

How can Antifragility Help Theorize Coaching in a Volatile and Unpredictable World?

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Abstract

This conceptual article explores how antifragility might support a fuller theorization of coaching in the context of a world characterized by increasing levels of complexity, volatility and unpredictability. Antifragility, a term which describes how certain systems become stronger when exposed to volatility, has been embraced by and applied within a range of disciplines and industries but is yet to receive any substantive attention in the coaching literature. This article introduces the concept of antifragility and explores how antifragility might support a process of greater critical reflexivity in how the purpose of coaching is conceptualized and the types of coaching conversations it might facilitate. It is proposed that antifragility offers a valuable lens for re-examining and redefining some of the under-theorized norms of coaching including the still largely unchallenged assumptions concerning the benefits of performance enhancement, growth and efficiency. In doing so, this article seeks to add to the growing number of scholars who are calling for coaching to reposition itself as a vehicle for social change rather than a method of individual and organizational optimization.

Keywords: coaching, antifragility, optimization, growth, theorization of coaching, complex systems

Introduction

Coaching is now well-established as a means of enhancing the performance of individuals, teams, and organizations. Since Grant's (2013) assessment of coaching as "a mainstream activity in organizations worldwide" (p. 15), the popularity of coaching and its application for the purposes of both individual and organizational learning and development have continued to expand. Yet, the 21st century world is becoming increasingly complex and recursive. This has created events that are difficult to predict, which are beyond our collective control and at times, even beyond our comprehension. These challenges raise questions about the assumptions that underpin many of the dominant theories, models and methods that have characterized the field of coaching to date, and which have their roots in neoliberalism, with its emphasis on performance enhancement and the optimization of resources.

In order to respond effectively to the challenges of the 21st century, there is a need for perspectives that can support the field of coaching in re-examining its fundamental purpose and methods of working. The emergence of systems and complexity theories within coaching (e.g. Lawrence, 2019, 2021; O'Connor, 2020) offer alternative perspectives on human behavior and change, broadening the focus of coaching beyond the individual to consider the multidirectional

impacts of interactions between clients and the interconnected systems in which they are embedded (Lane et al., 2025). By utilizing systemic and complexity approaches coaches can provide a different lens through which individuals, teams and groups can make sense of their experiences and gain insights that may lead to novel ways of addressing complex challenges (O'Connor, 2020).

One aspect of complex systems that has yet to receive much attention in the coaching literature is antifragility. While our earlier article (Corrie & Kovacs, 2021) introduced the term to coaches, to the best of our knowledge, the implications of antifragility for coaching as a discipline and an industry are yet to be examined. Antifragility offers a perspective that specifically addresses the question of how to thrive in an unpredictable world, a relevant and useful concept for those coaches and their clients who are grappling with the complex and volatile nature of contemporary challenges.

The term 'antifragility' was originally conceived by scholar, author, and former financial trader Nassim Taleb (2012) to refer to systems that thrive, rather than merely survive, when faced with disorder, volatility, random events and chaos. Specifically, Taleb is concerned with why some systems flourish when confronted with unpredictable, destabilizing and high-impact events such as market crashes and pandemics. His body of work, as well as that of subsequent scholars in this field, articulates some of the properties of these systems and how it might prove possible to attain them. Engagement with antifragility also, we suggest, poses a fruitful challenge to some of the still largely uncritically adopted norms of coaching practice, such as framing coaching around the pursuit of growth, change, performance enhancement and optimization. In considering the relevance of antifragility for both the philosophy and practice of coaching, therefore, this conceptual article explores the following questions:

1. What challenges does antifragility pose to existing dominant discourses within coaching and how might it support coaching in casting a more critical gaze on some of its dominant foundational assumptions?
2. What might the concept of antifragility contribute to a fuller theorizing of coaching?
3. What kinds of coaching conversations or considerations might a focus on antifragility facilitate?

In order to address the questions above, the article first outlines the global context in which coaching is now delivered including the presence of what has been termed 'black swan' events. The need for approaches that can make sense of and respond to black swan events provides a basis for introducing antifragility which is then described. Some examples of the application of antifragility at a systems level are also provided before the article examines attempts to extend antifragility to the psychology of the individual and the extent to which this is a legitimate application. The article then explores the implications of antifragility for some of the dominant foundational assumptions of coaching, proposing that it offers a useful lens for a critically reflective engagement with some of the insufficiently unexamined assumptions that underpin numerous coaching approaches. Finally, the article offers some potential implications of antifragility for coaching, including how the purpose of coaching is defined and theorized and the types of coaching conversations to which a consideration of antifragility might give rise. In exploring these questions and issues, we hope to contribute to the growing number of voices within the field of coaching who argue for the urgent need for constructive and sustainable

alternatives to the relentless excesses and fragilities that arise from the pursuit of continuous improvement.

Coaching in a contemporary global context

The many varied contexts in which coaching is delivered are dynamic and increasingly complex. As an emerging field with a history rooted in multiple disciplines, there is no single, consensual definition of coaching, with coaching now comprising a highly diverse range of practices (Gannon, 2021; Koopman et al., 2021). However, it has been argued that emerging from the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s, its primary concern has been the cultivation of optimal functioning and the wellbeing of individuals (Passmore & Evans-Krimme, 2021). As coaching has evolved, its application has extended to an increasingly wide range of contexts in education, workplaces, healthcare and community settings (Gannon, 2021). The purpose of coaching has also evolved to include intentions such as optimizing performance, learning and development in organizations, and latterly, to promote social change (Gannon, 2021). The development of large-scale technology platforms to deliver coaching is also expanding the audience for coaching, making it accessible to a wider population (Passmore & Evans-Krimme, 2021).

As an industry, coaching has adapted not only in response to its range of audiences but also in response to the demands confronting individuals and societies of an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable world. While aspects of globalization have been beneficial in terms of human development, the growing interconnections between societies have increased systemic complexity and fostered systemic risks. The early part of the 21st century has already seen multiple events that have escalated beyond national boundaries and affected large parts of the global population. These include the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA in 2001, the global financial and economic crisis of 2008, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, and the impact of Russian aggression on energy, food and security (Wernli et al., 2023). Taleb (2008; 2012) uses the term *black swan* to describe these types of disruptive events, which have three key attributes: 1) they are extreme events that lie beyond regular experience and current knowledge systems, making them impossible to predict; 2) they deliver an outsized impact (either negative or positive); and 3) despite being outlier events, they are often subsequently rationalized through the hindsight bias; that is, people create explanations for their occurrence in ways that give the illusion that these incidents are explicable and could have been predicted. Black swan events can unleash many of the elements of what Taleb and West (2023) refer to as the *disorder cluster*, namely: uncertainty, variability, incomplete knowledge, change, volatility, chaos, disorder, entropy, time, the unknown, randomness, error, dispersion of outcomes, and turmoil.

Black swan events are typically made more complex by entanglements between multiple systems, such as humans, man-made systems and the natural environment, which can cause cascading effects across domains (Klisanin, 2023a). Thus, climate change is increasing the number of severe weather events, acting as a catalyst for food shortages or causing displacement, which in turn impacts the physical and mental health of individuals and communities and can on occasion pose threats to mortality. Large-scale systemic events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, can unleash levels of uncertainty and volatility which strain individuals' sense of control and exacerbate existing social inequalities (Klisanin, 2023a). As an example, the World Health Organization (2022) estimates that during the first year of the pandemic alone, the global

prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by 25%. From a sociological perspective, these extreme events can lead to disruptive and dramatic social transformation triggering ruptures in social structures that threaten the cultural identity of group members. Social change of this nature may be a result of the systemic risks already mentioned, but can also be produced by political upheaval, economic or legal reforms, technological innovations, violent and powerful protests or mass migrations (Stănciulescu, 2024). As additional threats emerge it is probable that individuals will experience multiple stressful events challenging their ability to protect and preserve opportunities to fulfill their needs (Klisanin, 2023a). There is, therefore, a need for approaches that can support a conceptualization of these threats and their impact as well as guide our collective thinking about how to respond. One such approach is antifragility.

Antifragility

Antifragility was coined by Nassim Taleb (2012) to describe systems and the properties of those systems that strengthen and flourish as a consequence of exposure to stressors, disorder and volatility. Taleb (2012) articulated antifragility as an approach to navigating a world in which prediction has become increasingly difficult and as a countermeasure to extreme and unpredictable events. In his exposition, Taleb (2012) makes a distinction between fragility, resilience and antifragility. Fragility is the tendency of an object or system (and by extension a person or social group) to be easily broken, damaged or depleted when encountering stress in some form. Fragility is not linked to a specific hazard but relates to the uncertainty that results from the wide variety of, and not necessarily known, factors that could cause damage (Chiffi & Curci, 2024). Taleb (2012) considers antifragility to be the counterpoint of fragility; that is, something that actively benefits from encountering turbulence and requires exposure to a certain amount of stress in order to thrive. In between fragility and antifragility lie robustness – when a system demonstrates an ability to withstand a disruptive situation or event such that functioning remains unaffected – and resilience – when an encounter with a stressor or volatility can result in a temporary destabilization or deterioration in performance but is followed by recovery to the previous state (Munoz et al., 2022). Thus, there is a spectrum from fragility, through robustness, to resilience and antifragility and these properties possess overlapping features.

A parallel idea to antifragility has emerged from the field of biology. Hamant (2023, 2024) explores the natural world to identify avenues that facilitate stability and thriving despite volatility in the external environment. Drawing on an understanding of the complex systems found in nature, Hamant (2024) identifies three interconnected abilities: robustness, adaptability and transformability, with robustness defined as the ability of a system to maintain stability (in the short term) and viability (in the long term) in spite of fluctuations. It is interesting to note the similarities between the perspectives of Taleb and Hamant, despite their different disciplinary roots (mathematics in the case of Taleb, and biology in the case of Hamant). The similarity between Hamant's (2023, 2024) notion of robustness and the concept of antifragility continues when considering the properties from which robustness may emerge. Hamant (2023, 2024) identifies variability, heterogeneity, slowness, delays, errors, randomness, and inconsistencies as features of systems which foster adaptability and create equilibrium when encountering external variations. He challenges the neoliberal agenda that privileges individual performance and optimization which, while creating the illusion of abundance, he argues actually weakens the ability of the human race to respond to volatility. Similarly, antifragility does not assume that thriving in volatility is achieved through the pursuit of growth and performance enhancement. In

fact, antifragility may require compromising performance in the short term for longer-term sustainability.

Although the field of antifragility does not yet offer any pre-defined criteria for how systems thrive in conditions of disorder, some properties have been identified as likely preconditions (Taleb, 2012; Johnson & Gheorghe, 2013). Antifragile systems require stress in order to survive, becoming weak in periods of stability (Nikookar et al., 2021). For example, in the field of human health, medical research is beginning to explore the idea of introducing eustress (stress that leads to positive growth) in examining the benefits of intermittent fasting. There is also evidence that certain amounts of stress boost immunity in humans (Taleb & West, 2023). The importance of exposure to stressors has been adopted in the technology industry. Companies including Netflix introduce stressors to their systems, which randomly induce various forms of failure in order to identify weaknesses and assess the potential disruption to services (Johnson & Gheorghe, 2013). In this way, the introduction of small amounts of controlled stress into an organization's systems develops resistance against future stressors that could be catastrophic and promotes the sustainability of that system. Nonetheless, a system can only be antifragile up to a point (Timashev, 2020). In evolutionary terms, extinction events can eliminate even the most antifragile of species and in contemporary society, many organizations would be destroyed in a total economic collapse such as that experienced in Sri Lanka in 2022.

The notion of introducing stressors is connected to another property of antifragile systems; namely the ability to learn from experience and small mistakes, evolving and innovating through trial and error to adapt to challenging experiences. Failing to engage in trial and error processes limits the ability to learn what works in a particular circumstance and limits the ability to handle new information or unexpected challenges (Zheka & Vishnevsky, 2022).

Systems with inherent antifragility also contain redundancies which may seem to be an inefficient use of resources, when viewed from the perspective of optimization and performance. However, in the context of creating antifragile systems, redundancy builds extra capacity that can be used opportunistically. It should, therefore, be understood as an investment, rather than an additional cost (Hamant, 2024; Taleb, 2012). Balancing investment in redundancy with short-term costs is only one of the numerous complementary but competing demands that antifragile systems keep in balance. Favoring one over the other can increase fragility. For example, the trend in the US power grid system is towards greater efficiency, reduction in safety margins and deregulation. These trends increase the fragility of the overall system and therefore the risk that the system could not withstand a severe weather event (Johnson & Gheorghe, 2013).

Antifragility and the individual

Antifragility has been incorporated into a variety of disciplines including computer science (Verhulsta, 2014), risk analysis (Aven, 2015), supply chain management (Nikookar et al., 2021), urban design (Timashev, 2020; Chiffi & Curci, 2024), healthcare systems (Tokalić et al., 2021) and management science (Ramezani & Camerinha-Matos, 2020). More recently, there have also been attempts to consider how this systems level concept might apply to the psychology and performance of individuals, with potential implications for coaching.

In one of the earliest attempts to relate antifragility to the psychology of the individual, Markey-Towler (2018) proposed that antifragility manifests through an individual's personal knowledge as shaped through their cognitive structures (i.e. their personal constructs or schema). These cognitive structures shape the development of the individual's mental maps of the world which govern cognitive content, processing and the causal attributions that individuals make about their own behavior. According to Markey-Towler (2018), an individual's personal knowledge can be considered antifragile if it grows in response to encounters with disorder, uncertainty and chaos. Where events disrupt the rules, norms and expectations embedded within an individual's constructs or schema and can be incorporated within them, personal knowledge expands.

Rather than locating antifragility within changes to cognitive structures and the expansion of personal knowledge, Klisanin (2023a; 2023b) understands antifragility as a distinct mindset. This mindset draws upon character strengths, personal values and engagement with nature, to promote the development of adaptable personal narratives which she argues are necessary for "healthy psychological futures" (p. 340; Klisanin, 2021, cited in Klisanin, 2023b). She locates the ability to develop this type of mindset within individuals' understanding of and willingness to embrace their fundamental interdependence with one another and with the natural world.

Bajaba et al. (2024) in contrast interpret antifragility as a state-like psychological capacity ranging from pure states (e.g. a short-lived mood) to enduring personal characteristics (e.g. personality traits). Finally, Tsai (2024) has focused on the measurement of individual antifragility, developing a 12-item self-report scale that draws on the properties of antifragility outlined in Taleb's (2012) original work. The items of this scale incorporate a distinct behavioral dimension, with examples including, "I actively seek out difficult challenges;" "I often do things by trial and error;" and "I take risks even when I know I might fail."

A striking feature of the attempts to extend antifragility to the psychology of the individual is the diverse nature of the definitions and conceptualizations which hamper attempts to more fully theorize, measure and examine its applications and potential contribution to understanding human experience and behavior. For example, if antifragility is a mindset, how does this mindset manifest in particular information-processing styles, decision-making and problem-solving orientations and behavioral tendencies or repertoires? Is antifragility best understood as a process or an outcome, or are there occasions when it could be both? Responses to these questions have implications for understanding how antifragility might be expressed (i.e. how we might know when an individual is 'demonstrating antifragility' in their attitudes or behaviors), its outputs (i.e. how it might be measured) and its implications (i.e. the consequences of 'being antifragile' for an individual, team or organization).

These ambiguities pose challenges for ascertaining the relevance of antifragility for coaching scholarship and practice. It is not currently clear whether the concept of individual antifragility could add substantively to the multiplicity of methods of personal development now available or whether it would merely contribute one more idea to the already inconsistent and conflicting perspectives that exist within the field of coaching (Fatien et al., 2023). Any attempt to apply antifragility to individuals should, therefore, be undertaken with caution, grounded in an awareness of how coaching itself might be caught within dominant discourses concerning the

self, and existing norms concerning the quest for growth, change and self-improvement as explored below.

Nonetheless, antifragility could enhance the discipline and industry of coaching through another means: namely, contributing to debates that would support a greater theorizing of coaching that some scholars have argued is so vital at this time (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019; Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020; Fatien et al., 2023). Specifically, through engaging with the concept of antifragility we see an opportunity to cast a more critical gaze at some of the foundational assumptions that have dominated much of coaching, the ways in which coaching might have been unwittingly used to support a neoliberal agenda, and its appropriation of an ever-expanding range of ideas, models and methods. This is considered next.

Implications for some of the dominant foundational assumptions of coaching

In her critique of organizational coaching, Bachkirova (2024) argues that the purpose of coaching has tended to be assumed rather than clearly defined which has resulted in some significant and problematic ambiguities. These ambiguities include not only a lack of clarity concerning the application and intended recipient of coaching, but also how coaching is distinct from professional services such as consultancy and therapy and the extent to which coaching can claim to be a profession. In our view, Bachkirova's critique of organizational coaching applies equally to other forms of coaching and draws attention to the need for the field to re-examine a number of its foundational assumptions; that is, those unquestioned principles and beliefs upon which the knowledge and practices of a particular discipline are based (Mahrer, 2000; 2020).

Antifragility does, we suggest, provide a useful lens for re-examining some of the foundational assumptions that have traditionally underpinned many coaching approaches. One of these assumptions concerns the dominant neoliberal worldview which encourages and perpetuates what Hamant (2023; 2024) has described as a cult of performance. The dominance in political theory of the assumption that performance improvement is necessarily positive (Lecocq, 2024) encourages the equating of performance with effectiveness (achieving objectives) and efficiency (with the least possible means). Yet, according to Taleb (2012) this approach ignores systemic risks and creates fragility, leaving systems with little or no capacity for adaptation when faced with volatility. Moreover, a metric of infinite growth makes no sense within the bounds of a planet with finite resources and supplants more complex objectives for individuals and societies such as wellbeing (Hamant, 2024). Fragility at the systemic level of societies and the natural world ultimately threatens individual wellbeing and the ability to thrive or even survive. The focus on optimization and performance in healthcare systems provides an example. The intensification of work from over-optimization and performance improvements can lead to equipment and medicine shortages as well as professional burnout, which compromise patient care, and reduce the ability to react to a crisis (Lecocq, 2024).

Recent years have, of course, witnessed the call for coaching to develop a more critical edge and to challenge many of the established norms arising from neoliberalism (e.g. Du Toit, 2010; Shoukry, 2017; Shoukry & Cox, 2018; Gannon, 2021). However, traditionally, the purpose of coaching has often been framed in terms of enhanced individual performance. One clear manifestation of this perspective can be found in the well-established practice of helping clients establish objectives and SMART goals at the start of a coaching contract. This practice is

underpinned by a foundational assumption that positive change occurs through a programme of change designed to achieve those goals that is largely under the individual's direct influence or control. This approach can be valuable in stable contexts but in unstable contexts can lead to potentially damaging consequences (see Kayes, 2006). From the perspective of antifragility, thriving in complex contexts requires an ability to adapt to unexpected turns of events as opposed to pursuing desired outcomes through adherence to a model, theory, protocol or intervention plan.

An emphasis on the optimization of the individual situates problems and their solution at the individual level, thus limiting the ability of coaching to challenge the social structures and systems which have been central in creating those problems (Du Toit, 2010). Here, we can identify echoes of Philip Cushman's earlier critique of psychology and the challenges that this discipline has faced in its attempts to theorize the concept of the self. Cushman (1990) argues that the self always operates within particular cultural routines, practices and expectations and that the history of Western society illustrates how the self has become ever more individualistic in parallel with industrialization. This has created a self with "specific psychological boundaries, an internal locus of control, and a wish to manipulate the external world for its own personal ends" (Cushman, 1990; p. 600). In the years following World War II, Cushman's analysis points to the emergence of a new era of the self, one that is increasingly empty and fragmented through a dislocation from its culture, traditions and the shared meanings that arise from community. As creating a secular personality (with its emphasis on popularity) came to dominate the earlier emphasis on developing a religiously-inspired character (with its emphasis on morality) (Susman, 1973), the self became positioned as an entity capable of growth, change and improvement, with seemingly "no limits to achievement and enjoyment" (Cushman, 1990, p. 603). Thus, the quest for personal fulfilment and self-actualization flourished as did the industries designed to meet the emerging demand. Cushman (1990) identified advertising and psychotherapy in particular as industries that gained a new significance during this era, emerging as powerful vehicles for both comforting and nourishing the empty self through the promise of unlimited self-improvement. In doing so, as he highlighted, these industries have served to reinforce and reproduce those very systems of power that were actually responsible for generating the empty self.

In what we would see as a legitimate extension of these ideas to the rapid expansion and popularity of coaching, Cushman's (1990) thesis provides a basis for considering the political ideologies and societal discourses that have shaped and continue to shape the discipline and practice of coaching. A significant number of coaching models have appropriated principles, models and methods from psychotherapy (Western, 2012; 2017). Yet if, as Cushman (1990) argues, psychotherapy has played a role in reinforcing the existing systems of power, the adoption by coaching of approaches from this field cannot be assumed to be unproblematic. Additionally, while antifragility has not emerged from the literatures of history, psychology and philosophy that have informed Cushman's analysis, there is a shared concern with how unbridled growth has been promoted as a desirable aspiration without due consideration of its potentially deleterious consequences. The politically expedient discourse of self-improvement and the quest to self-actualize also arguably increase the likelihood of what Bachkirova and Borrington (2020) have identified as the tendency of coaching to be seduced by 'beautiful ideas,' evident in the ever-expanding range of potentially contradictory theories, models, methods and skills that the field claims as part of its knowledge base – a point also made by Fatien et al. (2023). A self that

is concerned with continuous optimization has a limitless need and appetite for new and exciting ideas through which to self-actualize.

In organizational contexts the dominant usage of coaching has similarly been for the purposes of performance improvement (Shoukry 2017). Many coaching practices delivered within organizations are also founded on a neoliberal perspective that reinforces current social structures and norms of behavior or can be used to obstruct change (Shoukry, 2017), evident in the assumption that individuals, teams and organizations can achieve positive results through managing their resources more effectively and efficiently. Antifragility, as noted above, challenges the belief that thriving in complex contexts can be achieved through such an approach which likely relies upon a stable underlying normality that is to some degree predictable and therefore amenable to influence or control. Managing resources more effectively and efficiently can be a highly desirable aim when the environment is stable, consistent and predictable but these features do not typically characterize the events of the modern world.

Given, then, that coaching is delivered in environments characterized by the risk of black swan events, there is a need to assess whether our existing approaches are fit for purpose, especially as many of the commonly used approaches were developed in a comparatively more stable context (Stănciulescu, 2024). We see the potential of antifragility to support coaching conversations that focus on thriving and sustainability in new ways. Some of the ways in which antifragility might support this endeavor are considered next.

Potential implications for coaching of engaging with antifragility

The increasing calls for coaching to be utilized for wider social impact have implications for how the purpose of coaching is defined and conceptualized. Antifragility is offered as a valuable perspective in the spirit of this ongoing endeavor. Its contribution in a volatile and unpredictable world is not, as we see it, one of developing a fundamentally new model of practice. Nor do we currently find a compelling case for attempting to develop decontextualized interventions that focus on increasing the antifragility of individuals. Such approaches appear to us to remain consistent with a neoliberal preoccupation with the self-improvement and self-actualization of individuals that we have sought to critique. Rather, the contribution of antifragility does, we believe, lie in supporting the continuing calls to reconsider the purpose of coaching, theorize coaching more fully, and explore the type of conversations that coaching might now most need to facilitate. In this section, we outline what we think could be some of the themes likely to be present in coaching conversations informed by an understanding of antifragility.

1. Discussing the potential consequences of the pursuit of optimization

Coaching conversations informed by the perspective of antifragility would likely give rise to discussions about the perceived benefits and true costs of a focus on optimization, particularly in the face of increasing complexity. Optimization here refers to notions of continuous growth, efficiency and ongoing performance enhancement. Such conversations would focus on helping clients and the sponsors of coaching recognize the potential negative impacts on individual and systemic sustainability of pursuing optimization without the counterbalancing consideration of other factors, such as long-term viability.

2. Drawing attention to the risk of black swan events

In establishing a purpose for any coaching contract, coaching conversations would likely include drawing attention to the risk of black swan events and their consequences while exploring the readiness of the client's personal, social or organizational systems to adapt. The emphasis is not on trying to predict when and what these events might be, which is unlikely to be possible. Rather, the focus would be on assessing for (perhaps through the deliberate introduction of stressors) and addressing potential fragilities in order to create the capacity to respond when a black swan event occurs.

3. Exploring the potential benefits of under-optimization: shifting the agenda from improved performance and efficiency towards establishing the conditions for a sustainable future

Antifragile systems can appear to be sub-optimal but in fact this 'under performance' creates the conditions that allow for adaptation and transformation; antifragile systems have reserves in numerous forms, ensuring the ability to adapt when required. There is, therefore, an opportunity for coaches to talk with clients about their reserves: What reserves do they have in different domains? Are their reserves adequate or do they need to be increased, developed or refined? The purpose of the coaching would be to recalibrate away from the pursuit of an agenda focused on continuous growth and improved performance towards one of creating the conditions for a sustainable future at both individual and systemic levels.

4. Taking into consideration our interdependence with non-human systems

As Hamant (2024) has argued, considering individual performance in relation to the natural world forces us to adopt a different standpoint, one which emphasizes that "to live is to coexist" (Preamble, para. 5). A conversation that encourages clients to extend their perspective to incorporate a consideration of non-human systems, our impact on them and theirs on us, enables the balance between performance and our sustainability on earth.

5. Exploring the benefits of coaching to promote collective engagement rather than pursuing the performance improvement of individuals

A focus on optimization and the glorification of individual competitiveness has a tendency to create silos (Hamant, 2024). A consideration of the properties of antifragility would likely place greater emphasis on the need for collaboration, giving rise to a more extensive use of group and team coaching. Greater engagement with groups would enable coaches to encourage consideration of multiple perspectives and include a broader range of parameters when working to address complex problems.

6. A greater need for systems thinking and drawing on systemic approaches to coaching

Coaching conversations that draw upon antifragility would seek to facilitate clients' understanding of their role in multiple interacting systems. Consideration would be given to the question of what outcomes these systems require the coaching to deliver (Hawkins & Turner, 2020). The evolution of coaching has seen an increase in the use of systems perspectives (see Lawrence, 2019; 2021) and we see the ongoing development of systemic approaches as essential

to supporting coaches in developing their capacity to engage their clients effectively in conversations about the risk of black swan events.

7. Drawing attention to the value of a mindset of experimentation or trial and error in the context of complex systems

Coaching conversations that consider the principles of antifragility would draw attention to the difficulty of predicting outcomes within complex systems due to their many interconnections and feedback loops. Encouraging clients to adopt a mindset of experimentation and of learning through trial and error in such contexts reduces the likelihood of creating unintended (fragilizing) consequences in interconnected systems.

8. Leveraging the coaching collective for wider social impact

Coaching approaches drawing from other disciplines and perspectives such as sociology (Stănculescu, 2024) and social change (Gannon, 2021; Shoukry, 2017) are providing an important counter perspective to the current dominant worldviews that underpin much of coaching. These approaches locate social problems in the societies from which they emerge rather than psychologizing problems at the individual level. For example, coaching is already being deployed to contribute to broad societal concerns such as climate change which will involve alliances within coaching and with other groups with similar aims (Gannon, 2021). Initiatives such as Climate Change Coaches and Climate Coaching Alliance are examples of collective endeavors that are emerging (Gannon, 2021).

Conclusion

To date, antifragility has remained largely absent from the coaching literature, despite attracting growing interest from other disciplines. This article has sought to address this gap and to outline how the inclusion of antifragility within coaching discourses might make a valuable contribution to debates concerning the theorization of coaching. A central tenet of antifragility is that in order to thrive – and ultimately survive – societies need an alternative to the pursuit of continuous optimization. The argument that the continuous pursuit of efficiency, growth and enhanced performance actually fragilizes individuals, organizations, societies and ultimately our planet, provides what we see as a persuasive lens through which to consider afresh some of the largely unexamined foundational assumptions that continue to underpin much of coaching. If coaching is to legitimately claim that it represents a force for social good, there is an urgent need for the field to engage in a fuller exploration of how to help individuals, organizations and societies understand their essential interdependence and engage meaningfully with the risk of black swan events and the disorder cluster that increasingly characterize the modern world. Antifragility is not a solution to the dilemmas facing coaches and their clients in a complex and volatile world. Yet, it is a compelling if incomplete counter model worthy of further consideration.

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