A leap into the unknown: The self-employed coach's experience of self-doubt

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Abstract

This study explores the experience of self-doubt of four self-employed coaches. The study sought to explore the metaphorical meaning-making of the participants, and semi-structured interviews were augmented by imagery created by the participants to visually depict their experience of self-doubt. The data were gathered and analysed using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach. The findings suggest that the skills and knowledge required to fulfil the roles of both coach and business owner are dynamic and complex and take time to master. As well, the experience of self-doubt has symbolic, psychological and economic impacts, and has the potential to prevent the self-employed coach from being able to do their work in the world. The findings point to the need for safe places for the self-employed coach to explore the increased complexity of their world. The implications of the use of participant-created imagery in qualitative research are also considered.

Keywords: coaching; self-employment; self-doubt; metaphor; images.

Introduction

While studies suggest that the majority of professional coaches consider themselves to be self-employed (Association for Coaching 2014; George 2013; Grant & Zackon, 2004), there is little research investigating the experience of *being* a self-employed coach. While coaches are in the business of uncertainty, with no two clients or coaching sessions ever quite the same, the self-employed coach faces the additional complexity of operating a business, often with few natural opportunities for support. This study seeks to explore the experience of self-doubt of four self-employed coaches.

The key objective for this study was to understand something of the phenomenological nature of self-doubt. I wanted to explore how the coach personally experienced and responded to self-doubt and the impact this had on their work with clients, as well as the ramifications for their coaching business.

The research questions sought to answer the following:
- What are the coach's physiological, cognitive, emotional and felt-sense experiences of self-doubt?
- How does the research participant's experience of self-doubt impact their coaching?
- Is there a pattern or thematic nature to the experience of self-doubt?

My own experience of self-doubt arose as soon as I began coaching. Armed with enthusiasm, techniques and a shiny certificate declaring my title of "Coach", I found that clients *brought their whole lives* to coaching sessions. I was aware of an internal disquiet when clients did not experience 'positive results' from our coaching and, when I did not know what to say, I noticed that sessions tended to lapse into advice-giving. I was also concerned at the limits of my expertise to competently address the complex issues clients brought to coaching. I found myself beginning to cultivate a level of existential doubt about the role and efficacy of coaching.

This prompted my enrolment in a Master's programme; it seemed that the scholar-practitioner approach had the greatest potential both to make sense of the derivative nature of coaching, and to provide an empirical basis for my coaching practice. Having access to formal supervision during that programme was a turning point. This "home for the shadow" (Bachkirova, 2015: 11) provided the space for me to explore my doubts and develop deeper levels of self-awareness. My self-doubt has significantly dissipated and this shift is reflected in the nature of the issues I bring to supervision now.

In 2013 I chose to leave a fifteen-year career as a management consultant in order to pursue coaching full-time. In parallel to building a coaching practice, I needed to quickly acquire the knowledge and skills to run a small business. The requirement to market myself in the face of rising professional competition raised questions of confidence and authenticity, to say nothing of the blurred distinction of work and life when one's office is in the spare bedroom. Just as supervision had helped, finding a business mentor was key to developing my entrepreneurial skills to create what is now a sustainable and successful coaching business.

The literature review in the next section provides an account of studies of self-doubt as experienced by the coach and the entrepreneur. There follows an account of how the methodological approach has been specifically applied in this study, including the use of visual research methods. The three dimensions that emerged from the analysis are then presented, before a concluding summary of the findings and their potential implications for theory, practice and research.

A review of the literature

Within the academic literature, there are few explicit references to self-doubt; only two UK-based researchers (de Haan 2008 and Hindmarch 2008) have explored self-doubt within a coaching context. The coach's experience of self-doubt is also notably absent from practitioner literature, perhaps reflecting the positive-psychology basis for proprietary coaching models concerned with empowerment, development, and the prizing of optimism. An inquiry into self-doubt necessitates delving into the emotional state of the coach, and while coaching accreditation bodies require competency in emotional literacy, there remains debate and confusion within the profession around working with emotions (Cox & Bachkirova, 2007; Cremona, 2009). Similarly, research in the entrepreneurial domain regularly concludes that entrepreneurs have greater degrees of confidence than the general population (Koellinger *et al*, 2006). Consequently, the business owner's experience of self-doubt is largely ignored. This review highlights the main themes in the literature: the nature of self-doubt; self-doubt and self-employment, and interventions to address self-doubt.

The nature of self-doubt
The subjective nature of self-doubt presents a challenge for researchers and has resulted in a confused, and sometimes contradictory, spectrum of definitions. At one end there is the concept of

self-doubt as an experience of general uncertainty about one's competence: here self-doubt is viewed as a momentary state and a natural response to societal pressures on the individual (Carroll, Arkin & Shade, 2011; de Vries 2005; Berglas & Jones, 1978). At the other end of the spectrum are warnings of the nature of self-doubt as a "threat from within" where self-esteem is at risk (Hermann, Leonardelli, and Arkin, 2002: 396). Other researchers straddle the fence of both/and; Baumeister *et al* (2003: 2) describe low self-esteem as "either an accurate, well-founded understanding of one's shortcomings as a person, or a distorted, even pathological sense of insecurity and inferiority" and Bandura (1997, cited in Hindmarch, 2008: 2) states "people's level of motivation, affective states and actions are based more on beliefs than what is objectively true".

Although self-doubt is a relatively under-researched phenomenon, studies proposing its positive consequences are not unheard of. de Haan's content analysis of critical moments of doubt concludes that it is "precisely in and as a result of such moments that the coach can learn something about him or herself" (2007: 534). Kernis, 2003 (cited in Lupien *et al*, 2012: 762) associates acknowledgement of vulnerabilities to potential threats with high self-esteem, resilience and optimal functioning. Bennett-Levy and Beedle's grounded theory study of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy trainees self-perceptions of competence found that gains in competence were often accompanied or preceded by a "volatile sense of self-competence" (2006: 73).

The lack of consensus about what might be gained or lost through experiencing self-doubt seems to reflect the nuanced and individual experience of this phenomenon. Without a clear understanding of what self-doubt *is*, the coach may not be consciously aware of their self-doubt and thus deflect or ignore it. Two studies report on the hidden nature of self-doubt; Hindmarch (2008: 7) found that previously unrevealed experiences of self-doubt were recognised only after an analysis of metaphors the coach had used to describe their practice and de Haan (2008: 537) suggests there are many doubts that coaches "are not aware of, or that are temporarily outside their awareness".

The question of the capacity of coaches to be cognitively and emotionally aware concerns several researchers who argue that coaches need psychological literacy. Bluckert (2005: 175) warns that, without this essential platform, work with clients "may remain superficial", or worse, "subtly or crudely prevent the client from going where they need". For Bachkirova (2004: 37), if the strategies of the coach and client do not match, this "may become a barrier to an effective working relationship between them". Without a practice of reflection, coaches may fear the ramifications of exposing their own vulnerabilities even to themselves, thus denying themselves a rounded sense of self that will serve as "a rudder for navigating difficult waters" (Leonard *et al*, 1999: 13).

Coaches who consciously ignore their self-doubt and its implications, may be engaging in the paradox of self-deception: "how the same person at the same time can both know and keep oneself from knowing the same thing" (Bachkirova, 2015: 3). This is of particular relevance for self-employed coaches whose livelihood depends on marketing themselves as 'confident experts' and who, as they often work alone, may have few natural opportunities for feedback. Geller, Norcross and Orlinksky's multi-modality study found therapists described a reluctance to seek help "as if they will be seen as an imposter" (2005: 6). While therapists have a responsibility to understand how their own unconscious processes can impact their relationships with clients (Adams, 2014: 6), there is no such requirement for coaches.

Numerous studies have highlighted the responses of those who identify with Imposter Phenomenon (IP). Quantitative studies of North American undergraduates are consistent in contending that imposters attempt to ameliorate the negative effects of failure, by either procrastinating until the last minute (and are then likely to attribute failure to a lack of effort rather than ability) or over-preparation (and are then more likely to attribute success to luck) (Cowman & Ferrari, 2002; Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Holmes *et al*, 1993). While the characteristics of IP are well established in the literature, there is less consensus on the nature of IP itself. A North Korean study (Chae *et al*, 1995) argued that IP should be construed as a motivational style rather than a clinical syndrome. Norem and Cantor (1986: 352) also doubt the notion of IP as a static disposition and offer an alternative strategy of "defensive pessimism", defining this as a behaviour of individuals who typically perform well, but who discount their past successes and lower their expectancies prior to entering a new challenging situation.

Early studies into IP (Clance & Imes, 1978; Clance, 1985) observed symptoms in more than 150 women studied, and the notion of a gendered response to self-doubt remains prevalent in the print and online press. de Vries (2005: 110), however, claims IP is by no means limited to women; rather, its presentation will be found in roles and industries where the appearance of intelligence is vital to success, and Bandura (1998, cited in Bachkirova, 2004: 30) argues that most talented people feel dissatisfied with their achievements.

Developing a healthy and proportionate response to self-doubt is arguably difficult in our Western individualist culture, where confidence is socially prized. Baumeister *et al* (2003: 3) states that North American society in particular has come to embrace the idea that high self-esteem is "the central psychological source from which all manner of positive behaviours and outcomes spring", yet, in a comprehensive longitudinal study, found weak positive correlations between self-esteem and an improved life experience.

Coaching, self-employment and self-doubt

Surveys of the coaching industry and some studies suggest that the majority of professional coaches consider themselves to be self-employed (Association for Coaching 2014; Grant & Zackon 2004; International Coaching Federation 2012). There is, however, no research into the experience of *being* a self-employed coach. Grant and Zackon (2004) found that virtually all coaches come from a prior professional background, though it is unclear what, if any, entrepreneurial experience people bring to coaching. While most coaching schools include an element of business development training (Grant & O'Hara, 2006), a high proportion of coaches leave the coaching industry after two years (Grant & Zackon, 2004).

Women are over-represented in the coaching industry (Association for Coaching 2014; George, 2013, Grant & Zackon, 2004), and, in the UK, women account for 80% of the newly self-employed (Office of National Statistics, 2013). Research on women business owners has shown that they possess many of the characteristics that are essential for business success (Moore, 1999), though Watkins and Watkins (1984) reported that 50 per cent of women business owners had no prior or direct experience relating to their business (compared to 5% of men). Some studies have suggested that women tend to have lower levels of confidence than men at all stages of their entrepreneurship (Bengtsson *et al* 2005; Kirkwood, 2009) and research by Fielden *et al* (2003: 162) concludes that a lack of confidence is perhaps "the greatest barrier to women's progression into small business ownership". Other research suggests that this conclusion reflects socially constructed gendered

concepts, where the emerging image of an entrepreneur is that of the "heroic self-made man" (Ahl, 2006; 599).

Evidence supports the notion that self-confidence increases with entrepreneurship education (Wilson *et al,* 2007) and the time an entrepreneur is in business (Koellinger *et al*, 2008). Fielden (*et al,* 2003) conducted in-depth interviews with 22 women entrepreneurs, and recommended business mentoring as a key mechanism for improving self-confidence in women business owners.

Interventions and strategies

The literature points to three models of reflective practice that will provide support for the coach to reduce the impact of self-doubt: supervision, coaching and structured reflection. These approaches claim to provide "the reflective container for the trainee to turn their competencies into capabilities and to develop their personal and coaching capacities" (Hawkins, 2009: 384). de Vries argues that supervision allows the coach to experience "open, honest, critical feedback as an opportunity for new learning and not an irredeemable catastrophe" (2005: 116), while good one-to-one supervision will both "model and expose the coaching process" for the purposes of learning and development (Mead, Campbell & Milan, 1999: 283). This means that within these reflective contexts, the coach is able to make sense of their self-doubt on two levels: the explicit content of the remembered moments of self-doubt, and the experience of what occurs in the session between the coach and supervisor. This is consistent with Bluckert's (2005: 174) promotion of the coach's ability "to see the past in the present and make links between current issues and what has happened previously". A safe venue for the coach to acknowledge their vulnerabilities around self-doubt may be particularly beneficial for the coach working alone, or the coach working as an independent third party within an organisation.

At a wider strategic level within the coaching profession, there is arguably a need for coaches to be prepared for their encounters with self-doubt. Bluckert (2005: 171) advocates for a shift in the emphasis of coach training to incorporate a focus on the personal development of the coach. This is supported by Bachkirova (2004: 34), who offers a model for the learning and development of coaches which explores the discrepancy between the ideal image and the self-image. An introduction to coaching that incorporates the understanding that self-doubt is along for the ride may offer the coach some comfort in accepting that coaching "involves risk, effort and discipline as we grapple to make more sense of our own and others' experience" (Bluckert 2005: 175).

It is clear that the coach's response to their experience of self-doubt has implications for the coach and their clients, as well as the sustainability of the coach's business and, by extension, the coaching industry as a whole. Clearly, not all doubt is the same: some is fundamental to the coach's self-concept while some occurs at critical moments in the context of a coaching session and is related to questions such as 'What is going on?' and 'How do I respond?' (de Haan 2008a: 98). Still more doubts may be hidden from the consciousness of the coach. Few studies have explored the implications of self-doubt for the coach; even less is known about the experience of the self-employed coach. This inevitably raises questions about the aspects of self-doubt that are missing from the existing literature.

Methodology

The key reason for undertaking this study was to explore the "quality and texture" (Willig, 2000: 9) of the research participants' experience of self-doubt. My choice of methodology needed to provide coherence within my interpretavist epistemology, and enable an inquiry of "researching with, rather than on, people" (Heron 1996; 144). I considered the qualitative approaches of Grounded Theory, Narrative Analysis and Heuristic Inquiry, before selecting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as my approach of choice for this study. IPA is concerned with giving a rich and nuanced account of the personal experiences of a small sample (Smith *et al*, 2009). It has an idiographic focus, which means that it aims to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon.

While there is an acknowledged affinity between IPA and Grounded Theory (Willig, 2013: 99), the latter may be considered more of a sociological approach (Willig, 2003), drawing on convergences within a larger sample to support wider conceptual explanations. I was not particularly interested in uncovering new theory, but rather in deeply understanding and, by necessity, interpreting, the experience of the research participants. I also considered utilising Narrative Analysis, a social constructionist approach concerned with meaning-making. However, Narrative Analysis is focussed on the way a story is constructed, and the intention of the teller as well as the meaning of the 'plot' (Riessman, 2008 cited in Ritchie *et al*, 2014: 270). I felt that IPA could include consideration of narrative in the sense-making of participants, without being constrained by this focus (Smith *et al,* 2009).

Perhaps because of my own experience with the subject matter, I experienced considerable tension while making my decision to discount a Heuristic inquiry. Moustakas (1990, cited in Sela-Smith 2001: 58) offers heuristics as a valid method for investigating experience where the "focus is inward, on the feeling responses of the researcher to the outward situation, rather than exclusively to relations between the pieces of that outside situation". I chose IPA as a deliberate means of formalising the separateness of myself as researcher, in order to retain my focus on the research participant and their experience of the phenomena being explored.

Because this study is an exploration of experience, it was an interpretative endeavour for both the research participants, and myself, as the researcher "trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith *et al*, 2009: 87). The nature of this double hermeneutic means access to experience is both partial and complex (Smith, 1996). The aim of this study, therefore, was not to produce generalisable findings, but rather to reveal something of the life-world of four specific individuals, and their unique experience of self-doubt, within a given context.

The use of visual research methods

The semi-structured interviews I conducted were augmented with visual images created by the research participants to depict their experience of self-doubt. The use of visual methods in qualitative research is considered useful for providing participants with ways to articulate hard-to-define feelings (Zuboff, 1988), access "conscious emotions captured or evoked" by their images (Broussine, 2008: 72), and elicit verbal data (Willig, 2009). I hoped to help the research participants make sense of, and

attribute meaning to, their experiences, as well as address the potentially 'hidden nature' of self-doubt other researchers had found (Baumeister *et al*, 2003: 2, Hindmarch, 2008: 7).

One participant drew a series of sketches, the others created collages from magazine clippings. Analysis of the drawing and collages was approached phenomenologically, and so the images were deemed meaningful only to the individual participant. The images provoked "dialogue, reflection and sense-making" (Broussine, 2008: 78) and provided the interview with a focussed way of accessing the lived experience, the somatic response and the metaphorical world of each participant. Perhaps most importantly, the interviews were stimulated and enhanced by the participants' willingness to share their experiences and interpretations. I was delighted and surprised by the richness and depth of the interviews.

Selection of research participants

In keeping with IPA requirements, the research participants were a purposively small and fairly homogenous sample. My criteria for research participants were, broadly, to find self-employed coaches who had experienced self-doubt and were willing to explore this phenomenon. The participants needed to see emotions as normal and positive rather than "unruly, undesirable and needing to be managed" (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007). Pseudonyms have been used to protect participant confidentiality (see Table 1 below).

Research Participant	Country of residence:	Age at last birthday:	Number of years coaching:	Do you currently have professional supervision?	Member of a coaching or business support group?	% of total personal income derived from coaching:	% of total household income derived from coaching:
Rachel	UK	52	20+	Yes	No	75-100%	75-100%
Sybil	USA	61	3	No	I have in the past	10-25%	10-25%
Polly	USA	44	3	I am considering this.	I have in the past	< 10%	< 10%
Clary	USA	33	2	I have in the past	Yes	< 10%	< 10%

Table 1 – Participant characteristics and demographics

Prior to becoming coaches, the four women held senior roles in television, management consulting, film production and social work, respectively. Rachel is now a leadership coach based in the UK; Sybil, Polly and Clary trained and certified with the Martha Beck Institute and are life coaches based in the United States.

Each participant was interviewed once via Skype audio; the interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. Immediately following each interview I recorded my thoughts, feelings and any embodied aspects of my experience. A third party transcribed all interviews. The interviews yielded rich and fascinating data, providing some reassurance that my interview schedule was sufficient as a means to mine the participants' experience.

Analysis of the data

IPA is concerned with idiography: the particular experience of the individual. The phenomenological view of experience is that it is both "tantalising and elusive" (Smith, 2009: 33) and it is accepted that IPA research aims to get at an experience through the sense-making of the individual recalling the experience itself. This presents a challenge to the IPA researcher charged with

further translating each individual's experience into a practical and coherent analysis of the wider data set. This required a detailed examination of each case, moving cautiously to an examination of similarities and differences across the cases, in order to produce a pattern of meaning for the four participants reflecting on their shared experience of self-doubt.

Each transcript was read three times, the first while listening to the recorded interview to ensure the transcript captured all salient shifts in tone. This revealed two instances of acute emotion missing from the written data. During a second reading, I made initial notes in the margins, noting explicit initial ideas through identifying patterns and commonalities within the material, and avoiding introducing my own interpretations or imposing my own ideas. The third reading was a more analytical exercise, concentrating on my notes and checking back through each transcript in turn, in order to provide validity for the emergent themes I began to identify.

I then reviewed all notes to examine patterns and connections, contradictions and divergences across the four participants, using coloured Post-its on a wall to cluster the data into themes. Within the clusters, I began to see a series of dimensions where divergences between the participants could be connected along a spectrum. Once the dimensions were clear, I created a table in a Word document for each dimension, with direct quotes from the transcripts and my notes. This process resulted in the emergence of three super-ordinate themes: Visibility, Unknown Space, and Movement.

During the interviews and throughout the process of analysing the data, I endeavoured to adopt a 'phenomenological attitude' by listening closely to the voices of the participants. I tried to let the participants teach me how to retell their stories in a way that was close to that of their experiential world. There were moments when I felt particularly moved by the participants' struggles with self-doubt, and was aware of my own embodied response to their accounts: a knotted stomach, constriction in my throat, hot palms; I was cognisant of my empathy for the participants. I found it impossible to stand completely outside of the study and found some comfort in Finlay's (2008: 3) stance that rather than strive to be "objectivistic, distanced or detached, the researcher is fully involved, interested and open to what may appear".

Findings

The most significant aspect emerging from the data centred on the research participants' experience of self-doubt related to running a business. Coaches cannot engage in coaching without clients, who need to be identified, and marketed and sold to. This offers an interesting perspective on the experience of self-doubt, particularly in how the coach reconciles their economic dependence on the client with their roles as coach and business owner. Three of the participants operate primarily in the online sphere, and this presents challenges around the need to be visible. Given the implications of this for coaches, this paper focuses primarily on these aspects of the study's findings.

A leap into the unknown
The experience of the participants in this study suggests that the choice to become self-employed is a psychological and symbolic shift, as well as an economic one. All four research participants came to coaching after holding relatively senior roles in complex industries, though none had run a business before. The coaches characterised being self-employed as: leaping from a cliff; jumping out of a plane; riding a rollercoaster; attempting to unlock a safe containing all the answers; walking a tightrope, and climbing a never-ending mountain. These are images of endurance, uncertainty and

facing fears; it is also interesting to note how little choice is available to the participants in these metaphoric scenarios. The coaches' ability to be in this unknown space emerged as a key theme.

For example, at the centre of Clary's collage (see Figure 1) is a rollercoaster, emblematic of her experience of self-doubt, which she describes as '*the most undoing feeling.*' Underneath the rollercoaster is an image of a small plant symbolising Clary's coaching business. The plant is positioned quite far away from the rollercoaster, suggesting that she is aware her business is vulnerable to her self-doubt. Clary offers:

> *I can see myself as successful and I have a business and things are great, and when my self-doubt hits, it's like my business accomplishments and everything I've achieved turns into two leaves.*

There seems to be a loss in this uncertain space not only of Clary's physical bearings, but of her emotional ballast. This impacts how she views the small and growing foundations of her coaching business. Similarly, Polly likens becoming self-employed to her memory of jumping out of a plane, describing her experience as a mixture of excitement and fear that she can only enjoy in hindsight. The uncontrolled movement of both the rollercoaster and the skydive suggest there is a sense of being at the mercy of outside influences. Both Clary and Polly reported developing techniques (journaling and meditation) to enable them to be in this unknown space.

In contrast, Rachel describes her own *'leap of faith'* into self-employment as a decision taken after weighing the likely outcomes for some time, suggesting this was not a spontaneous jump into the unknown, but rather a considered choice. This interpretation is supported by the emphasis Rachel places on the success criteria she created for her business:

> *I can remember them to this day: I don't want to work that hard anymore, actually that's really important, if I find myself working that hard, then I'm failing. And I know that sounds a bit naff but I want to like the people I work with because life's too short to work with knobs…I've had to work with far too many of them in the corporate world.*

This extract conveys a strong sense that it was important for Rachel that self-employment was on her own terms; in deciding what would constitute success, Rachel brings what is known into the unknown space of her new working environment. It is worth noting that Rachel described the process of creating her collage for this research project as a process of gaining insight into the nature of her doubt: "*I realised it wasn't about wanting certainty*". Rachel's perspicacity allows her to recognise the importance of this distinction as she offers:

> *Actually I am very, very comfortable, in fact I quite enjoy the uncertainty in a coaching context because you never quite know what you're going to be presented with and actually you end up with some really interesting conversations… I love that, I love that sense of surprise.*

This illustrates her continual willingness to be in an unknown space, and serves as an echo of her original leap off the cliff; Rachel's 'leaps' into the unknown are considered, actively pursued and enjoyed.
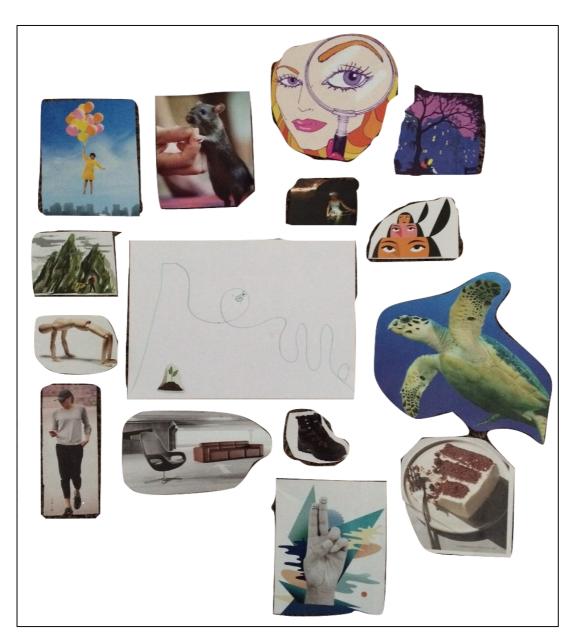
Figure 1: Clary's collage

The process of becoming self-employed features as both a key event and a principal source of self-doubt for all participants. This is consistent with Gray *et al* (2015) who found that for some, the transition to coach is one of disjuncture that does not prove to be easy. While virtually all coaches come from a prior professional background (Grant & Zackon, 2004) there is little research into what it is like for coaches to move into the 'unknown space' of self-employment. We can see through the metaphorical life-world of the participants in this study that the process is a psychological and symbolic shift as well as an economic one, characterised variously by fear, loneliness, confusion, self-doubt, and at times, excitement. This contrasts with the prevailing view of the literature, which holds that entrepreneurs exhibit a higher propensity for risk-taking than the general population (Corman, Perles & Vacini 1988; de Vries 1996; Shaver & Scott 1991).

The four coaches all identified their decision to become self-employed as a means to fulfil a desire for financial and personal independence. Several studies claim this as the overriding

motivational factor for women who become self-employed (Carter & Canon 1988; Fielden *et al* 2003; Mattis 2000). It is notable that while all participants report high levels of self-doubt at the time of becoming self-employed, all have remained in business for several years (albeit for Polly, Clary and Sybil on a part-time basis). Studies suggest an 80-85% failure rate of all new businesses within three years (Baron & Henry, 2011; Grant & Zackon, 2004). The accounts of the participants showed a range of emerging and established practices to overcome the impact of self-doubt on their coaching businesses.

As the most seasoned coach, Rachel's account also suggests that, over time, the 'unknown spaces' of the self-employed coach can reduce significantly. This is consistent with studies (Fielden, 2003; Kirkwood, 2009) that found women experienced a distinct lack of self-confidence at the time of starting their business, but most developed strategies over time. Collerette and Aubry (1990) suggest that while some entrepreneurs may have enough confidence to enter self-employment, they may not have the self-confidence required to grow their business. It is possible, then, that in the case of owner-operated coaching practices, growth may be dependent on either the market or on a lifestyle choice. Grant and Zackon (2004) found that less than 1% of self-employed coaches have five or more employees, offering support to this interpretation.

Being visible in a modern business

The level of visibility afforded to the self-employed coaches emerged as a significant theme. Three coaches talked about the challenge of needing to be visible online in order to market their coaching services, and the internal conflicts this created. The impact of being constantly seen, via websites and social media, raised challenges for how the participants reconciled their sense of self with their roles of coach and business owner.

Sybil's account is characteristic as she offers: *"I'm just not doing very well at this… I've been trying to get my website going for two years, and self-doubt is totally getting in my way"*. For Sybil, there is an internal conflict between her wish to market her coaching business and her beliefs about the consequences of becoming visible. This conflict is underpinned by a fear of judgement:

> *I think that's because I'm afraid of failure. And I kind of always have been. It was a big thing in my family, it's better to do nothing than do something badly and bring embarrassment and shame upon the family.*

Sybil describes how this feels:

> *My whole chest is just totally clamped down, I can't quite breathe and I feel really exposed. I feel like I have to put a blanket over myself or something. I just want to hide and curl up, and I feel like I want to hit myself on the head for being so stupid, I should be punished for being so stupid.*

Sybil's somatic response to the risks she perceives - her wish to comfort herself with a blanket, to hide, and her fear of being punished - is almost childlike. We begin to see that, for Sybil, becoming more visible carries not only the risk of failure, but also the potential for humiliation and familial loss. Remaining 'invisible' by not publishing her website is a response of protection from the judgement and punishment Sybil imagines would result.

The available technology also creates an unprecedented level of visibility for the coaches, as they can watch people interact with anything they say and do online. Clary describes feeling *'constantly distracted'* by her phone *'looking to my little device as any kind of affirmation.'* Sybil describes how technology allows her to look through a virtual window at other coaches who seem to have the answers: *'When I look on Facebook – good old Facebook – I feel like everybody else is kind of doing this in some way'.* Both Clary and Sybil describe searching for information about how to do this 'properly' and there is a sense that the answer is an externalised hidden knowledge, but the search itself seems to reinforce their doubt.

The research participants all describe a conflation between the jobs they have (coach, business owner) and their overall sense of self. Like Sybil, Polly experiences a conflict at wanting to be both seen and not seen, and describes this further with reference to the image of "Blue Nude II" by Henri Matisse, which appears at the centre of her collage:

> *That's sort of how I feel about putting myself out there and like having it, for me I interpret this Matisse sort of like I'm all jumbled up and I might be naked but I'm sort of trying to hide a little bit. I want to be seen but I don't want to be seen, a little bit of Matisse. But also I feel all alone in it.*

Matisse's cut-out is a naked figure comprised of separate parts; that the image lacks a core solidity is disruptive and evokes a sense of vulnerability. There are echoes of this fragmented, uncertain self throughout the interview, as Polly repeatedly describes feeling 'jumbled', 'stumped', 'stuck' and 'muddled', and wanting both to be seen and not seen. She expands on this: *'I am…myself, Polly is the coach and Polly, myself, is the business and… I don't make money, I don't have a business unless I coach… so they're all… sort of...muddled together'* suggesting that at the heart of Polly's 'muddle' is a process of reconciling her roles as coach and business owner with her sense of self. This correlates to the findings of Gray *et al* (2015) who found that most respondents consider there is a moderate-to-complete overlap between the coaching profession and their sense of self. George (2013) found that many coaches linked their professional work to their individual identity.

The 'muddle' of different roles that Polly describes also means any risk to her work is internalised to mean a risk to herself; her coaching business is not something she has, her coaching business *has her*. Kegan (1994) suggests that when people do not have the capacity to meet the demands in their lives, they may feel overwhelmed, inadequate, unhappy and "in over their heads". Berger and Fitzgerald (2002) suggest that Kegan's theory may help us think about how we create 'holding environments' where adults are encouraged to challenge their own assumptions, and can support and foster shifts in development.

Movement

The theme of movement relates to the coaches' sense of progress as both a coach and a business owner. The coaches describe how self-doubt can arouse confusion and overwhelm around decisions and steps to be taken in their business, leading either to unfocussed action or inaction.

This sense of stasis is central to Sybil's account of her experience of running her business. Sybil's collage shows an androgynous stick figure standing with a drooped head standing in the rain:

The sad little person being rained on by a horrible black cloud makes me actually want to tear up and cry because I feel like, 'Boy, that's not me, that's not who I want to be at all'.

We understand that this is a self-portrait, though not of who Sybil wants to be. An androgynous figure, described in the third person, is perhaps a way for Sybil to disassociate from the unwanted aspects of herself. Bluckert (2005: 175) suggests the ability to be aware of one's experience, to observe and reflect on it, "offers the possibility of using self as an instrument of change". But in differentiating herself from the images in her collage Sybil introduces objectivity; the image can be observed as a perception of her experience rather than a factual representation of it. When asked what she thinks the rain is, Sybil is immediately aware that this is a limiting belief. She describes being adept at noticing her thoughts, but not challenging them: *"Maybe it's that kind of thing of feeling like yeah I know how to do that so I don't have to do it, which is so not true".* This contradiction makes sense when we view it through the figure under the raincloud: Sybil notices the rain (limiting beliefs) but does not move, believing it is the rain that is impeding her.

Clary compares her experience to that of ascending a mountain where *"there's always going to be more to climb."* Three of Clary's collage images relate to ideas of hiking alone with no respite; this is a "hard slog" where Clary asks herself: *"Am I going to quit? Is this enough?"* The closed nature of Clary's questions also brings to mind the constriction of an actual mountain climb, where one's choices are limited to ascent or decent.

Clary also describes what it's like to experiment with new business ideas:

Here she is "Whoa!" she's made it to the top. But what ends up happening is that fear, desperation, graspy energy or too much work land her back into a tailspin.

Much like Sybil, Clary references herself in the third person, perhaps as a way of disassociating from the disquieting image. The tailspin also evokes the sense of cyclical movement, of making progress, experiencing doubt, regrouping and moving forward again. Clary describes confusion and frustration at the continuous nature at this cycle, describing her experience of failure as:

...like a complete panic, like total panic. Almost like a crisis response, so in my body ... my chest constricts and my breathing is shallow and with my limbs, my hands and my legs, I have this frantic need to move, to do, whether it's to move my legs or to move my hands, whether it's running or doing.

This extract gives us some insight into both the constriction and the expansion of Clary's 'bodily comprehension' (Gendlin, 1997: xxi). This felt dimension of Clary's experience also mirrors her behavioural response: Clary describes a compulsion to: *"just fix, fix, fix - whatever I can do to fix whatever is the problem so that the failing goes away"* (expansion); and to *"get that magnifying glass out and look around at every little thing and let's just see where you're messing up"* (constriction).

Rachel's experience provides an interesting contrast to that of the other research participants. Her collage shows a set of footprints on the beach, and a monochrome pair of shoes with a red cross over them. For Rachel these images represent where she is prepared to 'walk' within a coaching conversation, and describes consciously choosing to step into uncomfortable conversations:

That's where some of the doubt comes in, there's a little voice in my head going, "Really? Are you sure?" and I just have to kind of steer myself to go "Yes, that's why I'm doing… that's what you're paying me to do, not just the easy stuff around the edges."

Rachel's phraseology evokes forward movement, past the voice of doubt and into the potential discomfort. In taking responsibility for her choices within the coaching conversation, Rachel is able to separate herself from the process - the conversation becomes an ongoing experiment with her client: *"I have to make that decision and then test it rather than ask for his or her opinion because that's not their problem, it's mine, to decide whether to step in there or not".*

While some studies suggest that entrepreneurs tend to exhibit higher self-confidence than the general population (Baron & Henry 2011; Kirkwood 2009; Singh & deNoble 2003; Wilson *et al* 2007), the data in such studies is often gathered from business students and nascent business owners. Shaver and Scott (1991) warn against the 'fruitless quest for the personality profile of the successful entrepreneur' while de Vries (1996) even suggests such studies indicate the behaviour of a number of entrepreneurs is not based on a secure sense of self-esteem and identity. It is likely that Rachel's prior professional experience has also contributed to her confidence; management consulting involves networking, enrolling clients and selling services, all skills conducive to self-employment. Grant and Zackon (2004) found that virtually all coaches come from a prior professional background and there is an opportunity for further study of how a coach's previous experience effects the success of their coaching practice.

It is also possible that the relative inaction of Clary, Polly and Sybil says something about their practitioner coach training. It is accepted that entrepreneurial processes can be taught (Kuratko, 2005). Kirkwood, Dwyer and Gray (2014) found that self-confidence, the attainment of new knowledge and skills, and the ability to develop feasible solutions, appear to be intertwined. This suggests that what is required is education that constructs a developmental "bridge" between the student's current way of understanding, and the new way, in order to provide a path to cross over (Kegan, 1994). Grant and O'Hara (2006: 31) stress the importance of coach training as more that "just a training programme designed to help people set up a coaching business" however, the preponderance of self-employment in the coaching industry suggests that entrepreneurial training is both relevant and necessary.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the experience of self-doubt has symbolic, psychological and economic impacts for the self-employed coach. The experiences of the research participants show that self-doubt can arouse loneliness, confusion and overwhelm, as well as fears of being judged or exposed. This can lead to either a kind of stasis where the path forward remains unclear, or to the expending of a great deal of effort, resulting in heightened confusion and anxiety if the effort doesn't pay off. In these ways the experience of self-doubt has the potential to prevent the self-employed coach from being able to do their work in the world.

To become a self-employed coach is to choose complexity, and the findings suggest that the skills and knowledge required to fulfil the roles of coach and business owner are varied, dynamic and complex, and take time to master. Self-doubt can exacerbate this role complexity into a conflation of selves (Polly's 'muddle'), as the self, the self as coach, and the self as business owner are all, at least in part, dependent on one another for survival. As these narratives overlap, the day-to-day challenges

of running a business can be interpreted as risks to the self. This points to the need for safe places for the self-employed coach to explore the increased complexity of their world, as well as to the relevance of entrepreneurial education for coaches in training.

Implications for 'holding environments'

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study relates to the need for safe places for the self-employed coach to explore the increased complexity of their world. Business mentoring and supervision are 'holding environments' that can serve as 'dynamic transitional growth spaces through high support and high challenge' (Drago-Seversen *et al*, 2001). The findings of this study can inform supervisors and mentors who may consider the themes of visibility, unknown space and movement useful for exploring the nature of self-doubt when working with self-employed coaches.

These findings have resonance in both entrepreneurial and coaching literature. Fielden *et al,* (2003) found that mentoring must match the challenge of the business owner to provide value, while Mead, Campbell and Milan (1999: 288) describe a group supervision context that 'soon became a very open and trusting group, where very experienced people admitted to their weakness and difficulties and drew strength from their colleagues'. Garvey-Berger and Fitzgerald (2007) also suggest that to be effective in traversing complexity, any support needs to hold on to the developmental aspects of experience, test previous assumptions, and be combined with developmentally-minded support.

Implications for coaching

The preponderance of self-employment within the coaching industry suggests that entrepreneurial training is both relevant to, and necessary for, the coaching industry. It is accepted that entrepreneurial processes can be taught (Grant & O'Hara, 2006; Kuratko, 2005). The findings of this study suggest that what is required is education that constructs a developmental 'bridge' between the student's current way of understanding and the new way, in order to provide a path (Kegan, 1994).

The findings also point to practical implications for practitioners of coach training and education, in regard to both their understanding of the experience of coaches' self-doubt, and to ways of addressing it. The fact that a significant proportion of coaches identify as being self-employed suggests that there is value in examining the nature of self-doubt in the training context. This would take into consideration the increased complexity of the self-employed coach's world, as well as the theory and practice of developmental approaches.

Implications for IPA methodology

The use of participant-created images in this study demonstrates how visual research methods can contribute to the IPA methodological approach. The images enhanced the analysis and findings of this study in two significant ways; firstly, the images enabled the participants to tell their story of self-doubt without words; the use of metaphor seemed to facilitate access to both their somatic and their emotional capacities. Secondly, the use of imagery seemed to enable the participants to view their experience with a new level of objectivity. As they were describing their experience using the metaphors conjured through the images, all of the participants either questioned the validity, or challenged the absolute nature of, their experience of self-doubt.

Gendlin (1997) offers that there is an important sense in which an experience is changed through being symbolised and I am reminded of *The Treachery of Images*, by Belgian surrealist René Magritte. This painting is of a gentleman's pipe, with the words 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not

a pipe') written below. Like Magritte's paradoxical pipe, the images in the participants' collages are not their *actual* self-doubt; they can only ever be representations of the coaches' remembered experience of self-doubt. However, the use of imagery in this study provided an important way into the participants' worlds; they were able to access something of the wordless aspects of both the felt-sense and the emotional nature of their experience.

Limitations of the study

The idiographic nature of the IPA methodology necessitates that the effectiveness of such a study be judged 'by the light it sheds in a broader context' (Smith *et al*, 2009). Because IPA privileges participants' stories, albeit in an empathic questioning way (Willig, 2009: 43), the implications stemming from any findings are substantiated through being "firmly anchored in direct quotes from participant accounts" (Pringle *et al*, 2011: 21). This reliance on subjective accounts can make it difficult to establish which variables are the most important; had I chosen different themes, I may have reached different findings. As my interpretations are filtered through my own experiences and epistemology, I found IPA required me to become an active participant in the study. This means that something of myself is in this research, giving support to Malim's claim (1992) that IPA studies are "subjective, intuitive and impressionistic."

A key criticism of IPA is that it is dependant on the participant's ability to "successfully communicate the rich texture of their experience" (Willig 2013: 95). Given that a fifth person was interviewed for this study but was unable to reflect on and share their experience of self-doubt, this criticism has validity.

Questions for further research

There is an opportunity to explore the characteristics of successful self-employed coaches, and in particular to investigate whether those characteristics can be identified, taught or even replicated. It would be particularly interesting to conduct a comparative study using images and metaphors of self-confident self-employed coaches, which may shed further light on the elements for overcoming self-doubt.

The potential opportunities to research how best to support self-employed coaches are wide-ranging. An exploration of different models of support in both supervision and business mentoring contexts would add to the picture. A review of the balance between practitioner education and entrepreneurial education undertaken by coaching schools would also be worthwhile.

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