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Practitioner's Perspective on Coaching in Pakistan; Barriers and Proposed Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the study: Coaching as a mean of individual and professional development is a well- practiced and academically researched field in the west. In developing countries such as Pakistan where industrialization on global level is still in its infancy, the necessity of coaching in business sector for professional development is still a new phenomenon. In this regard this research aimed to gain an overview of the field of coaching with specific emphasis on barriers and possible solutions to the field of coaching by drawing on the experiences of Pakistani born coaches who primarily practice coaching with Pakistani clients.

Methodology: A criterion based purposive and snow ball sampling strategy was used to recruit N=8 coaches (3 females and 5 males) from 3 major cities of Pakistan (Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad). Semi structured interviews were conducted focusing on two main areas of inquiry, 1) observed/perceived barriers in coaching field, and 2) suggested solutions for improvement that can help establish coaching as a professional field. The interviews were audio recorded and conducted online via skype and zoom. Inductive thematic analysis framework by Braun and Clarke, (2012) was used to analyze the interview transcripts.

Results: Three main barriers were identified as lack of public awareness regarding coaching, return on investment and malpractice. Solutions were proposed at academic and professional level.

Implications: At academic level this study highlights areas for further research on coaching in Pakistan. At practical level this study highlights areas that need focus to establish coaching field in Pakistan at a more professional, ethical and commercially viable standards.

Keywords: Barriers and Solutions to Coaching Practice, Practitioner's Perspective, Coaching in Pakistan.

Introduction

Coaching industry was built in organizational sector as a tool for helping executives and future CEOs in their roles as leaders. Being hailed as a billion dollar industry with an observed revenue of $15 billion in 2019 (Uta, 2019), the potential for the growth of coaching industry at industrial /organizational level is yet to be seen. On the other hand at academic level it is still in its early stages of development. In early 1990,

there was little to no research conducted in this field. In a summery repot from 2000-2017 the number of research papers published went from zero to above 400 (Grant & O'Connor, 2019) indicating development of evidence based professional standards in coaching research and practice.

Every field starts by developing a name and a functional definition for it be practiced and researched. Definitional problems surrounding coaching are due to the fact that coaching draws its tenets from various field such as counseling, mentoring, training and teaching. (Passmore & Lai, 2020). Originally used in leadership development as executive coaching, today coaching has branched out in various field like nursing, education, psychology, sports, medical field and the list is still growing (Passmore & Sinclair, 2020). With petitions for establishment of an academic degree in coaching and field specific research journals for executive coaching, leadership and coaching and coaching psychology (Vandaveer *et al.*, 2016), coaching research is still growing with many areas of possible inquiry.

Coaching is an emergent field and coaching literature provides future directions to focus the aim and objective of coaching research that can help in the growth of the field. In similar vein, Grant & O'Connor (2019) provided a summative model of coaching research by focusing the past and future of coaching research into what has been done and what needs to be done. Based on this model certain areas of future research were highlighted. Among them was an area that lacked insight was cultural aspects of coaching. Applicability of coaching differs based on cultural aspects both in terms of practitioner/coach and the customer/coachee. Considering Asian peninsula, with its diverse culture and an eclectic work force with varying linguistic, cultural, racial and religious backgrounds, the potential for coaching research is unlimited. With high demand for leadership roles required for prosperous organizational outcome, the need and demand of coaching outpaces the availability of competent coaches (Kon & Blackman, 2017).

In a developing country like Pakistan, the research on coaching is minimal to non-extant. The present scope of research in Pakistan is mostly focused on effectiveness of coaching in employee performance and engagement (Abbas & Yaqoob, 2009; Munir et al., 2011; Bashir, 2017; Ali et al., 2018; Ali et al., 2020) which shows that coaching is being practiced and researched in Pakistan. But the scope and range of coaching research falls short in terms of cultural and professional factors. This calls for a thorough understanding of what type of coaching is being practice, qualification and competence of the coaches, applicability of coaching in various field and cultural variations in coach-coachee relationship and use of self-help and self-development tools such as coaching in Pakistani context. To study all these areas was beyond the scope of this paper so to address this issue on a more grounded and practical level, current research was focused on establishing a baseline of the field by analyzing the barriers to practice and possible solutions for future of coaching practice in Pakistan.

Objective and Research Questions of the Study

The main objective of the study was to develop an in-depth understanding of coaching practice in terms of barriers and possible solutions to coaching practice in Pakistan from practitioner's point of view. Based on the objectives, following research questions directed the methodology and procedure of the study;

- What are the perceived barriers to coaching practice in Pakistan?

- What are the possible solutions to these barriers that can improve coaching practice in Pakistan?

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative inductive research design was used address research questions.

Study Sample

A total of N=8 coaches (n=3 female & n=5 male coaches) were recruited from metropolitan cities (Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad) of Pakistan

Sampling Procedure

Criterion based sampling strategy based on inclusion and exclusion criteria was used to recruit the participants.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The participants were recruited based on following criteria;

- To establish and create gender diversity and understanding, both males and female coaches were recruited.
- To establish authenticity, only certified coaches with authentic accreditation were recruited.
- To gain an informed perspective based on relative experience, participants with minimum 3 years of coaching experience were recruited

Table 1. *Demographic summery table of study sample (N=8)*

Sr#	Participants Pseudonym	Gender	Educational Qualification	Job Designation	Work experience in years	Coaching Accreditation	Coaching experience (in years)
1	P1	Female	MPhil	CEO/ Mentor	12	ACC	4
2	P2	Male	PhD candidate	Mentor, HRM	17	PCC	3
3	P3	Female	MPhil	Mentor, HRM	23	PCC	4
4	P4	Male	MBA	HRD,HRM	19	PCC	3
5	P5	Male	MPhil	Manager	12	ACC	3
6	P6	Female	MBA	CEO/ Mentor	24	PCC	3
7	P7	Male	PhD candidate	Mentor, Lecturer	16	PCC	4
8	P8	Male	MBA	HRD, Mentor	24	PCC	3

Note. *To maintain participants right to confidentiality and anonymity pseudonyms were given to each. MBA= Master's in Business Administration, CEO= Chief Executive Officer, HRM= Human Resource Manager, HRD= Human Resource Developer, ACC=Associate Certified Coach, PCC= Professional Certified Coach*

Study Instrument. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the barriers and possible solutions to coaching practice. Some sample questions are as follows;

- What is the scope of coaching in Pakistan?
- How is your experience in providing coaching to Pakistani organizations and clients?
- Based on your experience what are the barriers to coaching practice in Pakistan?
- What are the reasons behind these barriers?
- What are practical strategies that can help overcome barriers to coaching practice in Pakistan?

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Participant recruitment was done via online search of professional registry website of ICF. The participants were selected on the bases of study criteria of gender, accreditation and coaching experience. The participants fulfilling the criteria were approached via email. They were sent an invitation to participate in the study. To maintain transparency, the email contained a document of informed consent which contained the purpose and scope of the research, the rights of the participants such as confidentiality of the information shared, audio recording of the interviews and provision of the copy of those recording to them, their rights to withdraw from the study, anonymity while reporting of the data and right to withhold information or

withdraw from the study at any point. The participants who replied back positively were than emailed the objectives and research questions so that they were able to understand the purpose of the research. For data collection, semi-structured interviews were held with participants online via (skype, google meet and zoom). With the expressed permission of the participants, the data was audio recorded and utilized for research purpose only. Since all participants were bilingual, the interviews were conducted in both English and Urdu as per comfort of the participants but the transcripts were written in English for ease of analysis. Caution was exercised during translating Urdu verbatim to English as not to lose any cultural meaning or nuances to participant's expressions, opinions and views.

Data Analysis

An inductive approach was taken for extracting the themes. Induction approach was suitable for it allows open observation of data in order to search for similarity between different perspectives to reach towards a flexible conclusion that can be generalized (Creswell et al., 2003). The transcribed data was analyzed using thematic analysis because for qualitative data thematic analysis provides a more flexible, detailed, and comprehensive understanding of participants experiences. The six step process provided by Braun & Clarke, (2012) was used in the analysis as follows;

1. Data familiarization was achieved by reading and re-reading of interview transcripts by the researcher till conceptual clarity was developed.

2. Important passages in transcripts were identified for relevance and initial coding of the data was done during second and third reading of the data.

3. All transcripts were studied and meaning units with their related codes were grouped together into initial level themes.

4. The initial level themes were than clustered into overarching themes to get a more cohesive and unified analysis.

5. Major themes were identified in accordance with research questions across the different views given by the study participants. After clustering and reviewing the codes and initial themes, major themes were named and thematic map was drawn to give the findings a cohesive structure.

6. Results and discussion was drawn supported by thick descriptions of participants verbatim to ensure representation of participant's views on each research question.

Results

The study results showed that across two main themes (barriers and solutions to coaching in Pakistan) five subthemes were identified. Barriers are discussed in terms of lack of awareness of coaching field, return on investment and malpractice. Suggested solutions are discussed at practical and academic level. A summery table followed by discussion of each theme and subtheme supported by participants verbatim and literature is discussed below.

Table 2. *Summery table of main themes, subthemes and codes (N=8)*

Main theme	Sub theme	Codes
Barriers to coaching practice in Pakistan	Lack of awareness of coaching field	Lack of differentiation between counseling and coaching
		Stigma related to seeking help for mental health
		Fear of being perceived as weak
		Fear of personal information leaking
	Return on investment (ROI)	Expensive certification
		Expensive service
		Lack of awareness in problematic areas
		Lack of interest in self development

	Malpractice	Lack of field related job opportunities
		Exploitation of lack of public awareness of the field
		Lack of regulatory body
Solutions to coaching practice in Pakistan	At professional/field level	Establishing a regulating body
		Regulating service charges
		Using marketing technique of good customer reviews
		Creating public awareness
	At academic level	Introducing coaching as certification or degree
		Increased research in coaching field

Main theme 1: Barriers to coaching practice in Pakistan

Subtheme 1: Lack of awareness of the field

The biggest and most frequent barrier discussed by all participant was the lack of awareness regarding what coaching is and what it is used for. Common fields in organizational sector are mentoring, training and coaching but each have different academic and practical definitions.

> *"When I was approaching agencies and told the HR and CEO's that I am a coach and I can help your employees in performing better. The first thing that they said was that "we don't have a sports department and we are not into sports" (P1).....*

> *"People ask me what you are saying. What is coaching, what you are talking about, why we should spend so much money on our employees, it's their job and they should do it" (P4).....*

Since coaching is perceived same as counseling, the stigma related to seeking help for mental health purposes is transferred to coaching as well. People are afraid to be negatively evaluated for seeking help for mental health or personal growth.

> *"But the public, specifically in Pakistani culture has negative overview of help seeking behavior. Often mixed with counseling, coaching is considered for the people with serious mental issues. And due to fear of being labeled as having mental issues, people avoid any such agents and agencies" (P2).....*

> *"Especially in corporate sector where there is intense competition and coaching is used for executive or leadership roles, the fear of being perceived as weak by subordinates and counterparts leads to lack in faith in coaching practice" (P7)....*

Another fear that is considered as barrier to coaching practice in terms of coaching seeking, engagement in coaching sessions and working on self-development is the fear of personal information leaking.

> *……. "The company CEO or someone in higher position cannot ask for help because people or the subordinates look for weaknesses and they will exploit you to get promoted or take your seat" (P1) …… "In Pakistan people assume that if a coach is assigned to you that it means that I have some weakness, some challenge, and some deficiency" (P4) ……" So being in a vulnerable position is not possible in corporate world" (P3)*

People are afraid of their information being leaked and being used against them. Mostly the coach is hired by the organisation and the employee is asked to avail the opportunity. So it becomes a question of "who am I doing this for? For the company because I want to secure my job or for myself because I want to improve". So, it becomes difficult on the part of a coach to maintain neutrality and for the coachee to trust in the promise of confidentiality of information by the coach.

Subtheme 2: Return on Investment (ROI)

In a developing country with poor economic structure, the attainment of accredited coaching certificate from a foreign body is very expensive. Coaching is a high investment high return kind of field because of corporate sector. But the expensive nature in turn means that the coaches will not provide their expertise and services in an affordable manner. Personal cost of getting coaching is not possible for an average salary person.

> *"……..because this is an expensive degree, there is a lot of shift, and also problems. You cannot become a proper professional coach without proper training" (P1)*

> *"Nowadays coaches spend more money on getting their credentials and then that money is earned back through rapid coaching sessions". (P5)*

Coupled with lack of awareness in problematic areas and disinterest in self-development, the perceived return on investment in getting a coach for personal growth is considered as too low and not worth the time and money.

> *"Usually in our culture potential isn't bench marked, instead performance is bench marked. A performance is always regarding one's past, is limited in scope, mediocre in appraisal and above all it is subjective. But people don't know that and they are not interested in investing on increasing their potential"…….. (P2, P5)*

Subtheme 3: Malpractice

All participants discussed observing malpractice in the field of coaching in Pakistan. The coaching accreditation is a long an expensive process but it provides high return to coach in terms of prestige, annual income and entrepreneurship. Now coaching has become a million-dollar industry. This has led to development of short cuts and unethical practices in terms of low-quality certification and group coaching to save money.

> *"The attractive but expensive nature of coaching has led to very cheap and basic level trainings on Udemy and Coursera but the courses on these sites fail to capture and deliver the basis of coaching…. coaches who are non-certified failed to deliver the true essence and nature of coaching as a profession" (P2)*

Self-practice is not feasible and the coaches hired by the companies are requested to provide group coaching. Which is against the tenet of coaching practice for coaching is done one on one basis. Those who practice independently exploit the lack of public awareness of the field. They have no proper accredited certification. They most take one or two courses online from Udemy or coursera, or attend 2-3 weeks of workshop and start practicing. They charge accordable fees but they don't provide coaching in its essential essence, instead they give a mixture of problem solving, counseling, therapy and mentoring.

> *"In practice, coaching industry is effected by non-accredited practitioners who are not coaches but use an eclectic approach using mixture of counseling, training, motivational talks and problem solving" (P1, P7)*

This is due to lack of regulatory body which can keep a check and balance on practitioners by assessing qualification of the person providing coaching and quality of service.

Main Theme 2: Solutions to Coaching Practice in Pakistan

Subtheme 4: At professional/field level

The first and foremost suggestion was to establish a regulatory body which can eradicate instances of malpractice and pseudo-practitioners. Strict rules are necessary for this which can be applied at professional level with legal consequences for malpractice. The second suggestion was to regulate the charges of

coaching. The coaches should provide accessible and accordable services so that people can seek and gain help from coaching.

> *"A lot of coaches who are accredited list their profiles as very high and that creates a certain hesitation in coaches who approach them. So a coach needs to cultivate humbleness and approachability between themselves and clients". (P6)*

Creating public awareness regarding what coaching is, how it is different form related fields of mentoring, counseling, training etc. is very necessary. In business terms, the client must know what they are buying or investing their money in.

> *"Regarding the costly nature of coach training, well if people are aware of what kind of return they will get on their investment than it can become a good thing. Right now people are not aware of what kind of personal or professional output they can get from coaching, like in corporate sector people invest in getting their trainers this training regarding coaching because the upper management has foreign experience and they are aware of its effectiveness, so they are willing to invest in it." (P3)*

A very practical suggestion was given in a roundabout way. Using marketing technique of "good customer reviews" is a business strategy where people who use a product can verify its usefulness and authenticity.

> *"One of the people who hired worked in a foreign company for a while. He was coached and he know the benefits for it so when he hired me he said that he know that it can be beneficial and now he has given me my 4th client. People with personal experience of coaching can become a valuable asset in developing public awareness" (P2, P8)"…………so such examples of people who go through coaching and are benefitted by it can be a big influence in promoting coaching in Pakistan. They can also help in increase of coaching practice through referrals."(P7)*

Subtheme 5: At Academic Level

To create public awareness there is an urgent need for introducing coaching as certification or degree at academic institutions. Another factor that can overcome the barriers is increased research in coaching field at cultural level.

> *"students being more accepting of new technology should be targeted by adding coaching in academic circle as part of awareness regarding meaning, scope and use of coaching.."* (P2, P5, P7, P8)

Discussion

The most frequently reported problem in coaching practice was lack of awareness regarding the field, what coaching is for and who can avail it. Mostly it was mixed with previously established fields like sports, for the word of coach is used in sports identifying a person who can teach and guide you to perform better, an expert. With counseling, people think that as a coach is also there to help resolve your issues, he is just like a mental health practitioner. Mentoring and training are the most used and accepted terms and positions. For people in organizations recognize a mentor as a person who is a senior and is a head, with functions pertaining to providing you with ready guidance whereas training/ trainer is a domain specific expert who will train you for a limited amount of time in a very structure way with a specific objective in mind. The differentiation between these field which ae already accepted in Pakistan and a coach creates barriers to practice. For general public it seems hard to differentiate between counseling and coaching and other fields considered under the umbrella of help seeking for mental health. Only the practitioners know the difference and are able to distinguish between each of these fields which otherwise have common underlying mechanisms because all are centered on the idea of human growth. For 'untrained' individual the terms

mentoring and coaching are interchangeable, although both practitioners and scholars of the field holds that there are central differences in process and intended outcomes for both. (Clutterbuck & Turner, 2017).

First the coach has to clarify the confusion before he can practice coaching in its true essence. The confusion of coaching with counseling has another added cultural issue. Counseling or mental health is usually linked with mental illness/ craziness/psychoticism. Stigma related to mental health creates avoidance to be seen or associated with any such endeavors. The stigma related to counseling transfers to coaching because they are perceived as the same. (Millard & Korotov, 2014). Pakistan being a developing country has not developed the sense of investing in ones potential. This is supported by current economic downfall where lack of sustainable jobs in the after math of economy, price hicks in petrol and Pakistani rupee losing against dollar. The average man is more concerned with survival than investing in their potential. Coaching being an expensive field both for the coach to get certified and for the coachee to avail regular coaching sessions. This leads to malpractice. The pseudo-practitioners, with no proper accreditation or association use the public lack of awareness regarding coaching to their advantage. With certifications taken form Udemy and coursera, these coaches make elaborate pages on Facebook and Instagram, charge the coachees high amounts because there is a cultural perception that the more expensive a person's services are, the more they will be qualified and experienced. These coaches provide a mixture of techniques taken by all the similar professions such as counseling, mentoring, training etc. to make money, these or actioners also play a role in maintaining and encouraging publics lack of awareness regarding the field. This helps them maintain their cover and they keep taking advantage of public under the disguise of a coach. International coaching federation ICF identified "untrained/unqualified" coaches as one of the main problems in coaching awareness in market both in terms of coaching benefits and outcomes. (de Haan et al., 2013).

Another human factor is that anything that seems expensive with no promise of immediate return on investment usually meets skepticism. Even when provided by the company, the coaching is seen as a sign of weakness and the coachee cant device if coaching is given as punishment or reward. Due to ethical nature of practice, the confidentially of information becomes a gray area where the coach is obligated both by coach-coachee relationship and being hired by the organisation he/she is bound to share coachee information. This leads to lack of trust in the coach. With culturally relevant barriers, there is need to understand the underlying mechanisms and factors associated with these barriers and develop functional and applicable solutions. This requires research on both qualitative and quantitative levels.

Conclusion

Current study was focused on understanding barriers and solutions to the practice of coaching field from practitioner's perspective. The results of the study indicated cultural factors such as stigma related to fields that are linked to human behavior and psychology, a general lack of interest in financial investment in self development tools and technologies and dysregulated service provision as common barriers. Practical solutions that can help in improving coaching service are creating public awareness through education and increased specific research in coaching field in Pakistani context, establishing regulation of service, service charges and malpractice.

Limitations and Future Suggestions

This study has a few limitations. Due to strict sample criteria only professionals were taken and even though their contribution to current study was substantial in term of experience shared but it was observed that semi-professionals who are more active with diverse clientele can provide a more nuanced picture of the problem. The phenomenon of Return on Investment (ROI) needs further investigation in terms of cultural factors that influence a person's willingness to invest in self-development. More research is needed in understanding coaching relation, coaching process, standard of practice and professionalism in cultural contexts.

Implications of the Study

At academic level, the identified barriers can be used as future agendas for research to gain in-depth understanding of coaching practice in Pakistan. At practical level, this study can be guiding post for people who want to practice or research this area further. Since Pakistan has a general lack of acceptance in help seeking/ personal improvement areas, this can give an insight to create positive awareness and acceptance in the masses.

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