

Coaching Psychology Coming of Age: The challenges we face in the messy world of complexity: A response

Paul W.B. Atkins

Elemental realism and pragmatism in coaching psychology: Making our assumptions clear

THERE ARE many ways in which I agree with the target article: The world is complex, approaches to coaching based on simplistic ideas of cause and effect are inadequate and we need to learn to be comfortable with uncertainty in the face of complexity, and be open to the unpredictability of unfolding dialogue and multiple perspectives. Complexity science and its associated metaphors such as feedback loops have contributed to changing the way we view both natural and human systems. For example, the idea that small changes can have big, reinforcing effects and big changes can have small, dampening effects has prompted useful questioning of assumptions in areas as diverse as business (Pascale, 1999), climate change (Stermann, 2008), family dynamics (Pincus, 2001) and social policy (Tenner, 1996).

But while I am in broad agreement with the thrust of the article, I was left wondering whether applying metaphors from complexity science to coaching psychology will ever actually change what coaches *do*. My aim in this commentary is to try to clarify assumptions that might be impeding the application of complexity science to psychological research and practice. I begin by distinguishing between rationality and linearity, before exploring the implicit epistemology of the target article and pointing to a stance that I think might be rational, non-linear, and helpful for improving coaching practice.

Rationality and linearity are different

In building upon Stacey's early work (e.g. Stacey, 1999), the target article repeatedly discusses 'rational linear models' and 'linear rationality'. I wish to differentiate between these terms: In my view, coaching psychology needs to retain rationality while questioning linearity. To be rational is to 'have or exercise reason, sound judgment or good sense' (rational, n.d.). To be irrational is to act without reason. To reason is 'to think or argue in a logical manner', 'to form conclusions, judgments or inferences from facts or premises' and 'to urge reasons which should determine belief or action' (reason, n.d.). Science is built on rationality and reasoning. By lumping together rationality with linearity in the target article, and by contrasting the 'rational space' with the 'self-organising space', the target article obscures the nature of the changes needed in epistemology. We need to examine and change the core assumptions of what we do in psychological research, as I discuss below, but the problem isn't rationality, it is the purposes towards which rationality is directed.

This might seem like a small terminological issue but, like a reinforcing feedback loop, it can have a big effect. To implicitly disparage rationality as the old, or simplistic, way of doing things is to create an unnecessary schism with all the other disciplines built upon rationality. This in turn is likely to impair the very inter-disciplinarity for which the article is arguing. Rationality is an important part of the scientific process of public agreement regarding observations. We need

to be very careful we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater because it increases the likelihood that new ways of understanding the world will be rejected.

While it is difficult to imagine a version of science that is irrational or even a-rational, it is easy to imagine one that is not linear in the sense used in this article. Although no single definition is offered in the article, the article appears to equate the linear view with a particular model of causation, where systems are 'governed by simple (or complicated) linear chains of cause and effect' (p.X). By contrast with linear systems, non-linear systems involve feedback loops which make them more difficult or impossible to predict (Atkins, Wood & Rutgers, 2002; Target article, p.3). It is now abundantly clear that attempts to theorise about the world based on linear assumptions are limited in addressing most of the issues that we need to address in our modern world (e.g. Sterman & Sweeney, 2002). We *do* need to develop alternatives, and the target article does a good job of exploring ways in which we might relate to clients holding our stories about the world more lightly and living with uncertainty.

In the next section I explore the question of how *useful* it is to think about coaching psychology in terms of complexity science. Essentially I argue that complexity science can be useful for coaching psychology research and practice, but that it will be more useful if it is understood through the lens of a *pragmatic* rather than *realist* epistemology.

Coaching psychology through a pragmatic rather than a realist lens

Articles applying complexity science to psychology have been around for at least four decades (e.g. Simon, 1973) and have proliferated in recent years (e.g. Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007). Yet it is difficult to identify *any* psychological or management practices that have directly evolved from this way

of thinking. Why does the metaphor of 'social life as a complex system' seem to have had so little impact on actual practice? I believe it is because we are stuck in assumptions about the purpose of science that are sometimes unhelpful.

Pepper (1942) distinguished between alternate worldviews that can helpfully be applied to understanding the assumptions and aims underpinning different approaches to science. For brevity, I will focus on just two of these worldviews: elemental realism (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 2011)¹ and contextualism. The elemental realist worldview is based on the 'root metaphor' (Pepper, 1942) of the world as a machine with isolable parts that cause behavior. The truth criterion for the elemental realist is *correspondence*, such that the purpose of science is to attain closer and closer correspondence between the predictions of science and actual events unfolding in the world. Theories are true to the degree that they successfully predict what is actually observed in the world. Much of natural science is built upon elemental realist assumptions, and much of psychology has tacitly or explicitly imported these assumptions. All psychological theories that postulate causal linkages between hypothetical mental constructs, frequently illustrated using 'box and arrow' diagrams, are elemental realist in the sense that they emphasise causal relations between hypothesised *parts* and are directed towards obtaining greater and greater correspondence with what is 'real'.

The root metaphor for contextualism is, by contrast, the action of the whole organism in context (Pepper, 1942). To understand the act, we must understand the context, including the historical and current systemic influences upon the organism. From a contextualist standpoint, the world is understood to be an undifferentiated process, and the divisions and dichotomies that we

¹ Pepper (1942) called this worldview 'mechanism' but along with Hayes et al. (2011) I have used the term elemental realism as it is more descriptive of the reductive, realist stance of this worldview.

impose upon the flow of experience are purely functional; we divide up the world in ways that help us to achieve our ends. The truth criterion for contextualists isn't correspondence between model predictions and actual outcomes, but effective action – does this particular way of viewing the world help us to achieve our ends (Gifford & Hayes, 1999)²? Consider, for example, how we might theorise about an effective coaching session. We might say the success of the coaching was caused by the capabilities or motivation of the coach, or of the client, or perhaps it was caused by the organisation's efforts to bring about change, the congeniality of the room in which the coaching occurred, the trust built between the coach and client, a shared language or purpose, or a culture of coaching within the organisation, the economic system that supports coaching, and on and on. Our choice of explanatory mechanism is fundamentally guided by our goals in conducting the analysis. From a functional contextualist stance, explanations that help us to improve coaching are more 'true' than explanations that have little impact.

It is important to realise that elemental realist and contextualistic assumptions are just that, they are pre-analytic assumptions that we bring to understanding the world. Elemental realism pre-analytically assumes that if we just keep working away, we will eventually get closer and closer to the truth, a complete ontological model of the world. Contextualism assumes that it would be more helpful to direct attention to what can be shown to improve workability. In this sense, contextualism is a-ontological and fundamentally pragmatic. Such pragmatism is of course not new. In 1878, Charles Pierce argued that 'only practical distinctions have a meaning' (Pierce, 1982) in psychology. William James argued that ideas 'become true just in so far as they help us to get into

satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience... This is the 'instrumental' view of truth... the view that truth in our ideas means their power to 'work' (1983, pp.164–165). But neither elemental realism nor contextualism can be ultimately justified, they are a set of assumptions about knowing that are chosen according to our values.

Why is this important for the target article? Complexity science can be understood either in an elemental realist way (as a model of the way the world really is, where the aim is correspondence); or in a pragmatic, contextualist way (as a call for multiple perspectives where the aim is impact, what works?) The target article goes some way towards this latter perspective but, in my view, is insufficiently clear about its epistemological and ontological assumptions and this reduces its impact.

As an illustrative example, we might say that dialogue is a prime example of feedback loops in action. A small decision to listen instead of defend oneself in the midst of an argument might lead to a positive feedback loop of increased listening and, ultimately, more effective outcomes. The metaphor of the 'causal loop' certainly seems plausible here. But what then do we *do* with this insight? We have an elemental realist explanation that feels coherent and plausible but doesn't really inform practice. An alternative way of arriving at a solution of listening more would be to ask something like 'given this context, what behaviors in the past have moved us towards what we value?' Such a question entirely sidesteps debates aimed at discovering the particular qualities of the people involved or the situation (e.g. 'rational linear', self-organising or chaotic) and instead goes right to the heart of what works for what we want to achieve. In my view, coaching psychology research and practice will be better served by pragmatism

² There are actually at least two varieties of contextualism. Descriptive contextualism is content with exhaustive descriptions of experience, as in some branches of history. Here I am concerned with functional contextualism that is inherently pragmatic in nature.

in the sense outlined by Charles Pierce (1982) and William James (1983).

The sort of shift in emphasis I am arguing for is subtle but profound; and any experienced coach will have a feel for what I mean. We have all had the experience of a client fruitlessly trying to determine the 'reality' of a situation by asking questions such as 'am I competent enough', 'does my boss like me' or 'is this the optimal course of action that someone at my level could take in this situation?' And we have all also witnessed the power of the simplest question to cut through such 'elemental realist' deliberations: 'What do you really *want* for this situation and what might you *do* to move towards that?' The solutions-focused approach (Grant, 2006; Jackson & McKergow, 2002) evaluates possible action plans not by whether they are *right* in some absolute sense but by whether they are likely to be workable in context.

Interpreted from a realist perspective, complexity science can distract coaching psychologists from doing work that matters, into fruitless debates about whether a situation is linear-rational, self-organising or chaotic. But complexity science can also be interpreted as a useful pointer to the importance of the whole act in context, with an emphasis on purpose and workability. Although the solutions-focused approach to coaching is an example of the contextualist approach in action, coaching psychology researchers do not appear to have explored its epistemological or ontological assumptions. In this regard, coaching psychology can learn from such approaches as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which makes its roots in pragmatic contextualism very clear (Gifford & Hayes, 1999; Hayes et al., 2011). The contextualist theory underpinning Acceptance and Commitment Therapy has now been applied to areas as diverse as human suffering (Hayes et al., 2011), education (Strand, Barnes-Holmes & Barnes-Holmes, 2003), spirituality (Hayes, 1984), compassion (Atkins & Parker, in

press) and, more recently, coaching (Blonna, 2011). Pragmatic contextualism is entirely rational, but it is rationality directed towards a different purpose.

I am suggesting that the solution to the problems of linearity lies not just in thinking about the world as more complex, but in a deep re-examination of the usefulness of elemental realism. For all the reasons outlined in the target article, social systems that involve multiple perspectives and varied ways of constructing reality do not just require more complex models of the way the world really is, they also require a shift in focus towards the functions of behavior in context. I am not arguing that a pragmatic, contextualist epistemology is *true*er than a realist one, I am arguing that it is likely to be more *useful* in the context of coaching psychology. If, as James (1983) argued, 'ideas become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience,' then there is a challenge to those advocating the worth of complexity science to coaching to show how their ideas might actually influence practice.

Correspondence

Paul W.B. Atkins

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