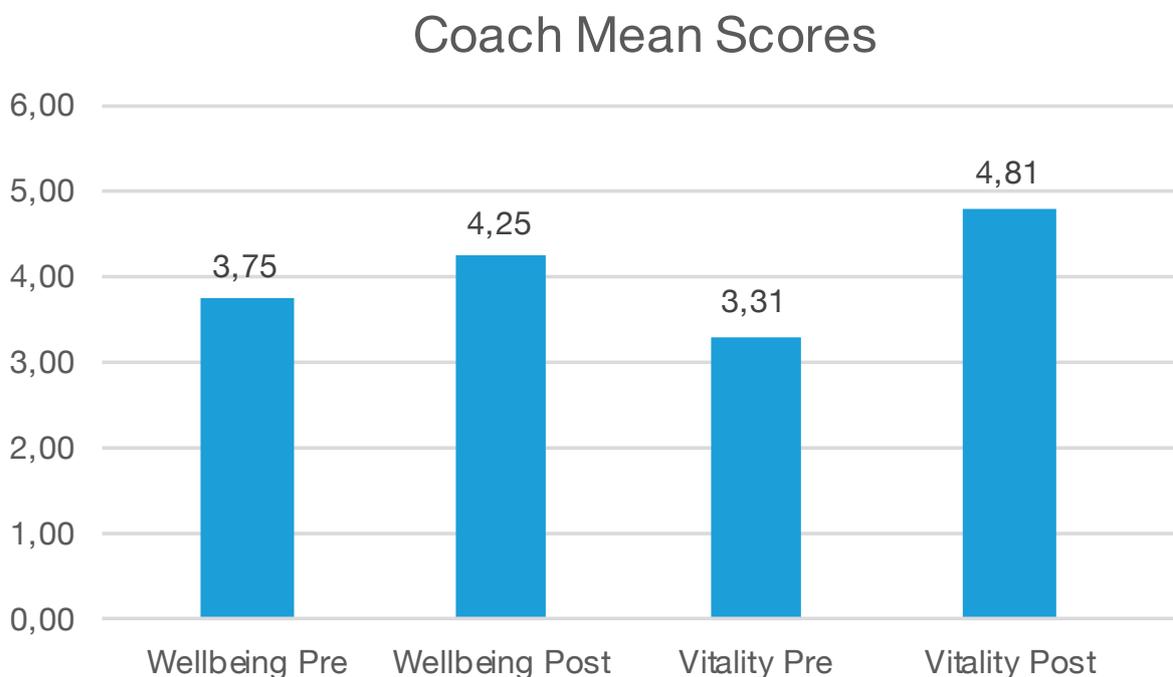


Figure 5 Mean scores pre and post time points for Wellbeing and Vitality by Coach role

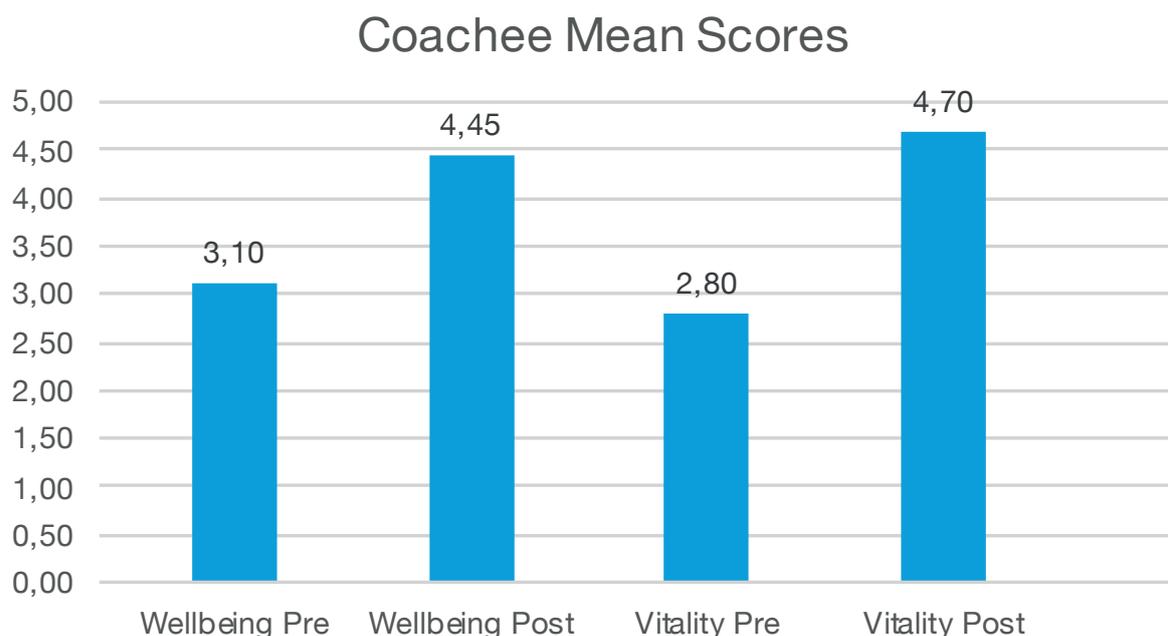


Figure 6 Mean scores pre and post time points for Wellbeing and Vitality by Coachee role

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Conclusions

The two studies reported here support existing observations in the literature that a 'walk and talk' outdoor coaching activity can positively influence wellbeing and vitality. The findings also support the view that there may be a three-way alliance between the coach, coachee and naturebased activity. More research is required into the dynamics of this tripartite relationship, which was beyond the scope of the current research studies particularly given that this was an opportunity sample drawn from conference delegates.

Whilst statistical analysis of the data gathered was not undertaken to examine differences between the two studies, there were two additional points of note in the weather and length of coaching session.

At a glance, the varying weather conditions across the two studies do not appear to have impacted upon the reported scores.

This is in support of research reporting the effects of weather on daily mood as minimal (Den-

issen, Butalid, Penke, & van Aken, 2008). As participants did not swap roles in study two, a longer coaching session was possible (e.g. 15 minutes) longer than in study one), although again this did not seem to have made a difference to the direction of the scores reported between the studies.

The inclusion of a 'walking only' control group, without the accompanying coaching conversation would be a useful improvement to the design for a future study. Also, a possible issue with this sampling method is that the participants were drawn from delegates already interested in the topic of ecopsychology, which might perhaps have led to a self-selecting sample.

The findings reported here should be interpreted tentatively as it is not possible to state the extent that the coaching conversations contributed to the self-reported increase in scores, or whether factors such as being outside, engaging in physical activity (movement) or the weather are in themselves more significant influences.

¹. Two participants reported a score greater than 5 on the sheet, therefore these were adjusted to a 5 rating to fit the Likert scale measure.

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