

Beyond the Eight Competencies: Coaching Needs a Theory of Change to Mature as a Discipline

I. When a Mature Discipline Begins to Revisit Its Own Foundations

Over the past three decades, coaching has experienced extraordinary growth. What started as a relatively diverse set of practices aimed at personal and professional development has become an activity present in organizations, universities, public institutions, and talent development processes across virtually the entire world. This growth has been accompanied by a progressive effort toward professionalization that has made it possible to establish ethical standards, certification processes, training programs, and international communities dedicated to strengthening the profession.

Within this process, few organizations have had as significant an influence as the International Coaching Federation (ICF). Since its creation, the Federation has made decisive contributions to providing coaching with a common language, a shared ethical framework, and a set of competencies that today constitute the main international reference for the training and certification of professional coaches (International Coaching Federation [ICF], 2021). Precisely because of the enormous impact the ICF has had on consolidating contemporary coaching, it is legitimate to ask whether the model it proposes constitutes a sufficient explanation of the discipline or whether, on the contrary, it represents only one of its possible levels of development.

Asking this question does not imply questioning the legitimacy of the ICF or disregarding its contributions. Quite the opposite. Mature disciplines evolve precisely because they critically examine their own foundations. The history of science shows that the progress of knowledge rarely occurs through the simple accumulation of information; it usually happens when the very assumptions that sustain a discipline begin to be examined more deeply. Karl Popper (1959) argued that no scientific theory can be considered definitively true. Its strength lies precisely in remaining open to criticism and the possibility of being refuted. Science does not advance by permanently confirming its models but by subjecting them to increasingly rigorous tests that allow us to identify both their explanatory power and their limits. Decades later, Thomas Kuhn (1962) showed that disciplines evolve through paradigm shifts. During long periods, a scientific community shares certain ways of understanding a phenomenon. However, when problems begin to accumulate that the prevailing paradigm can no longer satisfactorily explain, the need arises to develop different conceptual frameworks that expand the understanding of the object of study.

Although coaching does not yet constitute a science in the strict sense, it can be understood as a professional discipline in the process of consolidation. Like any applied discipline, it needs to periodically review the foundations on which it builds its practice. This review does not represent a threat to its development; on the contrary, it constitutes a necessary condition for its maturity. There is, however, an important difference between criticizing a discipline and critically analyzing one of

its models. Criticizing a discipline implies questioning its legitimacy. Analyzing a model means examining the scope of its assumptions, identifying what it adequately explains, and at the same time recognizing what remains outside its explanatory capacity. This work deliberately adopts this second perspective.

The question guiding this essay is much more specific and, probably, more relevant from an epistemological standpoint: can a model built fundamentally on professional competencies constitute, by itself, a sufficient framework for a discipline whose purpose is to facilitate complex processes of human change? Answering this question requires distinguishing concepts that are often mixed together in the coaching literature. Expressions like competencies, methodology, process, tools, or model are frequently used interchangeably, as if they all belonged to the same conceptual level. However, from the perspective of the epistemology of applied disciplines, each of these concepts serves a different function.

Any discipline that intervenes in a human phenomenon can be described, at least, through five interrelated levels. First, it must clearly define the phenomenon it intends to intervene in. Without a clearly delimited object of study, it is impossible to build cumulative knowledge. Second, it needs to develop a theory capable of explaining that phenomenon. Theory answers a fundamental question: how does what we seek to understand occur? Third, that explanation must be translated into a method of intervention. The method organizes procedures consistent with the theory and aimed at producing certain results. Only then do professional competencies appear. These describe what the professional needs to know how to do to properly apply the method. Finally, techniques constitute the concrete resources through which those competencies are expressed in everyday practice. The relationship between these levels can be represented as follows:

Object of study → Theory → Method → Competencies → Techniques.

This sequence is not intended to be an empirically exhaustive description of all existing applied disciplines, but rather an analytical proposal that this essay adopts as a conceptual ordering tool. Its plausibility rests on two established traditions: the classical distinction between substantive scientific knowledge and technological rules of action developed by Mario Bunge (1985), and the epistemology of professional practice proposed by Donald Schön (1983), who showed that any competent professional intervention presupposes—though not always explicitly—a theory about the phenomenon on which it acts. The central thesis to be developed throughout this article can be summarized as follows: competencies answer a professional question: how should a competent coach act? Theories of change answer a different scientific question: how do people change? Methods answer a third question: how should we intervene to facilitate that change? Confusing these three questions leads to attributing to a competency model explanatory responsibilities it never intended to assume. But it can also lead to the reverse error: assuming that a set of professional competencies constitutes, by itself, a theory of change or a method of intervention.

Before developing this analysis in detail, an exercise in intellectual honesty is necessary: to situate the question posed here within the academic tradition that has already formulated it, so as not to attribute to this essay a discovery that is not its own. That is the subject of the following section.

II. This Essay in Relation to the Evidence-Based Coaching Movement

The central idea defended in this work—that coaching needs something more than a competency model to consolidate itself as a discipline—is not a new observation in the specialized literature. Since the early 2000s, a group of authors grouped under the label of evidence-based coaching has been raising, with considerable rigor, exactly this same concern. Anthony Grant, one of the first psychologists to dedicate his doctoral research to the scientific study of coaching, argued early on that the profession could not sustain itself indefinitely on the anecdotal experience of its practitioners or on purely behavioral standards, but rather needed to integrate empirically validated psychological knowledge (Grant, 2003, 2005). Soon after, Cavanagh, Grant and Kemp (2005) brought together in a collective volume—*Evidence-Based Coaching: Theory, Research and Practice from the Behavioural Sciences*—a series of proposals explicitly aimed at theoretically grounding coaching practice. Stober and Grant (2006), in the *Evidence Based Coaching Handbook*, stated even more explicitly the need for each coaching approach to make explicit its theoretical basis and empirical support, rather than operating as an undifferentiated set of conversational techniques. This movement also gave rise to academic publications specifically dedicated to this purpose, such as the *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, and the *International Coaching Psychology Review*, which for nearly two decades have produced research aimed precisely at the question this essay formulates.

Acknowledging this trajectory is a matter of intellectual honesty, not a rhetorical gesture. It would be imprecise to present the distinction between competencies, theory, and method as an original finding of this work, when in fact it constitutes the foundational problem of an established academic current. What, then, is the specific contribution of this essay if the problem has already been raised by others? At least three. First, much of the production of the evidence-based coaching movement circulates in academic journals and volumes that are difficult for the average practicing coach to access, particularly outside the English-speaking world; this essay attempts to act as a bridge between that academic discussion and the community of coaches trained exclusively under competency models like that of the ICF, who are rarely exposed to this literature during their certification. Second, while much of that current has focused on empirically validating results of specific interventions, this essay proposes a conceptual architecture—the sequence object of study, theory, method, competencies, techniques—usable as a curricular diagnostic tool, that is, to assess at what level a given training program is effectively situated. Third, it directs the critique specifically toward the ICF model, the most widespread *de facto* standard internationally, something that the evidence-based coaching literature—more

oriented toward validating particular approaches than toward analyzing the dominant competency standard—has addressed more tangentially.

With these clarifications, the argument that follows should be read not as the discovery of a new problem, but as an applied reformulation of an existing debate, with the purpose of bringing it closer to those who train and are trained within the most influential competency framework in the world.

III. The Historical Contribution of the International Coaching Federation: Professionalizing a Profession Without Unifying a Theory

It is difficult to understand the contemporary evolution of coaching without recognizing the role played by the International Coaching Federation. Since the mid-1990s, the organization has made decisive contributions to consolidating professional standards that are now used by thousands of schools, organizations, and coaches in more than a hundred countries. Its main contribution has not been to develop a new theory of human behavior or to propose a specific method for producing change. Its contribution has been different and, probably, much more necessary for the historical moment in which it emerged. The ICF provided what every emerging profession needs to consolidate itself: a shared ethical framework, common certification criteria, quality standards, and a professional language that made it possible to differentiate coaching from other helping practices, consulting, mentoring, or psychotherapy.

In a context characterized by the coexistence of multiple schools and approaches, the Federation opted for a particularly intelligent strategy: avoiding adherence to a specific theory of human change and focusing instead on identifying those professional behaviors that could be considered common to high-quality coaching practice, regardless of the paradigm from which each coach worked. This decision explains, to a large extent, the international success of the model. The ICF did not intend to become a school of thought. Nor did it attempt to establish a conceptual orthodoxy about the functioning of the human mind, learning, or personal transformation. Its purpose was to build a standard broad enough to integrate the existing diversity within professional coaching.

This aspect is fundamental to correctly understanding the scope of the competency model. The eight Core Competencies published by the ICF were not conceived as a theory of change. They constitute, essentially, a professional performance framework that describes observable behaviors during a coaching conversation (ICF, 2021). This precision is essential because it prevents attributing to the model responsibilities that were never part of its foundational purpose.

It should be clarified, however, that this declared neutrality does not amount to a total absence of theoretical assumptions. Competencies such as "evokes awareness" or "facilitates client growth" are not theoretically empty: they presuppose, albeit implicitly, a vision of the human being close to humanistic psychology and the person-centered approach formulated by Carl Rogers (1961), as well as certain assumptions compatible with adult learning andragogy. The

problem this essay identifies does not consist, therefore, in the ICF lacking theory altogether, but rather that this theory remains implicit, eclectic, and not subjected to an explicit process of formulation, testing, and eventual refutation.

However, recognizing this fact makes it possible to raise a consequence that deserves careful analysis. If an organization decides not to adopt an explicit theory of change to preserve its neutrality toward different coaching schools, then it cannot derive from it a unique method of intervention grounded in verifiable mechanisms. And if there is no explicit method supported by an articulated theory of change, competencies become the main organizing axis of professional training. This architecture has proven extraordinarily effective for standardizing coaching practice. The question that remains open—and that constitutes the core of this essay—is whether this architecture is sufficient when the objective of coaching is no longer merely to accompany developmental conversations but aspires to understand and facilitate processes of human transformation that, although without clinical conditions, still represent a high level of complexity.

IV. Can a Competency Model Explain Human Change? A Necessary Epistemological Distinction

Up to this point, the extraordinary contribution that the International Coaching Federation has made to the professionalization of coaching has been recognized. It has also been noted that the purpose of this work is not to question the quality of that model, but to analyze its epistemological scope, in dialogue with an academic tradition—that of evidence-based coaching—that has already been raising similar questions.

The central question guiding this section seems simple, but it has profound implications for the future development of coaching: can a model built on professional competencies explain, by itself, how people change? Answering affirmatively would imply assuming that describing the expected behavior of the professional is equivalent to understanding the phenomenon on which that professional intervenes.

Over recent decades, much of the international evolution of coaching has focused on perfecting the competency level of the profession. The ICF's own trajectory is a case in point. From the publication of its first competencies to the structural revision carried out in 2019 and the updates introduced in 2025 (ICF, 2025), the institutional effort has been aimed at describing more precisely what characterizes the performance of a professional coach. The 2025 update, far from modifying the fundamental structure of the model, incorporated five new subcompetencies, refined eleven existing subcompetencies, updated the definition of one of the main competencies, and incorporated a glossary aimed at standardizing understanding of the language used by the Federation (ICF, 2025). These modifications strengthened the professional standard without altering the logic on which it is built.

The ICF's mission has never been to build a theory of learning, cognitive development, or psychological transformation. Its purpose has been to offer a professional standard broad enough to integrate the diversity of schools and approaches existing within coaching. This theoretical neutrality explains, to a large extent, the international expansion of the Federation.

Nevertheless, recognizing this institutional decision leads to a new reflection. If competencies do not explain the mechanisms of change, then that knowledge must come from somewhere else. The scientific literature offers a consistent answer: disciplines that intervene in complex phenomena do not build their methods solely from professional competencies, but rather develop explanatory models of the phenomenon they seek to transform. Medicine does not derive its clinical procedures solely from the physician's competencies, but rather, to a large extent, from theories about the physiological and pathological functioning of the organism; it should be noted that contemporary evidence-based medicine also relies heavily on statistical results from clinical trials, not only on theoretical mechanisms, but even that empirical knowledge is organized and interpreted based on explanatory frameworks about disease, so the central argument—that clinical practice is not derived exclusively from the professional's competencies—remains. Education does not base its methods exclusively on the teacher's competencies, but on theories that attempt to explain how people learn. Psychotherapy also does not organize its procedures solely around the therapist's skills; each school develops a particular explanation of psychological functioning and, from that, builds its own method of intervention. This observation leads to a conclusion that constitutes one of the axes of this essay: competencies represent an indispensable requirement for professional practice, but by themselves, they do not constitute an explanation of the phenomenon on which that practice intends to intervene.

V. From Explanation to Procedure: Why a Theory of Change Is Not Enough to Build a Method of Intervention

In everyday language, the term "method" is often used to refer to any organized way of working. However, from the epistemology of applied sciences, a method has a much more precise meaning. It is not merely a sequence of activities or a set of techniques used habitually. A method constitutes a systematic organization of procedures whose internal logic derives from a prior explanation of the phenomenon on which one intends to intervene. In other words, the method represents the operational translation of a theory. If the theory explains the functioning of the phenomenon, the method transforms that explanation into professional decisions.

This relationship can be clearly observed in numerous disciplines. Cognitive-behavioral therapy did not emerge simply because certain therapists asked effective questions. Its development was possible because Aaron Beck previously proposed a specific explanation of how cognitive schemas, core beliefs, and cognitive distortions participate in the generation and maintenance of psychological distress (Beck, 1976). From that explanation, it became possible to

design concrete procedures for identifying automatic thoughts, testing hypotheses, restructuring beliefs, and evaluating the stability of the changes achieved. The methodology did not precede the theory; it was a consequence of it. Something similar happened with Reuven Feuerstein's Structural Cognitive Modifiability. His proposal was not limited to stating that people could develop new capacities. He identified a specific mechanism—the mediated learning experience—and described the conditions necessary for that mediation to produce a progressive reorganization of cognitive functions (Feuerstein, Feuerstein, Falik & Rand, 2010). Even in the field of education, Barry Zimmerman did not build his model of self-regulated learning from a set of study techniques. His work began by explaining how students plan, monitor, evaluate, and deliberately readjust their own learning. Only afterward was it possible to develop didactic strategies aimed at strengthening those self-regulatory processes (Zimmerman, 2000).

These examples allow us to identify a common principle: a method is not defined by the tools it uses, but by the logic that organizes their use. This observation is particularly relevant for coaching.

Much of the specialized literature has highlighted the value of conversation, active listening, and questions as distinctive elements of the coaching process. Available evidence shows, effectively, that these conditions favor reflection, strengthen the working alliance, and stimulate the generation of new perspectives (Theeboom, Beersma & Van Vianen, 2014). However, recognizing their usefulness does not resolve a deeper methodological question: what specific function does each intervention fulfill within the change process? Answering this question requires more than describing good conversational practices; it requires having criteria to decide why a particular intervention is appropriate at one point in the process and could be ineffective or even counterproductive at another.

At this point, a difference that runs through many disciplines dedicated to human development begins to become visible: the difference between creating favorable conditions for change and conducting a change process. Creating favorable conditions means generating a context in which the person can explore, reflect, question assumptions, and expand their understanding of a situation. These conditions are indispensable. But conditions alone do not constitute a procedure. A procedure implies establishing a sequence of decisions based on explicit criteria. This difference can be illustrated with a simple analogy: the quality of the relationship between a doctor and their patient significantly influences treatment adherence. However, no one would conclude that these relational competencies constitute, by themselves, the treatment of the disease. They facilitate the intervention; they do not replace it. Similarly, the quality of conversation in coaching constitutes a necessary condition for learning, but it does not by itself explain how a person reorganizes a belief system, modifies a consolidated pattern of information processing, or develops more stable forms of self-regulation.

If coaching aspires to consolidate itself not only as a professional practice but also as a progressively cumulative field of knowledge, it will need to move toward models capable of integrating three levels of analysis that have so far evolved with

relative independence: coach competencies, contemporary theories of learning, and the specific procedures through which those theories can be operationalized during intervention.

VI. Change as an Object of Study: Why Not All Transformation Responds to the Same Phenomenon

One of the most frequently used expressions in the coaching literature is probably the word change. It is claimed that coaching facilitates change, promotes change, accompanies change processes, or drives personal and professional change. However, when the scientific production on the subject is examined more closely, an important difficulty emerges: rarely is it explained precisely what is meant by change, what its mechanisms are, or whether all forms of human transformation respond to the same phenomenon.

This observation is not merely terminological. From an epistemological perspective, how a discipline defines its object of study determines the type of knowledge it can produce and, consequently, the forms of intervention it develops. One of the first authors to notice this situation was Paul Watzlawick. In his well-known work *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*, written together with John Weakland and Richard Fisch (1974), he proposed distinguishing between first-order changes and second-order changes. The former occur within the system itself and modify the way it functions without altering its fundamental organization. The latter involve a transformation of the rules that organize the system, producing a qualitatively different reorganization.

This differentiation began to be developed more deeply in the field of adult learning thanks to the work of Jack Mezirow. His theory of transformative learning holds that the most significant modifications do not consist simply of acquiring new information, but in critically revising the frames of reference through which people interpret their experience (Mezirow, 1991). Robert Kegan later expanded this understanding by studying adult development from a constructive-evolutionary perspective: people not only modify content in their thinking; the structures through which they construct meaning also evolve (Kegan, 1994). A complementary perspective comes from the work of Reuven Feuerstein, whose theory of Structural Cognitive Modifiability holds that, through intentional mediation processes, it is possible to progressively reorganize cognitive functions that condition how the person perceives, processes, and uses information (Feuerstein et al., 2010). Barry Zimmerman, from the study of self-regulated learning, contributes another essential dimension by showing that an important part of learning depends on the capacity the individual develops to plan, supervise, evaluate, and deliberately readjust their own behavior (Zimmerman, 2000).

These perspectives, although they come from different traditions, converge in the same direction: all distinguish between superficial changes and deeper reorganizations, and all agree that intervening in these processes requires understanding mechanisms that go beyond observable behavior. From this perspective, the real challenge consists of abandoning a homogeneous

conception of change and beginning to differentiate the different objects on which a coaching process can intervene: a first category corresponds to observable behaviors; a second includes the meanings through which those behaviors acquire coherence for the individual; and a third level corresponds to the processes that organize how the person processes information, constructs knowledge, and deliberately regulates their own cognitive activity.

VII. From the Object of Intervention to Procedure: Why Different Levels of Change Require Different Methods

The previous section argued that human change does not constitute a homogeneous phenomenon. Accepting this diversity has an immediate consequence: if the phenomenon changes, the way of intervening on it must also change. In all applied disciplines there is a relatively stable principle: the nature of the object of intervention conditions the nature of the intervention procedure. A surgeon does not use the same approach to repair tissue as to treat a systemic infection. A teacher does not use the same strategy to favor memorization of information as to develop critical thinking.

This principle leads to a question that acquires special relevance for coaching: what criterion allows us to decide how to intervene when the objective of the process is to facilitate change? Answering this question requires introducing a concept that has remained relatively absent in much of the coaching literature: diagnosis. It is necessary to immediately clarify the sense in which this term will be used. Talking about diagnosis in coaching does not imply, under any circumstances, carrying out clinical evaluations, establishing psychopathological categories, or replacing the work of psychology, psychiatry, or other health professions. The diagnosis referred to here has a strictly functional character. Its purpose is to understand the learning and change process that the client needs to develop to achieve their goal. It is, therefore, a diagnosis of the process and not of the person. The question ceases to be "what does this person have?" and becomes "what do they need to learn, reorganize, or develop to resolve the situation they are facing?"

This proposal, however, cannot be incorporated without examining a philosophical tension that runs through much of the coaching tradition and which this essay cannot avoid. Much of the historical legitimacy of coaching—including that which the ICF itself explicitly codifies in its ethical framework and in competencies such as "cultivates trust and safety" or "evokes awareness"—rests on a non-directive principle: the client is the one who has authority and expertise over their own life, and the coach does not offer solutions, does not prescribe, and does not decide for them. Introducing the notion of diagnosis, even defined in strictly functional and non-clinical terms, could be interpreted as a first step toward a logic closer to that of psychotherapy or formal education, where an external expert decides not only what the other needs but the very content of that need.

From our perspective, this risk should not materialize, and the reason is as follows: the coach is directive in terms of managing the method, the process, and the

intervention strategy, but the client remains the owner of their decisions and points of view. Ignoring this tension would be a serious omission for an essay that demands conceptual rigor from other models.

The resolution proposed here—and which should be understood as a working hypothesis, not as a settled point—consists of distinguishing between resolving for the client the content of the change, what they should think or do, and diagnosing and intervening in the type of process that change likely requires. The former would be incompatible with the non-directive tradition of coaching: it would correspond to the coach deciding what is best for the client or which particular belief is dysfunctional, usurping an authority that does not belong to them. The latter is of a different nature: it consists of the coach recognizing—without imposing it on the client or substituting their judgment—how the client is primarily using observable behaviors, meaning frameworks, or self-regulatory processes, with the sole purpose of selecting, within an equally non-directive repertoire, the type of question or intervention most pertinent to that level. Under this reading, functional diagnosis does not replace the client's authority over the content of their change; it operates on a different level, that of the methodological and conversational architecture. This intervention seeks at least three objectives: redirecting the client's attention, enabling changes in how they process information and update the meanings involved, and creating the necessary and sufficient conditions for the learning process to take place. Even so, it is necessary to recognize that this distinction, although conceptually defensible, is not without practical risk: any introduction of a diagnostic framework, however functional, requires explicit ethical vigilance to avoid deriving into a subtle form of covert directivity. This risk does not invalidate the proposal, but it does require that any subsequent methodological development incorporate explicit safeguards against that drift.

With this clarification, the quality of an intervention depends less on the sophistication of the tools used than on the precision with which the professional identifies the object on which they intervene, without this implying wresting from the client the authorship of their own process. A method, understood in this way, ceases to be a rigid sequence of steps and becomes a logic of decision-making: it establishes when to intervene, why to do so, what indicators justify moving to another phase of the process, and what evidence suggests that the strategy being used is not producing the expected results.

VIII. What the Evidence on Effectiveness Says—And What It Does Not Say

Before moving toward the training implications of what has been argued so far, it is necessary to subject the central thesis of this essay to a test that, for the sake of rigor, cannot be omitted: what does the available empirical evidence say about the relationship between explicit theoretical grounding and coaching effectiveness? The honest answer is less favorable to this essay's thesis than an enthusiastic reader might expect.

The meta-evidence available—including the meta-analysis by Theeboom, Beersma and Van Vianen (2014) already cited, and that of Jones, Woods and Guillaume (2016), which specifically examined coaching in organizational contexts—shows positive and relatively consistent effects of coaching on goal achievement, performance, well-being, and coping, obtained from interventions using highly heterogeneous theoretical frameworks, from cognitive-behavioral approaches to humanistic or openly eclectic models. None of these meta-analyses offer robust evidence that approaches with an explicitly formulated theory of change produce, in terms of measurable outcomes, systematic advantages over well-executed competency-based or eclectic approaches.

This finding requires a precision that this essay cannot avoid without losing credibility: the argument developed here is not, nor does it intend to be, an argument about demonstrated superiority in results. It is, rather, an argument about knowledge accumulation and about the necessary conditions for a discipline to be able to explain why what works works, and not merely that it works. These are different questions. That an intervention produces positive results does not imply that the mechanism that produces them is understood, and a discipline that does not understand its own mechanisms faces concrete limits: it cannot accurately predict in which cases an intervention will fail, it cannot systematically differentiate which component of a complex intervention produced the observed effect, and it cannot reliably transfer its knowledge to new contexts or populations. It is, in a sense, the same problem that medicine faced for a long time with treatments that showed documented clinical efficacy before their underlying pathophysiological mechanisms were understood. The absence of explicit theory does not necessarily prevent a practice from working; it does prevent a discipline from explaining, predicting, and systematically refining why it works.

Formulated with this precision, the argument of this essay becomes more modest but also more defensible: it does not claim that coaching without explicit theory is ineffective—the available evidence does not allow for that affirmation—but rather that without it, coaching cannot consolidate as a scientifically cumulative discipline, even if it continues to produce good practical results in the short and medium term.

IX. Toward a Second-Generation Training: Integrating Professional Competencies, Learning Science, and Intervention Methodology

After more than three decades of development, coaching has reached a level of professionalization that would have been hard to imagine in its early years. Professional competencies remain indispensable. No one could responsibly practice coaching without developing capacities such as active listening, presence, trust-building, effective communication, or the ability to facilitate reflective processes. However, conversation constitutes the medium of intervention, not necessarily the explanation of the phenomenon that intervention intends to facilitate.

From this perspective, a second-generation training does not mean abandoning professional competencies but integrating them with other levels of knowledge that have so far received considerably less attention.

The first of these dimensions corresponds to the science of learning and human change. Over the past forty years, research in cognitive psychology, self-regulated learning, adult development, cognitive modifiability, and behavioral sciences has produced an enormous amount of knowledge about how people build new learning, modify their systems of meaning, develop self-regulatory capacities, and progressively reorganize their ways of interpreting reality. Paradoxically, much of this progress barely appears marginally in numerous coaching training programs.

The second dimension corresponds to the functional diagnosis of the change process, in the terms—and with the safeguards against directivity—outlined in the previous section.

The third dimension corresponds to intervention methodology. Tools are indispensable, but they do not constitute a method. Their effectiveness depends less on the tool itself than on the place it occupies within a methodological sequence guided by a prior explanation of change.

Finally, a second-generation training should incorporate a fourth dimension: the evaluation of how the client processes information and the quality—in terms of stability over time—of the change achieved. A more complete evaluation should also ask what capacities the client developed during the process, what learning shows evidence of transfer to new situations, and what appears to remain stable once the intervention has concluded.

The absence of a widely shared model that explains with sufficient precision how human change occurs has also generated a conceptual void that numerous schools have attempted to fill in an undisciplined manner. It is not unusual to find certification programs where conversational models, simplified references to neuroscience, elements of neuro-linguistic programming, concepts taken from quantum physics, and various techniques from completely different disciplines coexist, without an articulated theoretical framework explaining how they relate to each other. One of the most visible examples of this phenomenon can be observed in the increasing use of neuroscientific concepts as a mechanism of legitimation: numerous studies have documented the proliferation of neuromyths, simplified or incorrect interpretations of scientific findings that end up being used to justify practices whose effectiveness has never been demonstrated (Dekker et al., 2012; Howard-Jones, 2014). Expressions like "reprogramming the brain" or "creating new brain connections through a specific conversation" are often presented with a level of certainty far beyond what research actually allows.

X. Toward a New Research Agenda for Coaching: From Professional Performance to the Construction of a Scientific Discipline

A discipline can reach high levels of professionalization without having yet developed a sufficiently robust explanation of the phenomenon that constitutes its object of intervention. Professionalization represents only one part of a discipline's development. The other part corresponds to the progressive construction of the scientific knowledge that explains the phenomenon on which that profession intervenes.

A theory of change that aspires to scientifically strengthen the discipline should satisfy, at least, certain fundamental conditions. First, operationally define what it understands by change. Second, clearly differentiate the different levels at which that change can occur. Third, explicitly identify the processes responsible for each level of change, formulating hypotheses susceptible to empirical testing. Fourth, establish criteria for functional diagnosis that methodologically guide the intervention without invading the domains of other disciplines or compromising the non-directivity that distinguishes coaching. Fifth, describe procedures consistent with those mechanisms. Finally, any theory of change should allow for objective evaluation of the results obtained and accept the possibility of being modified or even refuted when evidence so indicates (Popper, 1959).

In this context, various initiatives are beginning to emerge aimed at integrating professional competencies, learning science, theory of change, and intervention methodology within broader conceptual architectures. Some of these proposals are still in initial stages of development and require significant empirical validation before they can be considered consolidated models. Among them, mention can be made of the proposal called Coaching as a Self-Regulated Learning Method (CSRLM), which will soon be published and whose purpose is to articulate contributions from learning science, structural cognitive modifiability, self-regulation, and intervention methodology within an explicitly researchable model.

The future of the discipline will hardly depend on one specific proposal imposing itself over others. It will depend, rather, on the collective capacity—including the already consolidated evidence-based coaching movement—to build increasingly rigorous, comparable, researchable models open to scientific critique.

CONCLUSIONS

The first conclusion is that one of the major contributions of the International Coaching Federation has been to professionalize the practice of coaching through a competency model, ethical standards, and internationally recognized accreditation processes.

The second conclusion is that a competency model describes how a competent professional should act, but does not necessarily constitute an explicit and testable theory of the mechanisms of human change—even though it implicitly

presupposes certain assumptions inherited from humanistic psychology and adult learning.

The third conclusion is that the absence of a sufficiently developed and explicit explanation of the mechanisms of change hinders the construction of equally explicit intervention methods.

The fourth conclusion is that this explanatory void has favored the emergence of a great diversity of methodological proposals within coaching, not all with the same theoretical or empirical support.

The fifth conclusion is that this debate is not new: it is part of the evidence-based coaching tradition developed since the early 2000s, and the specific contribution of this essay consists of operationalizing that discussion in relation to the dominant competency model and bringing it closer to a practical audience that rarely knows it.

The sixth conclusion is that the available evidence on coaching effectiveness does not allow us to affirm that theoretically explicit models outperform well-executed eclectic approaches in outcomes; the argument of this essay is, therefore, an argument about scientific maturity and explanatory capacity, not about demonstrated superiority in outcomes.

The seventh conclusion is that the introduction of a functional diagnostic criterion does not compromise the non-directive principle of coaching, as long as the distinction between two planes is maintained with precision: the coach exercises, and must exercise, a directive role over the structure and methodology of the process—how the conversation is organized, which intervention is pertinent at each moment, under what logic the process advances—while remaining strictly non-directive regarding the ideas, values, solutions, and decisions, which are the exclusive domain of the client. This essay distances itself, therefore, from a purist interpretation of non-directivity that confuses both planes and that, taken to the extreme, would end up emptying professional responsibility from the very conduct of the process.

Finally, this work maintains that the central question is to determine whether a model built exclusively on competencies is sufficient for a discipline whose purpose is to facilitate complex processes of learning and human change. Professions reach maturity when they perfect the competencies of those who practice them. But disciplines achieve their true consolidation when, in addition, they manage to explain with increasing precision the phenomenon on which they intervene, subject that explanation to empirical testing, and honestly acknowledge the limits of what current evidence allows us to affirm.

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