What's the Story? The Contribution of Formulation to Coaching Practice in Complex Times

Keynote Presentation at the Division of Coaching Psychology's Annual Conference, June 2023

Introduction

The ways in which coaches make sense of their clients' needs and how they use that understanding to design an intervention is an under-researched area of coaching practice. In other, related forms of professional practice, including disciplines within applied psychology, this approach to making sense of a client's needs is known as formulation.

In recent years formulation has begun to play an increasingly prominent role in coaching practice, especially in contexts of complexity (Corrie & Kovacs, 2019; Kovacs & Corrie 2017a, 2017b; Kovacs & Corrie, 2021). In this article, based on my keynote presentation earlier in 2023, I make a case for the importance of formulation in coaching practice, introduce one way of approaching formulation and position formulation as a distinct form of storytelling that is grounded in the language of coaching theories and research.

As a starting point for engaging with the ideas presented in this article, I invite you, the reader, to consider your responses to the questions included in Box 1:

Box 1. Suggestion for Reflection

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An early encounter with formulation: a personal reflection

Formulation has a long-standing history within applied psychology (see Corrie & Lane, 2010 for a review). However, my first encounter with formulation came from an entirely different field – namely, my career in the performing arts in the mid-1980s. At the time, I was an aspiring actor engaged in the task of learning my craft, a task which entailed developing knowledge and skill in the technical aspects of performance, acquiring vocal dexterity and stagecraft and learning how to create a sense of presence on stage.

During my training, an opportunity arose to participate in a workshop with the well-known and highly regarded actor Sylvia Syms. The focus of the workshop was Noel Coward's play *The Vortex*, first performed in 1924. With a strong desire to impress our esteemed teacher,

each student had worked diligently to memorise their lines in order to deliver a word-perfect performance. It was a surprise, then, when rather than launching into any of the scenes, she began by asking us the following questions:

- What is a vortex?

- Why do you think Noel Coward called the play, *The Vortex*? What was he trying to convey?

- What are the essential themes that inform how the play unfolds?

- What do you know about drug use in society in England at the end of World War I?

- How does Coward portray the issues surrounding same sex-attraction and how does this portrayal influence the characters' actions over the course of the play?

This was not what we had expected and each of her questions were met with an awkward silence. Eventually, Sylvia Syms responded with barely concealed irritation, "How can you be credible as an actor if you haven't taken the trouble to understand the characters you are playing? You can't just go on stage and 'act'!"

Her rebuke exposed a fundamental error in our approach to the workshop. As keen young actors, our mistake had not been a lack of preparation, but rather a focus on the wrong things. We had misunderstood what was needed, focusing our energies on *doing* the play before we had devoted sufficient time *to understanding* the play. Yet as our teacher pointed out, without the background research (what I later came to understand as formulation) we could not deliver a convincing performance of a character's circumstances and needs that gave the lines their meaning.

It was from this inauspicious beginning that I was introduced to the Stanislavski method – a method which presents actors with a series of questions that enables them to build an understanding of any character they are portraying. These questions are:

- Who am I (character)?

- What do I want (objective)?

- What are the circumstances (physical and non-physical)?

- What are the obstacles (physical and non-physical)?

- Given the above, what do I do (action)?

Some years later, and by now working as a psychologist and coach, I was actively involved in researching formulation and looking at ways of supporting coaches and other practitioners in better understanding and using formulation. This resulted in a project, co-led with my colleague David Lane and with contributions from actors, directors and playwrights as well as psychologists and coaches, which explored the role and use of formulation by different professions. The output was a book entitled, *Constructing Stories, Telling Tales: A Guide to Formulation in Applied Psychology*. One quotation from Simon Callow in particular about why actors use formulation was reminiscent of my first encounter with this concept as a student actor:

> "Exactly as in life, a character's behaviour is often a kind of puzzle. Why on earth do they do this, that or the other? And, exactly as in life, the actor is always looking for clues. …. before one starts trying to understand the motives of the character, one has to know who he is, which will point us to the meaning of the story" (Callow, 2010; p.274).

The notion of 'characters as puzzles' does, I believe, have resonance with our work as coaches. This is not in any sense to objectify our clients by regarding them as something to be solved. Rather it is to suggest that coaching invites us into the puzzles that confront our clients and making sense of those puzzles is central to decisions concerning how coaching might best proceed. What, then, is a formulation and how might it support us in this endeavour?

Understanding formulation: a definition and description of functions

In broad terms, a formulation can be defined as "an explanatory account of the issues with which a client is presenting (including predisposing, precipitating and maintaining factors) that can form the basis of a shared framework of understanding and which has implications for change" (Lane & Corrie, 2009, p.194). A primary function of formulation is, then, to aid us in developing a coaching plan (including the selection, planning and sequencing of interventions). There are, however, additional functions that formulation can serve. These include clarifying key hypotheses and relevant questions; developing a broad, shared understanding of the client's context, circumstances and needs; helping prioritise client issues and agreeing criteria for a successful outcome. The benefits of a formulation have also

been noted to include organising coach and client around the same goals; predicting obstacles; supporting thinking about a lack of progress and identifying gaps in understanding (Butler, 1998; Corrie & Kovacs, 2019). Adapting the explanation offered by Rachman (date unknown) for the clinical setting to the coaching context we see that the value of formulation is that it imposes,

> "…a necessary discipline on the coach's reasoning and actions, and generally leads to the construction of specific goals and thereby to specific outcome criteria. By contrast, the omission of a formulation can leave the coach, and the client, with an amorphous blur that has no direction and can have no clean conclusion." (p. xvii; cited in Bruch & Bond, 1998)

Formulation has been recognised as a critical competence for professional psychologists (British Psychological Society, 2011) and has also been identified as central to evidence-based practice (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006). However, a formulation may not be necessary for every client. As the evidence base of coaching expands there may be instances where the intervention of choice is clear and uncontested or where having a working hypothesis to guide the work is sufficient. Nonetheless, coaching is delivered in contexts of increasing complexity. Recent years have witnessed debates concerning the extent to which our existing coaching models and methods can adequately match the complexity of the settings in which coaches deliver their work or whether more emergent models are needed (see Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Drake 2012, 2018). The use of formulation may be particularly important in situations where clients' needs relate to decision making in situations involving multiple interacting factors, navigating ambiguity and uncertainty and responding to unexpected occurrences where emergent methods (e.g. appreciative inquiry coaching; Gordon 2008, and narrative coaching; Drake, 2018) are likely to be needed. How, then, might formulation help coaches untangle the many factors that might be at play?

How to approach formulation: levels of formulation and the rice field analogy

The professional psychology literature offers a range of approaches to formulation but for the purposes of this article, one particular approach is offered, developed by Louise Kovacs and I in 2019 specifically for the coaching context (see Corrie & Kovacs, 2019). This approach

proposes three distinct but inter-related levels of focus through which a client's concerns might be explored and from which a formulation might be developed. These are the level of the situation, pattern and case, as described in Table 1.

Table 1. The Three Levels of Formulation

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To illustrate how it is possible to consider a particular situation, dilemma or concern from the position of situation, pattern or person, we used the analogy of the farmer and the rice field. At the level of situation the farmer will focus on the factors supporting or inhibiting the growth of an individual rice plant. There might be a variety of factors at play which, understood at the micro level of the individual plant, enable appropriate interventions to be identified (e.g. the plant needs more water as its position at the edge of the field means that it is deprived of adequate hydration). At the level of the pattern, the focus is on the rice field itself. This meso level of analysis can help the farmer optimise the yield from the rice field. If the yield is sub-optimal, this might, for example, be due to over-planting. At the level of the person, the rice field analogy focuses on the field in a broader context. Areas of analysis arising from this macro perspective might include a consideration of the role the field has in the farmer's life, or the life of the community, the market demand for the rice and other options that might be available to the farmer such as selling his field for property development (NB: this analogy for formulation was originally described in Corrie & Kovacs, 2019).

Applied within coaching, each of the levels of situation, pattern and person creates different possibilities for exploration, understanding and change and requires particular types of data. For example, at the level of the situation, the aim is to identify precipitating events, thoughts, emotions, physical changes and behaviours that were operating in a particular situation. What is needed, therefore, is a specific example/s of the dilemma of interest that can enable coach and client to focus on the detail. Theoretical concepts will be used to make sense of the client's situation-specific experience in pursuit of answering 'What? Where? When? Who? Why?' based questions.

At the level of pattern, the aim is to identify factors that are implicated in similar reactions across situations. Here coach and client look beyond a single situation to detect broader

tendencies in emotional reactions, physical sensations, cognitions and patterns of information-processing, repertoires of action/inaction as well as interpersonal patterns.

At the level of the person, the aim is to arrive, over time, at a full, longitudinal formulation of the client that includes an understanding of their history, their strengths, their vulnerabilities and their needs. This includes a consideration of (1) overt issues of concern; that is, the challenges which the client experiences that could be captured with a situation level formulation; (2) underlying psychological mechanisms; that is values, beliefs and assumptions, patterns of information-processing and behavioural repertoires that can be captured with a pattern level formulation and (3) the client's broader context; that is, personal and cultural values, relationships past and present and the systems in which the client has been and is currently immersed. (For examples of how this approach has been used in practice see Corrie & Kovacs, 2019; Kovacs & Corrie, 2021.)

<u>Box 2. Suggestion for Reflection</u>

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Formulation and the functions of effective stories

The three levels of formulation described above highlight not only different types of explanation but also different ways of telling a story. Stories and the act of storytelling have long been recognised as playing a vital role in human experience. Storytelling has been a characteristic of life since human beings developed a capacity for mental representation and symbolic thought with some scholars advocating that the brain itself is a narrative-making, story-creating organ (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Moreover, there is long-standing evidence from studies examining the cognitive development of children which suggests that we come into the world 'hard-wired' to develop storytelling capabilities in the same way that we are 'hard-wired' to acquire language (Barth, 1995; Mandler & Goodman, 1982). Why might this be the case?

Scholars have observed how stories and storytelling serve numerous functions within society (Tatar, 2003; Corrie & Lane, 2010; Drake, 2018). For example, storytelling helps us make sense of being human, enabling us to derive meaning from our experience. Stories help us grapple with complex questions about identity, self-worth, and the possibilities that exist for

our lives and provide an effective way of synthesising meaning and emotion. In the form of myths, legends and fairy tales, stories can also impart cultural values, morals and knowledge and introduce us to the ways of the world, where people and situations are not always what they seem (Tatar, 2003).

An additional function of storytelling that has relevance to coaching is that it can help bridge what has been termed, 'the head-heart divide;' that is, where an individual understands something intellectually but does not engage with that understanding on an emotional or behavioural level (Bruner, 1987; 2002; Bernard & Teasdale, 1991; Epstein, 2003; Stott et al., 2010). An example might be where an individual understands that there is no objective danger associated with delivering a work presentation yet continues to fear this situation intensely. A further example might be where a client agrees that a particular course of action would be advantageous yet avoids acting on that knowledge, such as continuing to procrastinate on a work project when facing an important deadline.

To understand the disconnect between head and heart a number of scholars (see Bruner, 1987; 2002; Bernard & Teasdale, 1991; Epstein, 2003) have proposed the existence of two different but interacting information-processing systems that operate in distinct ways. In his cognitive-experiential self-theory of personality, Epstein (2003) differentiates what he terms the rational system and the experiential one. The rational system is analytical, reason-oriented, logical and largely affect free. The experiential system in contrast is intuitive, automatic, more connected to emotion and typically narrative-based.

Clients intuitively express the influence of these different systems in their use of language. For example, "I know it, but I don't feel it" speaks of a disconnect between the rational and experiential systems. Common expressions that cannot be understood at the rational level, but which have a clear meaning to the experiential system include "he broke my heart," "the wind blew right through me, it was so cold I was frozen" and "she wears her heart on her sleeve." Literal and metaphorical language have a prominent place in our lives as they are both creative and generative (Stott et al., 2010) but it is the experiential system that houses our enduring beliefs about ourselves and from which we generate deep truths about our lives. It is also the system which is particularly sensitive to the impact of stories and acts of storytelling. How, then, can we create stories in the context of formulation that appeal to the experiential system?

Formulation and storytelling: implications for practice

Based on what has been discussed so far, there is evidence to conclude that, (1) the act of storytelling and the stories we construct are a powerful means of making sense of ourselves, the worlds we inhabit, and the possibilities that exist for our lives; (2) we are biologically inclined to represent ourselves and our experiences through the medium of stories and (3) we come equipped with a cognitive architecture that enables us to recognise and respond to the meanings conveyed by stories. However, not all stories are created equal. Some are more compelling than others, with greater potential to bridge the rational and experiential systems. If we understand the properties of compelling stories, there is the potential to ensure that these are reflected in the ways in which we approach the task of constructing formulations with our clients.

In his examination of compelling stories, Hoyt (2000) concluded that we like stories that are "…vivid and eloquent; that involve the generation and resolution of some tension; that see the protagonist emerge successfully, perhaps even triumphantly" (p. 22). A similar view was expressed by Sluzki (1998) who identified that the most effective stories are appealing; provide richer connections between individuals and contexts; convey characters as active and competent; presuppose that characters have rules for living that guide their behaviour; contain assumptions about growth and change and have implications for agency.

If the most compelling stories do conform to certain characteristics, and if formulation can be understood as a distinct form of story, what possibilities might emerge for building more compelling formulations in coaching? The following would seem to be possibilities:

1. Aiming for stories that are vivid and eloquent. This can be achieved through grounding the formulation in the client's self-told story, ensuring that it is co-constructed with the client not imposed upon them and drawing on relevant theoretical concepts that illuminate aspects of the client's experience;

2. Generating and resolving tension. This can be achieved through attending to aspects of the client's experience at the level of both content (e.g. specific cognitions, behaviours and emotions) and process (e.g. how a client processes information and makes decisions) and developing testable hypotheses that clarify the dilemma and options for change;

3. Enabling the client to emerge successfully. This can be achieved through using the formulation to generate a clearer understanding of the client's strengths and resources (internal and external), establishing achievable objectives that stretch the client and working to foster a sense of agency.

Further possibilities for how conceptualising formulation as a distinct form of storytelling might benefit coaching practice are offered below:

A re-examination of life limiting stories

Reflecting on her work with stories in coaching, Pemberton (2015) observes that we all have stories that we hold on to even when it would serve our interests to replace them. As adults we often subscribe to out-dated stories that limit our perspectives and choices yet remain attached to them. Regardless of whether a formulation is at the level of situation, pattern or person, it enables coaches to support their clients in identifying and mapping the impact of factors that maintain life limiting stories.

Developing agency through the co-construction of new stories

Stories represent a distinct form of agency. As Pemberton (2015) observes, "We live by the stories we create" (p. 39). When carefully developed and co-created, a formulation at the level of situation, pattern or person can illuminate new possibilities for acting in the world that may hitherto have been obscured. As noted above, effective formulations include a consideration of client strengths and resources and the generation of testable hypotheses that enable a client to experiment with new forms of behaviour.

Bridging the head-heart divide

As a distinct form of story, one that is grounded in the theories, models and research of coaching, formulation can help bridge the world of rational thought and emotional experience through attending to the qualities that characterise effective stories and ensuring that these are present in our formulations.

Moving beyond sound-bite explanations towards fuller, more relevant and meaningful explanations

It has been recognised for some time that Western culture currently favours "sound-bite explanations and quick-fix solutions" (Strawbridge, 2010; p.xxi). Such explanations and solutions can be intuitively appealing yet will likely miss the mark for clients who are grappling with the complexities of the modern, globalised world. Formulation challenges any tendency towards over-simplification through the quest to co-construct an explanatory account of the issues with which a client is presenting.

<u>Some final thoughts</u>

Formulation is of growing interest to coaches which is, I believe, a positive development. The reasons for which our clients seek our services will probably always be in advance of the evidence base on what works best for whom, requiring coaches to be adept at constructing individualised formulations with and for their clients. Stacey's reflection from the early 1990s holds true for us today, namely that "The key to success lies in the creative activity of making new maps, not in the imitative following and refining of existing ones" (1992; p.1).

This article has shared one approach to formulation based on thinking about the different levels at which explanatory accounts can be constructed: the situation, the pattern or the person. Each of these levels can be adapted to the needs of clients in any coaching setting. Yet, the formulations we develop are still essentially stories, albeit ones that are shaped by the theories, models and research that we bring to our clients' narratives.

My hope is that this article and the presentation upon which it was based might have engaged or re-engaged your interest in the stories that you create with your clients and to give you an opportunity to reflect on the role that formulation does or could have in your practice. Learning how to construct more effective stories in coaching has perhaps never been as important as it is now. Formulation does, I believe, support us in this endeavour.

<u>Box 3. Suggestion for Reflection</u>

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<u>Acknowledgement</u>

book on formulation in coaching, commissioned by Routledge, is due to be published shortly.

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Table and Boxes

Box 1. Suggestion for Reflection
- When you start working with a client how do you go about making sense of their needs?   - How do you decide what course of action to take?   - What sources of information do you draw upon the most to make sense of a client's needs?   - What sources of data do you rarely or never draw upon to make sense of a client's needs?   - How closely do you rely on any particular theory or model as an organising framework for deciding how to proceed?

Table 1. The Three Levels of Formulation

Situation	Pattern	Person
A micro-formulation of how a client is responding in a specific situation.	A formulation of the factors that may be involved in a pattern of responding that appears in multiple situations.	A formulation of the whole person in context and the multiple layers of information relevant to their performance, functioning and well-being.

Box 2. Suggestion for Reflection
To explore the relevance to your own practice of this approach to formulation, consider which level of formulation you tend to use – situation, pattern or person – with which clients, in which circumstances and why. You might also wish to reflect on a recent or current coaching client and which level of formulation has been dominant in how you and the client have made sense of their needs. If you changed the level, either adopting a more micro (the level of situation) or more macro (the level of the person) perspective, what difference would that make to the questions you ask, hypotheses you generate or intervention you use? What possibilities might emerge that were not evident before?

Box 3. Suggestion for Reflection

If the ideas in this article have appealed to you, you might wish to use the questions below to consider the impact of one particular story on your own life:

1. Identify a story that you hold about yourself (it might be one that you value or one that you would like to change).

2. Think about how this story has impacted your life:
    a. Your sense of identity
    b. How you think and feel on a regular basis
    c. How you act in the world
    d. Your sense of choices and possibilities for your life

3. How does this story impact your sense of agency?

4. To what extent is this a compelling story? If it is not a compelling story, in what ways is it unhelpful or deficient?

5. What would happen if you gave up this story for a month? A week? A day?

6. If you wanted to create a formulation of the part/s of yourself that is/are captured through this story, where would you begin – situation, pattern or person level?

7. If you wanted to, how might you tell that story differently? What form would you like the story to take? What would be different at the levels of situation, pattern and person?

8. How far away from that desired, possible story are you now? What would have to happen to close the gap between what the old story and the new?