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DOI: 10.1177/1350507615598907

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Available on RADAR: 13.12.2016

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Intersubjective Identity Work and Sensemaking of Adult Learners on a Postgraduate Coaching Course: Finding the Balance in a World of Dynamic Complexity

Abstract

This article explores how we make sense of identity in situations of dynamic complexity. It contributes to debates on how dynamic complexity, conceived as periods of heightened uncertainty, disrupts the balance between acting and thinking that is constitutive of sensemaking. The article follows narratives of adult learners (including the first author) aspiring to become academically trained coaches within an emerging industry. We examine dynamic complexity in terms of individuals relating to multiple contexts (e.g. biographical, learning and industry) arguing that each of these creates varying degrees of complexity as individuals relate to a multitude of others within them. We show that heightened uncertainty resulting from such complexity makes greater demands on identity work. This involves both failure (more persistent intransigence of identity) and success (transience of identity). We suggest a mediating role for relationality and reflexivity in making sense of identity as they offer a balance between acting and thinking. By exploring professional identity work of the first author in relation to the participants we explicate the intersubjective nature of identity work and sensemaking. The contribution we make is to theorize identity work as intersubjectively conducted.

Introduction

This article examines how we make sense of identity in situations of dynamic complexity. Dynamic complexity refers to periods of heightened uncertainty caused by events for which we have no ‘sensible guide’ (Colville et al., 2013: 1). It is understood to disrupt the balance of thinking and acting that is constitutive of sensemaking in favour of a more action-oriented focus that helps individuals respond to the unprecedented nature of such events (Colville et al., 2012). However, debates on how dynamic complexity challenges sensemaking have not addressed sensemaking’s relationship with identity. We address this by examining a group of adult learners aspiring to become academically trained coaches within an industry (coaching) that is also in a process of becoming.

The article is based on research prompted by the first author’s desire to make sense of his own developing professional identity as a coach. For this he interviewed four adult learners on the same coaching course and created individual narratives for each of them. To explore the impact of dynamic complexity on sensemaking and identity the article draws on extracts from these narratives as well as autoethnographic vignettes from the first author’s experiences (Humphreys, 2005). Adopting this approach is significant in that it shows how the first author made, and continues to make, sense of his own identity as a professional coach.

We argue that for coaches-to-be dynamic complexity, or ‘what is going on here?’ (Colville and Pye, 2010: 373), is experienced in three intersecting ways. First, complex conditions (biographical context) influence the participants’ decision to join a coaching course; a decision we regard as sensemaking. Second, these complex conditions are compounded by engagement with the adult learning context (Williams, 2010) with consequences for participants’ on-going sensemaking and for their identity

work that becomes increasingly heightened in more acute conditions (Beech et al., 2012). Third, the individual learner's position as someone seeking to establish a more coherent professional identity is amplified by the ambiguity of doing so within an emerging (coaching) industry (Gray, 2011).

Conceiving of dynamic complexity in terms of how individuals relate to multiple contexts (e.g. biographical, learning and industry), we extend Brown's (2015) recommendation to explore how contexts might affect individuals' identity work by analyzing identity work in relation to intersecting contexts. We argue that each of these contexts brings with it varying degrees of complexity as we all relate directly or indirectly to a multitude of other individuals and that the heightened uncertainty resulting from such complexity makes greater demands on (professional) identity work. These demands can lead to both failure (e.g. the likelihood of more persistent intransigence of identity) and success (e.g. characterized by greater transience of identity). Within this, relationality and reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2004, 2008) are shown to have a mediating role as they offer a balance between acting and thinking in making sense of identity. By exploring professional identity work of the first author in relation to the research participants we explicate the intersubjective nature of identity work and sensemaking.

Our analysis has two core contributions. First, we propose an understanding of identity work as being intersubjectively conducted. The extensive body of research on identity work (see Brown, 2015) acknowledges that identity is: on-going, fluid and socially constructed (Brown and Phua, 2011); variously expressed as a dialectic between self and other (Beech, 2008; Ybema et al., 2009); an interaction of internal and external aspects of identity (Watson, 2008); and actively engaged in via a process of formation and revision (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). However, since 'we are

always in relation to others whether they are present or not' (Cunliffe, 2008: 128) a more explicit intersubjective approach is called for which, as we demonstrate, is key to understanding how we make sense of identity in situations of dynamic complexity. Second, from within the coaching industry there continues to be pressure to move towards accreditation, formalization and standardization in order to establish and achieve legitimacy for a coaching profession. This has clear implications for professional identity formation (Beijaard, et al., 2004; Pratt et al., 2006) not yet addressed in the literature. We argue that too much formalization or structure can be counterproductive to successful professional identity formation for those working in an occupation, such as coaching, in which the use of intuition is considered central to effective practice (Cox, 2013).

The remainder of this article addresses our theoretical positioning and research approach, then illustrates and analyses the narrative of the first author in relation to several other participants, and culminates in a discussion and conclusion.

Identity work and sensemaking of adult learners

The growing importance of coaching in organizations and management highlights a range of implications that professionalization might have for the coaching industry. This raises questions of professional identity, which are briefly discussed below before focusing on the issue of identity work against which we articulate our contribution in relation to intersubjectivity. Since we seek to understand the relationship between identity work and sensemaking we explore how sensemaking theories, which have typically focused on external considerations for identity, might be relevant to the individual. Finally, we briefly discuss the role of the learning context in which processes of sensemaking and identity work unfold.

Coaching and professional identity

Coaching as ‘a collaborative relationship formed between coach and coachee for the purpose of attaining professional or personal development outcomes’ (Grant et al., 2010: 126) has taken on an increasingly prominent role in organizations (De Haan et al., 2011; Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001). Coaches provide guidance in a wide range of situations such as assuaging the existential angst encountered by managers in increasingly complex organizational environments (Cavanagh and Lane, 2012). Coaching is a multi-billion dollar global industry (ICF, 2012) that continues to expand (Baron and Morin, 2009) through the hiring of external coaches as well as using internal staff to carry out coaching (CIPD, 2013). By examining the professional identity work of coaches-to-be we offer insights into the identity and sensemaking journeys of this emerging group of organizational actors with whom managers increasingly interact.

Whether coaching is or should be a profession characterized by unique skills, specialized knowledge and a code of conduct is heavily debated. For example, Ruane (2013: 32) claims that coaching is ‘still very early in its journey towards professionalization’ and Drake (2008: 16) wonders if coaching is ‘an industry, field, profession, philosophy and/or set of tools’. Notwithstanding these concerns there is a strong desire from both coaches and corporate clients for coaching to achieve professional status (Gray, 2011). It has also been argued that this status should be combined with developing standards for coaching practice, a rigorous evidence-base and appropriate training (Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001; Grant and Cavanagh, 2004; Cavanagh, 2013). However, the diversity of coaching’s theoretical origins and the breadth of tools and techniques upon which practitioners draw, make coaching

responsive and flexible leading to concerns that pursuing professional status may stifle such a dynamic practice (Du Toit, 2014: 1).

In addition, attempting to distinguish coaching from comparable occupations, such as consultancy or human resources (see Clegg et al., 2007; Hamlin et al., 2008), can lead to further ambiguity amongst adult learners aspiring to become a coach - something which inevitably has an impact on their identity (cf. Illeris, 2014; Jarvis, 2009; Wenger, 1998).

The professional identity literature has shown that learning to be a professional is often influenced by the role of one's personal biography (Williams, 2010), the perspectives of 'relevant others' (Beijaard et al., 2004: 126), specific experiences before and after training courses (Johnson et al., 2012) and/or by work and educational settings (Pratt et al., 2006). However, these studies have yet to address how professional identity is constructed in relation to *multiple* contexts, whereby each context is influential in determining the extent of complexity that an individual experiences (see Cavanagh and Lane, 2012).

Our understanding of the individual's relationship to multiple contexts aligns with Pritchard and Symon (2011: 437) who observe that 'professional identity might be achieved in respect to both local (organizational) and broader (institutional and societal) contexts' particularly where these contexts are considered to be 'fluid and dynamic'. Here, we focus on the course (learning) context of our coaches-to-be, on aspects of the pre-course context (personal biography) and on the wider context of 'an ambiguously defined industry environment' (Clegg et al., 2007: 499). As an industry without a clear lineage (Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001) the coaching context thus adds further complexity for our adult learners. As argued by Johnson et al. (2012: 566) 'knowledge about the past' is an important constitutive factor in professional

identity formation, because ‘it helps explain current practices and provides a sense of connection to something significant and on-going’.

Identity work for an aspired coaching identity

Understanding why people behave and perform the way they do, and how they make sense and enact their environments ‘is tied intimately to their identity’ (Brown and Phua, 2011: 84). Our understanding of identity draws on the rich body of literature on identity work in organization and management studies (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Coupland and Brown, 2012; McInnes and Corlett, 2012; Watson, 2008; for a comprehensive synthesis and analysis see Brown, 2015). Identity work expresses the active engagement of the individual except that, as explicated above, in our understanding it is the individual experiencing themselves in relation to multiple contexts and to various others; identity work is intersubjectively conducted.

Identity work is defined as ‘people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165). This work is situated, social, and discursive (Watson, 2008; Ybema et al., 2009) and therefore relational (Beech et al., 2012). Eschewing essentialist notions in which individuals are held to possess fixed identities, identity work favours the existence of multiple personal identities (Beech et al., 2012) that are sometimes in conflict with each other (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

To understand the identity work of our coaches-to-be, it is important to acknowledge that identity work can involve a variety of reactions. These include: simultaneously identifying and dis-identifying with a particular identity (Beech et al., 2012: 45); responding to particular tensions such as conflicting demands experienced

during organisational change such as the standardisation of practices (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012); or anxieties experienced between current and aspirational identities (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). Such tensions or ‘passages’ require identity work ‘to sustain feelings of authenticity’ (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010: 136). Identity work provides ‘a potential bridging concept between individual agency, choice and creation of the self, on the one hand, and history, culture and social shaping of identities on the other’ (Watson, 2009: 426). Trying to determine what it means to be/become a practitioner in an emerging industry (coaching) or reconciling conflicting identities as, for example, student, existing professional and aspiring coach, are examples of such tensions that require heightened professional identity work.

The identity work of our coaches-to-be has a strong aspirational dimension to it. Research adopting a psychological perspective has examined the human capacity to imagine possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999; Stevenson and Clegg, 2012) and also alternative selves (Obodaru, 2012). However, in keeping with the emphasis on relationality and intersubjectivity in our article, we see a closer connection to the broader body of literature on identity work (as argued above) and the investigation by Thornborrow and Brown (2009) into aspired identities. Their research into British paratroopers shows how aspirational identities are formed through a combination of individual narrative and institutional processes. Our study of coaches-to-be draws parallels by considering the narrative element (subjectively making sense) as well as ‘institutional’ forces (what it means to be a coach). We hold that because of the ambiguity that currently characterizes the coaching industry, for our coaches-to-be the latter is to a larger extent their creation (compared to those active in more formalized structures) and this further increases identity work.

In the absence of recourse to a formalized organizational structure with clearly recognizable cultural norms, identity work for our coaches-to-be is an individualized relational experience. This experience involves more disparate influences and frames of reference stemming from multiple contexts as they piece together what it means to be a coach. This highlights the nature of identity work as an intersubjective act; intersubjective in that ‘we are who we are because everything we say, think and do is interwoven with particular and generalized others: generalized groups, categories, language systems, culturally and historically situated discursive and non-discursive practices’ (Cunliffe, 2008: 129). Hence, we propose identity work is intersubjectively conducted.

Sensemaking and the learning context

According to Brown (2015) research into sensemaking has primarily focused on ‘the sense that people make of their external worlds rather than themselves’ (p. 32). By considering sensemaking and identity work as intersubjective our article seeks to explicate the sense people make of themselves through their relations with others.

Sensemaking theory stems from the pioneering work of Weick (1995, 2001). According to Weick, on-going negotiation of identity takes place within a (narrative) process of authoring and re-authoring of frameworks that individuals create, and within which they make sense of the world. In keeping with Bourdieu (1990) these frameworks provide a way of viewing the self-limiting influence of socio-historical and taken for granted perspectives. For Weick (1995), construction of identity comes about through a process of testing frameworks through social interaction – by asking the question, who am I to you? – and through the individual’s ability to ‘invent’ (p.

14) new ways of acting in response to the ‘interruption’ (p. 5) of expectations inherent in those frameworks.

Recent research has questioned the retrospective emphasis within Weick’s sensemaking framework (Colville and Pye, 2010; Holt and Cornelissen, 2013) and his core focus on ‘breakdowns’ (Holt and Cornelissen, 2013: 2). It has been argued that the general tendency to understand sensemaking as being based on past experiences and the known might deflect attention from ‘the ongoing moment’ and obscure a much wider range of ‘answers to the question, ‘what is going on here?’’ (Colville and Pye, 2010: 378). This invites a more prospective view of sensemaking, since it is particularly the situations that we have not encountered before and in which acting might predominate over thinking, that open us up for new understandings.

The call for prospective sensemaking by Colville and Pye (2010) resonates with the argument by Holt and Cornelissen (2013: 3) that current sensemaking theories in organization and management fail to consider the everyday-ness of certain situations in which ‘our usual frames no longer pertain’ and the importance of ‘mood’ and ‘openness’ to the unknown in terms of restoring balance. Indeed, for those aspiring to work in occupations such as coaching, awareness to the ambiguity of ‘life projects [being] inherently open, without specific direction or even form’ (Holt and Cornelissen, 2013: 3) is part and parcel of the job.

An academic course is a suitable context in which to focus on sensemaking of identity in situations of dynamic complexity since it involves encounters with the familiar and the quotidian, and includes new and often intensely discomfiting experiences for adult learners. Arriving in this learning context as a response to conditions of dynamic complexity, the sensemaking of our coaches-to-be is challenged further as they find that their past can ‘no longer serve as a reliable guide

to what is going on' (Colville et al., 2012: 7). The adult learning literature supports the notion that learning itself is instigated by conditions of dynamic complexity. For example, Mezirow (2000) talks of a disorienting dilemma and Jarvis (2009: 22) argues that 'disjuncture (the gap between biography and my current experience)... precedes all human learning'.

The learning context is significant in terms of understanding the relational nature of identity work, such as the mutually influential relationship between learner and cohort / academic-practitioner staff as a wider community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This particular learning context, with its emphasis on shifting positions of coach (e.g. as student practitioner with volunteer clients) and 'coachee' (e.g. in classroom practice) and between student-practitioner (on the course) and seasoned professional (in external life) further reflects the dynamic nature of identity for adult learners (Jarvis, 2012). Building on our proposal above, learning is considered relational in that individuals exist and their subjective sensemaking shapes and is shaped in relation to a variety of contexts (e.g. biographical, learning, coaching industry) and subjective others. These relationships therefore influence how individuals make sense of identity supporting our view of identity work as intersubjective action.

Research approach

Our study uses an interpretive epistemology prompted by an interest in how people (in this case, coaches-to-be) give meaning to their lives (Denzin, 1989; Yanow, 2006). In the interpretivist tradition, research is very much a 'puzzling-out process' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 27) going back and forth between findings and theoretical literature in an iterative and recursive manner in order to make sense, from

puzzle to understanding and explanation. ‘New concepts, relationships, explanations or accounts are created in the process of theorizing these surprises or puzzles’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 1012: 33). The account that follows and the theorizing presented is therefore very much our puzzling-out.

There is a strong autoethnographic element to the article, which reflects the influential nature of the first author’s role within the research setting (Ellis et al., 2011). The use of his narrative strives for ‘honesty, revelation, and [understanding of] the ‘larger picture’’ (Richardson, 2000: 11) and is a key source of data for answering questions of identity (Reed-Danahay, 1997) and identity work (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011).

In addition to the autoethnographic dimension, the relationality between the first and second author has been key in developing this article and the insights gained. The authors met during a two-year part-time academic Masters in coaching, the first author being an adult learner on the course and the second author the lecturer for research methodology. The former asked the latter to supervise his dissertation. This was an intuitive decision influenced by his understanding of how the second author, (an anthropologist with an ethnographic research background), might support his autoethnographic interests, as well as a sense that they would work well together.

The first author conducted in-depth interviews with four adult learners (three females, one male). The consequent narratives, as a means through which humans order and make sense of experiences (Brown et al., 2008; Polkinghorne, 1988), explore these adult learners’ developing sensemaking of their professional identity. It is through a process of negotiation and a developing relationship (Legard et al., 2003) that the first author and the interviewees reflexively co-constructed their own learning and sense of becoming a professional (cf. Gudmundsdottir, 1996). This ‘reflexive

interaction with the research engagement' (Linstead and Thomas, 2002: 17) is an important rationale for working with a small number of participants. Besides the transcripts, sensemaking (as data) took place in the interaction between the first author and the participants as well as between the two authors.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. The focus was on exploring the participants' learning experiences and consisted of open questions such as: 'How would you describe your experience of training/studying so far?' This focus derived in large part from the first author's desire to understand his own emerging coaching identity. Two years on from the original study, considerations of professional identity work remain significant as the first author continues to develop his coaching practice.

The second author familiarized herself with the data through various readings of and engagement with the full transcripts as well as through extensive conversations with the first author at various stages (as supervisor during dissertation writing and as co-author of the current article). Since interpretive analysis 'should make no claim to singularity' (James, 2012: 574) our different interpretations (see Hibbert et al., 2014) proved both valuable and frustrating. For example, as the deadline for submission approached, the emphasis within our conversations about conceptual misunderstandings, which had brought us many moments of positive surprise, shifted away from the content of those differences towards what it meant to each of us to be trying to resolve them while faced with an impending deadline. As such doing this project and developing this article is an example of relational reflexivity.

The narrative analysis initially followed Riessman (1993), with the first author composing extensive narratives for each of the participants in order to make use of the content-rich material and to deliver 'thickness' of description (Geertz, 1973).

Including autoethnographic vignettes (Humphreys, 2005) provided an additional way of exploring the experiences. With the narratives and vignettes as sources of identity (Somers, 1994), the emerging story-to-tell (Locke, 2011) developed into a *before*, *during* and *aspirational after*.

Findings: Aspiring to be a coach

This section presents a single narrative, that of the first author, *Liam*, introduced as autoethnographic vignettes in the form of a *before*, *during* and *aspirational after*. Following each of these vignettes we provide an explication including quotes from the narrative interviews *Liam* conducted with four fellow students: *Jane* an accomplished learning facilitator with a history of delivering one-to-one work, which she equates to coaching; *Michael*, another veteran trainer and facilitator who was familiar with coaching but had not practiced it widely; *Isabel* who was working for a coaching consultancy, although not in a coaching capacity; and *Diane* who arrived on the course following redundancy during which time she had her first encounter with coaching (as a client) but who had not yet practiced coaching herself. Participants' names have been changed for privacy reasons.

Before - Liam

Prior to starting the coaching course, I had worked in operational roles in entertainment organisations for 14 years. I was unhappy with my career progression and through coaching I received at work I decided on a change of direction into employee development, related also to my interest in managing my team. I applied for a Masters in organizational behaviour (OB). At that time a restructure at work took place in which my line management responsibilities were set to diminish, thus

encouraging me to leave the organization. Things were further complicated when I turned down the offer to do the OB course due partly to anxiety about not being able to complete a Masters programme. Although I enjoyed learning for its own sake I felt ambivalent towards academic learning having left school with two average A levels and having failed my undergraduate dissertation at the first attempt. I had come to see myself as conceptually adept (able to ‘think’ academically) while feeling unable to ‘do’ academic work. Another reason for turning down the OB Masters had been a strong attachment to the idea of working closely with people to support their learning and wellbeing. A positive experience being coached further influenced my new choice of course. This alternative programme also broke down into three stages at each of which I could step off with a qualification, lowering my anxiety about completing a Masters. Having been accepted onto the coaching course I was still anxious but this time I was also excited about what lay ahead.

Before – Explication

Conditions of dynamic complexity emerge in relation to the unstable nature of *Liam*'s professional identity. Holt and Cornelissen (2013) propose that sensemaking takes place not only as a consequence of so-called ‘breakdowns’ (p. 13) but also in response to more prosaic discrepancies that surface in day-to-day life. We see sensemaking enacted here in the creation of an aspirational coach identity and in its pursuit through the course, which, as we shall see, brings further complexity. *Isabel*'s narrative opens with a similar identity issue:

I work for a coaching consultancy... [but] haven't delivered any coaching work for them because we are quite a niche organisation and I didn't have any, kind of, experience or qualifications in coaching previously... (*Isabel*)

Liam's encounter with organizational restructure (see also *Diane*, below) further compounds this 'disjuncture' (Jarvis, 2009: 22), whereby a situation at hand is no longer consistent with an existing narrative and for which there is no sensible guide (Colville et al., 2013).

Things [at work] had moved on... And then that, I think, exposed the fact that I didn't really fit... So, doing the coaching course seemed to be a good escape.
(*Diane*)

Dynamic complexity finds expression here in the intensity of *Liam's* disorientation with regard to his (professional) identity (Mezirow, 2000). It increases further with anticipation of academic study in which his narrative (and that of other participants) expresses the resurrection of long-held (and potentially unhelpful) beliefs that can affect those returning to education (Williams, 2010):

I'd never studied to Masters level... I felt as though I'd just missed the turn... and I would like to... really stretch myself academically. (*Jane*)

I'd never done a higher degree... you could almost call [it] intellectual vanity or something, 'I should have got a Masters!' (*Michael*)

The value *Liam* derives from having been coached and that he places on supporting others with their learning, hints at the meaningful nature of being a coach:

[Coaching] kind of felt quite natural... (*Isabel*)

I do have an innate ability, so I'm told... (*Diane*)

I've always had a facilitative way of working (*Michael*)

In their talk of having a 'natural' or 'innate' affinity for coaching, the participants describe an intuitive understanding of and identification with what it means to be a coach. However, their decision to study for a coaching qualification expresses a contradictory notion; that of professional illegitimacy with respect to the coaching industry (Drake, 2008; Gray, 2011).

I hadn't actually got any piece of paper, which said 'coaching' on it... It was only when the recession started hitting, a couple of years or so ago [that I realized]... there's lots of people out there. They're accredited; they've got coaching pieces of paper... (*Jane*)

We understand the decision to study for a professional qualification to be a sensemaking frame through which participants attempt to manage the complexity of their identity. Such identity issues arise here from a variety of factors: from a growing sense of feeling out of place; from the ordeal of professional redundancy; and/or from a desire to formalize an intuitively felt connection to a new occupation. In addition,

for these coaches-to-be this process of becoming appears to involve both identification and dis-identification (Beech et al., 2012) with the aspired identity.

During – Liam

Throughout the course, excitement and anxiety shifted in intensity with writing assignments, meaning I was forced to face my academic demons, sometimes reducing me to tears. Success with my first paper didn't stop me from experiencing similar feelings throughout the course. However, in time I began to develop a more constructive perspective on my academic abilities. Occasionally, my coaching practice also provoked anxiety as I experienced uncertainty from being thrown in the deep end working for the first time with (volunteer) clients. Nonetheless, a productive relationship working with a supportive coaching supervisor helped me to consider my developing practice. Despite this I continued to feel confused over what it meant to be a competent coach as I was unable to reconcile how failing to secure a Masters might invalidate the progress I was making in 'real life' coaching situations. I also became aware of a lack of fit between labels such as 'executive coach' and how I understood myself as a practitioner.

During – Explication

Being an adult learner often gives rise to ambivalence as positive expectations vie with anxiety and the re-emergence of historical educational experiences (Askham, 2008). This confounds rather than delivers upon the participants' expectations of the course (e.g. *Diane's* desired 'escape'), bringing greater complexity and heightening identity work:

I did go through quite a lot of angst before... thinking, 'What the hell am I doing, doing this course with all these people?' ...They just seemed quite foreign, some of them did... (*Diane*)

[My relationship with my studies is] tumultuous! ...I really love studying... but I wish that I could spend more time doing it... but the practicalities; the logistics of it are difficult to fit with my life... (*Isabel*)

Isabel's 'love' of studying draws a parallel with the participants' talk of feeling naturally connected to coaching. Ironically, having sought to formalize intuitively felt characteristics through a coaching course, they nonetheless find themselves challenged by 'structure' (see *Jane's* language, below) encountered in the learning process (e.g. *Liam's* issue with academic measurement, or *Isabel's* 'practicalities'). For example, Jane claimed that her..:

...struggle was... the way I work, which is very fluid and open and not very structured... [was different to my coaching supervisor who was] very used to working with a lot of psychometrics, for example... (*Jane*)

In this sense, a surfeit of structure proves problematic. Conversely, as *Liam* suggests with his comment about 'being thrown in the deep end', these coaches-to-be also describe problems arising from a *lack* of structure in their learning experiences. For example, *Michael* expresses a sense of disorientation evident in his early encounters with coaching supervision, for which he had no suitable frame of reference:

Because of my own lack of experience of [coaching supervision] I didn't quite know how to do it...

In this respect, both excess and absence of structure appear to destabilize sensemaking, heightening identity work and leading to intransigence (immobility) of identity. This creates a parallel with what is going on in the coaching industry in which both imposition of standards and an incoherent professional identity (Du Toit, 2014) may be disorienting for its members

Colville et al. (2012) propose that in such complex situations sensemaking tends to be driven by action (percept) over thought (concept). However, we propose that the narratives point to another element, relational reflexivity that mediates the making sense of identity in such situations. Relational reflexivity emerges in *Liam's* talk of working with his coaching supervisor and in the following comments:

I really enjoyed the [volunteer] client work... I suppose I had a sense of liberation... having the permission of being a student again, once I'd got used to the idea that... I'd lost my 'suit'... I did enjoy that sense of experimentation... (*Jane*)

Reading... what [those authors] had said... just made me realize that you'll go through change and transition and part of that is just being self-aware and admitting it to yourself. (*Diane*)

I did an assignment on self-compassion and... my approach now is to focus on the things that are really important... and just to focus on that and try and be

self-compassionate about the other things that I have decided not to focus on.

(Isabel)

One of the pieces of theoretical knowledge that I would say has made a difference, was the... stuff about reflective practice, and learning to be... reflective in the moment... which I thought was... quite difficult but fascinating. *(Michael)*

Each of these quotes reveals sense-enabling devices (e.g. assignment-writing, theoretical literature, supervision, client work) through which coaches-to-be relate to others at different degrees of separation (e.g. directly in conversation with a coaching supervisor or indirectly to authors through literature). These devices also facilitate reflexivity through which coaches-to-be conduct their professional identity work. Each interview provides a similar opportunity for the interviewee (and by extension the interviewer) to recognize themselves, albeit momentarily, in the story that is created within it (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012).

In the *during* phase, complexity increases as attempts by the participants to construct their professional identity, are confounded by experiences that are contradictory or unhelpful to achieving the aspired identity – notably through the absence and/or excess of certain structural conditions – leading to intransigence of identity. In contrast, transience (fluidity) of identity is achieved using relational, sense-enabling devices through which individuals reflexively manage professional identity work. In the final section, we look at how the narratives express the aspirants' progress toward the aspired coaching identity.

Towards an Aspirational After – Liam

I continued to experience anxiety until completion of the course but towards the end I had reconciled myself to believing that, provided I submitted my dissertation, a pass was likely and I convinced myself that that would be ‘good enough’. From a coaching perspective, my confidence as a practitioner was growing as I began to trust my judgement to an increasing degree. By then, I had re-contracted with my coaching supervisor since both of us had realized that I had outgrown our previous relationship and now suited the role of junior partner more than that of coaching student. A similar relationship had emerged through working with my academic supervisor whose identity as a coaching outsider permitted me to bring the (coaching) content, while she provided support and guidance from an academic perspective. Still, in spite of my growth as a practitioner and the prospect of a pass that would provide me with an important measure of legitimacy from an industry perspective, an absence of paid work meant I remained conscious of still not feeling like a ‘proper’ coach.

Towards an Aspirational After – Explication

At this stage, the innate or natural affinity that had dominated the relationship participants had with coaching prior to the course, is given different emphasis:

Looking back on my early attempts at coaching... I became conscious that it was just intuitive; I was just following my nose... ...I haven’t felt that for some time now, which is nice because it makes me feel like I’m getting there... (*Michael*)

I’m learning to use my, sort of, innate, instinct, natural intuition... And... I

suppose, rein it in a bit and structure it and... give it a form... (*Diane*)

Participants' comments similar to *Liam's* desire to 'trust my judgement' indicate that they began to surface previously formless or intuitive understanding (Cunliffe, 2008) of how to do coaching. This led to a more confident attitude emerging:

It's interesting having put my foot firmly... in the coaching waters now, I get the sense that... there's different pools, if you like, that I can explore with a Masters... than I realize existed before... (*Jane*)

I was doing bits of coaching before I started and, I suppose, partly now... I feel that I am perfectly qualified to say, 'yes, I am a coach' and it's a reasonable and credible position. (*Michael*)

These comments suggest that participants considered progress had been made towards achieving the desired professional status. Such confidence also indicates a reduction in complexity (greater transience) experienced in relation to identity. However, as *Liam* articulates more explicitly in his description of not yet being a 'proper coach', these statements also reveal a sense of incompleteness that is indicative of an ongoing journey, and which, is characteristic of aspirational identities (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009).

Discussion

The discussion of our findings opens with an illustration of dynamic complexity as it relates to multiple contexts. We then describe the implications this has for individual

identity and identity work, in particular with regard to how certain conditions encountered can intensify identity work. We consider the relational and reflexive nature of successful identity work and the contribution made by elements of the coaching course to this process. Finally, we illustrate the intersubjective nature of identity work that takes place in the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and between the authors in our study, and briefly discuss the implications that this and our other findings have for those who practice coaching.

We conceive of dynamic complexity as the interactivity of challenging circumstances experienced in relation to multiple contexts of which the individual is unable to make sense. In our study, these heightened conditions of uncertainty for which our participants have no ‘sensible guide’ (Colville et al., 2013: 1) occur in three intersecting ways: pre-course (e.g. redundancy at work); on-course (e.g. managing work / life / study balance); and aspiring to a new professional identity (e.g. figuring out how to meet the requirements of a new occupation / industry). As Weick (1995) suggests, we recognize the extent of the challenge to sensemaking expressed in these cases in the emotional tone present in certain elements of the narratives (e.g. *Isabel’s* ‘tumultuous’ relationship with her studies).

Dynamic complexity in these cases, we propose, is experienced as disorientation of identity leading to heightened identity work (Jarvis, 2009; Mezirow, 2000). Our findings indicate tension arising from either excess (e.g. managing the practicalities of study) or absence (e.g. experiencing the uncertainty involved in coaching for the first time) of structure within the learning experiences of our coaches-to-be. In our view, this reflects similar tensions encountered by those undergoing organizational change (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012) or by those in other occupations in which intuition also plays a central role, for example, where (innate)

creative tendencies can be frustrated by (structuring) commercial imperatives (Beech et al., 2012). We propose that an outcome of such heightened identity work is greater intransigence of identity, essentially a slowing of processes that produce ‘a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165) or ‘feelings of authenticity’ (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010: 136).

It is our understanding that the coaching course provides resources to help manage the issue of intransigence. These take the form of what we describe as *sense-enabling* devices, such as theoretical literature, assignments and coaching supervision as well as coaching as a ‘reflective, dialogic practice’ (Cox, 2013: 1). Following Cunliffe (2008) we consider these devices to be relational in that individuals use them to relate to themselves, providing a platform on which to reflexively mediate their identity work. For our participants, these moments of recognition are part of an ongoing journey towards an aspirational identity (Mallet and Wapshott, 2012; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). These moments, ‘re-punctuating [their] experience [as] a form of continuous learning’ (Weick and Westley, 1996 in: Colville et al. 2013: 2), thus help to restore balance between thinking and acting in situations of dynamic complexity (Colville et al., 2012). This perspective also highlights the ‘everyday’ nature of sensemaking, ‘which give[s] sense to our activities and the passions and goals we and everyone else pursue’ (Holt and Cornelissen, 2013: 3). The outcome of this, we suggest, is a diminution in the intensity of identity work, which reorients the individual and leads to greater transience of identity.

We propose that this identity work is intersubjectively conducted. The original research that lead to this article was prompted by concerns raised by the first author (*Liam*) relating to his developing professional (coaching) identity. Our findings show how each participant’s subjectivity develops as a result of unique experiences that

occur across multiple contexts and that are thus intertwined with those of others. These interactions were therefore significant not only in helping *Liam* to do identity work but also in terms of how he did (and continues to do) that work. In the interviews, each of these subjectivities was influential; the participants intersubjectively constructed what it means to be a coach along with *Liam*. In other words, each of these coaches-to-be is involved in doing their own professional identity work, as well as *Liam's*, and vice versa.

The writing of this article is a similarly intersubjective process of identity work. We have approached the topic and the process together but from our own subjectively informed perspectives, and thus have contributed to and shaped not just the resulting article but also the identity of, and the nature of our relationship to, each other. Similar challenges have resulted in different (e.g. more or less emotional) experiences at different stages of the writing journey, which indicates fluctuating intensity of identity work. As argued by Cunliffe (2008: 129) 'we are not two individuals coordinating activity and coming to an understanding of what each other thinks, but we are always selves-in-relation-to-others'. For the second author this implied having to let go of her tested way of writing academic papers (as part of her academic identity) and handing over ownership to the first author whose approach, due to a lack of practice in writing such papers, was more intuitive and unstructured. We thus became part of each others 'life story'. Although we do not claim any specific theory development resulting from this, we did engage in 'otherness' by exploring (our) alternative views and enacted 'connectedness' in our conversations on the meaning of the data, as suggested by Hibbert et al. (2014: 3). This article could not have been written in this way and with these insights by us individually.

The coaching industry is also an intersubjective construct. The coming together of practitioners with myriad personal and professional backgrounds (Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001) and with a variety of theoretical approaches and techniques (Du Toit, 2014) perpetuates the challenge of establishing a clear definition of coaching. This has important consequences for practitioners' professional identity work. Conversely, the introduction of codes of conduct and development of standards within the coaching industry risks rigidifying a flexible and intuitive practice. It also risks destabilising the balance between individual narrative and institutional processes that are conducive to successful aspirational identity work (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009).

In discussing their learning experiences, our participants describe having brought structure or coherence to a previously innate sense of how to do coaching. We argue that an over-formalized (structured) approach to training has the potential to restrict openness (or intuition) to the unknown, which can facilitate responsiveness in conditions of complexity (Holt and Cornelissen, 2013). In addition, based on the first author's subsequent and continuing coaching practice, we suggest that developing and maintaining a highly reflexive stance that keeps the individual alert to the shifting balance of structuring influences contributes to more effective management of complex situations. This has value not just for those within the coaching industry who may seek to affirm a professional identity but also for coaches in the field (and those they work with) as they are increasingly called upon to support others through similarly complex organizational conditions (Cavanagh, 2013).

Conclusion

This article explored the issue of how individuals make sense of identity in situations of dynamic complexity. Stimulated by the desire of the first author to understand his own development as a coach, our article presents the experiences of a group of adult learners on a postgraduate coaching course. By conceiving dynamic complexity as individuals relating to multiple contexts (e.g. biographical, learning and industry), in the sense that each context contributes varying degrees of complexity to individual lives, we were able to show that heightened uncertainty resulting from such complexity makes greater demands on (professional) identity work. The development of a coaching identity under these conditions involves experiences of both intransigence and transience of identity.

However, this identity work is not purely an individual activity. Sense-enabling devices, elements of the course that permit individuals to relate to themselves by relating to others (directly or indirectly), create a platform on which to reflexively mediate identity work. Therefore, our examination into how we make sense of identity in situations of dynamic complexity shows that our coaches-to-be do so through a process of intersubjectively conducted identity work. This process is relational and reflexive and restores the balance of thinking and acting originally disrupted by dynamic complexity.

Our article also raises new questions. First, how to further understand the relationship between sensemaking and identity? Throughout the writing of this article we have had difficulty in separating the two, which has led us to understand identity work as a process of sensemaking. More research is needed to support this finding. Second, how might our case compare with related (professional) groups such as psychotherapists for example? Would such comparative research result in similar patterns being witnessed in the sensemaking and identity work of adult learners

training for such occupations? Third, as shown, the process of making sense of our own identities during the writing of this article offered unique insights. We suggest further examining such cooperation as it offers potentially a way to connect academic and practitioner communities (see Orr and Bennett, 2012).

The findings point to the following practical implications for management and organizations. From a change management perspective the extent to which structure is imposed by a particular change programme will have an impact on the ability of individuals to do identity work. Thus, a programme of change into which employees have minimal input (excess of structure) or in which change is poorly communicated (absence of structure) is likely to lead to heightened tension in the organization as individuals work harder to make sense of their identity. The intersubjective nature of identity work makes this an even more complex process. We suggest that organizations could provide suitable opportunities to engage in relational reflexivity. For instance, by actively involving employees in the co-construction of a new organizational landscape they are better able to ‘see’ themselves and their relatedness to others, and therefore to mediate the identity work required to enable fluid and more congruent personal and organizational transitions.

In addition to this, we believe that with the growing presence of coaches (internal and external) in organizations there is relevance in our finding that intuition and ‘openness’ are key qualities that coaches can bring. Coaches therefore can offer support to organizations in times of complexity where openness to the unknown might be a way forward.

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