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Exploring Coaches' Experiences of AI-Assisted Reflective Practice

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Biographical notes

Jane L Montgomery holds an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology and a BSc (Hons) in Psychology. She is a positive psychology practitioner and EMCC-accredited coach, a certified SPARK facilitator, a member of the British Psychological Society Division of Coaching Psychology, and founder of Enhance Positive Psychology Coaching. In 2024, she created the Positive Provocation Book Club, an online community for coaches and coaching psychologists. Her research interests include reflective practice, wellbeing and flourishing during midlife, and the ethical and responsible integration of AI in coaching practice.

Sonya Dineva is an active business psychology practitioner and researcher with extensive experience in various managerial roles across multiple industries and countries and an award-winning senior lecturer on the MSc Occupational and Organisational Psychology and MSc Business Psychology programmes at the University of East London. She holds five university degrees in disciplines including business administration, psychology (majoring in work psychology and psychology of personality) as well as learning and teaching in higher education. Sonya is also a member of the British Psychological Society, Fellow of Advance HE, WAVE trauma-informed practitioner, MIE, ECDL, and EON-XR certified, and Occupational Ability and Personality Test User. Her research interests lie in the areas of occupational attitudes, emotions and behaviours, flexible work schedules, the dark side of leadership, stress and well-being in the workplace, as well as interventions related to fostering entrepreneurial intents and effective work design. Her latest focus is on the application of artificial intelligence in work settings to identify cases of dysfunctional use of emotional labour and prevent consequent work-based aggression or burnout, all aiming at improving employees' well-being and helping them thrive.

Abstract

Reflective practice is widely recognised as a core competency in coaching, yet many practitioners struggle to engage consistently due to time pressure, limited structure, and challenges in moving beyond descriptive reflection. Emerging technologies may help address these barriers, but little empirical evidence exists on whether AI-assisted scaffolding enhances or hinders coaches' reflective practice. To address this gap, this qualitative study examined professional coaches' experiences of using ChatGPT to support post-session reflection. A volunteer convenience sample of twelve professional coaches completed three AI-assisted reflection dialogues with ChatGPT over one week. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were generated: (1) The Reality of Reflective Practice; (2) Framing AI: Expectations, Attitudes, and Relational Aspects; and (3) Experience of Using ChatGPT as a Reflective Tool. Many participants reported gaining fresh perspectives and engaging in deeper reflection, while others experienced constraints related to response pace or length. Participants varied in their use of structured reflective frameworks, with some preferring a more flexible approach. While generalisability is limited by the qualitative design, the findings provide novel empirical insight into how AI-assisted reflective practice may complement traditional methods and support ongoing reflective development in coaching contexts.

Keywords: AI-assisted reflective practice, coaching, generative AI, artificial intelligence, ChatGPT

Implications for Practitioners

- AI tools such as ChatGPT may help bridge the intention–action gap in reflective practice, particularly when time, structure, or motivation are barriers, provided they are used critically.
- When guided by clear prompts, generative AI can help coaches deepen reflective dialogue by highlighting patterns, surfacing assumptions, and offering alternative perspectives, while retaining professional judgement.
- As coaches increasingly engage with generative AI, professional bodies and training providers are well positioned to offer guidance and guardrails that support ethical and effective use.

Introduction

Reflective practice (RP) is the process of intentionally “learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights of self and practice” (Finlay, 2008, p. 1). It is widely recognised as a core component of coaching, helping practitioners deepen their insight, evaluate their work, and continuously develop their professional skills (Grant, 2022; McCormick, 2023). Accordingly, it is considered a key competency for coaches by professional coaching bodies (McCormick, 2023). However, many coaches may lack the skills or time to engage in consistent, high-quality practice, resulting in weak or mechanical reflections that lack meaningful evaluation and analysis (Finlay, 2008; Nash et al., 2022; Platt, 2014).

Large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT are increasingly used to generate ideas, present information, and support reflection (Wu et al., 2023). In particular, the ability

of artificial intelligence (AI) to adopt roles, respond to prompts, pose questions, and simulate dialogue has prompted interest in its use to facilitate reflective dialogue (Nobes, 2025).

Recent research has explored AI-assisted RP in education (L'Enfant, 2024) and primary care (Lewis & Hayhoe, 2024). However, there is limited research on its use in coaching contexts.

Recent research exploring how coachees experienced AI chatbot coaching found that participants viewed ChatGPT as an “asynchronous, external, intelligent, conversational agent that prompts self-reflection” (Nobes, 2025, p. 5). The current study builds on this emerging work by addressing a gap in the coaching literature, and is guided by the research question: How do professional coaches experience the use of ChatGPT as a tool for AI-assisted reflective practice?

Reflective Practice: Definitions and Models

Reflective practice is commonly understood as a structured process of learning from experience (Dewey, 1910), encompassing both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). Reflection-on-action encourages practitioners to revisit the reasoning and assumptions underpinning their decisions, supporting deeper learning and informing future practice (Schön, 1987). In contrast, reflection-in-action involves in-the-moment awareness during practice, enabling practitioners to respond and adapt in real time (Schön, 1987). However, Schön's work has also been criticised for being difficult to apply in practice. Ixer (1999) describes his accounts as vague and insufficiently attentive to context, while Eraut (2006) questions whether Schön adequately recognised the different purposes and environments in which reflection takes place. Finlay (2008, p. 10) similarly notes that professionals working under time pressure may struggle to engage meaningfully, resulting in “bland, mechanical, routinised and unthinking” reflections.

Several structured models have been widely adopted in coaching, education, and healthcare to provide more explicit guidance and support the reflective process (McCormick, 2023). These frameworks are designed to help practitioners learn from experience in a structured way by taking the coach through a series of stages, such as those outlined in Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle which includes description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action planning. Similarly, Rolfe et al's (2001) model, often summarised as "What? So what? Now what?", offers a concise and flexible reflective approach widely used in coaching (McCormick, 2023). More recently, van Nieuwerburgh and Love (2024) have stressed that reflection goes beyond events and outcomes, encouraging practitioners to explore why an experience mattered, with attention to values, identity, and intention. However, while structured models can help support reflection, Cushion (2018) cautions that if used too rigidly, they may turn the process into a tick-box activity involving limited emotional engagement. This underlines the importance of keeping RP more than procedural, ensuring it remains a thoughtful and critical process that supports ongoing learning and development (McCormick & Forsyth, 2024). This deeper engagement is especially relevant in coaching, where the coach's presence can influence meaning making and outcomes for the client (Cushion, 2018).

Reflective practice is related to, but distinct from, other reflective approaches such as reflective journalling, peer reflection, and coaching supervision, which vary in their levels of structure, relational engagement, and professional support (van Nieuwerburgh & Love, 2024). Reflective journalling is typically an unstructured process of recording and processing experiences, whereas solo or AI-assisted reflective practice may introduce prompts or dialogic elements to support deeper reflection. In contrast, peer reflection and coaching supervision involve others who contribute to the coach's reflective work. While peer reflection is often informal, coaching supervision involves a more formal and relational

process in which a trained supervisor supports the coach's reflective processes, ethical awareness, and professional development (Bachkirova et al., 2021). Solo or AI-assisted reflective practice is self-directed and does not offer the relational, contextual, or ethical oversight that supervision can provide.

Benefits and Barriers to Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is widely valued within coaching and is recognised as a core professional competency, supporting learning, self-awareness, and ongoing development (Dewey, 1910; McCormick, 2023; Schön, 1983). It can enhance both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action by increasing awareness of how situations might be handled more effectively in future (Schön, 1983) as well as how one's own thoughts, emotions, and behaviours may be managed more effectively (Farres, 2004). Hullinger et al. (2019) link reflection, awareness, and self-regulation within an integrated reflective practice model, underscoring its importance for both practitioner wellbeing and development.

However, despite its prominence in training and accreditation, many coaches report difficulty engaging in RP consistently and meaningfully. Nash et al. (2022) highlight a paradox in which coaches express limited appreciation for RP while simultaneously recognising its role in shaping and improving their work. Reflection is often perceived as time consuming, effortful, or as a tick-box requirement rather than an integral part of professional development (Finlay, 2008; McCormick, 2023; Platt, 2014). When undertaken without adequate structure or support, reflective accounts can remain descriptive, reinforcing existing assumptions and habitual patterns rather than promoting critical evaluation or transformative learning (Cushion et al., 2010; Ixer, 1999). This could be further exacerbated by factors such as the lack of motivation or role modelling (Gathu, 2022), and in the absence

of such, other approaches, such as AI-assisted RP, may offer a way to support coaches' professional development.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) broadly refers to computer systems designed to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, including reasoning, decision-making, pattern recognition, and language processing (Russell & Norvig, 2021). Most current applications fall under narrow AI, where systems are developed for specific functions such as facial recognition, language translation, or content generation. A rapidly advancing branch of AI is large language models (LLMs), including tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude. These models are trained on large datasets and fine-tuned using human feedback to improve relevance, coherence, and safety (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Russell & Norvig, 2021).

While some view these tools as enhancing productivity and access to information, others have raised concerns around reliability, bias, and the lack of human empathy or contextual judgment (Cave & Dihal, 2020; Floridi, 2023). LLMs may produce inaccurate yet plausible outputs, known as hallucinations, and while their responses may sound articulate or empathetic, they are generated without genuine comprehension (Floridi, 2023; Rathkopf, 2025). Their conversational design can also encourage anthropomorphism, where users attribute human understanding or intention to the system (Epley et al., 2007; Luger & Sellen, 2016; Weizenbaum, 1976), which can increase trust and engagement (Waytz et al., 2010) but also create unrealistic expectations or dependence on the tool (Fang et al., 2025). Over time, this may contribute to cognitive offloading, where thinking tasks are increasingly delegated to external systems (Gerlich, 2025; Risko & Gilbert, 2016), highlighting the importance of keeping user wellbeing and psychological safety central when engaging with non-human agents.

AI Use in Coaching

The academic literature on AI in coaching has largely focused on the potential effectiveness of AI acting as a coach compared to human coaching (Nobes, 2025; Passmore et al., 2025a, 2025b), concerns about the threat to coaches' jobs (Diller et al., 2024), and ethical issues related to data protection, confidentiality, algorithmic bias, and the absence of regulatory oversight (Diller, 2024; Passmore & Tee, 2023). These developments have sparked a range of perspectives within the coaching community, with some researchers remaining strongly opposed. For example, Bachkirova (2025, p. 1) argues that current AI tools do not meet the foundational criteria for coaching and may contribute to the “enshittification” of the profession by diluting the depth and quality of human-centred practice. However, other research has explored how AI might enhance access, reduce costs, and support practitioner development (Passmore et al., 2024).

AI-Assisted Reflective Practice

Despite growing interest in AI tools across professional domains, there remains relatively little focus on AI-assisted RP within the coaching literature. Researchers have investigated the use of AI to reflect on coaching performance. Bridgeman and Giraldez-Hayes (2024) explored the use of AI-enhanced video review software to support coaches' reflection on their performance. By combining behavioural analytics (e.g., speech patterns, body language, and facial expressions) with session recordings, they found that this approach supported deeper reflection, increased self-awareness, and behavioural change. Similarly, Jelodari et al. (2023) developed an AI-powered system that maps coaching conversations and identifies key segments to support reflection, demonstrating its potential to enhance behavioural awareness and provide a more structured approach to reflective practice. These

studies highlight the growing interest in AI-supported reflection within coaching contexts. Furthermore, research in other domains points to similar possibilities. In education, L'Enfant (2024) examined the use of AI as a reflective coach, finding that it supported reflection through structured, data-driven and personalised feedback, contributing to student-teacher development. In primary care, Lewis and Hayhoe (2024) explored the use of LLM models through a series of case studies, demonstrating how AI-generated questions can prompt deeper reflection and help practitioners reframe their experiences. In organisational contexts, Chen et al. (2025) investigated AI-assisted reflection in meetings, demonstrating that both passive and interactive forms of AI feedback can support reflection-in-action, goal alignment, and more intentional behaviour, while highlighting the importance of timing and user control in design.

Additionally, recent research exploring whether AI chatbot coaching can be considered coaching (Nobes, 2025) found that ChatGPT facilitated self-reflection by summarising, prompting and questioning internal dialogue, and providing feedback to coachees. This reveals the potential of conversational AI to scaffold RP “by helping practitioners to reframe situations, identify blind spots, surface implicit assumptions and articulate tacit thinking” (Peiris, 2026, para. 7). Theoretically, this could be understood through perspectives on extended cognition, whereby cognitive capacity is amplified through sustained human–AI interaction that not only mirrors professionals’ reflections but also supports processes such as prompting, reframing, and perspective-taking, enabling the interpretation, transformation, and development of meaning, and potentially enhancing insight and learning (Clark & Chalmers, 1998; Risko & Gilbert, 2016).

In addition to the described cognitive impact, Ellis-Brush (2021) found that an AI wellbeing app offered users a non-judgemental space to explore difficult emotions and thoughts. This sense of safety is widely recognised as an essential condition for effective

reflection (McCormick, 2023). However, Cheng et al. (2025, p. 1) argue that sycophancy, "the phenomenon of AI excessively agreeing with or flattering users", could hamper judgement and validate delusions which could have a negative impact on the effectiveness of coaches' RP. Others such as Riley et al. (2025) express concerns over the potential of such systems to increase both cognitive and emotional dependency which could escalate anxiety and have a detrimental impact not only on coaches' cognitive performance but also on their wellbeing.

The Current Study

Despite growing interest in AI, there remains limited empirical research examining how professional coaches experience using generative AI tools to support RP. Professional coaching bodies emphasise the importance of RP, yet many coaches report difficulties engaging with it consistently. Common challenges include a lack of time, uncertainty about how to structure reflection, and limited clarity around what effective RP involves (Finlay, 2008; Nash et al., 2022; Platt, 2014). At the same time, tools such as ChatGPT are becoming increasingly popular for everyday reasoning and self-guided support (Wu et al., 2023), raising questions about their potential role in supporting coaches' RP and professional development.

Rather than resisting this trend, the present study adopts a critically open stance by investigating whether ChatGPT can act as an interactive and responsive tool to support RP in coaching. The study does not position AI as a replacement for supervision, peer dialogue, or deep reflexive work, nor does it seek to evaluate AI as a coach. Instead, it addresses a gap in the coaching literature by exploring the research question: How do professional coaches experience the use of ChatGPT as a tool for AI-assisted RP? The aim is to use a freely

available resource as an AI-assisted reflective scaffold for RP and examine whether such use can support reflective habits in ways that are both ethical and valuable.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study adopted a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) to explore how professional coaches with no prior experience of using AI tools for RP engaged with ChatGPT as a reflective tool. A convenience and snowball sample of eligible coaches was recruited to capture initial experiences of AI-assisted RP. None of the participants had prior experience of using AI to assist with RP. However, general familiarity of using AI varied. The analysis followed an exploratory and inductive approach within a critical realist stance, acknowledging participants' subjective meaning-making while attending to the wider professional and contextual factors shaping those experiences.

Participants

Fifteen professional coaches volunteered to take part in the study, of which twelve completed all stages and were included in the final sample. Participants were eligible if they were practising coaches aged 18 or over and willing to engage with ChatGPT, using researcher-provided prompts, to support RP. Demographic information was collected via a short questionnaire and is summarised in Table 1 (see Appendix A). No incentives were offered for participation.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of East London Ethics Committee (Ref: 476/2731249/07-25). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Following consent, participants were provided with instructions to access ChatGPT (OpenAI; GPT-3.5 or GPT-4 where available) and asked to engage in reflective dialogue with the tool on at least three occasions within one week, following coaching sessions. A structured core prompt, supported by optional probes, was provided to guide reflection and support consistency across participants (see Appendix B for full prompt details). The prompt design was informed by established reflective frameworks (Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984; Rolfe et al., 2001) and by published guidance on effective human–AI interaction, emphasising clear and specific instructions (Amershi et al., 2019). Participants were also free to generate their own reflective questions and were reminded not to include identifiable client information. Following the reflective period, participants took part in individual semi-structured interviews exploring their experiences of using ChatGPT as a reflective tool (see Appendix C for the interview guide). Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised prior to analysis. Pseudonyms were used throughout reporting to protect participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2021) six-phase framework for reflexive thematic analysis, involving familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Analysis commenced as transcripts were prepared, enabling iterative engagement with the data throughout the research process.

Interview transcripts were coded inductively to identify patterns of meaning in participants’ accounts of using ChatGPT as a reflective tool (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Quirkos software (Version 3) was used to support coding and data management, but all interpretive decisions remained the responsibility of the researcher (Quirkos, 2023). A critical realist

stance underpinned the analysis, recognising both individual meaning-making and the broader professional context in which participants operate (Fletcher, 2017). Codes were treated as flexible, interpretive tools rather than fixed units, and neither code counts nor numerical prevalence are reported. Qualitative prevalence terms such as most, many, several, some, a minority, and a few are used descriptively and should not be read as statistical estimates (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

Analytic adequacy was guided by the principle of information power rather than numeric saturation. Given the focused study aim, the specificity of the sample, the quality of interview dialogue, and a theory-informed, reflexive analytic approach, the dataset was judged sufficient to generate rich, patterned insights (Malterud et al., 2021).

Reflexivity

The researcher is a professional coach, and this research was inspired by her own experiences of using ChatGPT for reflective practice. This prompted a growing interest in the ethical and responsible integration of AI in coaching practice. A reflexive journal was kept throughout to record reflections and to consider how professional identity and experiences with AI might influence interpretation.

Results

Three themes were generated: (1) The Reality of Reflective Practice; (2) Framing AI: Expectations, Attitudes, and Relational Aspects; and (3) Experience of Using ChatGPT as a Reflective Tool. The themes are presented in a logical sequence, moving from broader contextual factors to specific experiences, rather than in order of prevalence. An overview of the themes and subthemes is provided in Table 2 (see Appendix D) . Participants are referred to by pseudonyms and quotations have been lightly edited to remove identifying details.

Theme 1: The Reality of Reflective Practice

This theme describes how coaches approached RP in everyday work, covering the forms they used (e.g., written, meditative, drawing), what they focused on (self or coachee), and how often and why they reflected.

1.1. Type, Style and Triggers of Reflective Practice

Some participants reported that they engage in regular written reflection using established frameworks, while others preferred a more freestyle approach. The frequency varied from immediately after each session to once a week. Several participants linked their reflective frequency to time availability or to whether a session required deeper exploration. The main trigger for a more formal, written reflection was if something did not go as planned in the session. Kathryn shared, “If something hasn't gone well, or I've got stuck, that's when I do it... I find reflecting and journalling... the best ways to work through a particular problem.” Conversely, the coaches did not always feel the need to reflect after a session. When sessions went well, many did not feel the need to reflect at all. Beth shared “...the sessions that do go well, I'm probably like, oh yeah, that's great. I don't need to think about that too much... that was a great one”.

1.2. Perceived Value and Barriers of RP

When asked to position RP on a continuum from tick-box requirement to essential, the majority viewed the process as ranging from very important to essential to their coaching practice. Stephen shared “I'm kind of the view that humans don't actually learn very well... So, I think reflective practice is a critical element to improving”, highlighting the importance of RP for coaching development. Only Nicola placed herself on the opposite side of the continuum as RP is something she engaged with briefly when supplied with a RP worksheet

during group supervision “I maybe used it a couple of times and then did not use it again. So, I'd be like, right down that end of [the continuum]”. However, having completed the AI-assisted reflection task, she shared: “...it has made me think a little differently and made me think that I actually do want to do something that's more formal” and that she will adopt a more intentional approach going forward.

The most common barrier to RP was time constraints. James noted “I know it's important, but it's just hard to prioritise. There's always something more urgent.” Rosie explained that she would like to say she reflects after every session but is limited as “my calls are back-to-back with only a five-minute break”. Jake added that “It's more the time aspect of it where it's the easiest thing to kind of like, go... I'll do that later. And then it doesn't happen.” Cognitive effort was also presented as a barrier. Kathryn explained that “it takes quite a bit of cognitive energy, “if I've had a long day, I just can't face it”. Stephen added “I must confess... I tend to feel tired after sessions”.

Individual differences also shaped participants' engagement with reflection. For example, Beth described how her neurodivergence made reflective practice more challenging, “[reflective practice is] important for me... but it probably doesn't do the same thing for me as other people... Because of my ADHD, reflection isn't always linear or comfortable. It can get overwhelming. I find it hard to get started... it feels like too much effort to structure my thoughts... reflective practice is probably something that I'm not that great at, to be honest”

Theme 2: Framing AI: Expectations, Attitudes, and Relational Aspects

This theme describes how participants framed AI before and during the task, their prior exposure, initial expectations, and the way they engaged with ChatGPT. Participants ranged from one first-time user to experienced users. Most began curious or open rather than sceptical, with a few initially cautious. Whether they approached ChatGPT as a tool, a

partner, or just "a computer" influenced what they expected from the dialogue and how they evaluated it.

2.1. Prior Exposure to AI

Michelle shared that she had no prior experience of using ChatGPT and this is what attracted her to take part in this research. Although cautious at first, “I am not the most technical person in the world... but when I read your directions and how to set it up, I thought, I could actually manage this... I kind of got interested then”, adding that anything “that might help or enhance reflective practice I’m completely open to and want to try”. Beth had used AI before but “was already using AI to problem solve (and) discuss things”. Many were occasional users, but there were also experienced users and software engineers and prompt engineers within the sample. This diversity of experience led to different expectations and reactions of using ChatGPT for RP.

2.2. Initial Expectations and First Reactions

Emma explained “I have never thought about going to ChatGPT for reflection as a mentor or an advisor, or regarding coaching practice. So honestly, I started with nothing in mind and no expectations”. Michelle, a new user, was “blown away” by how easy it was to use. Ava, a regular ChatGPT user, said she was “still surprised by the answers... how much value they offer for reflection”. Sophia added “I was curious about understanding AI with reflective practice”. Nicola recalled “I was intrigued by it... I thought it would be interesting and useful [however] I don't think I realised the depth of reflection it could create.” These expectations shaped how participants described their interactions with ChatGPT.

2.3. Relational Framing and Anthropomorphic Language

Several of the coaches described their experience with ChatGPT in human-like terms such as attributing relational, cognitive and conversational skills and qualities, as well as referring to the tool as he or she or by name or role. Michelle shared, “one thing that I thought was interesting was I wanted it to be more relational... I wanted it to have a name. That was important to me. And it's not something I would have thought about before [this] study at all”. Michelle continued “Oh, this is a bit strange... Who is this? What is this?... I was developing a relationship with it”. While Nicola explained she “knew it was a thing, and I knew it's been fed data, and it's just spitting stuff back at me” she attributed human-like processes such as ‘being clever’ and understanding her. She continued “it kind of surprised me... I took some photos of some things that it came up with... it was like, oh, wow! Okay, you kind of got me”. Beth recalled, “it felt like I was talking to a computer, but it also felt like talking to... like a therapist coach”. Ava referred to the tool as “a sparring partner” and like getting “additional information from a mirror”. Jake recalled, “it definitely didn't feel like a computer talking to me... I'm fully aware that it's not a person... but at the same time, I think that I'm capable of almost creating... an imaginary partner within my mind... seeing it as an imaginary person and that is useful” He continued, “that person that I say I'm imagining... it was a very, very good coach... a very good supervisor”. However, not all of the coaches anthropomorphised ChatGPT, some only referred to the tool as ‘it’ or as a computer. For example, Stephen explained that “you can create a persona for it, and it will respond out of that persona” but did not indicate that it felt like talking to a person.

Theme 3: Experience of Using ChatGPT as a Reflective Tool

This theme captures the experiences of using ChatGPT for RP. Many of the coaches use ChatGPT occasionally to regularly for various tasks although most had not previously

used it for RP. Apart from some technical issues, the coaches found the task protocol easy to follow.

3.1. Prompts, Models and Freestyle Use of ChatGPT

All coaches began with the core prompt and then either used freestyle inputs, the optional prompts, or asked ChatGPT to follow their preferred reflective framework. Three frameworks were mentioned during interviews: Gibbs (1988), ORSC (CRR Global, n.d.) and Henley Eight (Passmore & Sinclair, 2020). Agnes explained that she started with Gibbs or ORSC and then, when she wanted to go deeper "I used the values, critical, instant review, theory, awareness and blind spots [prompts]. I thought that was very powerful". James reflected using the Henley Eight and explained that he was "a bit surprised by some of the feedback that ChatGPT gave me and how rigorous and granular it was". However, some responses did not resonate with James, "I didn't necessarily agree with some things". Ava shared, "Although I work regularly with ChatGPT, I was still surprised by the answers, how much value they offer for reflection". Sophia noted that ChatGPT helped her "stay longer in each of the Gibbs sections and synthesise patterns... I was able to go a bit deeper into some of the behavioural mechanisms of why these things might be coming up." However, not all of the coaches applied a framework. Jake used the core prompt with no additional framework and said, "it took me on a journey... it was more profound than I could ever imagine".

3.2. Interactive Style and Cognitive Load

Some found the speed of responses quite overwhelming. Michelle exclaimed, "it's just so instant and so quick and just covers so much in such a short space of time. I mean, I cannot think that quick!", and wondered if she was "losing myself in this", explaining that the responses were not her thoughts but were "being offered to me, but I'm losing my own

creative process in it”. However, by the third reflection, she felt more comfortable with the process. She explained that “when I try something new, I need to try it a couple of times. Just sit back, take stock”, before concluding, “Okay, no, this is my reflection. I take it back almost”.

For some, ChatGPT felt like a dialogue, whereas for others it gave lots of information or asked several questions at once “so many questions came up, though... I didn't know which question to answer” (Nicola). Rosie shared that sometimes six different questions were offered, and she never felt that she was having a dialogue. Stephen explained that at times it didn't feel like a dialogue and the length of the response felt more like a “data dump... it probably gave me 300 words”. Agnes explained that, for her, a choice of questions is not helpful for thorough reflection as it enabled her to “pick and choose, which is good and bad, because then I'm selective in how I'm responding”. Conversely, Sophia found that it stopped the selection process by “keeping you in the frameworks a bit longer than you would naturally... because you're like, let's move through the areas of the framework that I don't like feelings, you know, like, whereas Chat [GPT] was like...let's go deeper in this area” before moving on.

3.3. ChatGPT versus Solo Reflective Practice

Rosie noted that ChatGPT “brings up questions that I wouldn't have come up with... it came up with some killer questions. Really killer questions. They were so insightful”. Similarly, Beth shared that ChatGPT “asked the questions that I might not think about to ask myself...it was definitely really useful... [and] probably got me to actually reflect on things a bit more”. James added that “[it highlighted] patterns and blind spots. I thought that was really useful”. Nicola concluded that ChatGPT was more effective “because it's more interactive than just a template [which] doesn't go anywhere, whereas this, at least, you're

getting a response from a machine”. This was echoed by Ava who shared “If I want deeper thinking or better understanding, it is more useful to have a machine who gives back than just my own thinking to prevent myself from running in circles. So, I definitely think it adds value.” Additionally, Stephen shared, “one of the things I did learn from using this was that my Gibbs reflective practice is probably very narrow in its focus... I tend to go through [the stages] in my mind... this gave me the richness. It was quite impressive, really... it gave me a lot more than my typical Gibbs cycle would give me”.

Some participants noted the tendency for ChatGPT to agree with the user’s perspective, potentially limiting reflective depth by avoiding challenge. Jake noted, “there was... a small, tiny bit... where it... just completely agrees with you, everything that you’re saying.” Nicola found that it was often complimentary “even though I was talking about something that I had a concern about, maybe I didn’t do it so well” although at times she found these compliments insincere, she shared that the reframing produced ‘fabulous insight’.

3.4. Boundaries, Safety and Future Use

Jake explained that opening up and talking about himself doesn’t come easily, even in group supervision, but he found having this as a safe space for reflection gave him a chance to open up. He explained, “I’ve found this kind of like wisdom inside of me through going through a profound experience before. So, I’ve got this personal insight and all I really need is the environment and the questions... if you give me the right questions... it will create a space to really bring these things out of myself, and that’s what it’s done... It was really powerful”. However, there were also concerns about over-sharing. Nicola recalled, “I felt a bit uncomfortable... I don’t want to bear my soul too much to this thing”. Similarly, Emma explained, “I wanted to work with it, but I also didn’t want [it] to take over”.

Most participants indicated that they would integrate ChatGPT reflections into their RP routine. Kathryn explained, “So up until doing this, I would always journal with pen and paper, but having done this... I’m interested in doing a combination... I might do this more often at the end of the day... I was able to get some insights and some reflections really quickly.”

Discussion

This study explored how professional coaches used ChatGPT to support reflection and whether AI-assisted prompts helped or hindered structure and depth. Overall, participants engaged with the AI in a considered, critical way. In line with the research question, ChatGPT acted as a reflective scaffold that both enhanced reflection (new perspectives, deeper analysis, greater structure) and, at times, hindered it (overload from response length, pace, or questioning style).

The Theory-to-Practice Gaps

The benefits of regular RP for learning and development are well established (Dewey, 1910; McCormick, 2023; Schön, 1983). Reflective practice is a higher-level cognitive skill that goes beyond recounting events to critical evaluation and analysis (Platt, 2014). In the current sample, coaches commonly engaged in informal RP (e.g., reflective thinking) but were less consistent with structured approaches that support deeper analysis (Theme 1), echoing prior reports that, without explicit structure or training, RP often remains descriptive (Cushion et al., 2010; Finlay, 2008; Platt, 2014).

However, in contrast to Nash et al. (2022), who reported coaches undervalued RP, yet still recalled times when they found RP beneficial, a different paradox was identified in this study. Participants valued RP yet still struggled to engage with it consistently.

Participants consistently described RP as very important or essential, yet still struggled to

practice it regularly. This intention–action gap appears to reflect time and energy constraints, low confidence when RP has not been explicitly taught, and the emotional cost of deeper work (Themes 1 and 3). AI-assisted scaffolding addressed some of these issues by adding structure, extending time in specific stages, and surfacing patterns and questions that the coach may not have considered alone (Theme 3). However, it did not remove time pressures or the need for critical judgment.

Perceptions of ChatGPT's Role in Reflective Practice

In the context of this study, anthropomorphism refers to attributing human qualities or intentions to ChatGPT, the non-human agent (Epley et al., 2007; Waytz et al., 2010). Coaches in Theme 2 described a spectrum of framings, from relating to ChatGPT as a conversational partner to treating it as a functional tool, with some shifting between these positions (Theme 2.3). These findings align with research showing that people often attribute human-like qualities to interactive systems and that such framing can increase trust and engagement (Epley et al., 2007; Luger & Sellen, 2016; Waytz et al., 2010). However, LLMs do not understand in a human sense, instead they generate plausible text by modelling patterns in data (Kojima et al., 2022).

In this sample of coaches, relational framing appeared to matter for experience and depth. Participants who used more relational language sometimes reported a greater sense of safety and stayed longer with challenging parts of a reflection (Theme 3.1–3.3). In contrast, those who held a strictly tool-based view tended to focus on prompt utility and summaries (Themes 2.3, 3.1, 3.3). This pattern is consistent with suggestions that perceived relational qualities can shape the richness of AI-assisted reflection (Nobes, 2025). Existing research findings indicate that self-disclosure is facilitated by the use of conversational AI due to various factors, among which the experience of safety caused when sharing sensitive

information with an anonymous digital entity and in the absence of a judgemental human counterpart that could exacerbate own vulnerability (Papneja & Yadav, 2025) as well as the sense of trust in AI due to the belief that it is objective and neutral in nature (Jiang, 2024). Such perceptions and beliefs could promote AI attachment and disclosure intention and even lead to underestimating privacy risks (Zhao & Li, 2026), especially if self-disclosure is reciprocated via different cues implying human-like experiences of the AI (Warren-Smith et al., 2025) or is encouraged through sycophancy and emotional mimicry (Cheng, 2026). In that connection, some participants flagged concerns about oversharing and about the system agreeing too readily, which could limit challenge and depth (Theme 3.3). Paradoxically, continuous self-disclosure in such cases could perpetuate growing de-anonymisation and reduced sense of safety because of the increasing amount of sensitive information being shared and the existing data protection risks (Gumusel et al., 2024), which is of significant concern and should be raised with all coaches engaging in AI-assisted reflective practices. Therefore, a measured approach is warranted. Coaches could be encouraged to adopt an intentional framing that fits their reflective goal, supported by guidance on pacing, confidentiality, and question sequencing (Themes 3.1–3.3).

While some coaches reported being more likely to engage in reflective practice following sessions that did not go well (Theme 1.1), this pattern suggests a tendency to associate reflection with problem-focused evaluation. However, it is important to note that effective reflective practice also encompasses the exploration of strengths and effective coaching practice (McCormick, 2023). In the current study, the reflective process was not limited to problem-focused reflection. The core prompt invited participants to consider “what stood out” in their sessions (see Appendix B), which could include positive, neutral, or challenging aspects. In addition, optional prompts encouraged reflection on areas such as values, professional growth, and patterns, supporting a broader and more balanced

exploration of practice. Consistent with this, the findings highlighted both strengths and areas for development. For example, participants described moments of strong relational presence, effective questioning, and alignment with their values, alongside identifying areas for further growth (Theme 3). This suggests that AI-assisted reflective practice can support not only areas requiring development, but also the recognition of effective coaching practice.

Coaches' Experiences and Planned Future Use of AI-Assisted Reflective Practice

Participants generally described AI-assisted RP as valuable and thought-provoking. Many reported that the prompts supported deeper analysis, drew attention to patterns and blind spots, and kept them reflecting in specific stages of a reflective model for longer than they would typically manage alone (Themes 3.1 and 3.3). These experiences align with findings in other fields such as education (L'Enfant, 2024), primary care (Lewis & Hayhoe, 2024), and coachee experience (Nobes, 2025), where structured, technology-mediated prompts have been shown to deepen reflection and learning. Several participants also exercised clear agency by tailoring inputs, choosing among optional prompts, or drafting reflections offline before importing them for synthesis, which indicates active rather than passive use (Theme 3.1).

However, challenges were also raised. Some participants reported feeling overloaded by the speed and length of responses, including multiple questions presented at once, which increased the cognitive effort required, reduced the sense of dialogue, and at times became overwhelming (Theme 3.2). Others observed that the system often agreed too quickly, which could lessen the level of challenge and limit depth (Theme 3.3). These constraints mirror known issues with LLM interaction style and pacing, and they point to the importance of one-question-at-a-time prompts and concise response settings to sustain reflective engagement (Themes 3.1–3.3).

Going forward, most participants planned to integrate ChatGPT as a complement to existing routines, not as a replacement for supervision or peer dialogue (Theme 3.3). Many anticipated it would be most valuable when they wanted to reflect quickly, check for blind spots and patterns, produce ready-to-paste summaries for their reflective log, or conduct a brief end-of-day review, with continued paper journalling, peer work, and supervision for broader insights and meaning-making (Theme 3.3). Nevertheless, the expected benefits should be weighed against the associated risks, including the tendency of autonomous AI systems to produce hallucinations (Joshi, 2025) and misalignment (Dung, 2023).

Cognitive Offloading versus Cognitive Scaffolding

While all participants in the study appeared to engage critically with the tool, there is a wider debate about whether AI use risks outsourcing thinking or, if used responsibly, can support deeper critical thinking. Gerlich (2025) warns that when AI is poorly integrated, it may encourage cognitive offloading, the use of external tools to reduce the demands of internal thought or memory (Risko & Gilbert, 2016), which may weaken independent thinking. In contrast, Yatani et al. (2024) suggest that, when used within a balanced AI–human partnership, it can encourage higher-order thinking, acting as cognitive scaffolding. While this tension is relevant to AI-assisted RP, where the aim is to enhance rather than replace the user’s critical thinking processes, in the context of coaching, cognitive offloading for RP may be less likely than in domains where reflection is mandatory or externally assessed, such as primary care (Lewis & Hayhoe, 2024). In coaching, there is little incentive to outsource the process, except perhaps when a reflective log is required for accreditation applications. Coaches in this study appeared intrinsically motivated to use the tool to engage in deeper reflective thinking. A practical implication is that professional bodies and

policymakers could develop guidance for responsible use, framing AI as a tool to support and deepen reflection rather than replace it.

Limitations and Directions For Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the volunteer sample was self-selecting, with many participants already curious about AI, which may have biased responses (Luger & Sellen, 2016). Second, the project timeframe was short. Participants engaged with ChatGPT three times in one week, so longer-term effects and sustainability were not captured, and novelty may have inflated positive responses (Wells et al., 2010). Third, the study focused exclusively on ChatGPT and did not include comparison with other generative AI tools, which may differ in design, interaction style, or reflective affordances. In addition, participants used either GPT-3.5 or GPT-4 depending on availability, which may have influenced their experiences. Furthermore, the data used in the study was constrained only to participants' experiences with AI-assisted reflection, while the actual AI-coach conversation logs were not analysed, and this might provide additional insight into how reflective processes unfold in AI-mediated dialogue. Finally, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the findings reflect the researcher's interpretation of the participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Future research could examine longer-term use, recruit participants with less prior interest in AI, and compare AI-assisted RP with individual and group based approaches, such as group supervision. It could also compare different AI platforms, including agentic AI or embodied AI, analyse AI-coach conversation logs, and test how prompt design, for example, sequencing one question at a time and signalling clear turn-taking or relational framing may affect engagement and reflective depth (Sawalha et al., 2024). A mixed-methods approach

could also provide complementary quantitative insights alongside qualitative findings (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2023).

Practical Implications and Contribution of The Research

These findings suggest that AI-assisted RP could help address known barriers such as low engagement, lack of structure, and limited confidence (Cushion et al., 2010; Finlay, 2008). In this study, ChatGPT prompts supported deeper analysis, pattern recognition, and the exploration of perspectives that participants reported they would not have reached unaided. The findings align with evidence that structured frameworks can help bridge the theory–practice gap in coaching (McCormick, 2023; Nash et al., 2022) and provide promising new evidence that reflective scaffolding can be delivered effectively via an AI tool.

In practice, AI-assisted RP could be integrated into coach training and continuing professional development, alongside journalling, peer dialogue and supervision. It may prove particularly valuable for newer coaches or those without regular access to supervision. Its effectiveness, however, depends on active critical engagement, as the quality and context of input shape the quality of responses, which underlines the need for clear guidance (Loos et al., 2023). Professional coaching bodies, therefore, have an opportunity to provide such guidance to encourage safe, effective use and support key coaching competencies.

While AI-assisted RP has been studied in education (L'Enfant, 2024), healthcare (Lewis & Hayhoe, 2024), and student learning (Cronjé, 2023), and reflective video-feedback has been trialled in executive coaching (Bridgeman & Giraldez-Hayes, 2024), to the best of the author's knowledge this is the first empirical study to examine how professional coaches engage with AI to support structured reflection. As such, it offers a unique contribution to the

coaching literature by providing timely, practice-oriented insights with implications for research, theory, and training.

Conclusion

This study explored professional coaches' experiences of using ChatGPT for reflective practice ($N = 12$). In this exploratory study, the findings provided evidence of critical thinking and engagement with the tool. Experiences ranged from profound insight to feelings of overwhelm about the speed, length of output, and style of questioning. Many coaches found that the ChatGPT prompts led them to consider new perspectives that they might not have explored during solo practice, resulting in fresh insights and deeper reflection. Several coaches continued to use their preferred reflective frameworks, while others chose to work with ChatGPT in a more freestyle manner. Future research should explore how AI-assisted reflective practice can be implemented in ways that support, rather than replace, human connection and supervision, and ensure it is accompanied by clear guidance to optimise its effectiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that using ChatGPT as a reflective aid can complement established approaches such as journalling, reflective thinking, and peer reflection, offering support for coaches seeking more structure or fresh perspectives, while highlighting the need for guidelines and guardrails for ethical and effective use.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability statement

The qualitative data generated during this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations relating to participant confidentiality.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Participant Characteristics (N = 12)

Characteristic	Breakdown
Gender	Women (9), Men (3)
Accreditation status	EMCC (2), ICF (4), ICF & CSA (1), ICF & EMCC (1), NZPsS (1), BPS DCoP member/EMCC pending (2), EMCC pending (1)
Years of experience	Mean: 9.2 years (Range: 2-25 years)
Coaching focus	Life (1), Executive (3), Health (1), Life/Exec (1), Sports/Life (1), Teams (1), Life/Wellbeing/Workplace (1), Positive Psychology Coaching (1)
Location of Practice	Australia (1), Canada (1), Ireland (2), Malaysia (1), the Netherlands (1), New Zealand (1), UAE (1), UK (4)
Client Reach (Geographical scope)	Domestic (within country of practice) (5), Global (7)

Note. Values in parentheses indicate the number of participants. EMCC = European Mentoring and Coaching Council; ICF = International Coaching Federation; CSA = Coaching Supervision Academy; NZPsS = New Zealand Psychological Society; BPS DCoP = British Psychological Society Division of Coaching Psychology.

Appendix B

Core prompt

Please adopt the role of an experienced coach with expert knowledge of coaching and psychological theories. Act as a curious, supportive, and non-judgemental reflective partner. I have just finished a coaching session and would like to reflect on what stood out, what challenged me, and what I'm learning about myself as a coach. I will not include any identifiable client information. Please help me think critically and reflectively, not by offering advice, but by prompting deeper awareness, insights, and learning.

N.B. If you would like to use a reflective model, please add this to the end of the Core Prompt: Please guide me using the reflective model [Gibbs/Kolb/insert reflective framework].

Optional prompts

Values

I'd like to explore how my values showed up in this session. Please include any moments where I felt aligned or in flow. Help me reflect on how this relates to my development as a coach.

Critical Incident Review

I'd like to reflect on a specific moment in this session that felt particularly significant or challenging. Please help me unpack what happened, how I responded, and what I might take forward into future coaching.

Theory Awareness

What psychological or coaching theories might help me make sense of what happened? What models or frameworks might I have drawn on, either consciously or unconsciously, in this session?

Patterns and Blind Spots

Are there any patterns, tensions, or blind spots in my reflection that I may not have noticed?

Professional Growth Lens

Please help me reflect on how this session contributed to my development as a coach. Were there any moments that prompted me to consider my professional responsibilities or values? I won't include any identifiable client information.

Closing prompt

I have completed my reflective practice for this session. Please provide me with a comprehensive summary of what we discussed today, formatted as a Word document, so I can save it to my reflective journal.

Appendix C

Semi-structured Interview questions

The following questions were used to guide semi-structured interviews:

1. Can you tell me about your current reflective practice?
 Prompt: How often do you reflect? What approaches do you normally use?
 Paper/technology?
2. What were your initial thoughts about using ChatGPT as a reflective partner?
 Prompt: Expectations or hesitations before trying it.
3. Can you describe how you used ChatGPT during the one-week period?
 Prompt: Which prompts did you try? How many times? What did you explore? Which device did you use?
4. How did your experience using ChatGPT compare with other forms of reflective practice?
 Prompt: Journalling, peer discussions, supervision, etc.
5. What surprised you about the experience?
 Prompt: What were the unexpected benefits or challenges?
6. What was the impact of ChatGPT on your reflections?
 Prompt: Did it affect your thinking, awareness, or insights?
7. Were there any moments that felt uncomfortable, unhelpful or limiting?
 Prompt: Any concerns about bias, tone, limitations of the tool?
8. Do you think you might use AI again as part of your reflective practice?
 Prompt: Why? Why not?
9. What, if anything, would have improved the experience for you?
 Prompt: Did you find the additional prompts provided helpful?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience with this method of reflection?

Appendix D

Table 2

Themes and subthemes

Themes and subthemes. <i>Brief Description</i>
1. The Reality of Reflective Practice 1.1. Type, Style and Triggers of Reflective Practice: <i>Describes how coaches reflect in practice, the styles they use, and the moments that trigger post-session reflection.</i> 1.2. Perceived Value and Barriers of RP: <i>Explains what coaches see as the benefits of reflection and the barriers that limit depth or frequency.</i> 2. Framing AI: Expectations, Attitudes, and Relational Aspects 2.1. Prior Exposure to AI: <i>Summarises participants' starting point with AI and how prior exposure shaped confidence and setup.</i> 2.2. Initial Expectations and First Reactions: <i>Outlines expectations before trying ChatGPT and first reactions after initial use</i> 2.3 Relational Framing and Anthropomorphic Language: <i>Explores how coaches framed ChatGPT (partner, mirror, assistant) and how that framing influenced trust and engagement.</i> 3. Experience of Using ChatGPT as a Reflective Tool 3.1. Prompts, Models and Freestyle Use of ChatGPT: <i>Details how participants used structured prompts, existing reflective models or freestyle dialogue, and why each helped or hindered.</i> 3.2. Interactive Style and Cognitive Load: <i>Describes what the interaction felt like, including pace, length and turn-taking, and the effects on cognitive load, concentration and flow</i> 3.3. ChatGPT vs Solo Reflective Practice: <i>Compares ChatGPT-supported reflection with solo reflection in terms of challenge, perspective and usefulness.</i> 3.4. Boundaries, Safety and Future Use. <i>Sets out ethical and practical boundaries for using ChatGPT in reflection and participants' intentions for future use.</i>