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Choosing a Coach: The influence of age, gender and experience in shaping preferences for business coaches.

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Abstract

The present study examined people's preference for an executive coach. A sample of 504 participants completed a questionnaire in which they were asked to rate eight potential coaches stratified by sex (male versus female), age (under 40 versus over 50 years), as a proxy for experience, and background experience (business vs psychology). There was a significant main effect of gender, with female coaches being preferred over male coaches; effect of experience, with less experienced coaches being preferred over those with more experience; and background, with those from a business background being preferred over those with a psychology background. There were more important interaction effects, particularly around the sex of the coach. These results are discussed in relation to the extant literature on preferences for different types of professionals. Implications and limitations are noted.

Keywords: Client preferences; Coaching; Business; Psychology

Practitioner Statement:

Potential clients have to choose between different coaches. The question is what sort of factors they take into consideration when making this choice?

Practice Points

1. The central question is what clients (also sometimes referred to as coachees in the literature) look for in a potential coach? Most clients have a choice of coaches who give information of their experience and approach but it is not clear how clients make the choice?

2. The extensive literature about choice of doctor suggests that people have strong preferences for a similarity effect; a bias towards the same age group, gender and ethnicity. The question is whether this is the case in coaching.
3. An important question is to know what clients want, particularly about the coaches' business vs psychology/counselling experience as this has implication about how they advertise their services

Introduction

Many organisations put considerable assets into educating their senior managers, which now often involves coaching, an intervention focused on their personal and professional development. Often managers are given a choice of “organisation-approved” coaches that they believe will help them most and suit their personal needs. Some have coaches chosen for them while others are given a short list, with a relevant biography to help them choose. There is an important difference between the focus, content and desired outcome of business vs personal coaching (Scoular, 2020). In this study we are particularly focusing on coaching in a business context.

This study concerns three factors that potential clients take into account when choosing a business coach. It is one of a series of studies concerned with the choice of a professional, like a doctor (Furnham et al., 2006), a dentist (Furnham & Swami, 2009, Swami et al., 2011), a counsellor (Furnham & Swami, 2008), a lawyer (Furnham et al., 2012) or an accountant (Furnham & McClelland, 2019).

Choice of Professional

The professional preference literature has been dominated by a focus on choice of medical doctor and has focused on a few demographic factors. There are many websites and blogs that suggest how to “choose the best/right doctor” for those who have choice. Indeed there is a research literature on “doctor shopping” especially when it comes to seeking out complementary medicine practitioners (Furnham, 2005).

There is a well-established finding showing a preference for *same-sex practitioners* of general medical care (Ahmad et al., 2002; Derose et al., 2001; Furnham et al., 2006), particularly when patients present with intimate health concerns (Kerssens et al., 1997; Plunkett et al., 2002). Female practitioners appear to be judged to have better personal and emotional skills than male practitioners (Shah & Ogden, 2006) and patients also report more participatory consultations with female practitioners (Cooper-Patrick et al., 1999). However, this preference seems less apparent when looking for professionals giving financial advice. In this study we investigate whether the same-sex preference occurs in coaching.

Patients also show a preference for practitioners from their own ethnic background (Ahmad et al., 2002; Bichsel & Mallinckrodt, 2001; Saha et al., 2000). This may influence patient-practitioner communication and promotes patient feelings of participation in the consultation (van Ryn & Burke, 2000). Patients however seem more accepting of practitioners from ethnic groups other than their own, especially if the practitioner displays a positive personal manner and evidence of technical expertise (Gerbert et al., 2003; Shah & Ogden, 2006).

Professionals' amount of *salient* experience is obviously an important factor. This is usually expressed by considering the age of the professional, but the results of studies are more equivocal. Some studies suggest that practitioner age does not influence patient preferences (e.g., Furnham et al., 2006), but other work suggests that patients prefer older practitioners because they are seen as having better interpersonal skills and are more thorough in the consultation compared with younger practitioners (Kite et al., 1991; McKinstry & Yang, 1994). Some patients perceive younger practitioners as more up-to-date (McKinstry & Yang, 1994) and as having better technical and explanatory skills (Shah & Ogden, 2006). There is clearly

seen to be a trade-off between experience/knowledge, interpersonal skills and having state-of-the-art skills. Patients, however, usually prefer practitioners with better qualifications and experience (Bornstein et al., 2000).

There is always the assumption that professionals have received accredited training in their relevant field and this provides them with the skill set to appropriately care or advise the client. Though many professionals may have additional and wider experiences within or even outside their expertise. This can be seen as a benefit if it relates to a professional's diagnostic and advisory skills. Further, professionals are expected to be regulated or associated with a professional body that governs their behaviour and interaction with clients to ensure the professional is working in the best interest of the client.

In medicine, changes in training and accreditation, the delivery of advice “electronically” (as opposed to face-to-face), as well as the training and certification of new therapists/therapy has meant that many – but not all – people have more choice in the clinicians, professionals and other experts that they consult (Ellis, 2022). Research in this area is dominated by hypothetical studies because of the demands of experimental research. There are far fewer qualitative studies which can throw additional light on the subtlety and complexity of the actual decisions made when choosing helping professionals. We believe that this is one of the first studies in this area and reliant on the experimental method described above.

Coaching

There has been, since the millennium, a tremendous growth in business coaching as well as research in the area (de Haan & Duckworth, 2015; Scoular, 2020). The area has also attracted a great deal of research (Bright & Crockett, 2012; de Haan, 2021; de Haan et al., 2011; 2016; Grant, 2013; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Ibarra & Scoular, 2019; Kaufman & Coutu, 2009). Indeed, there are now a number of academic journals dedicated to coaching: *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*; *The Coaching Psychologist*; *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*. For many the fundamental question still remains, namely empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of coaching (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006; Graßmann, & Schermuly, 2016; Jones et al., 2015; Molyneux et al., 2021; Rekalde, et al. 2015; Sonesh, et al., 2015; Theeboom et al., 2014).

The emerging literature has now covered a great number of topics (Barner & Higgins, 2007, Bartlett et al., 2014; Berry, 2020; Gan & Chong, 2015; Grover & Furnham, 2021; Olson, 2008; Styhre et al., 2010). For instance, researchers have looked at very particular issues like coachee characteristics (Bozer et al, 2013; Erdos et al, 2021; Nicky, & Terblanche, 2020) but also, and more importantly, the dynamic between coach and coachee (van Coller-Peter, & Manzini, 2020; Williams 2021; Wycherley, & Cox, 2008).

One of the fundamental issues that has been explored and thought to be very important is the relationship between coach and client (Baron & Morin, 2009; Boyce et al., 2010). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that the client-coach relationship is a major determinant of the success of coaching (McKenna & Davis, 2009). Hence the importance of choosing the most suitable coach to maximize insight and learning.

People wishing to engage a business coach are often spoilt for choice. Furnham (2020) listed eight criteria that may be interesting in choosing a coach: **Training**: Has the coach had formal, independent, accredited training in coaching? **Experience**: What is their total experience of coaching *and* of business in particular? How many people have they coached at what level and in what sector with what effect? **Style and Chemistry**: Do they inspire trust; seem similar in energy, politics and humour. **Intellectual Framework**: What is their theoretical approach/process; can they explain it? **Measuring success**: How outcomes will be measured; when, why and how? **Supervision**: Is the coach supervised and supported by others? **Self-Awareness**: How aware is the coach of his/her strengths and weaknesses. What is their motivation for doing it? Do they come across as adjusted? And why have they chosen this career? These questions are about style as much as background, and do not include the obvious and simple issue of whether the two parties like and trust one another.

Within the coaching world, it is often recommended that a client should meet more than one coach for a ‘chemistry meeting’ before deciding who to work with. This allows them an informed choice though the coaches may be pre-chosen or assessed by others (e.g., people in HR) and those actually paying for the coaching.

This Study

This study looked at coach preference focusing on three factors, and with the aim of answering two questions: is the sex, age and experience of a coach important in determining the choice, and is there a sex difference with respect to the preference observed?.

First, we examined gender/sex preference as a main effect (are men or women chosen more often) as well as an interaction effect to test the same-sex preference effect. Given the similarity

of coaching to counselling, at least in the eyes of many clients, we expected to find evidence of the same-sex effect (H1): that is, participants would show a preference for a coach of their same gender.

Second, we looked at age, which may be seen as a “code” or proxy for experience, though we accept people may have had different experiences. Many people see a business coach as a wise and experienced person who has “been there and done that” however others would prefer a younger person more aware of current trends and technology. We anticipated from experience of teaching coaches that there would be an “experience effect”, such that participants would show a preference for older coaches (H2). However, there might be a curvilinear relationship – wanting plenty of experience, but not be ‘too old’/out of touch. Further, some kind of age/experience matching may occur, such that senior executives seem to want someone who is not too much younger than themselves, essentially a peer, while younger, ‘high potentials’ may have quite different preferences about the profile of coach they expect to get the most out of. This suggests an interaction between age of coach and coachee.

Third, we examined the background or experience of the coach. For many clients the coach provides good council on a number of issues including personal development, interpersonal relations as well as micro-and macro-business issues. While it seems the case that clients choose, and businesses offer, coaches for a range of reasons they may prefer a coach with training more in psychology than business, though that may well depend on essentially why they are choosing to have coaching. It has been our experience that, while not always openly admitted, many clients are as equally interested in the former than the latter. However, one could equally build a hypothesis that many people are slightly threatened by ‘psychologists’ (even if intrigued and respecting of the profession). ‘Seeing a psychologist’ has a very different

implication than ‘working with a coach’. It can feel more remedial and more like it might involve therapy. However, many new clients can be skeptical that someone who has not done a job very similar to their own can have much to offer. For example, lawyers often seek a coach who is a former lawyer, partly because they are often looking for more mentoring advice than non-directive coaching – and see that someone with a business background is more likely to be able to offer that. In this study, because of the participants we had, we hypothesise that participants would show a preference for those who have a psychology, over a business background (H3).

Method

Participants

A total of 504 participants completed the questionnaire: 254 were men and 249 were women. They ranged from 20 to 73 years old, with a mean age of 38.42 years ($SD = 8.36$). They stated their employment which varied enormously. About seventy percent were graduates. In total 33.9% were single and 44.2% married, with 45.4% having no children. They rated themselves on a number of dimensions including their religious and political beliefs and general health status.

Materials

Preferences for Coaches (Furnham & Swami, 2009): To examine preferences for coaches we adapted a scale first used by Furnham and Swami (2009). These were their instructions:

Imagine that you work for an organisation that is committed to training and developing its employees. This organisation has invested in some executive coaching for you. Coaching is used in organisational settings to improve employee, team and organisational performance in a number of ways, including but not limited to: helping shorten the learning curve in a new organization, country or role, succession planning and career planning, to improve job satisfaction, flexibility, interpersonal relationships, and leadership and management skills. Coaching consists of a one-to-one relationship with a coach who facilitates behaviour change in the coachee (i.e. you). Coaching tends to be non-directive so the coach will not tell you what to do or give you advice

*like a mentor might do but they provide you a structure to increase your self-awareness and achieve your work goals. Your organisation has hired a coaching firm that has a number of coaches from which you can select your coach. Below are each coach's details. Please rate each coach in terms of your preference to work with them from 1 (absolutely **don't want** to see) to 10 (absolutely **would love** to see). A score of 5 or 6 indicates no strong preference.*

Demographic details consisting of sex, age, ethnicity, and marital status were also measured.

Procedure

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant university ethics committees. The authors directly recruited participants from business meetings. Once participation had been agreed, participants completed a two-page paper-and-pencil questionnaire. All participants took part on a voluntary basis and were not remunerated for participation. Once participants returned their completed questionnaires to the experimenters, they were verbally debriefed.

Results

The means and standard deviations for the eight stimulus conditions are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

An ANOVA was conducted with gender of coach (male vs. female), experience (less experience vs. more experience) and background (business vs. psychology) as within-participant independent variables, and rating (1-10) as the dependent variable. Participant gender was also included as a between-participant independent variable.

There was a significant main effect of gender, with female coaches ($M = 6.92$) being preferred over male coaches ($M = 6.66$), $F(1, 501) = 16.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .032$. There was also a main effect of experience, with less experienced coaches ($M = 6.90$) being preferred over those with

more experience ($M = 6.69$), $F(1, 501) = 16.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .032$. There was a main effect of background, with those from a business background ($M = 7.15$) being preferred over those with a psychology background ($M = 6.43$), $F(1, 501) = 58.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .104$. Thus there was a preference for female coaches, those with business experience and those who were younger. However, although statistically significant, the effect sizes were small.

The gender of the coach interacted with experience, $F(1, 501) = 25.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .049$ (See Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here

A simple effects analysis revealed that within males, there was no significant difference in the mean preference rating for less experienced ($M = 6.65$) and more experienced ($M = 6.68$) coaches, $t(501) = 0.54$, $p = .585$, $d = .02$. However, within females, less experienced coaches ($M = 7.15$) were preferred over more experienced coaches ($M = 6.69$), $t(501) = 5.98$, $p < .001$, $d = .27$. The gender of the coach also interacted with background, $F(1, 501) = 28.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .055$ (See Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 here

Simple effects analysis showed that for coaches with a business background there was no significant difference in the preference for a male coach ($M = 7.15$) versus a female coach ($M = 7.16$), $t(501) = 0.13$, $p = .896$, $d = .01$. However, for coaches with a psychology background, females ($M = 6.69$) were preferred over males ($M = 6.18$), $t(501) = 6.2$, $p < .001$, $d = .28$. Background also interacted with experience, $F(1, 501) = 44.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .081$, (See Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 here

Simple effects analysis revealed that amongst coaches with a business background, less experienced coaches ($M = 7.43$) were preferred to more experienced coaches ($M = 6.88$), $t(501) = 7.60$, $p < .001$, $d = .34$, but there was no significant age preference amongst coaches with a psychology background (Younger: $M = 6.37$, Older: $M = 6.50$), $t(501) = 1.70$, $p = .090$, $d = .08$. Finally, there was a significant three-way interaction between coach gender, experience and background, $F(1, 501) = 13.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .026$. A simple interaction effect analysis revealed that there was a significant interaction between gender and experience for coaches with a business background, $F(1, 501) = 42.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .077$. Simple effect analysis showed that within males with a business background there was no significant difference in the preference for less experienced ($M = 7.21$) and more experienced ($M = 7.09$) coaches, $t(501) = 1.49$, $p = .137$, $d = .07$, but less experienced females ($M = 7.64$) were strongly preferred over females with greater experience ($M = 6.68$), $t(501) = 9.35$, $p < .001$, $d = .42$. There was no significant interaction between gender and experience within coaches with a psychology background, $F(1, 501) = 1.35$, $p = .247$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$.

There was no main effect of participant gender, (Female: $M = 6.88$, Male: $M = 6.71$), $F(1, 501) = 1.83$, $p = .177$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, but participant gender did interact with the gender of the prospective coach, $F(1, 501) = 6.12$, $p = .014$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$ (see Figure 4).

Insert Figure 4 here

Simple effects analysis revealed that for male coaches, there was no significant difference in the mean ratings given by female participants ($M = 6.67$) and male participants ($M = 6.66$), $t(501) = 0.08$, $p = .937$, $d = .01$. However, for female coaches, the mean for female participants ($M = 7.09$) was significantly higher than for male participants ($M = 6.76$), $t(501) = 2.33$, $p =$

.020, $d = .21$. Participant gender also interacted with background, $F(1, 501) = 3.98, p = .047, \eta_p^2 = .008$ (see Figure 5).

Insert Figure 5 here

Simple effects analysis showed that for coaches with a business background, there was no significant difference in the mean rating given by female participants ($M = 7.14$) and male participants ($M = 7.16$), $t(501) = 0.12, p = .908, d = .01$. However, for potential coaches with a psychology background, female participants gave a significantly higher mean rating ($M = 6.61$) than male participants ($M = 6.25$), $t(501) = 2.25, p = .025, d = .20$.

Discussion

Although coaching is becoming a popular intervention utilised by organisations there is little investigation of how individuals select their coach, or indeed what sort of choices they make. As with therapeutic interventions the effectiveness of a coaching intervention is often profoundly influenced by the relationship between the coach and coachee (Williams, 2021). In order to understand how preferences may influence coach selection this study sought to investigate how demographic characteristics of a coach, such as their gender, age and background, influenced participants' preference. Inevitably because of the constraints of experimental design we had to limit the number of variables we investigated.

In this study not all our hypotheses were confirmed. Indeed, the opposite effect occurred for H2 and H3. Participants did show an age/experience preference favouring younger hypothetically less experienced coaches. Younger coaches may have been seen as less expensive, more “tech-savvy” and informed about recent changes in business compared to

older coaches. Additionally, this could be explained by the nature of coaching compared to mentoring. The majority of coaching interventions are non-directive and the role of the coach is to provide the client with a structure and process through which the client can find the answer to their problems themselves but the coach's role is to not give advice to the client. Whereas a mentor is an individual that would provide their mentee with advice. Individuals select mentors that are likely to have more experience than them to help advise them but this may not apply to coaching. Coaching clients may prefer a coach that is similar to them in terms of experience and values. Given the average age of the current sample (approximately 38 years) similarity bias may have contributed to these results. The younger coaches were aged between 30-40 years and older coaches were aged between 50-60 years.

Also, our results showed that our participants favoured coaches with a business over psychology background; that is, life experience in business of many sorts usually in a managerial role as opposed to experience usually in applied psychology like educational, clinical, counselling or occupational. Many coaches are eager to distinguish themselves from clinicians or counsellors, though they may have many of those skills (Scoular, 2020). Equally many businesses are eager to employ essentially *business* coaches, to help potential employees become more effective and efficient at their work. Some also hire psychotherapists for senior staff, who focus more on intra- and inter-personal issues (Furnham 2020).

The results of this study showed that young female coaches with a business background were preferred. The general preference for female coaches over male coaches is in line with previous research where female practitioners are perceived to have better personal and emotional skills than male practitioners (Shah & Ogden, 2006). As coaching is an intervention that is heavily dependent on the relationship between a coach and client it makes sense to select a coach who you perceive to have better interpersonal skills. However, age, which was used as a proxy for experience, was not a factor when choosing male coaches. Many older women report routinely

experiencing discrimination of this kind – feeling ignored and ‘invisible’ (Stamarski, & Son Hing, 2015). Although it is difficult to dissect this result in the current study, this issue is clearly worth exploring with future research.

At first, these results may seem counterintuitive as more experience may suggest a more effective coach, but experience may also provide insight into the cost of coaching. A less experienced coach is likely to charge less than a more experienced coach. Equally, younger people may seem to be more aware of such things as generational differences in work attitudes and experience as well as a better understanding of new technology. Although if this was the explanation, then it would apply to both men and women coaches. However, the effect size for this result was small. Overall, female coaches were preferred to male coaches.

Finally, examining participants’ gender found that female participants preferred female coaches and those female coaches with a psychology background. This could be due to the similarity effect where participants feel that individuals with similar demographic characteristics may have a better understanding of their experiences in the workplace. Women, especially those in male-dominated fields, may benefit from a coach that understands or has experience in the work environment and the effects that can have on performance and wellbeing.

Conclusion and Implications

We hope that this pilot study will encourage further research on professional coaching choice, which will complement the work now well established in the field of medicine (Leach et al., 2018). There are clearly many factors, other than the ones investigated here, that determine the choice of a professional coach by an individual, and we believe that research in this area would greatly benefit from a qualitative approach, based on interviews with people who have had to make these choices.

We found that there was a preference for younger female coaches, and although we had no supporting evidence, we speculated about why that is so. Indeed, it may be that there are many countries and industries with more female than male coaches, though information on the gender of coaches in particular sectors is not readily available. It was interesting to note that participants seemed not to favour “the wisdom that comes with experience”, preferring younger over older coaches. This may be a reflection of our sample or a particular occupational sector, but it is possible that people view younger coaches as being more up-to-date on technology developments, and with a wide range of business issues, such as new marketing strategies utilising social media. Many individuals view coaching as an effective intervention for professional development which is distinct from both mentoring and psychotherapy, which would explain the preference for business understanding over psychological experience and the preference for some experience but not an entire career’s worth of experience.

One implication of this study concerns what people look for when they seek out a coach and equally what information coaches provide when advertising their services. Clearly what a client looks for gives a clear indication into what type of help and advice they want. Similarly, coaches may not always provide the type of information that clients really want to know when they are “shopping” for a professional.

Limitations

Like all others, this study had limitations. This was, of course, a hypothetical exercise and it maybe the three variables we provided for each coach were of minor or lesser importance than the range of attributes that clients usually seek out. Indeed, they may also be influenced by non-conscious factors in the selection of professional coaches.

This study, did not restrict itself to an investigation of those people (usually relatively senior managers) who seek out, or are offered, business coaching. The large sample included many younger people, who may have a limited experience and understanding of the nature of coaching. This might be a major factor in explaining the results of the present study. It could be that younger people (in their 20s and early 30s) who choose a coach in their mid-30s (rather than one in their 50s) are still choosing someone perceived to be ‘older and wiser’ (relative to their own experience), but at the same time someone similar to themselves. Hence, it would be desirable to replicate this study on an older, more senior group of professionals, as well as getting more background details on their experience and understanding of coaching.

Another major limitation was the paucity of information regarding each coach. Usually, clients know much more about a potential coach than was provided in this study. We only stipulated sex, age-band and type of experience, and did not go into detail or describe the coach’s personal experience, such as how long they have been coaching, their training or the model of coaching they use, which may be more humanistic or psychoanalytic. Essentially it followed earlier studies on professional preference, with the advantage of testing specific hypotheses but giving participants a minimum amount of data and not providing other information they may have wished to have known about (Furnham et al., 2006, 2012). For example, we did not specify the area of psychology (e.g., counselling, clinical, educational, occupational) within which the potential coach had expertise. It is also worth noting that some participants may have had both business *and* psychology experience, and equally many participants may have had no personal experience of coaching.

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Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the ratings as a function of coach gender, experience and background.

Gender	Experience	Background	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Female	Less Experienced	Business	7.64	2.02	
		Psychology	6.66	2.37	
	More Experienced	Business	6.68	2.38	
		Psychology	6.71	2.27	
	Male	Less Experienced	Business	7.21	2.08
			Psychology	6.08	2.23
More Experienced		Business	7.07	2.36	
		Psychology	6.28	2.34	

Figure 1: The gender and experience of the coach.

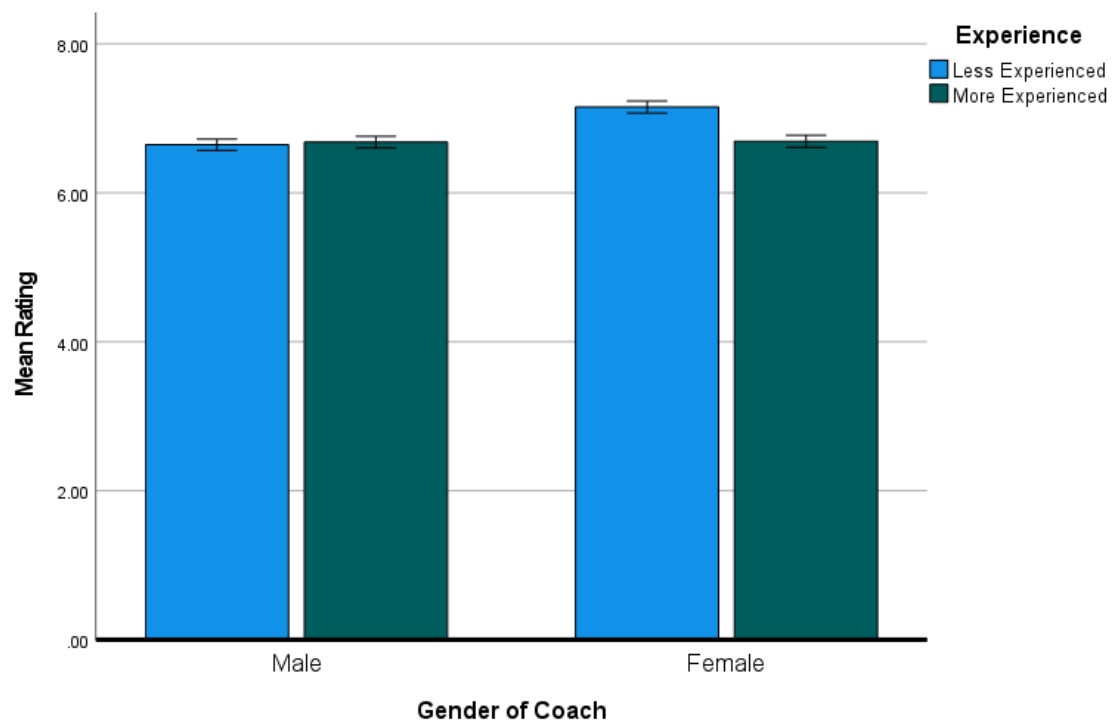


Figure 2: The gender and background of the coach.

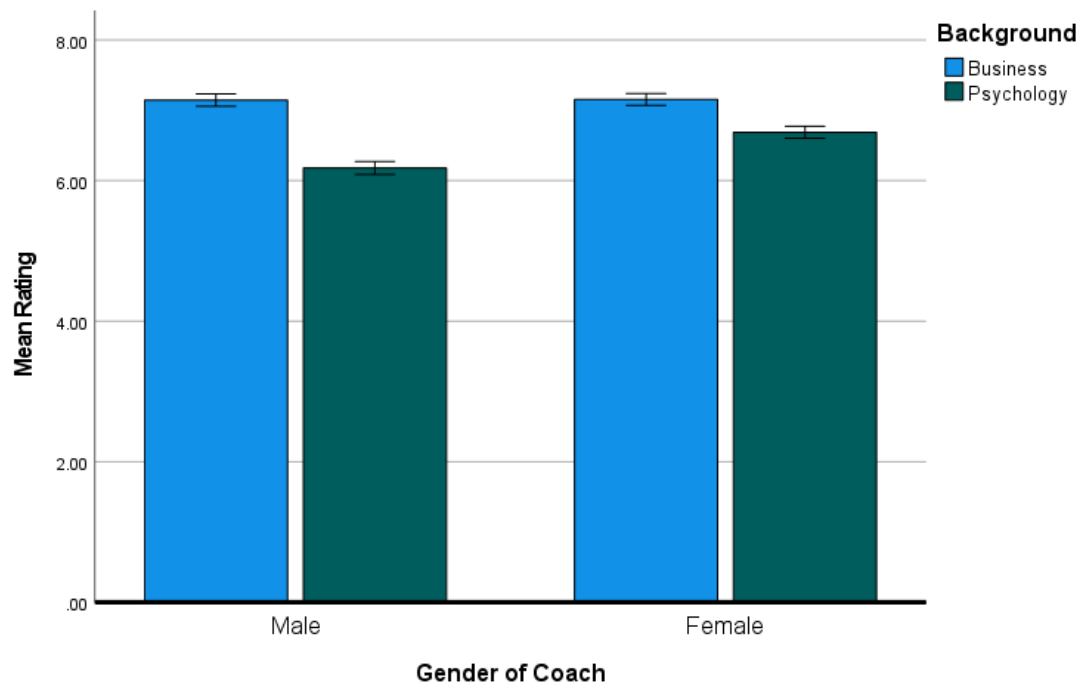


Figure 3: The experience and background of the coach.

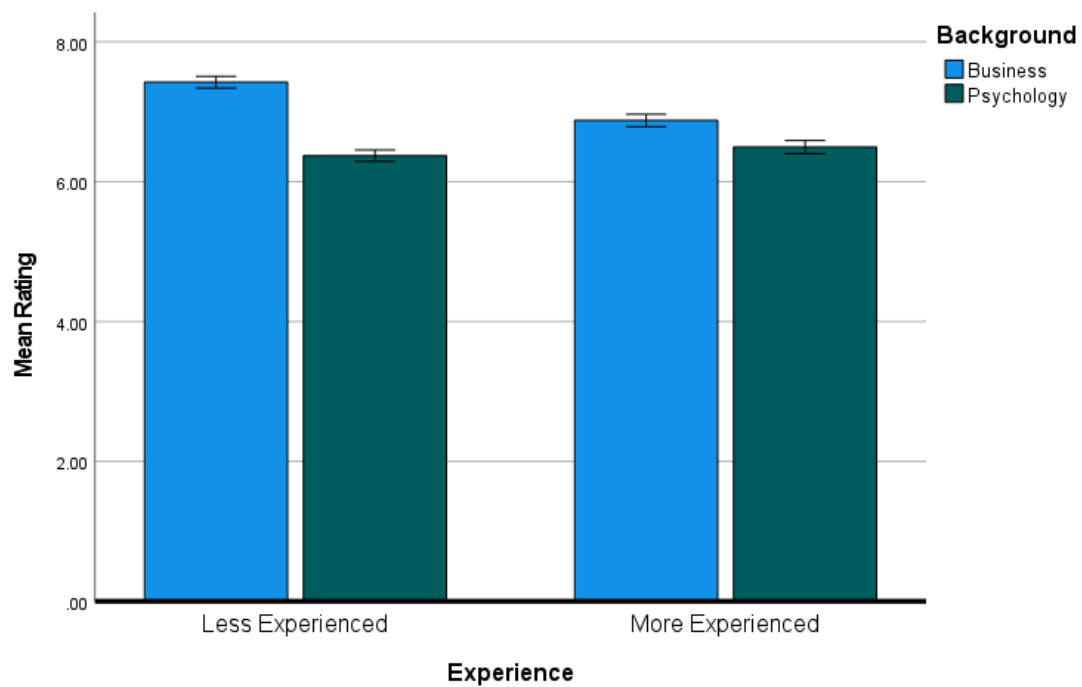


Figure 4: The gender of the coach and the participant (client)

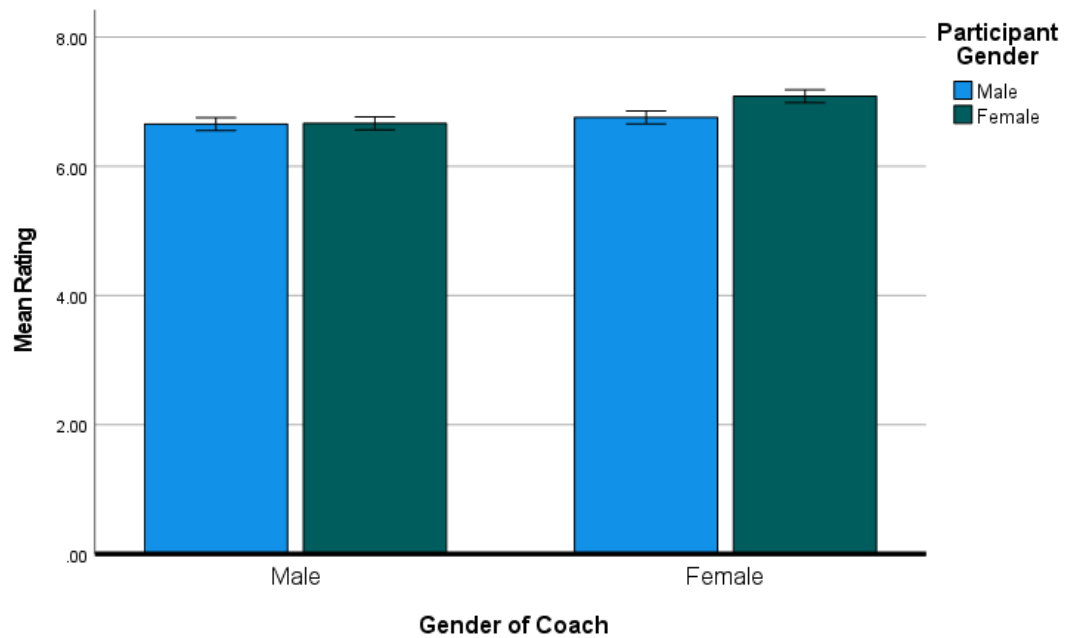


Figure 1: The gender and background of the coach.

