

Academic Paper

# Personal Transformation: Developing Self-Processing Competence Through Coaching

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## Abstract

This study employed a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore personal transformation and how it manifests in the coaching process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven senior leaders who had previously engaged in a coaching programme of at least six sessions. The findings describe personal transformation as a self-processing competence that evolves before, during and after the coaching process. Three themes pose personal transformation as: (i) an activated processing of the self; (ii) an evolving processing of the self; and (iii) a continued internal self-processing competency.

## Keywords

coaching process, self-processing competence, personal transformation, processing of the self, self-reflection

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## Introduction

Coaching research has mainly been quantitative and focussed on outcomes to prove its effectiveness and impact (Graf & Dionne, 2021a; Myers & Bachkirova, 2018). To understand how coaching transpires, more researchers have moved from outcomes-based research to investigating coaching as process (Graf, Dionne and Spranz-Fogasy, 2020; Hinck, 2022; Pandolfi, 2020). Outcomes-based coaching deals with measuring what changes have occurred due to coaching. However, coaching as process entails understanding how change was achieved for the client. Research that forefronts coaching as process, therefore, deals with coach-client interactions and highlights the intrapersonal, intersubjective and relational dynamics that manifest in the course of coaching (De Haan, 2019; LoPresti & Mwelwa, 2018; Myers & Bachkirova, 2018). This current study explores a fundamental outcome of coaching; namely, personal transformation from a process perspective and from the perspective of the client.

Personal transformation is a process of dynamic self-change that is uniquely individual. It entails raising one's reflective and critical consciousness and integrating old and new world views to the

point of transforming the meaning of self (Wade, 1998). Personal transformation constitutes deep and comprehensive self-change as it manifests in changing the individual's ways of knowing, doing and being in the world (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Eschenbacher, 2019; Hawkins & Smith, 2014). Coaching is effective when it facilitates a process of transformation in clients (Graf et al., 2020; Hinck, 2022) and more research is necessary to understand the processes of personal transformation and how it manifests during the coaching journey (Graf et al., 2020; Wittmann & Buchi, 2010). However, taking a client-centred approach is scarce as researchers tend to follow the perspective of the coach (Birnie, 2019). The purpose of this paper is to describe personal transformation and how it manifests during the coaching process. This research contributes to coaching theory as it broadens the understanding of personal transformation from the perspective of the client and from the perspective of coaching as process.

## Literature Review

The literature review entails conceptualising coaching as process and a theoretical explanation of personal transformation as a fundamental outcome of the coaching process.

### Coaching as process

Coaching is a developmental process involving a purposeful and structured interaction between coach and client to promote and sustain change for the client (Bachkirova, Cox and Clutterbuck, 2014). In the professional coach-client relationship, the coach uses methods, tools and techniques that guide clients to reach set personal and work-related objectives (De Haan, 2019; Graf et al., 2020). Previous research has focussed on measuring coaching outcomes to establish the effectiveness of coaching practice as a scientific discipline and worthy of personal and organisational investment (McInerney, Giga and Morris, 2021; Myers & Bachkirova, 2018). The focus later turned from outcomes-based approaches to investigating coaching as process.

The process perspective emphasises that coaching constitutes a dynamic and relational process, driven by phenomenological experience and meaning making between the coach and client (Myers & Bachkirova, 2018). A focus on process deals with how coaching transpires and entails explorative and descriptive inquiry into the process variables that contribute to the value derived from coaching (Graf & Dione, 2021a). Process variables include the relational dynamics between the coach and client, the clients' lived experiences and their meaning-making processes during the coaching journey (Myers, 2017). First, client transformation driven by the complex, two-way process between the coach and client, therefore, includes observable interactions (Graf & Dionne, 2021b) but also subliminal inter- and intra-personal dynamics (Lee, 2014). Secondly, in addition to its relational focus, coaching as process emphasises coaching as a subjective sense-making process where the client engages in understanding and integrating new perspectives and behavioural change (Jarosz, 2016; Kauffman & Hodgetts, 2016; Peel, 2005; Stelter, 2007; Stout-Rostron, 2009). Finally, coaching as process fosters the notion that the clients' transformation is dynamic, and this means that it is marked by a continuous and evolving change in the perspective, affect and behaviour of the individual.

### Personal transformation

Related concepts, such as 'change', 'transformation' and 'personal transformation' are often used to encapsulate the coaching outcome (Brockbank & McGill, 2006; De Haan, 2008; Graf et al., 2020; Griffiths, 2005; Stelter, 2014; Webster-Smith, Albritton and Kohler-Evans, 2012). In this study, the use of the term 'personal transformation' is preferred as it brings more emphasis to the level and extent of self-change that potentially derives from a coaching engagement. Personal transformation is also considered to be at the root of changing behaviour (Brockbank & McGill, 2006; Carey, Philippon, and Cummings, 2011; Fielden, 2005; Hanssmann, 2014; Koroleva, 2016;

Paige 2002), and it extends the notion of behavioural change that captures a more enduring sense of self-change rooted in a broadening of one's world view, achieving higher levels of consciousness, and a redefining of the self (Wade, 1998). As noted by Kets de Vries (2014, p. 6), "effective coaches guide clients on a journey toward personal transformation and reinvention".

Personal transformation is also a multidimensional concept (Wade, 1998) consisting of complex processes that need to be understood to enhance the helping relationship (Wittmann & Buchi, 2010). Therefore, personal transformation reflects a deep developmental movement causing people to experience life differently by changing the way they think, feel and behave (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh and Parker, 2010). It denotes shifts in thinking, increased critical self-awareness, revising self/other interactions, experimenting with new behaviour, and the meaningful reflection on the consequences of behaviour (LoPresti & Mwelwa, 2018; Makaiau & Freese, 2013; Pandolfi, 2020). To reflect the extent and level of self-change, personal transformation has been conceptually aligned to self-transcendence, emphasising personal transformation as an encompassing change in one's existence and outlook in life (Teixeira, 2008). Such a radical perspective change is described as an emancipatory process of *becoming* critically aware of and *continuously* making sense of the cognitive, conative and affective elements that determine one's frame of reference (Gambrell, 2016) by consistently reframing one's assumptions and perspectives about self and others (Makaiau & Freese, 2013). Anderson and Braud (2011, p. xvii) have provided a poignant conceptualisation to summarise the complexity of personal transformation:

*Personal transformation involves a qualitative shift in one's life view and/or worldview ... Transformation may manifest as changes in one's perspective, understandings, attitudes, ways of knowing and doing, and way of being in the world. It may be recognized by changes in one's body, feelings and emotions, ways of thinking, forms of expression, and relationships with others and with the world.*

Personal transformation, therefore, is deemed instrumental in one's search for meaning and purpose in life that enhances one's quality of life and well-being (Teixeira, 2008). Ultimately, at the root of personal transformation is:

- i. the self and one's meaning of self
- ii. the notion that transformation is an evolving process
- iii. reframing one's assumptions

## Methodology

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and compatible qualitative methods of inquiry. Hermeneutic phenomenology focusses on in-depth exploration of lived experience intertwined with a disciplined interpretative approach to construct focussed, in-depth phenomenological understanding or meaning (Arghode, 2012; Kafle, 2011; Kvale, 1996; Lavery, 2003; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy and Sixsmith, 2013). Hermeneutic phenomenology is well aligned with a social constructivist thinking that allows for synthesis of multiple realities and for accepting researcher-participant interactions and preconceptions to direct the co-construction of meaning from data (Crowther, Ironside, Spence and Smythe, 2017).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen as the analytic strategy because it is well suited to explore coaching clients' sense-making processes (Birnie, 2019) and it is epistemologically congruent to hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry (Alase, 2017; Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Callary, Philippon and Cummings, 2015; Lech, Van Nieuwerburgh and Jalloul, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith, 2004, 2011; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012; Van Manen,

2017). An IPA strategy forefronts the use of subjective, ideographic experience (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) and aims to interpret the in-depth lived experience of participants in relation to a particular phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Smith, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2003, 2015; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012; Van Manen, 2017). In IPA, literal and concealed interpretation is allowed as it is influenced by researcher preconceptions (Shinebourne, 2012).

This study was conducted after obtaining ethical clearance from the relevant Institutional Research Ethics Committee of University of South Africa (Ref#: 2016CEMS/IOP087) and by observing and ensuring the required ethical principles and procedures. The applied qualitative research methods are described below.

## **Participants and setting**

In line with purposive sampling and a small sample size typical to IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012), seven participants were selected to generate narrative data relevant to answering the research question: “How do coaching clients experience personal transformation in the coaching process?” To this end, participants were included if they: i) held a senior leadership position in a corporate setting and ii) if they had engaged in a coaching programme of at least six coaching sessions.

The primary researcher is part of a network of certified integral coaches. Integral coaches were approached about the study and acted as gatekeepers for accessing consenting participants. Integral coaching emphasises a holistic self, and focusses on the cognitive, emotional, somatic, relational and spiritual elements of the holistic self. The integral coaching model thus served as the coaching context in which this study was conducted. Integral coaching aligns with the notion of personal transformation as it strives to facilitate deep change in the coaching client’s way of thinking, relational being and identity (Hunt, 2009; Jakonen & Kamppinen; 2015). The participants hailed from the fields of telecommunications, banking, entertainment, transportation and the information technology industries.

## **Data collection and analysis**

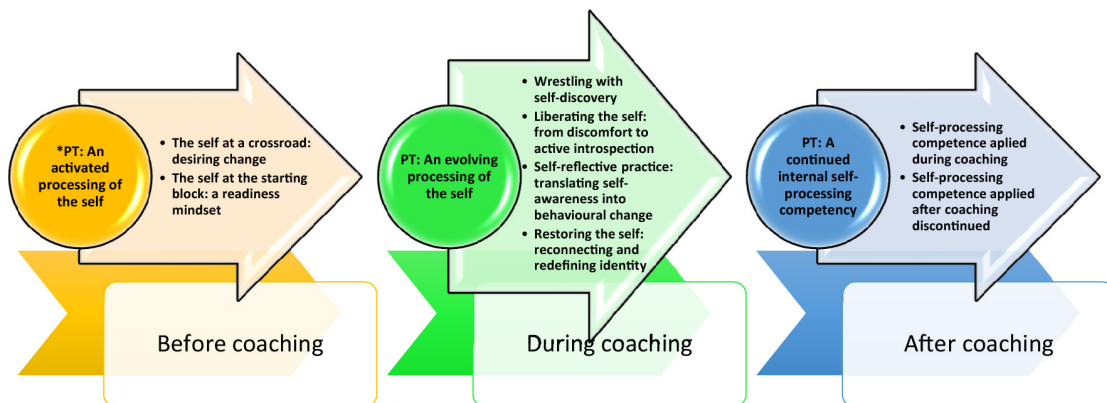
Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted at each of the participants’ business premises. Interview questions focussed on eliciting a narrative of what happened to the client before, during and after the coaching sessions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis followed four IPA stages, namely:

- i. gaining a preliminary holistic understanding of the data through repeated reading of the transcripts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012; Söderhamn, Dale and Söderhamn, 2013)
- ii. generating a list of significant statements (codes) about how participants experience the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012)
- iii. grouping significant statements (codes) into a larger unit of meaning to construct themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013, Morrow, Castañeda-Sound and Abrams, 2012; Simmonds-Moore, 2016; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012; Söderhamn et al., 2013)
- iv. writing up the final themes grounded in the verbatim participant quotes with interpretative researcher commentary (Creswell, 2013; Morrow et al., 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012)

## Findings and Discussion

Three super-ordinate themes emerged from the data and are conceptualised with relevant sub-ordinate themes as outlined in Figure 1 below. The themes describe personal transformation as an outcome of the coaching process and are grounded in verbatim data in the discussion that follows. For confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for participants (e.g. P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6 and P7).

**Figure 1: Personal Transformation as an outcome of coaching as process**



\*PT: Personal Transformation

### Theme 1: Personal transformation as an activated processing of the self

Personal transformation as an activated processing of the self is described in the two sub-ordinate themes of: i) desiring a need for change and ii) developing a readiness mindset towards personal change. Discomfort or uncertainty activates a self-reflective process in which clients recognise their desire to change. Through self-reflection, the acknowledged desire leads to a change of mind, encompassed in a readiness mindset and the decision to go for coaching.

#### The self at a crossroad: desiring change

The need for coaching is endless and varies from individual to individual (Reissner & Du Toit, 2011). Similarly, this study's participants reported on various reasons for deciding to opt for coaching. However, all the reasons resemble a state of finding the self at a crossroad, because of a discomfort/dissatisfaction/uncertainty requiring a new direction to go forward. This is described by P3 as follows:

*I was just in a very unhappy place in my career and my life path actually ... I found myself a single mother at 30 and I felt like my world ended and I had to re-look at everything ... that's when someone said, why don't you go for coaching, because I really felt like I actually didn't know what to do.*

Similarly, it was a state of uncertainty that motivated P5: *"I was going from a specialist role to a leadership role [and] I actually didn't know how to get the whole thing to happen"*. It also motivated an emotional P2 as follows: *"I was in a real state because, I needed to get a plan. I need a plan, damn it, and I don't know"*. Participant 6 further articulated a deep desire for self-change, stemming from self-reflection about his sense of dissatisfaction in managing work/life demands:

*I need to start feeling more comfortable in my own skin ... we talk about work, work-life integration ... They used to sort of spill into each other at sort of wrong times and create sort of way too much stress and anxiety ... I want to be a happier employee. And that's sort of where it started.*

Most participants reflected on a deep desire for change, as evidenced in the desire to:

- i. enhance self-understanding (P1)
- ii. develop a role competency (P2; P5; P6)
- iii. develop a more positive work-life orientation (P3)
- iv. to develop intrapersonal characteristics such as self-confidence and resilience (P6)

In reviewing their narratives, it was clear that many participants engaged in a self-reflective process, which enabled them to recognise their need for change. This is well illustrated in how P1 emphasises the value of self-reflection, which for her, led to realising a need to change her self-understanding:

*So, you often come to work every day, sit behind the same desk, engage with the same people, face the same issues, and you never really on your own go away and reflect ... I was behaving in certain ways that might not be ideal for people [and wanted] to sort of go a level deeper, on the root cause. I guess of why I might be feeling a certain way which then results in a certain behaviour.*

The self-reflective process is echoed by P2 who recalled that by attending a course in business partnering:

*Made me see the value of it [coaching] ... and that got me thinking quite a lot ... I came back fairly determined that I need to be coached. I need a coach to work with.*

These findings reflect the notion that desiring change leads to recognising coaching as a transforming opportunity. The process of personal transformation is thus sparked by self-reflection through which participants realise a need for change prior to commencing coaching sessions. The desire for change is typically when the coaching client experiences being stuck in an uncomfortable place or stage in life, and then in realising a firm desire for change and a need for coaching (LoPresti & Mwelwa, 2018).

### **The self at the starting block: a readiness mindset**

Coaching is contingent upon the client's willingness or readiness for self-exploration, growth and transformation (Cherry & Boysen-Rotelli, 2016; González, 2003). In this study, the participants' personal transformation is reflected in developing a readiness mindset, as part of the processing in the self (self-reflection) that is activated prior to coaching. For P1, it was overcoming her initial resistance and developing a readiness for coaching that was a prerequisite to embrace its benefits:

*The HR guy said, consider it (coaching) a gift. That was really empowering to me ... You can't go in and say, okay I'm going to just tick this box, you get nowhere. So, I think you really have to be in a mindset where you really want to embrace the process and I certainly was.*

Developing a readiness mindset, as part of the activated self-reflection process, is the result of becoming self-aware about wanting to change and needing help. Participant 3 expressed a readiness for coaching saying: *"I miss my career and I'm ready again and I didn't know how to do something about that, so I needed help"*. Similarly, P4 came to a point of readiness by exclaiming: *"You need to be ready. As much as like for me it felt like a blessing that like, you know what, when I needed it ... I would not have initiated it"*. She continues to describe her readiness for coaching with



an analogy: *“Yeah, the teacher [coach] arrived. When the student was ready, the teacher arrived”*. Participant 7 opined that a person who enrolls for coaching must be ready and open to experience a process of transformation. According to her, readiness indicates the right time to engage fully in the process:

*People should only go for coaching if they really want to. You cannot force anyone to be coached. It will be a futile exercise ... coaching happens when it's the right time to happen.*

Coaching readiness is, in itself, an indicator of change and transformation (MacKie, 2015; Kretzschmar, 2010; Van Coller-Peter & De Vries, 2022). The process of personal transformation thus evolves through activated self-reflection in seeking a transformational opportunity to address the desire for change and it involves the participant stepping into the starting blocks from a previously resistant stance or tentativeness into a state of readiness that embraces the coaching process fully.

## **Theme 2: Personal transformation as an evolving processing of the self**

Theme 2 focusses on how personal transformation manifests as an evolving processing of the self during the coaching phase. Personal transformation as an evolving processing of the self involves:

- i. wrestling with self-discovery
- ii. active introspection
- iii. enhanced self-awareness and insight
- iv. reconnecting and redefining the sense of self

### **Wrestling with self-discovery**

Personal transformation through coaching also requires a willingness to be vulnerable and have one's attitudes and assumptions exposed and challenged (Askew & Carnell, 2011). As reflected in P1's story, the participants who embarked on coaching went through a deep and meaningful self-discovery: *“And so we started exploring a lot of that, it's what's inside”*. Yet, the process of self-discovery was self-exposing and emotionally difficult. For P2, such self-discovery made him feel exposed and vulnerable: *“[It's] an incredibly intimate thing ... in terms of the conversation and what's shared and it's a very emotional and vulnerable thing”*. For P5 it was emotional: *“For me the coaching journey was emotional above anything else”*.

Because participants experienced the self-exposing process of self-discovery emotionally challenging, they were also hesitant and uncertain to embark on it. For P4, the struggle and hesitancy was revealed when she realised the need to expose herself: *“I took that risk, like somebody, this person, knows me, you know. Am I going to be, you know, open to this coaching?”* Likewise, P6 struggled with the vulnerability of self-discovery: *“It's incredibly difficult talking about anything that is personal or feeling-orientated. ... I still really struggle to talk about that sort of stuff”*. Other participants also wrestled with the initial process of exposing difficult feelings and insecurities in the self:

*I was feeling a little bit uncomfortable about talking about myself the whole time ... discussing the reasons for certain types of behaviour, and then you have to acknowledge that the root of them might be things that you're afraid of or you're insecure about, or you feel inferior (P1).*

However, participants soon recognised the value of self-exposure lies in self-discovery. As P2 recalls: *“So I walked out of the first day of coaching feeling so vulnerable and exposed but at the same time I thought, why haven't you been asking yourself that question?”* His reflection demonstrates that intimate exploration entails an exposure of shadow behaviour. For P6 self-

exposure also calls for honesty: *"This is not private, you're telling somebody else. I guess in a word it's just, you have to be vulnerable, and you have to actually be truthful"* (P6). For P2 it was beneficial: *"I think you can do a lot of introspective work, but it's tougher to see through your own nonsense I think"*. Similarly, self-discovery is worthwhile, despite the emotional 'wrestling', as emphasised by P5:

*It was hard ... for me it was the lack of understanding or the lack of appreciation of the deeper you go and the more you wrestle with stuff, it's just the better you come out on the other side.*

For P4, there is the benefit with regard to personal and professional growth: *"as much as like it was personal ... I knew that the result would impact on the professional level"* (P4).

Discovering and getting to know the self on an internal level is not a smooth process, however, it is in this struggle of exposure of the self that personal transformation evolves. For some, exposure of the self then initiates a process of self-discovery that leads on to a broadening self-perspective, which is fundamental to personal transformation (Orem, Binkert and Clancy, 2007; Webster-Smith et al., 2012).

### **Liberating the self: from discomfort to active introspection**

For Williams (2012) introspection is essential to coaching as it leads to self-awareness. Although participants continued to be challenged with the difficulties of self-exposure, the coaching enabled self-discovery with increasing ease. As such, the participants moved through their discomfort to active introspection. Actively exploring self-behaviour often led participants to experience the consistent self-processing during coaching as liberating. The words of P3 explains it well:

*Hearing her [the coach's] truth about the way I was showing up was really hard you know. Accepting that people are perceiving me in a really bad way. That was terribly difficult ... it's hard to keep confronting your own whole story ... but it's also liberating.*

The participants became more open, interested and courageous to explore their behaviour; and applied a more active approach to exploring the self. Participant 1 particularly emphasised the importance of introspection:

*Those sessions of exploration for me also enable me more in my life to use a more explorative approach in how I do things ... we started exploring quite wide areas which ...that's when it became very interesting. I really embraced it, because I felt well, let's explore what this is going to give.*

For many participants personal transformation manifests as a process of active introspection and exploration of their behaviour. As a result of their evolving self-knowledge, they started to feel freer by transcending the difficulty of self-discovery and consequently were able to continue the practice of processing the self during coaching.

### **Self-reflective practice: translating self-awareness into behavioural change**

Actively practising introspection evolves into another phase of processing the self during coaching; namely, self-reflection. The participants' self-reflective practice was developed during coaching sessions and led to increasing self-awareness. As noted by P7: *"A lot of the stuff that you learn is your thinking and... things about your awareness being expanded and you being able to know yourself better."* Similarly, P3 related how self-reflection led to self-awareness:

*That deep self-reflection has just been amazing ... what started was a huge amount of self-awareness, which I had never had an opportunity to explore.*



Ultimately, self-reflective practice enabled some participants to translate their growing self-awareness into changing behaviour. In particular, P5 relates that self-awareness gave him some insight regarding why he behaves as he does; enabling him to change:

*I actually found myself being much more capable of bringing everything together about myself and gaining valuable insight about myself and why I do certain things in a certain way ... the feedback then is what brings about a change in behaviour.*

Self-reflection is conceptualised by P2 as ‘applying thinking’ to emotion. For him it entails developing emotional self-awareness and reflection to derive understanding. Ultimately, the understanding brings about change: “I’ve been on a year-long journey of applying intellect to emotion and from that self-awareness driving changed action”.

For P2, change on a personal and professional level because of self-awareness is recounted as:

*A surprisingly large amount of this self-awareness revolves around family as much as work ... how do I support my wife appropriately and not go to my natural disdain.*

Similarly, P6 emphasised changed behaviour was due to self-awareness:

*If I had to break it down to anything, it was self-awareness ... [it’s] difficult to understand its worth, but there have been real changes in me in the last two years.*

He (P6) also stressed that self-awareness stems from self-reflection that entails a processing of the self in relation to others:

*[Becoming] more aware of what everyone else in the room is doing, it’s awareness of how you play into that and that’s been incredibly powerful for me.*

Self-reflection that leads to self-awareness and ultimately to behaviour change, must be intentional, as noted by P2:

*I think self-awareness ... it’s got many different layers, but it starts right at the beginning of not just happening by accident but being who you are on purpose, and then in doing so applying [who] you are on purpose in different circumstances.*

Clearly, the participants’ comments above show that self-reflection is regarded as essential for the coaching client to grow in self-awareness and thus to bring awareness into action through changing behaviour (Mosteo, Checkanov and De Osso, 2021; Stout-Rostron, 2009). Personal transformation is thus seen as incumbent on the interaction of self-processing cycles of self-reflection and self-awareness.

### **Restoring the self: reconnecting and redefining identity**

Defining the essential self then deals with the ‘Who am I?’ question or identity of a person (Brygola, 2011). This was an issue that was very prominent in the participants’ coaching experience. Several participants recalled being confronted with this question: “So it was almost, Who am I? What do I want from my life? How do I focus?” (P3); and “The first part of our sessions together was about, well ..., Who am I?” (P2). This related not only to personal identity, but for some of the participants to their work identity too.

Processing the self through self-discovery, active introspection and self-awareness also led participants to the restoration of a sense of who they are, whether it be by reconnecting with their true self or redefining their identity. Coaching entailed a restoration of identity for P5, but in a way

that he realised that he was detached from himself and had to truthfully look at and reconnect with the self:

*It was coming face-to-face with 'me' and who I am and the way that I behave and realising that it's actually a different person to what I've led myself to believe ... [it's like] having to crawl out of your own skin.*

Reconnecting to the self is verbalised by P4 as “rediscovering myself. I think for me the biggest thing was rediscovering myself”. Restoring the self through reconnection for P3 entailed “that realisation that who I am is okay. In fact, who I am is valuable”. In the same way, coaching helped P2 to acknowledge his sense of having lost his identity, and his personal transformation was experienced in reconnecting with the self:

*I was having a moment of realisation of loss of personal identity, where I was looking more for what other people were describing I needed rather than what I knew I needed. So, it's reconnecting with my own ... I'm owning who I am and now I'm applying that consciously.*

For P1 and P6, the self-awareness gained during coaching enabled them to redefine their sense of self:

*I found that [Enneagram feedback] quite interesting because I had a certain definition of me, what I am. And then you sort of ... in a way you migrate, you know, to how you define yourself ... I liked then being able to redefine myself in a certain way. (P1)*

*In the running circles there's no-one faster than me. I used to define myself by those things. Now obviously I'll compete with them but it's not how I define myself anymore. (P6)*

To restore a sense of self, participants therefore also engaged in identity work, which is defined as the process of activities that people engage in to create, sustain, repair or revise a coherent and distinctive sense of self (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In this study, restoring the self meant either reconnecting or redefining the self. Restoring a sense of self results from engaging in self-processing activities during coaching and reflects the dynamic and processual nature of personal transformation for participants.

### **Theme 3: Personal transformation as a continued internal self-processing competency**

Participants developed an internal processing competence during coaching, which was retained and practised after a coaching session and also after the coaching programme had completed. At the time of the research interviews, some participants were still in coaching. The internal self-processing competency was evident for these participants, and it was noteworthy in those who had completed their coaching programme.

Having completed his coaching programme, P5 relates how he continues to seek feedback about himself to continue growing:

*What I continue to work on even till today, is soliciting feedback and being able to take feedback and handle it. The feedback then is what brings about a change in behaviour.*

For P7, a recollection of how she continued to apply self-processing activities between coaching sessions was expressed as:

*And even though I would leave the coaching session and a week would go by and life and work would go on, that awareness stayed.*

She also maintained the self-awareness competence long after completing the coaching programme:

*I still remember the things she [the coach] said, ... it's like she's become a little voice in my head ... Things that I still do today, even though I'm not doing coaching anymore, that I take with me, because I found so much of benefit in it ... I always tell everyone, you know these things, I'm sure you've read it somewhere. The difference when you have a coach, you become aware of it. And not just aware for that hour that you're there, forever.*

The development of an internal self-processing competency by participants helped them to engage and cope differently with life after coaching. Participant 4 provides an example of applying intra-personal processing when a conflict arises: *"It opens your mind to other possibilities ... it just gave me perspective of how to deal with my own issues; what to do to get myself back on track"*. Similarly, P5 deals differently with mistakes by applying self-reflection: *"Because normally when the mistakes come, that's when the deep reflection comes and where a lot of value from the coaching process is unleashed"*. For P7, the identity work is maintained:

*All the people that used to frustrate me and used to get on my nerves and situations that used to get on my nerves, they still happen till today. The only thing that has changed is me and how I look at those situations and, you know, how I react to them.*

Consequently, some participants have integrated the idea of being in coaching as an important long-term intention fuelled by the desire to continue practising the self-processing competence that they have acquired. As noted by P4: *"I think time and again we need that [coaching] in our lives. Somebody who'll help you to look at things differently. I'll continue doing it [coaching]"*. Participant 6 re-contracted with a coach already and P2 feels equally invested in coaching throughout his life:

*I need a coach for the rest of my life. I think because as long as you are a human and you want to be better at being you, you need a coach. I will forever and a day now have a coach.*

People who went through a coaching process tend to use coaching as a transformational opportunity by working with the self. Personal transformation manifests as a continued internal self-processing competency as the ability to self-reflect evolves during coaching into a practiced competence thereafter. Self-reflective practice results in making meaning of life and experiences, adopting different perspectives of life, and an increasing level of self-awareness and self-efficacy (Flaherty, 2010; Gmeiner & Perkins, 2006; Grant, 2013; Lech et al., 2018; Moen & Allgood, 2009; Rank & Gray, 2017).

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to describe personal transformation and how it manifests during the coaching process. The study approaches personal transformation as a fundamental outcome of coaching from a coaching process perspective. An in-depth hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry with coaching clients enabled a rich description of the manifest process nature of personal transformation.

Fundamental to the three super-ordinate themes presented in the findings is the idea that personal transformation, in essence, manifests as a dynamic processing of the self before, during and after coaching. The findings illustrate how personal transformation manifests:

- i. before engaging with coaching as an activated processing of the self
- ii. how it manifests during coaching as an evolving processing of the self
- iii. how it manifests as a continued internal self-processing competency applied during and after coaching

Personal transformation is an intrapersonal dynamic that already starts prior to coaching, through the activation of reflective self-processing and by establishing coaching as a potential transformational opportunity. This process of engaging with the self is activated by a desire for change and to develop a mindset of readiness to engage in coaching as a transformational opportunity. Personal transformation, therefore, derives in the coaching client even before coaching has started. Coaching becomes a transformational opportunity as it presents the coaching client with a potential source of transformation and a process that may alter self-experience, which at that point the client is seeking.

During coaching, the process of personal transformation evolves through iterative cycles of self-discovery, active introspection, self-reflective practice and identity work to restore the self. These self-processing tasks translate into an enhanced self-processing competency and reflect the dynamic, process-driven transformational competencies that develops during coaching. Personal transformation as a self-processing competence integrates into the identity of the coaching client and becomes part of how the client deals with the self in relation to work and life, long after coaching has ended. Some clients even maintain coaching as a transformational opportunity to consistently apply and develop the self-processing competence as they have seen the benefits thereof to their sense of self, how they deal with work-life challenges and how they show up in work and life on a daily basis.

Although this study is limited by its small sample and the context-specific sampling of integral coaching clients, it offers a useful understanding of personal transformation and how it manifests during coaching. The findings, as clustered in Figure 1, offer a useful framework on the dynamic processes of personal transformation that can be expected from a good coaching programme. The findings further the notion that the effectiveness of coaching is inextricably tied to personal transformation and provides tangible conceptualisation of how such transformation entails working predominantly with the self before, during and after coaching. Personal transformation is presented as an outcome of the coaching process a dynamic and evolving competence for self-processing because it evolves in tangible and intangible ways throughout the coaching journey.

Theoretical and practical implications from this study's findings support the idea that coaching effectiveness does not only lie with the coach, the coaching sessions or with the client, but in the interactional dynamics of the whole coaching system. Taking a personal transformation stance to coaching establishes the experience of the coaching client as central to the effectiveness of the coaching engagement. This study, therefore, contributes to the understanding of coaching effectiveness as a process-based outcome that is made meaningful in the phenomenological experience of self-reflective work and its consequences. The impact and significance of the study is that personal transformation starts within the client before engaging with coaching; it is then reflected as a self-processing competence, and coaching becomes the vehicle for its evolution.

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