Reflective Practice and Professional Boundaries in Coaching: An Integrative Review of Ethical Decision-Making and Practitioner Development

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ABSTRACT

Coaching has expanded rapidly as a professional practice, yet in most countries it remains unregulated, and practitioners enter it from widely differing professional backgrounds. Ethical codes issued by professional bodies set out principles and prohibitions, but research with coaches indicates that codes alone rarely resolve the dilemmas encountered in practice, particularly those concerning role boundaries, multi-party contracts and clients whose needs exceed the scope of coaching. Reflective practice and supervision are widely recommended as the means by which coaches develop sound professional judgement, but the mechanisms through which reflection might support ethical conduct are seldom specified. This integrative review examines how reflective practice relates to ethical decision-making, professional boundaries, referral and practitioner development in coaching. It synthesises theoretical and empirical literature on reflective practice, moral psychology, ethical decision-making in the helping professions, coaching ethics, the boundary between coaching and therapeutic practice, and coaching supervision, identified through a purposive search whose limitations are reported transparently. The review finds that the evidence directly linking reflection to ethical behaviour in coaching is thin and largely qualitative, while related evidence from health professions and counselling is more developed but not directly transferable. On this basis the article proposes the Reflective Ethical Judgement Model, a theoretical synthesis that links four forms of reflection (reflection-for-action, reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action and critical self-reflection) to the four components of ethical action described in moral psychology, and identifies five candidate mechanisms: ethical sensitisation, perspective widening, deliberative justification, self-awareness of personal influence and accountable consolidation. The model is applied to five types of boundary in coaching. Implications are drawn for coach education, supervision and professional standards, and five propositions for empirical testing are formulated. The model has not been empirically validated and is offered as a basis for future research.

Keywords: coaching ethics; reflective practice; professional boundaries; supervision; ethical decision-making

INTRODUCTION

Coaching has become an established form of professional support in organisations and in personal life. It is commonly described as a collaborative, goal-oriented process that helps non-clinical clients to enhance performance, learning or well-being. Meta-analytic evidence indicates positive effects of workplace coaching on a range of individual outcomes, although estimates vary with study design and are sensitive to assumptions about publication bias (de Haan & Nilsson, 2023; Theeboom et al., 2014). The quality of the working alliance between coach and client is consistently associated with outcomes (Graßmann et al., 2020). Coaching can also produce unwanted effects, which are reported more often when the relationship is weaker (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2016; Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019).

Despite this growth, coaching is not regulated as a separate profession in most jurisdictions. In Bulgaria, for example, coaching has no statutory regulation, and private certificates, accreditation by professional bodies, vocational training documents and academic degrees certify different things (Natseva, 2026). Coaches enter the field from management, human resources, education, psychology and other backgrounds, and early research on Australian coaches already raised the question of duty of care in an unregulated industry whose practitioners differ widely in background and practice (Spence et al., 2006). Professional bodies have responded with codes of ethics. The current International Coaching Federation (ICF) Code of Ethics came into effect on 1 April 2025 (International Coaching Federation [ICF], 2025), and the fourth version of the Global Code of Ethics for coaches, mentors and supervisors, whose review was completed in late 2025, was announced in February 2026 by EMCC Global with eleven signatory professional bodies (EMCC Global, 2026). The ICF code explicitly commits coaches to continuous self-reflection, defines coaching supervision as a reflective process, and requires coaches to set clear and appropriate boundaries and to manage conflicts of interest (ICF, 2025).

Codes of ethics state principles, obligations and prohibitions. They cannot, however, specify in advance how a practitioner should act in every situation. In a qualitative study of executive coaches, Fatien Diochon and Nizet (2015) found that coaches often regarded codes as irrelevant to their dilemmas, incomplete, or even an obstacle to their own ethical reasoning, and recommended that codes adopt a more questioning tone that prompts reflection. Coaching literature frequently presents reflective practice and supervision as the means by which practitioners translate principles into sound judgement (Hawkins & Smith, 2013; Iordanou et al., 2017). Yet the claim that reflection improves ethical conduct is rarely examined. It is usually asserted rather than explained, and the mechanisms through which reflection might affect ethical perception, reasoning and action are seldom specified.

This article addresses that gap through an integrative review. Its focus is the relationship between reflective practice, ethical decision-making and professional boundaries in coaching, with particular attention to the boundary between coaching and therapeutic practice and to the practitioner's responsibility to refer. The article does not evaluate the effectiveness of coaching, and it reports no new empirical data. Its contribution is a theoretical synthesis that makes explicit the mechanisms through which reflection may support ethical practice, together with propositions that would allow these mechanisms to be tested.

2. Research Problem and Rationale

Three features of coaching make the relationship between reflection and ethics particularly important. First, coaching is a lightly regulated practice whose ethical safeguards depend largely on the judgement of individual practitioners. Where external regulation is weak, internal mechanisms of professional self-correction carry a greater share of the burden. Second, coaching takes place close to other helping practices. Clients may bring material that touches on mental health, relationships or trauma, and the coach must judge when a conversation has moved beyond the scope of coaching. Cavanagh (2005) argued that coaches will inevitably encounter clients with mental health problems and must be able to recognise them. This judgement is made in real time, within the relationship, and often without external guidance. Third, coaching is frequently commissioned by a third party, such as an employer, which creates competing obligations to the individual client and the sponsoring organisation (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014).

The rationale for the review is therefore twofold. Practically, coach education and supervision require a clearer account of what reflection is expected to achieve in ethical terms, so that it can be taught and assessed rather than merely recommended. Theoretically, the literatures on reflective practice, moral psychology and coaching ethics have developed largely in parallel. Integrating them may clarify which forms of reflection are likely to affect which aspects of ethical functioning, and under what conditions reflection may fail to do so.

3. Research Questions and Objectives

The review addresses the following questions:

- **RQ1.** How is reflective practice conceptualised in the literature on professional practice and coaching, and what is known about its relationship to ethical decision-making?
- **RQ2.** What kinds of professional boundaries arise in coaching, and how do they relate to scope of practice and referral?
- **RQ3.** What functions does supervision serve in supporting ethical practice and practitioner development in coaching?
- **RQ4.** Through which mechanisms might reflective practice support ethical professional conduct in coaching, and how can these mechanisms be tested?

The corresponding objectives are to synthesise the relevant literature critically, to distinguish evidence from theoretical claims, to propose a conceptual synthesis of mechanisms, and to derive implications and testable propositions for coach education, supervision and professional standards.

METHODOLOGY

4.1 Design

The study is an integrative literature review. Integrative reviews combine theoretical and empirical sources, including studies with diverse designs, in order to generate new perspectives or frameworks on a topic (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). They differ from systematic reviews, which seek to answer a narrowly defined question through an exhaustive, protocol-driven search, duplicate screening and formal appraisal, often followed by meta-analysis. An integrative approach was chosen because the topic spans several disciplines, the relevant coaching literature is largely conceptual and qualitative, and the aim is theoretical synthesis rather than an estimate of effect (Snyder, 2019).

4.2 Search strategy actually conducted

The literature work was conducted with a general web search engine and with direct retrieval of publisher pages, professional association websites and institutional repositories. Subscription databases such as PsycINFO, Scopus and Web of Science were not accessible. Searches were purposive: they targeted foundational texts on reflective practice and moral psychology, peer-reviewed studies and reviews on coaching ethics, coaching supervision and coaching boundaries, and current professional codes. A recent analytical review of the coaching field (Natseva, 2026) was used as a secondary source for the regulatory context and for locating professional documents; the current ICF Code of Ethics and the announcement of the fourth version of the Global Code of Ethics were then consulted directly on the websites of the issuing bodies. Bibliographic details were checked against publisher pages, repositories and author or association websites where these were accessible. Exact queries and the number of records returned were not logged. No screening statistics are therefore reported, and the review should not be read as exhaustive.

4.3 Proposed search strategy for replication

To support verification and extension of this review, Table 1 sets out a database search strategy that could be used in a systematic follow-up. It has not been executed for this article.

Table 1. Proposed database search strategy for systematic verification (not executed for this article)

Element	Specification
Databases	PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC, Business Source Complete; grey literature from coaching professional bodies
Concept 1: coaching	coach* OR "coaching psychology" OR "executive coaching" OR "life coaching"

Element	Specification
Concept 2: reflection and supervision	"reflective practice" OR reflect *OR reflexiv* OR supervision OR "continuing professional development"
Concept 3: ethics and boundaries	ethic *OR "ethical decision*" OR boundar *OR "scope of practice" OR referral OR "dual relationship*" OR confidential*
Combination	Concept 1 AND (Concept 2 OR Concept 3), with Concept 2 AND Concept 3 as a priority subset
Limits	Peer-reviewed articles, books and official professional documents; English; no date limit
Screening and appraisal	Duplicate independent screening; appraisal with design-appropriate tools; PRISMA flow reporting

Note. Proposed for future replication; no records were retrieved or screened with this strategy for the present article.

4.4 Inclusion criteria, appraisal and synthesis

Sources were included if they (a) presented a foundational theoretical account of reflective practice, ethical decision-making or professional boundaries; (b) reported empirical research or a review concerning ethics, boundaries, referral or supervision in coaching; (c) reported systematic reviews of reflective practice in other helping or health professions; or (d) were current codes or official documents of coaching bodies, accessed directly or through a documented secondary review. Practitioner opinion pieces without an evidential or theoretical basis were excluded. Appraisal was qualitative and focused on design, sample, setting and transferability to coaching. Sources from counselling, psychotherapy and health professions were used where coaching-specific evidence was lacking, and their transfer to coaching is treated as an assumption to be tested. Synthesis was guided by the stages of data reduction, display, comparison and conclusion drawing described by Whittemore and Knafl (2005), applied in a simplified, single-reviewer form. Sources were first grouped into five themes: reflective practice, ethical decision-making, professional boundaries, ethics in coaching and supervision. For each source, the type of evidence, the setting and the principal claims relevant to the research questions were noted, and coaching-specific evidence was distinguished from evidence transferred from other professions (Table 2). The themes were then compared for points of convergence and tension, in particular between the coaching literature, which recommends reflection, and moral psychology, which describes where ethical action can fail. Finally, the four components of ethical action described by Rest (1986) were used as an organising structure for relating forms of reflection to ethical functioning, which produced the conceptual synthesis in Section 9. No second reviewer was involved, and no formal quality appraisal tool was applied.

5. Theoretical Foundations

5.1 Reflective practice

Schön (1983) challenged the view that professional competence consists in applying scientific knowledge to well-defined problems. Practitioners, he argued, face situations of uncertainty, uniqueness and value conflict, which they handle through reflection-in-action, the capacity to think about what one is doing while doing it, and reflection-on-action, the retrospective examination of practice. Killion and Todnem (1991) added reflection-for-action, the anticipatory consideration of future situations. Boud et al. (1985) described reflection as a process of returning to experience, attending to feelings and re-evaluating the experience, and emphasised that emotions can either support or obstruct learning. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle located reflective observation between concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation. A further distinction concerns depth. Mezirow (1991) distinguished reflection on the content or process of a problem from critical reflection on its premises, the assumptions that shape how a problem is perceived in the first place. Critical reflection, in his account, is the route to transformative learning. Fook and Gardner (2007) developed a model of critical reflection for professional practice that examines how personal assumptions and social context shape practice. Moon (2004)

noted that reflection is often treated as self-evidently beneficial, while its forms and outcomes vary considerably. These distinctions matter for ethics: a coach may reflect on the techniques used in a session without examining whether the session should have taken place at all.

5.2 Ethical decision-making

Rest (1986) proposed that ethical action requires four distinct psychological components: moral sensitivity, the recognition that a situation contains an ethical issue; moral judgement, the reasoning about what ought to be done; moral motivation, the prioritising of ethical values over competing interests; and moral character, the persistence and skill needed to carry out the chosen action. Failure at any component can produce unethical conduct even when the others are intact. Jones (1991) added that the perceived moral intensity of an issue, including the magnitude of its consequences and the proximity of those affected, influences whether it is recognised as ethical at all. Kitchener (1984) distinguished an intuitive level of ethical reasoning, based on personal moral sense and experience, from a critical-evaluative level, which draws on rules, principles and ethical theory to examine and justify intuitive responses. Research in moral psychology suggests that many moral judgements are generated rapidly and intuitively, with reasoning often following as justification (Haidt, 2001). Work on bounded ethicality further shows that people can fail to see the ethical dimension of their decisions, a process described as ethical fading, through which self-interest and framing allow ethical considerations to recede (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). These accounts imply that ethical failure is often a failure of perception and framing rather than of knowledge about principles.

5.3 Professional boundaries

In the clinical literature, Gutheil and Gabbard (1993) distinguished boundary crossings, departures from customary practice that may be harmless or even helpful, from boundary violations, which harm the client or exploit the relationship. The distinction emphasises that boundaries are not fixed rules but judgements about the meaning and consequences of particular actions in context. Transferring this distinction to coaching requires caution, because coaching relationships are typically less asymmetric than clinical ones and are often embedded in organisational settings. Nonetheless, the underlying insight, that boundary decisions require context-sensitive judgement rather than mechanical rule-following, is directly relevant.

6. Critical Review of the Literature

6.1 Evidence on reflection and professional performance

The most substantial body of evidence on reflective practice comes from the health professions. A systematic review of reflection in health professions education concluded that reflective capacity varies between individuals, can be developed and may support deeper learning and the handling of complex situations, but that definitions are inconsistent and evidence linking reflection to improved practice outcomes is limited (Mann et al., 2009). Research on counsellor and therapist development describes continuous reflection as a central process through which practitioners develop over their careers, and identifies its absence as associated with stagnation (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). These findings support the plausibility of a link between reflection and professional competence, but they do not show that reflection improves ethical conduct specifically.

6.2 Evidence on ethics in coaching

Among the sources covered by this review, empirical research on ethics in coaching is sparse and predominantly qualitative. Fatien Diochon and Nizet (2015), analysing ethical challenges reported by 27 executive coaches, identified three ways in which coaches experienced limits of ethical codes: as not relevant to the situation, as having shortcomings, and as obstacles to their own ethics. They concluded that ethical decision-making in coaching is subjective, emotional, social and value-driven, and that codes should invite reflection rather than prescribe responses. Duffy and Passmore (2010) proposed an ethical decision-making framework for coaching psychologists, developed with practitioners, consisting of sequential but non-linear stages. Iordanou et al. (2017) examined how values shape ethical practice in coaching. Taken together, this literature consistently positions

reflection as the means through which coaches move from codes to decisions, but, within the literature reviewed here, it provides little evidence about whether, or how, reflection changes ethical behaviour.

6.3 Evidence on boundaries, mental health and referral

Spence et al. (2006) reported early findings on the diverse backgrounds and practices of Australian coaches and raised concerns about duty of care in an unregulated industry, including coaches' capacity to recognise clients with psychological difficulties. Cavanagh (2005) argued that executive coaches will encounter clients with mental health problems and need to be able to recognise when coaching is inappropriate or insufficient. Research on unwanted effects of coaching shows that clients report side effects of low to moderate intensity, that these are related to the quality of the relationship (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2016), and that the overall evidence on negative effects is still limited (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019). Natseva (2026) notes that evidence for organisational coaching does not automatically transfer to personal or holistic forms of coaching, in which the boundary with therapeutic work may be closer.

6.4 Evidence on supervision

Coaching supervision has been described as serving developmental, resourcing and qualitative functions, reflecting a tradition in the helping professions that distinguishes formative, restorative and normative purposes (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012; Hawkins & Smith, 2013). In an interview study with 33 executive coaches and 29 purchasers of coaching in Australia and New Zealand, Lawrence and Whyte (2014) found that coaches saw the predominant function of supervision as developmental, whereas purchasers emphasised quality control, although only a minority required supervision as part of quality assurance. Bachkirova et al. (2011) presented a range of theoretical approaches to coaching and mentoring supervision. In the literature covered by this review, evidence on supervision outcomes in coaching is limited, and claims that supervision improves ethical practice rest mainly on professional consensus and transfer from other fields.

6.5 Summary of the evidence

Four conclusions emerge from the literature covered by this review. First, reflection is consistently recommended as a basis for ethical coaching practice, but no direct evidence for its effect on ethical behaviour in coaching was identified. Second, moral psychology indicates that ethical failures often occur at the stage of perception and framing, which suggests that reflection may be most valuable where it changes what practitioners notice rather than what they know. Third, the boundary between coaching and therapeutic work is a recurring source of ethical difficulty, and the capacity to recognise it depends on practitioner judgement. Fourth, supervision is widely recommended but its ethical functions are under-researched in coaching. Table 2 summarises the main bodies of evidence and their limitations.

Table 2. Main bodies of evidence reviewed and their limitations

Area	Principal sources	Nature and limitations of the evidence
Reflection in health professions	Mann et al. (2009)	Systematic review; reflection can be developed and assessed; limited evidence of effects on practice; variable definitions; not coaching-specific
Practitioner development	Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003)	Qualitative and longitudinal research with counsellors and therapists; transfer to coaches is assumed
Ethics in coaching	Duffy and Passmore (2010); Fatien Diochon and Nizet (2015); Iordanou et al. (2017)	Conceptual frameworks and qualitative studies with small samples; no outcome data on ethical behaviour
Boundaries and mental health	Cavanagh (2005); Spence et al. (2006)	Conceptual analysis and early survey findings; limited recent empirical work

Unwanted effects of coaching	Graßmann and Schermuly (2016); Schermuly and Graßmann (2019)	Client-reported side effects; small literature, mostly from one research group
Coaching supervision	Hawkins and Smith (2013); Bachkirova et al. (2011); Lawrence and Whyte (2014)	Theoretical models and one interview study; no controlled outcome studies identified

Note. Summary prepared for this review; it does not result from a systematic search.

7. Professional Boundaries and Scope of Practice in Coaching

7.1 Coaching and neighbouring helping practices

Coaching is usually distinguished from counselling and psychotherapy by its client population and purpose. Coaching works with non-clinical clients towards self-generated goals related to performance, learning or well-being; counselling helps clients address emotional, relational or adjustment difficulties; psychotherapy treats mental disorders and is a regulated profession in many countries; mentoring draws openly on the mentor's own experience; and consulting provides expert analysis and recommendations. In practice, these distinctions blur. Coaches use techniques derived from cognitive-behavioural, solution-focused and psychodynamic traditions, and the content of coaching conversations may move into areas that resemble counselling. The ethical issue is therefore not whether a coach uses psychological methods, but whether the coach recognises when the purpose and scope of the work have changed.

7.2 Five types of boundary

For the purposes of this review, five types of boundary in coaching are distinguished. The typology is an analytical proposal derived from the literature reviewed above. *Scope boundaries* concern the line between coaching and therapeutic or other specialist help, and the corresponding duty to refer. *Role boundaries* concern shifts between coaching, mentoring, advising and managing, including situations in which a manager acts as coach to a subordinate. *Contractual boundaries* concern obligations to multiple parties, especially in three-way contracts with sponsoring organisations, where agendas may diverge (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014). *Relational boundaries* concern dual relationships, dependency, self-disclosure and the coach's own needs within the relationship. *Informational boundaries* concern confidentiality and its limits, the reporting of information to sponsors and the handling of personal data. Table 3 summarises how each boundary type may present and which reflective questions are relevant.

Table 3. Five types of boundary in coaching and relevant reflective questions

Boundary type	Typical presentation	Reflective questions
Scope	Persistent distress, symptoms suggestive of a mental health difficulty, trauma-related material	Has the purpose of the work changed? What would I advise a colleague to do? Am I avoiding a referral conversation?
Role	Moving from coaching to advising, mentoring or managing; manager acting as coach	Which role am I in now, and does the client know? Has the client agreed to this shift?
Contractual	Divergent expectations of client and sponsor in three-way contracts	Whose interests does this action serve? What did each party agree to, and what has changed?
Relational	Dual relationships, dependency, extended self-disclosure, social contact	Whose needs does this serve? Would I be comfortable explaining it to a supervisor?
Informational	Requests for reports to sponsors; sensitive personal data; limits of confidentiality	What was agreed about confidentiality? What would the client expect, and what does the law require?

Note. Analytical typology proposed in this article; not validated.

7.3 Referral as an ethical judgement

Referral is often presented as a procedural obligation: when a client's needs exceed the coach's competence, the coach refers. In practice, referral involves several judgements, each vulnerable to error. The coach must notice indicators that may suggest a mental health difficulty, interpret them without diagnosing, decide whether they affect the appropriateness of coaching, discuss them with the client in a way that preserves dignity and autonomy, and decide whether coaching should pause, continue alongside other support, or end. Each step has an intuitive and a critical-evaluative dimension (Kitchener, 1984). Ethical fading may also operate: a coach with a commercial interest in continuing the engagement, or a strong wish to be helpful, may fail to frame persistent distress as a scope issue (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Referral is therefore an area in which reflection may have a specific protective function, by making such interests and framings visible. Notably, the current ICF code addresses boundaries, conflicts of interest and the coach's duty to seek professional guidance where necessary, but it does not set out a referral procedure as such (ICF, 2025). Judging when and how to refer is thus left largely to the practitioner.

8. Reflective Practice, Supervision and Practitioner Development

8.1 Reflection and ethical decision-making

The theoretical foundations suggest that different forms of reflection may contribute to different components of ethical action. Reflection-for-action, such as considering in advance how a contract with a sponsor will handle confidentiality, may prevent dilemmas from arising and prepare responses. Reflection-in-action may support moral sensitivity during a session, for example by noticing that a client's account has shifted from a work challenge to sustained hopelessness. Reflection-on-action allows deliberate reasoning about what happened and what should be done next, engaging the critical-evaluative level described by Kitchener (1984). Critical self-reflection, in Mezirow's (1991) sense, examines the coach's own assumptions, needs and interests, which may otherwise distort perception and motivation. Research on countertransference in therapy indicates that practitioners' own reactions can influence their work and that self-insight helps to manage this influence (Gelso & Hayes, 2007); the concept of the self as an instrument of coaching expresses a similar idea (Bachkirova, 2011).

8.2 Supervision as structured reflection

Supervision can be understood as reflection conducted with another person who brings an external perspective, professional standards and accountability. Hawkins and Smith (2013) describe a model in which supervision may focus on the client, the coach's interventions, the relationship, the coach's own process, the supervisory relationship and the wider context. This structure is relevant to ethics because it allows a dilemma to be examined from several angles, including those that the coach may be unable or unwilling to see alone. At the same time, supervision is not a guarantee of ethical practice. Its quality depends on the supervisor's competence, the coach's openness and the presence of genuine challenge, and the purchaser's expectation of quality control can sit uneasily with the coach's developmental use of supervision (Lawrence & Whyte, 2014).

8.3 Practitioner development

Developmental research on counsellors and therapists describes a long-term progression in which practitioners move from reliance on external rules and techniques towards an integrated professional self, with continuous reflection as a central driver (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). If a comparable progression applies to coaches, ethical competence would develop from knowledge of codes, through supervised application to concrete dilemmas, to an internalised capacity to recognise and reason about ethical issues in real time. This hypothesis has not been tested with coaches, and the diversity of coaches' entry routes makes a single developmental pathway unlikely.

9. Integrative Conceptual Synthesis: The Reflective Ethical Judgement Model

9.1 Status of the model

The Reflective Ethical Judgement Model is the original contribution of this article. It is a theoretical synthesis derived from the literature reviewed above and has not been empirically validated. Its purpose is to make explicit the mechanisms through which reflective practice may support ethical conduct in coaching, so that they can be taught, examined in supervision and tested in research.

9.2 Structure

The model links four forms of reflection, namely reflection-for-action, reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action and critical self-reflection, to the four components of ethical action described by Rest (1986), and proposes five mechanisms through which the link may operate. Four of the mechanisms correspond to the four forms of reflection. The fifth, accountable consolidation, depends on supervised reflection, which is not a fifth category in this classification but an additional social form in which reflection-on-action and critical self-reflection are conducted with a supervisor or peer. Table 4 presents the model. The mechanisms are as follows. *Ethical sensitisation* refers to the increased likelihood of noticing the ethical dimension of a situation, counteracting ethical fading. *Perspective widening* refers to the consideration of the interests and viewpoints of all parties, including absent ones such as a sponsoring organisation or the client's family. *Deliberative justification* refers to the explicit reasoning through which intuitive responses are tested against principles, codes and consequences, corresponding to Kitchener's critical-evaluative level. *Self-awareness of personal influence* refers to the recognition of the coach's own needs, interests, emotions and assumptions that may bias perception or motivation. *Accountable consolidation* refers to the process through which decisions and their rationale are made explicit to another person, most often a supervisor, and integrated into the coach's future practice.

Table 4. The Reflective Ethical Judgement Model

Form of reflection	Main ethical component (Rest, 1986)	Principal mechanism	Example in coaching
Reflection-for-action	Moral sensitivity; moral judgement	Perspective widening	Anticipating confidentiality conflicts before a three-way contract
Reflection-in-action	Moral sensitivity	Ethical sensitisation	Noticing during a session that the client's concern has shifted to sustained hopelessness
Reflection-on-action	Moral judgement	Deliberative justification	Reasoning after a session about whether to continue, pause or refer
Critical self-reflection	Moral motivation	Self-awareness of personal influence	Recognising that a commercial interest favours continuing the engagement
Additional social form: supervised reflection	Moral character; supports all components	Accountable consolidation	Explaining the referral decision to a supervisor and integrating the learning

Note. Theoretical synthesis proposed in this article; not empirically validated. The first four rows form the classification of reflection used in the model. Supervised reflection is not a fifth category but a social form in which reflection-on-action and critical self-reflection are conducted with another person; it is listed separately because it is the condition for the fifth mechanism. Links between forms, components and mechanisms are hypotheses.

9.3 Conditions and limits

The model specifies conditions under which reflection is unlikely to support ethical conduct. Reflection may be superficial, descriptive rather than analytical, or performed to satisfy requirements rather than to learn (Moon,

2004). It may also serve as rationalisation, providing post hoc justification for intuitive decisions rather than testing them (Haidt, 2001). Reflection conducted alone is limited by the practitioner's blind spots, which is why the model assigns a distinct role to accountable consolidation through supervision or peer review. Finally, reflection cannot compensate for missing knowledge: a coach who does not know the indicators of serious mental health difficulty cannot reflect their way to recognising them. The model therefore treats reflection as a complement to, not a substitute for, training in ethics, boundaries and the recognition of situations requiring referral.

9.4 Application to the five boundary types

Applied to the boundary types in Section 7, the model suggests that different mechanisms are most relevant to different boundaries. Scope boundaries depend mainly on ethical sensitisation and self-awareness, because the main risk is failing to notice, or preferring not to notice, that a client's needs exceed coaching. Contractual and informational boundaries depend mainly on perspective widening and reflection-for-action, because the main risk lies in not anticipating divergent interests. Role and relational boundaries depend mainly on self-awareness and accountable consolidation, because the coach's own needs and position are directly implicated. These differentiated links are hypotheses that could guide the design of supervision and training.

9.5 Testable propositions

The model yields the following propositions for empirical research. Each is linked to a form of reflection, a mechanism and, where relevant, a boundary type, so that together they cover all five mechanisms. They are hypotheses, not findings.

P1. Coaches who engage in structured reflection-for-action before engagements with three-party contracts will report fewer unanticipated conflicts concerning confidentiality and reporting than coaches who do not (reflection-for-action; perspective widening; contractual and informational boundaries).

P2. Training in critical self-reflection will increase coaches' recognition of ethical issues in standardised case vignettes, particularly issues involving their own commercial or personal interests (critical self-reflection; self-awareness of personal influence; relational and scope boundaries).

P3. The depth of coaches' written reflections, assessed with a coding scheme for levels of reflection, will be positively associated with the quality of ethical reasoning in vignette-based assessments (reflection-on-action; deliberative justification).

P4. Coaches receiving regular supervision will identify referral indicators in standardised vignettes more accurately than comparable coaches without supervision, after controlling for professional background (supervised reflection; accountable consolidation; scope boundaries and referral).

P5. The association between reflective practice and ethical sensitivity will be stronger for issues of low perceived moral intensity than for issues of high moral intensity, which are more likely to be recognised without reflection (reflection-in-action; ethical sensitisation; Jones, 1991).

These propositions could be tested through vignette studies, longitudinal studies of coach training cohorts and comparisons of supervised and unsupervised practitioners. Because coaches self-select into supervision and reflective training, causal claims would require randomised or quasi-experimental designs.

DISCUSSION

This review has examined the widely held view that reflective practice supports ethical conduct in coaching. The literature supports the plausibility of this view but does not demonstrate it. Reflection is recommended in coaching codes and supervision literature, and evidence from health professions and counselling suggests that reflection can be developed and plays a part in professional development. However, the literature covered by this review contains no direct evidence that reflection improves ethical behaviour in coaching; studies not

identified by the purposive search may exist. The contribution of this review is to specify why reflection might help, which forms of reflection might help with which aspects of ethical action, and under what conditions it might fail.

The synthesis has three implications for how ethics in coaching is understood. First, if many ethical failures arise from failures of perception and framing, as moral psychology suggests (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004), then ethics training that focuses only on knowledge of codes addresses the wrong component. Reflection is most valuable where it changes what practitioners notice. Second, the boundary between coaching and therapeutic work should be treated as a recurring ethical judgement rather than a fixed line. Referral is a sequence of judgements, each vulnerable to error and self-interest, and the model locates specific reflective mechanisms at each point. Third, codes and reflection are complementary. Fatien Diochon and Nizet (2015) found that coaches experienced codes as insufficient for their dilemmas; the model suggests that codes provide the content for deliberative justification, while reflection provides the conditions under which the content becomes relevant.

Several counterarguments should be acknowledged. Reflection may be used defensively, to produce documentation that protects the practitioner rather than to examine practice. Mandatory reflective requirements may encourage ritual compliance. The emphasis on individual reflection may also obscure structural issues, such as commercial pressures in coaching markets or organisational agendas in sponsored coaching, that individual practitioners cannot resolve alone. The model addresses some of these concerns by assigning a distinct role to accountable consolidation and by specifying conditions under which reflection fails, but it remains a model of individual and dyadic practice rather than of professional systems.

11. Implications for Coaching Education and Professional Practice

For coach education, the model suggests that ethics should be taught not only as knowledge of codes but as the development of ethical perception. Case-based learning with deliberately ambiguous vignettes, in which the ethical issue is not labelled in advance, is a plausible way of training ethical sensitisation; whether it is more effective than instruction on principles is a question for research (P2). Training in the recognition of indicators that may require referral is a necessary complement, because reflection cannot substitute for missing knowledge. Assessment of reflective writing should distinguish descriptive accounts from analytical and critical reflection.

For supervision, the model suggests that supervisors may usefully attend to all five mechanisms rather than only to case content. Questions about what the coach noticed, whose perspectives were considered, how a decision was justified, what the coach's own interests were and how the decision will inform future practice correspond to the five mechanisms. Supervisors should also be alert to the possibility that reflection is serving as rationalisation.

For professional standards, the review supports the recommendation that codes adopt an interrogative style that prompts reflection (Fatien Diochon & Nizet, 2015). Standards could specify not only that coaches should reflect and receive supervision but what ethical functions reflection and supervision are expected to serve. In lightly regulated contexts, such as Bulgaria, where coaching is not a regulated profession (Natseva, 2026), professional bodies and training providers carry particular responsibility for making these expectations explicit.

12. Limitations and Future Research

This review has several limitations. The literature search was purposive and conducted without access to subscription databases; relevant studies may have been missed, and the search cannot be reproduced exactly. The proposed search strategy in Table 1 is offered for future verification and has not been executed. Much of the evidence comes from health professions and counselling, and its transfer to coaching is an assumption. The coaching-specific evidence is small and largely qualitative. The Reflective Ethical Judgement Model and the boundary typology are theoretical syntheses that have not been reviewed by practitioners or tested empirically. Finally, the author holds professional positions in organisations connected to the author of one of the cited sources, as disclosed in the declarations.

Future research should first conduct a systematic search using the strategy in Table 1 to establish the scope of the available evidence. Content validation of the model with experienced coaches, supervisors and ethicists would test whether the mechanisms are recognisable and complete. Vignette-based studies could test propositions P2 to P5, and longitudinal studies of coach training cohorts could examine whether reflective capacity and ethical sensitivity develop together. Research should also examine coaches from different professional backgrounds, since the relationship between reflection and ethics may differ between coaches with and without prior training in helping professions.

CONCLUSION

Reflective practice is widely presented as the foundation of ethical coaching, but the mechanisms through which it might support ethical conduct have rarely been specified, and direct evidence remains limited. This integrative review has drawn together literature on reflective practice, moral psychology, professional boundaries, coaching ethics and supervision to propose the Reflective Ethical Judgement Model. The model links four forms of reflection to the four components of ethical action through five candidate mechanisms and applies them to five types of boundary in coaching, with particular attention to scope of practice and referral. It suggests that reflection is most valuable where it changes what practitioners notice, where it makes their own interests visible and where it is made accountable to others. The model is a theoretical proposal. Its value for coach education, supervision and professional standards depends on the empirical tests that it is designed to make possible.

Declarations

Author contributions. J.M. is the sole author and was responsible for the conception of the review, the literature search and synthesis, the development of the conceptual model, and the writing and revision of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest. The author is affiliated with the Happy Life Institute for Direct Change Science, Sofia, Bulgaria, and serves as Director of Educational Activity at Happy Life Academy® and as Deputy Managing Director of the International Association of Professional Therapists and Coaches (IAPTC®). Prof. Stoyana Natseva, the author of one of the sources cited in this review (Natseva, 2026), is the founder of the Happy Life Institute for Direct Change Science, the founder and CEO of Happy Life Academy® and the President of IAPTC®. The author declares no other competing interests.

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Ethics. This article is a literature review and involved no human participants or data collection; ethical approval was therefore not required.

Data availability. No new empirical data were collected for this study. The article is based on the analysis of previously published literature and publicly available professional documents, all of which are cited in the reference list.

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