

High potential coaching: the experience of participants and coaches

Alison Rose (2015)

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High Potential Coaching: The Experiences of Participants and Coaches

Alison Rose

Oxford Brookes University Business School

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and Mentoring

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Abstract:

This thesis aims to explore and conceptualise the subjective experiences of participants in high potential coaching. A review of the relevant literature indicates that the first person voice is almost entirely missing from both academic and practitioner commentary on this topic, and is needed to provide dimensionality and insight into what can be contentious practices. A qualitative study was conducted, based on semi-structured interviews with twelve participants – six coaches and six high potential coachees – using an interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology. Key findings of this study are that:

- The individual voices of participants in high potential coaching are highly diverse. Each actor in the process has a unique and dynamic view on the issues and responds from this unique perspective.
- Being considered to be a high potential is not always experienced as an unmitigated good. It can involve risks of many kinds as well as opportunities.
- Conceptual and theoretical challenges around talent management are reflected at the practice level. These factors can cause personal hurt and confusion, and can lead to cynicism on the part of people designated as high potential.
- Reputation management can be highly important to those who wish to be considered high potential and can lead to some gaming behaviours which militate against the espoused purposes of talent management programmes.
- Coaches do not appear to see high potential coaching as a distinctive area of practice. Rather, they appear to see their practice as capable of flexing to accommodate the high potential context.
- Coaches do see the design and implementation of some talent development programmes as militating against good work by overly-constraining the coach's freedom to act.
- Coaches frequently conceptualise coaching as having the potential for the client's sense-making and growth across their whole lives, but coachees do not always see it in this way.
- Coaches experience coaching as highly pleasurable. For the most part, their sense of self and their sense of self-as-coach are indivisible. The coach *is* coaching.

These findings illuminate a very under-researched area of both coaching and talent management practice. At a theoretical level, they provide the missing subjective voice in talent management debates. At a practice level, they have considerable potential to inform both the design and conceptualisation of talent development in organisations and coaching practice in this area.

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1. Introduction

Talent management is a hot topic in the world of business. A wave of interest in the subject was created by the publication at the turn of the century of two McKinsey reports which suggested that modern businesses were facing a crisis of leadership, and that a “war for talent” had begun to be waged (Chambers et al., 1998; Michaels et al., 2001). As a result of demographic pressures, the authors contested, there was “a severe and worsening shortage of the people needed to run divisions and manage critical functions, let alone lead companies” (Chambers et al., 1998, p1). These claims caught the popular imagination, and in the subsequent fifteen years, the topic of talent management received a remarkable degree of practitioner interest (Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Iles et al., 2010). This preoccupation with the best ways to attract, develop, and retain critical people has survived a global economic crisis, which might perhaps have been expected to have obviated the problem of a workforce shortfall. Indeed, some authorities suggest that the criticality of talent management has only been enhanced by a recessionary climate (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). The problem today, however, is more likely to be stated as one of a shortage not of people per se, but of people with the specific skills and capabilities to address increasingly complex business demands (eg Bersin, 2013; Oliver et al., 2009). Concepts of talent management are now firmly embedded within organisational life and are integral to its approach to human resources management. According to one study in 2010, more than 35% of large organisations had a talent management leader and almost a third operated a formal talent management strategy (Bersin, in CIPD, 2010). Another CIPD study, in 2006, found that 51% of HR professionals surveyed undertook talent management activities (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). A whole sector of specialism – usually within the HR function – has emerged to develop and promulgate talent management practices. As yet however, increasing interest does not appear to have achieved much greater clarity in terms of methods and approaches.

It may be useful for the reader to understand the genesis of this research from the researcher’s perspective. I have previously held roles as a talent director in a number of large private sector organisations. I am also qualified in coaching, and have practiced as an executive coach, both internally and as an independent practitioner. In my talent roles, I was responsible for designing and implementing succession planning and talent management programmes. Wearing this organisationally-identified hat, I planned and hoped for these programmes to be effective in securing a pipeline of talented people to lead the various businesses I worked for. I designed assessment methods which were intended to uncover raw potential and development programmes which were intended to polish it. However, I noticed without formally researching the topic that those identified as talented did not always actualise their potential as the organisation hoped. Participants would fail to meet expectations in various ways: They would turn out to be poor leaders, would be abrasively overconfident about their abilities or would refuse to take advantage of opportunities they were offered. Sometimes the assessment process seemed to be at fault in not delivering sufficiently accurate evaluations of participants’ capabilities. Sometimes whole cadres of participants were

blamed for lacking drive or leadership ability. Whatever the cause, talent management was a frustrating business, falling short of delivering either the number or the calibre of future leaders which would satisfy business needs.

At the same time, while wearing my coach hat and working with people who were on talent development programmes, I noticed that there was often a mismatch between the expectations of organisational stakeholders (including myself in my formal role) and those of coaching participants. While some coaching participants discussed their excitement at the prospect of more senior roles, and their frustration about the pace at which promotion came to them, others would express their reservations about taking on more responsibility and challenge. Sometimes it was clear that a participant's strengths were in entirely different areas than those valued by the organisation. Sometimes organisational and participant aspirations lay in different directions – the kinds of roles a high potential was intended for did not appeal to them, or seemed to them to be counterproductive to their longer term career aspirations. Sometimes it emerged that participants had a fixed intention to leave the organisation – to join a competitor or follow an entirely different career path. It seemed that participant motivations and aspirations were much more varied, nuanced, and unpredictable than was allowed for in the expectations of talent management programmes. It was clear that the confidential space of coaching allowed some of these misalignments to emerge, and that it was perhaps the only intervention in the talent development repertoire in which participants might be able to speak freely, and fully explore the implications of their status. I was also aware that I could not share information about my coachee with the organisation which hired me – and nor with my executive coach hat on, was I motivated to do so. Being a coach on a talent management programme was therefore an inherently conflicted and occasionally even invidious position.

While supervision was helpful in supporting me to make sense of these issues as a coach, such reflective support is seldom available in business practice, where managerial supervision usually has a different focus. I was aware from personal experience that there was little helpful exchange between the silos of coaching practice and talent management activity. Existing models and prescriptions for talent development relied either on no particular research, on small scale studies focused on organisation-centred outcomes, or on the application in the talent management context of related organisational development theory, such as in the area of leadership development. The talent coaching assignment itself remained a space of mystery. It seemed to me therefore that, in the interests of both areas, research into high potential coaching was called for.

In such virgin territory, it seemed sensible that the first questions should be purely exploratory and therefore my stance was one of curiosity. I started with no hypothesis or expectation about what would be revealed, not even an expectation that my own experience as a coach or talent manager would be confirmed. I formulated a simple research question: What are the experiences of coaching

as part of high potential development programmes from the perspective of participants and coaches?

I set four process objectives designed to facilitate the answer to this question. They were to:

1. Conduct a critical literature review on coaching and high potential/talent management
2. Undertake qualitative research to explore the lived experiences of programme participants and coaches in high potential coaching programmes
3. Analyse the data to develop a contribution to the body of theoretical knowledge about coaching and high potential/talent management
4. Make a contribution to coaching practice in the form of greater insight into the experiences of participants in such programmes

This thesis describes the ways in which these objectives were fulfilled, and the outcomes of this research project.

1.1. Key concepts

For the purposes of this study, clear definitions of the phenomena of coaching, high potential, executive coaching, and talent management are not critical. On the contrary, it will become clear that it is from the differences in definitions and understandings that much which is of interest in this research emerges. However, it is worth noting here some of the typical features of the key concepts which will be explored in order to draw some loose boundaries:

- “High potential” is understood to be a designation given to employees who are considered capable of taking on more senior roles in their organisations, by virtue of apparent or latent capabilities and/or skills and/or performance. Such employees are typically so designated in order to be targeted for differential treatment in terms of development, job opportunities, and/or reward. Employees designated as having high potential are sometimes called “hipos” or “hipots”.
- “Executive coaching” is understood to be an intervention deployed by organisational stakeholders to support the development or improve the performance of mid-level or senior-level managers in an organisation. It involves a one-to-one relationship with a coach who, in this study, is not an employee of the organisation. Coaching typically involves exploration and discussion of problems the individual is facing which are hindering their progress and/or strengths they have which they might leverage further. Often, the focus of a coaching assignment is on the individual’s leadership and, in high potential coaching, on preparation for handling higher levels of complexity and responsibility.
- “Talent management” is understood to be a set of processes in an organisational setting which are designed to attract, develop, and retain high potentials and others of value for the future of the organisation. Typical talent management processes include succession

planning, talent identification and assessment, and talent development (including high potential coaching). Talent development is distinguished from more generalised development practices by a specific focus on “high potentials” or “talent”.

1.2. Gaps in knowledge and purpose of the research

It is widely understood that the kind of contextual factors identified by McKinsey (Chambers et al., 1998), i.e. globalisation, technological development, and increasingly demanding markets, have transformed the demands on senior leaders in organisations. These pressures have led to a concomitant focus on attracting, developing, and retaining talented individuals (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Bersin, 2013). Despite high levels of practitioner interest however, academic attention and research has lagged behind (Ariss et al., 2014). In the academic arena, talent management suffers from a chronic lack of agreement as to its definition, scope, and aims (Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Ariss et al., 2014). So serious is this indeterminacy that some commentators suggest that “it appears that talent can mean whatever a business leader or writer wants it to mean, since everyone has his or her own idea of what the construct does and does not encompass” (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013 p2). They also suggest that that this ongoing confusion hinders the establishment of widely acknowledged talent management theories and practices and stalls scholarly advancement, and that a lack of construct clarity may undermine confidence in the conclusions that can be drawn from existing literature (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., (2013).

Notwithstanding definitional and conceptual confusion, talent is considered to be precious and rare: People seen as having high potential are estimated to be almost twice as valuable to their organisations as employees who are not seen that way (Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Bersin, 2013). They are often differentiated from other employees in terms of reward, access to development opportunities, deployment into challenging roles, and exposure to senior management.

Despite the attention and investment in talent management practice however, the efficacy of such programmes seems very debatable. Drop-out rates are high (Burke et al., 2014), talent management programmes are seen as ineffective in supporting business strategy with a pipeline of suitable people (Joyce & Slocum, 2012) and half of HR professionals are dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied with their talent management programmes (Burke et al., 2014). Arguably, no other HR activity attracts such high hopes and appears to deliver so little concrete benefit in its own terms.

Like talent management, coaching is a discipline which has emerged in recent years into practitioner and academic focus. As a nascent profession, if it may be so termed, coaching has achieved some heft. The International Coach Federation estimates that the industry is now worth US\$2bn, with 48,000 coaches worldwide, of which 28,000 work in human resources development (Gray et al., 2015). This growth shows no signs of slowing down, and the first indicators of professionalisation are

becoming visible in the form of established professional bodies. Some of the markers of professionalism, such as standardised training and governance, as well as licensing of practice, have however been slow to emerge (Gray et al., 2015).

Coaching is frequently promoted as a helpful intervention in talent development (eg. Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Bond & Naughton, 2011). Indeed, research suggests that the development of high potentials is one of the top three reasons why coaches are employed in organisations (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). While there is some overlap with executive coaching in the broader business context, high potential coaching can be understood as a distinct intervention. Coachees are part of a talent pool which is set apart from the general executive population and are participating by virtue of this differentiation. Similarly, while external coaches may work with executive clients on a range of issues, talent development assignments are also distinctive from this perspective – coaching in this context is expected to contribute in some way to the actualisation of the coachee's potential in relation to filling roles, or types of roles in the future as part of a medium- to long-term succession plan.

A notable feature in existing research into talent management is its normative, "managerialist" orientation, which assumes that the primary goal is for people and their skills to meet the needs of the organisation (Thunnissen et al., 2013). People who are talented are discussed as though their talent were a commodity and they themselves a form of capital, deployable in service of the organisation's strategy (Nijs et al., 2014). This narrow, organisationally-hegemonic perspective, results in there being little insight from a firsthand point of view of the lived experience of participants in talent management programmes, and there is an implicit assumption that the interests of the organisation are identical with those of the participant. As for executive coaching, a few papers have reported on surveys of coachees' views on various aspects of executive coaching and its effects (Stevens, 2005; Baron & Morin, 2009; de Haan et al., 2010) and coaches' experience of coaching has been the subject of some studies (eg. Day et al., 2008). But insight based on firsthand accounts in the talent management context is, effectively, unavailable.

My primary interest in undertaking this research was to take a different stance from that adopted by previous researchers in understanding the phenomenon of high potential coaching as experienced by its main actors. I conceived of this as, in effect, a return to first principles, and my hope was that exploring what seemed likely to be the complex psychology of the distinctive perspective of talent coaching participants would illuminate the phenomenon from the inside. I believe that without this first-person insight, theory in this area is incomplete, and I hoped that this new, more sensitive and nuanced insight would provide a basis for the development of new models or avenues for future research. My specific intention was that the research would make a contribution to coaching practice, as coaches potentially found some resonance with, and guidance for, their own coaching. I also

planned to make a contribution to the body of theoretical knowledge about talent management in organisations by relating my findings to existing theory.

1.3. Methodological overview

This study was conducted within a framework of an interpretative ontology and a social constructionist epistemology. This means that, while the physical reality of artefacts in the world is acknowledged, when it comes to the artefacts of human psychology and culture, I believe their nature is only revealed through a process of shared meaning making. The research question is, therefore, understood to focus on the meanings made by participants of their experiences as they are understood and interpreted by the researcher.

In line with this ontological and epistemological framework, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Qualitative research is suited to this philosophical paradigm as being exploratory, non-normative, based in experience, and with the role of the researcher explicitly acknowledged (Moustakas, 1994).

The specific methodology selected was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a relatively new methodology, particularly in a business setting, having been developed in the 1990s. IPA claims philosophical roots in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, and its overall stance may be described as being concerned with “the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience” (Smith, 2011, p9). Despite historic applications of the methodology primarily being in health psychology, IPA’s emphasis on lived experience, first-hand accounts, particularity, and researcher-participant co-construction of meaning, suggest that it is well-suited to the research question explored here.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, conducted by myself as sole researcher. Six coachees and six coaches were interviewed (not matched pairs). Participants were identified using the researcher’s networks and, to a lesser extent, a snowball approach. Participants from the coachee group were all middle to senior managers in large, private sector organisations which had talent management programmes. Coaches were qualified by virtue of being experienced coaches and having participated as coaches on such programmes. In line with IPA methodology, participants were also selected on the basis of their willingness to reflect on and articulate their experiences.

Interviews were transcribed and the resulting transcripts analysed using a process of coding to achieve higher levels of abstraction through several iterations of analysis. IPA has an explicitly interpretative stance, while still requiring that analysis be situated directly in participant’s accounts.

Each iteration of analysis relies more heavily on the researcher's interpretative faculties. Ultimately this results in the identification of a number of super-ordinate themes arising from participant accounts.

1.4. Thesis plan and outline

This thesis has seven main chapters:

1. **Introduction** – explains the background to and the context of the research, details the research question, and introduces the methodology used.
2. **Literature review** – a systematic review of the extant literature, which identifies the theoretical gaps in the field to be addressed. The talent management and executive coaching literature are separately examined, before the relationship between them is explored.
3. **Methodology** – situates the research in an ontological and epistemological paradigm and outlines the research methodologies considered and rejected. This chapter describes IPA in some detail, summarising its philosophical roots and addressing a number of critiques of the approach. The specific methods used in this project are explained, including the approach to sampling, to participant recruitment, to data collection, and to data analysis. Measures of quality in IPA research are considered, as are the ethical challenges of this project and how they have been addressed. The role of the researcher in IPA is discussed and reflections on the process of research, including some of its practical challenges, are given.
4. **Findings from research with coachees** – describes the themes identified from this sample and the detailed findings of the research.
5. **Findings from research with coaches** – describes the themes identified from this sample and the detailed findings of the research.
6. **Discussion** – relates the findings of this research, at a cross-sample level, to existing literature.
7. **Conclusion** – summarises this study, discusses its strengths and limitations, provides reflection on the research process and the methodology used, and details the contributions to knowledge and practice which are made.

Two additional chapters provide references and appendices.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction

The literature on talent management and executive coaching will be reviewed in this chapter. Very little material exists that covers coaching in the talent management context, so I have treated each topic separately before exploring the relationship between them. The purpose of this review is to explore and summarise the key debates and insights in the extant literature which might inform the findings from this research study and to delineate the theoretical and empirical gap in the field which is intended to be addressed by the research.

Talent management provides the context within which the coaching activities under study are placed, and the special characteristics of this context justify a thorough review of this field as well as that of coaching. In both fields, problems of definition, of conceptual and disciplinary boundaries, and the status of practitioner contributions, make a comprehensive review of the literature a challenging task. Part of this chapter therefore is given over to a discussion of the condition of the relevant bodies of literature as well as to the key insights and trends which have emerged in each area.

As with any such literature review, the boundaries of this enquiry are necessarily somewhat permeable: talent management is closely related to strategic human resources management (SHRM) and leadership development, and executive coaching can be understood in terms of organisational psychology, adult development or organisational development. This implies a multiplicity of possible theoretical contexts, and in two such immature fields as talent management and coaching, identifying the theoretical area to which a contribution is to be made by research necessarily involves choices. I have chosen “talent management” and “executive coaching” as being of mid-level theoretical order. They are not so broad and unwieldy as “all strategic HRM” and “all kinds of coaching”, nor are they so narrow as to cause the topic to disappear altogether in relation to a theoretical base. The fields of literature under review are recognisably related to the programme of research, but are also still broad enough to encompass a range of different perspectives and understandings.

For the most part I have focused my review on journal articles published in reputable (though not always peer-reviewed) journals, including relevant ABS three and four star journals. Databases and catalogues which were included in the search included:

- British Library Catalogue
- Google Scholar
- Emerald Fulltext
- Web of Science
- Business Source Complete
- EbscoHost

Search terms included “talent management”, “coaching”, high potential coaching”, “talent management coaching”, “executive coaching” “coaching talent development” and “coaching talent management”.

Plan of the chapter

This chapter is divided broadly into three sections and a number of sub-sections:

- The condition of the literature in the fields of talent management and coaching, and particularly the relationship between practitioner and academic contributions.
- Talent management
 - An overview of the extant literature
 - A brief historical survey
 - Main themes and insights from the literature
- Executive coaching
 - An overview of the extant literature
 - A brief survey of relevant fields of knowledge and their concerns
 - Main themes and insights from the literature
- A summary of key issues and insights relevant to this research, gaps in the extant literature, and implications for this research project

2.2. The condition of the literature

In both fields reviewed in this chapter – talent management and executive coaching – literature is characterised by an abundance of practitioner contributions in addition to academic papers. Both types of contribution cover a range from theoretical or conceptual work to contributions based on empirical research. It is worth briefly exploring this issue for two reasons. Firstly, in both fields, the condition of the literature is a phenomenon in itself which tells us something about the explosion of interest in both talent management and executive coaching over the course of the last ten years, and which has led to the rapid growth of talent consulting and of coaching practice. Secondly, it is important to be aware that practitioners have often sought to generate credibility through the publication of cases and exemplars and/or to contribute messy, real-world experience to the ongoing development of knowledge without having high methodological research standards as a primary concern. Academic interest in both fields has lagged behind practitioner engagement, which has led to a dearth of empirical research based on rigorous research standards. To note this difference is not to find either practitioner contributions necessarily weak, or to find academic standards unhelpfully rigorous. It is important to be sensitive however, to the strengths and limitations of the contributions from which our understanding is derived.

It may be helpful therefore to develop a conceptualisation of the basis of the literature reviewed. Fig. 2.1 is a diagrammatic conceptualisation which applies to both fields, and attempts to describe the kinds of contribution made and the standards which apply across the range of literature reviewed.

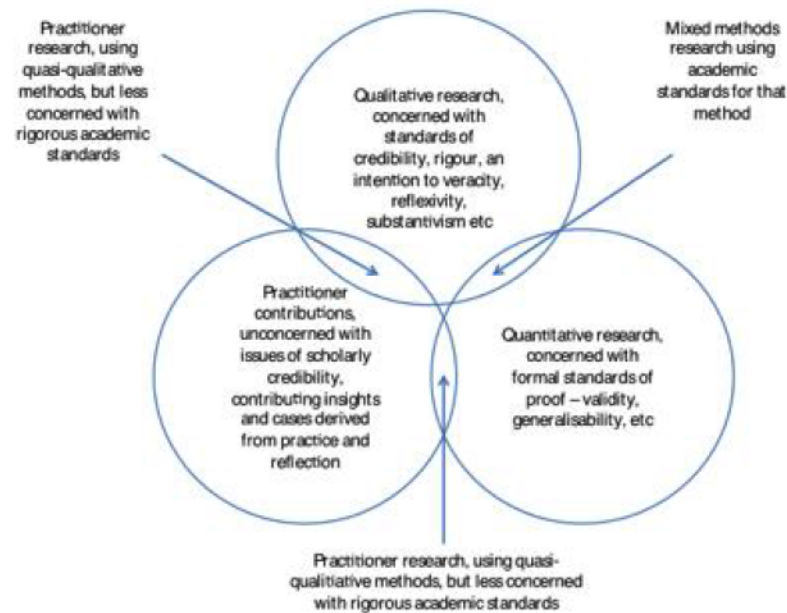


Figure 2.1 Qualities of academic and practitioner literature

2.3. Talent Management

In this section, I will begin with an overview of the volume, growth, and general nature of the talent management literature. I will move on to a brief historical review of the field, noting important developments in the last 25 years, before identifying key themes and insights.

Review of the literature

Succession planning and career management have long been a strategic preoccupation for the human resources department, but the notion of talent management has risen to a much greater prominence in corporate discourse since the promulgation of the concept of a “war for talent” by the consulting firm McKinsey at the end of the 1990s (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Ariss et al. (2013) note that businesses and consulting firms have subsequently been driving practice and discourse on talent management, and that academic literature has lagged significantly behind this advance guard. Nevertheless, in the last few years, there has been a notable increase in the volume of academic literature on the topic, including a number of recent special issues (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). A Web of Science search conducted on 12th May 2014 returned 117 items in total for a time span between 2000 and 2013, with only three papers in total prior to 2007 and 80 in the

course of 2011, 2012 and 2013 alone (Fig. 2.2) (see appendix 1 for search parameters). In other words, there has been a recent steep upward trend in the number of papers on talent management..

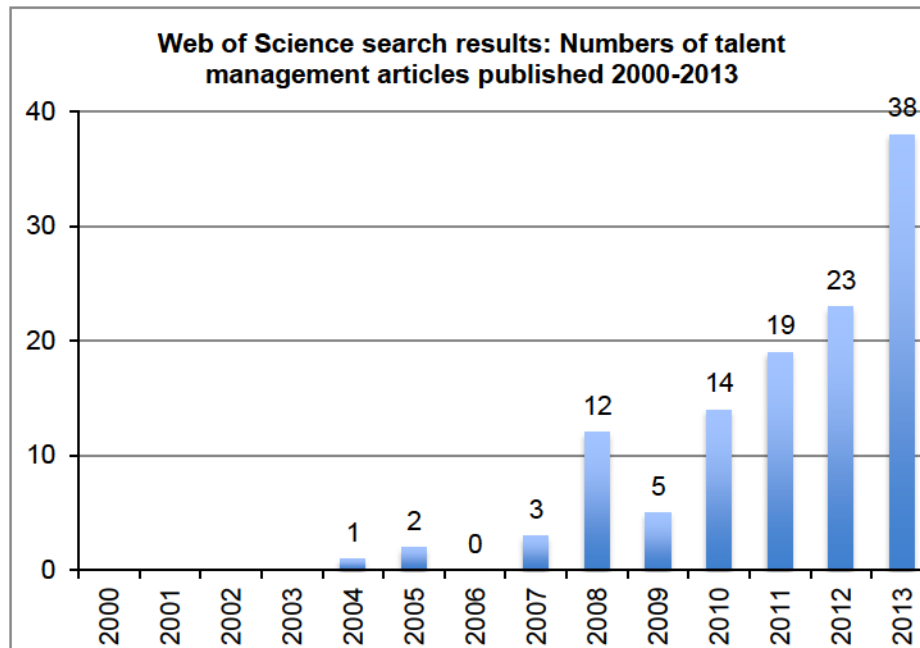


Figure 2:2 Numbers of published articles on talent management 2000-2013

Notwithstanding this recent attention, the overall volume of academic material is not large – 117 papers suggests an embryonic, rather than a mature field. The fact therefore that, as Lewis and Heckman note, “the topic “talent management” has been enthusiastically pursued in the trade and popular press without being linked systematically to peer-reviewed, research-based findings” (Lewis & Heckman, 2006, p4) is perhaps explained by the lack of available peer-reviewed, research-based material. This is particularly true of an empirical research base which might be expected to test and challenge theoretical assumptions: In 2013, it was noted that still only one third of published material in their study was based on empirical research (Thunnissen et al., 2013).

Historical overview

The practitioner publications which sparked this increased level of attention in talent management were, as has been noted above, two McKinsey reports: “The War for Talent” published in 1998 (Chambers et al., 1998) and a follow up study and publication of the same name (Michaels et al., 2001). These reports, based on consultant research in around 100 large US businesses (all McKinsey clients), cited a number of issues and changes in the commercial environment which would lead to a shortage of eligible candidates for executive positions. Demographic shifts, it was argued, meant that the numbers of potential executives available was dropping, leaders were facing increasingly complex work tasks, and organisational structures and competition from increasingly competitive small- and medium-sized enterprises and increasing job mobility meant that talented people had more job choices than ever before. A key contention was that to navigate these issues, concern for people would have to no longer be seen as the sole province of the HR function. The authors argued that “it

wasn't better HR processes that made the difference [to company performance]. Rather it was the mindset of leaders throughout the organization" (Michaels et al., 2001, pX [sic]). To win the war for talent therefore, companies needed to align a number of key strategies which were currently deficient. The reward function, the employee value proposition, recruitment and development strategies, and a willingness to differentiate between employees, the authors suggested, should all create alignment with the "passionate belief that to achieve your aspirations for the business, you must have great talent" (Michaels et al., 2001 p11).

So compelling and influential were the McKinsey findings that the phrase "war for talent" passed into common usage in organisational discourse. As Munro (2013) describes it, the McKinsey model "quickly became the new bible for an emerging generation of talent management professionals who took inspiration from the progressive practices of successful firms" (Munro, 2013, p3) and the "talent mindset" became "the new orthodoxy of American [and by extension, UK] management" (Gladwell, 2002, no page numbers). It turned out that talent management "seems to play well in the boardrooms of the world" (Reilly, 2008, p381). The language and concepts of a "war for talent" became part of an rhetoric which heightened the sense of urgency and criticality around the issues, and were used to justify often contentious practices (Huang & Tansley, 2012). In terms of both literature and practice, talent management became hot.

This enthusiastic adoption of the war for talent model has been tempered with some opposition. In the non-academic literature, Gladwell (2002) pointed out early on that one of the key organisations in the McKinsey study was Enron. He argued that Enron's spectacular failure was caused by practices and approaches which were directly related to the "talent mindset" promulgated by McKinsey, for whom Enron was an important client (though this criticism has itself been criticised in turn as "equally unburdened by rigorous data analysis" (Lewis & Heckman, 2006, p142)). More recently Munro (2013) criticised the McKinsey consultants' research methodology and their claims as overstated, based on a review of the subsequent performance of the organisations included in the research. This critique must be treated with caution however, as it is not peer-reviewed and the author a consultant with his own talent management product to promote. From an academic perspective, Pfeffer (2001) made an early objection to the war for talent principles, reminding us of an established body of theory in the organisational development movement which speaks to the challenges involved in talent management and to which the principles of the war for talent are entirely countervailing, such as the relative effectiveness of team work over individual achievement. More recently, Lewis and Heckman (2006) noted that the McKinsey research took place at the beginning of the US economic boom of the 1990s and that by 2005 profitability in a key case study organisation had slipped by 76%, raising the question as to what benefit a talent management mindset had really brought. Huang and Tansley (2012) pointed out the moral and ethical risks arising from the inevitable inequities of talent management and noted that these could undermine support and legitimacy for talent processes as they are deployed in organisations, threatening employee relations. That some organisations have

chosen to adopt a secretive approach confirms that there are undoubtedly ethical and moral dilemmas in talent management and this suggests that it is “a highly contentious innovation” (Huang & Tansley, 2012, p3674).

Notwithstanding these issues, talent management, as can be seen from the volume of practitioner literature produced, remains a widely-discussed topic. In contrast to the prescriptive and normative tone of the post war for talent years, a trend can be discerned in the most recent peer-reviewed literature, of a more questioning and exploratory stance, with a strong emphasis on establishing boundaries and definitions for the field, and a call for the voices of other stakeholders than those of organisational representatives to be more clearly heard in the debate (eg. Ariss et al., 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Tansley & Tietze, 2013).

Main themes and insights

An issue repeatedly noted is that of both conceptual and definitional problems with talent management (eg. Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Ariss et al., 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Reilly (2008) notes that “[p]roposed definitions are, at worst, a mélange of different concepts strung together without a clear statement of what is meant by talent and how we might manage it” (Reilly, 2008, p381). Lewis and Heckmann (2006), in a critical review of the field, identified three distinct strains of thought on the topic. Firstly, they suggested, talent management can be conceived of as rebadged SHRM (Iles et al., 2010), with various processes such as recruitment, development, and compensation being incorporated under the talent management banner; secondly it can be understood as a focus on internal “talent pools” – groups of employees with skills and experience which allow them to be managed, using succession planning approaches, and thirdly of “talent” as a generic commodity or quality of people without regard to organisational boundaries or specific positions. This conceptualisation is further subdivided into either talent as a quality of high performing, high potential people who are subject to differential treatment (most closely aligned to the war for talent model) or alternatively talent as a quality of all people, to be fostered and developed by the HR department. This latter differentiation has been described by Sonnenberg et al. as resulting in either exclusive or inclusive strategies, of which exclusive strategies are most popular in the UK (Sonnenberg et al., 2014).

Building on this summary, a matrix of these conceptualisations at the organisational level can be plotted on two axes: differentiation, i.e. the degree to which the organisation differentiates between groups of employees in its definition of talent; and scope, i.e. the breadth of HR processes involved in what is described as talent management. Fig. 2.3 describes the features of talent conceptualisations which fall into each quadrant delineated by these two axes.

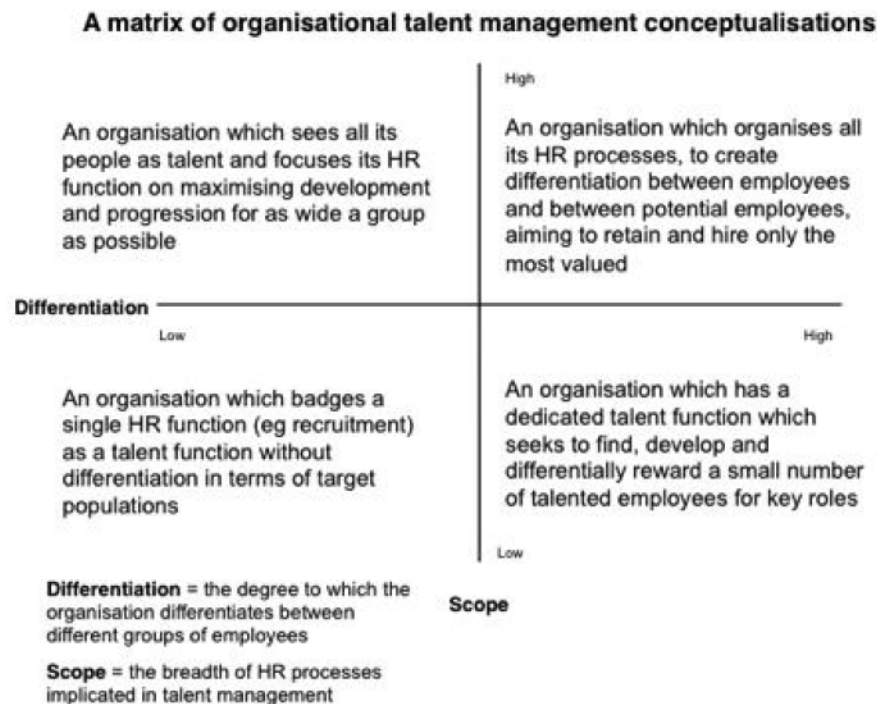


Figure 2:3 Organisational conceptualisations of talent management

Such a framework for conceptualising talent management is not the only option however. Ariss et al. (2013) for example encourage researchers in the field to understand talent management as a relational concept (and therefore not capable of being definitively described), and “to take into account relationships among individual, organizational, institutional, and national/international contexts that shape the management of talent” (Ariss et al., 2013, p4). In this conceptualisation for example, business policy and culture will define a context which shapes talent management activities, as above, but the individual’s personal agency, experience, and aspirations will provide another shaping context.

It is clear that the conceptual and definitional problems inherent in talent *management* activities are replicated in conceptualisations of *talent*, as a quality of individuals or groups. In other words, not only is it difficult to say definitively what talent *management* is, it is also difficult to say what *talent* is. Definitions in the literature include variations on talent as high performance, as a combination of performance and potential, as propensity to display certain behaviours, as a quality of individuals, and/or as differentiated at a group level (eg. leadership talent, or key talent) (Tansley, 2011). This problem of definition has driven some commentators to a philological and etymological examination of the term, a tactic which has sadly not succeeded in generating any greater definitional certitude (e.g. Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Some give a positive spin to the issue by suggesting that “organisations find greater value in formulating their own meaning of what talent is than accepting universal or prescribed definitions” (Tansley, 2011, p270). At a practice level, Walker and LaRocco

underline the inherent subjectivity – and espoused objectivity – of talent designations, and their lack of durability, and point out the risks of investing in the “wrong” people (Walker & LaRocco, 2002). This research is not concerned with establishing what talent “really” is, but the likelihood seems high that the definitional uncertainty established here will figure in some way in an exploration of talent management practice, and that it may have some effect on participants.

A notable feature of the talent management literature is, as has been argued, that much of it is normative – i.e. prescribing and appraising – rather than descriptive, interpretative, or based on empirical evidence (Dries & Pepermans, 2007). The organisational perspective is paramount and very little data has been collected on the views of people designated as high potential themselves. Certainly the individual perspective contributes little to the definitions or conceptualisations described above. There are some exceptions however. Tansley and Tietze (2013) conducted a case study looking at the experience of talented people from an anthropological perspective, particularly focusing on identity, and collected data using focus groups. Their findings note that the differentiation involved in being selected as a high potential can be connoted positively: “Being categorised as ‘talent’ is part of discursively fashioning particular (desirable) identities, such as ‘unique’, ‘gifted’, ‘special’ and part of an ‘elite’ group” (Tansley & Tietze, 2013, p1801). They suggest that talent management involves not only the development of technical and behavioural competence in the service of the organisation, but also a response from individuals at the level of reshaping their identity.

Huang and Tansley (2012), provide another rare exception in which the voice of the participant can be heard, in a data-rich case study of the experiences of individual high potentials and stakeholders in talent management programmes. They found that “rhetorical obfuscation” – “the intentional use of persuasive language to selectively project and communicate organisational agenda [sic] as a means of directing and reinforcing relevant stakeholders” (Huang & Tansley, 2012, p3675) was used extensively in the case organisation “to cover up inconsistency in practices and lack of legitimacy during the institutionalisation of talent management” (Huang & Tansley, 2012, p3673). Talent management, in this study was a locus of emotionalising rhetoric, covert dialogues, and deliberate use of obfuscating language to conceal true intentions and likely outcomes.

Another exception in the literature which foregrounds the participant voice is a CIPD study titled “The talent perspective: What does it feel like to be talent managed?” (CIPD, 2010). This mixed method study examined how participants felt about being talent managed, their engagement, motivations and aspirations, and their perceptions of the selection process, administration, sponsorship, and ownership of talent programmes. It found that participants, who were from a variety of organisations, were highly positive about their participation in such programmes, were highly engaged, felt valued, and were mostly positive about career opportunities. It also noted however that there was a

perceived lack of clarity about expectations from the talent programme and a wish for more transparency in selection processes. While this study is valuable for reflecting the subjective voice, there are a few grounds on which it may be questioned. Firstly, it is conducted from an avowedly pro-talent management position and situated in relation to other CIPD studies which favour talent management practices. Secondly, it starts with some “working assumptions” (CIPD, 2010, p2), which are not detailed. Thirdly, statistical data is rather superficially presented (not surprisingly, given that this is a report, rather than a journal paper), with no information about, for example, effect sizes. As a result, on the face of it some data appears to show relatively few differences between people designated as high potential and non-high potentials, such as, for example, in engagement levels.

A Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) survey of 199 leaders who attended CCL’s programmes between October 2007 and May 2008 generated a number of findings from the perspective of the view from inside the leadership pipeline (Campbell & Smith, 2010). The “pipeline” is a metaphor in common usage to describe cadres of people who are considered to be talented and capable of bringing their talent where it is needed in the organisation, as water flows through a pipe. This survey noted that identification as a high potential was important to individuals and appeared to have some correlation with an intention to remain in the organisation; that differential investment in development is expected by high potentials, and also received; that high potentials are generally positive about their status (in line with the CIPD study discussed above), but that “for some, there is a feeling of increased pressure or anxiety around high expectations or performance” (Campbell & Smith, 2010, p3); that high potentials are more engaged if they have a clear career path and that high potentials are actively engaged in developing others (Campbell & Smith, 2010).

Despite talent management being perceived as a critical organisational priority, paper after paper asserts that not enough is being done to ensure a pipeline of suitable talent (e.g. Cohn et al., 2008; Brant et al., 2008), and highlights the concomitant risk to organisational performance and continuity. However, risk as an aspect of talent management is almost universally understood as applying to the organisation. There is very little evidence to suggest that there is risk for the individual identified as high potential talent, and yet it might be speculated that such a designation, carrying a weight of (unclear) organisational expectation, involving competition with peers and superiors for influence and reward, requiring the stretching and challenging of skills and capabilities and confronting the sense of self, might also carry some jeopardy for the individual. Ready et al. (2010) are among the very few to make this point. They point out that a high potential designation has no tenure – individuals can be delisted, or delist themselves (they estimate that between 5% and 20% of designees are deselected each year, by choice or otherwise). Furthermore, the demands of being a high potential involve considerable sacrifice in the form of time spent at work and high levels of change in one’s personal life. Deselection might come about, they say, as a result of making a poor career transition, a fall-off

in performance, behaviour which is not congruent with the company's culture and values, or a significant visible failure.

Such events might befall any of us, but with the spotlight on people designated as high potential, the visibility of failure, or of an active choice to opt out, is significantly increased. We might imagine that this highly-visible potential risk might manifest itself in how such people think about themselves and their circumstances, and that this issue might arise in coaching, whether introduced by the coach or the coachee. Such effects can only be identified through the acquisition of data from participating individuals – data which to date is seriously lacking.

2.4. Executive coaching

As noted above, coaching is a commonly-used development intervention in talent management programmes (e.g. Dries & Pepermans, 2007; Oliver et al., 2009). Bond & Naughton (2011) note that it is one of seventeen possible talent management interventions which can be deployed. However, the lack of research in this area means very few papers cover this application of coaching in detail, and for this reason, while reviewing those available, this section looks more broadly at the field of executive coaching.

A differentiation has been made in this study between executive coaching and general business coaching (which might take place at any level of the organisation) and, of course, life or career coaching which takes place outside an organisational context. There is no specific academic discipline of high potential coaching. Executive coaching however, defined in part at least by its target population of middle and senior managers, is a field in which issues of career transition or leadership development are often dealt with, and therefore offers some synergy or overlap with high potential coaching. It is therefore a suitable “umbrella” for this activity, at least in the context of this research project.

An overview of the literature

The origins of executive coaching practice can be traced in sports coaching, in social interventions designed to change problem behaviours (Kilburg, 1996), in organisational psychology and consulting (Sperry, 2013), and in counselling, training, and development and management (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). Just as with talent management, practitioner perspectives on executive coaching abound: A Google search conducted in March 2014 on the term “executive coaching” generated more than one million records. However, the field is also analogous in the fact that empirical research into its application is understood to be thin on the ground. Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson's seminal 2001 paper reviewing the literature on executive coaching noted only seven empirical papers published at that time. In 2006, Fillery-Travis and Lane were still noting that, “the evidence base for coaching has

not increased at the same rate as practice. Research into the efficacy of coaching has lagged behind and it has only started to develop seriously over the last five years” (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006, p24).

Notwithstanding this concern about an empirical base, in conducting literature searches for this study, I identified 48 papers in peer-reviewed journals which reported on some kind of empirical research (see appendix 2 for a bibliography). The studies ranged from quantitative studies of practitioner surveys (e.g. Coutu & Kauffman, 2009), to large-scale field trials (e.g. Yeow & Martin, 2013), to qualitative studies of various types. It should be noted that this search excludes unpublished doctoral and masters theses, of which there are several (see Ely et al., 2010, for a comprehensive review). Quality is variable however, as noted in Fig. 2.1. Some studies have no pretensions to scholarly levels of credibility (e.g. Coutu & Kauffman, 2009) while others have endeavoured to meet at least some quality criteria for quantitative research (e.g. Yeow & Martin, 2013). The challenges of research in organisations are legion, and respect is due to any researcher who wrestles results from this always confusing, dynamic, and often chaotic context. However, there is a detectable tendency to make strong claims, particularly in terms of generalisability, and to downplay the treatment of alternative explanations for observed effects. A normative tone is often adopted in the presentation of results which is not justified considering the limitations of research. Wasylyshn’s widely cited (2003) outcome study, for example, was conducted solely on her own previous coaching clients, but any potential effect of this circumstance is not discussed, though it might reasonably be assumed that it might explain her research participants’ expressed preference for psychologically-trained coaches such as herself.

Taking the literature as a whole, four major themes emerge. Firstly, as with talent management, there are questions of definition and theoretical bases, the status of research and the status of the executive coaching industry/profession; secondly, there are questions of the role, purpose, and applications of coaching; thirdly practice issues, including angles on particular types of coaching participant or types of organisation; and finally, issues of efficacy, impact, value for money, success measures and factors affecting them.

Kilburg (1996) was the first to attempt a specific definition of executive coaching and some theoretical boundaries for the field which would provide a basis for future research and theoretical development. His much-cited definition stresses the relational and client-centred aspects of executive coaching (where the coachee is the client) and conceptualises the coach as a consultant, with a range of expert skills deployed in the client’s service. He also introduces the concepts of goal-focus, performance improvement, personal satisfaction on the part of the client, and “proxy benefit” – the client’s organisation’s effectiveness is understood to improve as the client’s performance improves as a result of coaching. Joo (2005) notes eight distinct definitions of executive coaching in which the focus on the organisation or focus on the individual is balanced in various ways. Other definitions also incorporate

aspects of skills acquisition, feedback, learning and performance and career management. Nevertheless, despite these and many other attempts at definition, Sperry was still noting in 2013 that “there is still little consensus in the consulting psychology community on the nature of executive coaching, including its definition and functions” (Sperry, 2013, p285).

The question of the theoretical boundaries in such a nascent field as coaching is important because it raises issues of where we might direct our attention for theoretical support for practice or insight into what might be expected from coaching. Cox et al. (2014) point out that a lack of theoretical clarity “gives the impression that coaching is a blend of approaches, making it a difficult task for HRD professionals, and particularly buyers of coaching, to judge the relevance of numerous traditions of coaching and evaluate the value of them for the overall HRD agenda” (Cox et al., 2014, p2). A strong claim is made in the organisational psychology field for executive coaching as a sub-set of the discipline and executive coaching has taken up considerable space in this body of literature (Sperry, 2013). However, alternatives to this claim can be found in conceptualisations of coaching as an inter-disciplinary field (e.g. Walker, 2004; Stern, 2009), as a development intervention in the leadership development/training and development traditions (e.g. Yeow & Martin, 2013; Thach & Heinselman, 1999), as a relational activity closely related to psychotherapy (e.g. de Haan & Sills, 2010)), as an HRD intervention (e.g. Baek-Kyoo, 2005; Hamlin et al., 2008) and as an adult learning intervention (e.g. Gray, 2006).

Several contributors, some attempting to sidestep the problem of a lack of scientific proof of efficacy in the field, have proposed that, in the absence of a specific body of research and an organised discipline of executive coaching, we might look directly to the insights of psychotherapy. They argue that there is a functional similarity between the two processes (McKenna & Davis, 2009; De Haan & Duckworth, 2013). However this suggestion in turn has generated a continuing controversy over whether the two disciplines are truly analogous, and, relatedly, there are considerable concerns about ethical boundaries, functional dissimilarity, and a lack of expertise on the part of coaches who might be considered to be practising some sort of therapy (Berglas, 2002; Hollenbeck, 2009; Maccoby, 2009; Grant, 2009).

Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006) note a number of different focuses for coaching; to support onboarding, to support high potentials or those needing performance support, acting as a critical friend for senior managers, and as a retention/reward proposition. They see coaching as part of a portfolio of development opportunities available to the executive, and one which is flexible and capable of being tailored to the individual. Coutu and Kauffman’s (2009) Harvard Business Review survey of 140 coaches found that the top three reasons why coaches were engaged were to develop high potentials or assist transitions, to act as a sounding board, and to address derailing behaviour. Others see coaching through a less organisationally-focused lens as a psychological intervention designed to support the coachee in self-regulation, in meaning-making, in increasing their personal satisfaction and in developing an integrated and authentic sense of self in the organisational context (e.g. Grant et

al., 2010; Swart & Harcup, 2013; Wang, 2013). Lazar and Berquist (2003) suggest that the goal of coaching is to support clients to test and develop their alignment on four independent branches of personal enquiry: Spiritual, philosophical, ethical, and a focus on life and career.

Frequently, coaching is understood as a learning experience. Coaching promotes reflection and therefore contributes to learning and behaviour change on the part of the individual (e.g. Wasylyshyn et al., 2006; Gray, 2007). This learning is a process of discovery, application, and integration (Griffiths & Campbell, 2009; Lazar & Bergquist, W, 2003) and can sometimes be transformative (e.g. Laske, 1999). It is not confined to the individual, but has a ripple effect, transferring learning to the wider team or organisation (e.g. Orenstein, 2002; Swart & Harcup, 2013). Coaching is often conceived of as enabling or enhancing other organisational interventions, such as change programmes (e.g. Stober, 2008), leadership development programmes with taught elements (e.g. Wasylyshyn et al., 2006) or career management (e.g. Segers & Inceoglu, 2012).

Many coaches identify with one or more theoretical schools which support their practice. Whybrow and Palmer's (2006) study of psychologically-trained coaches noted that the majority of survey respondents described themselves as using "a facilitative approach to their practice, within a Cognitive, Behavioural and/or Solution Focused framework" (Whybrow & Palmer, 2006, p62). Other frameworks in use noted by this study included psychodynamic, rational emotive behavioural coaching, humanistic, transactional, existential/Gestalt, personal construct psychology, positive psychology, motivational interviewing, psychosynthesis, and hypnosis approaches (Whybrow & Palmer, 2006).

The coach's skill in developing and maintaining a relationship appears often as a factor in successful coaching practice – often drawing on research in the neighbouring field of psychotherapy. Coaching is characterised variously as a helping relationship (De Haan et al., 2011), or as a collaborative enterprise, partnership or alliance (Grant et al., 2010; McKenna & Davis, 2009; Baron & Morin, 2009). Coaches are seen as needing to attend to the quality of the relationship, as it is the medium through which learning and change take place (Critchley, 2010). Similarly, coaches are understood to apply process skills in their practice such as questioning, challenging, exercising restraint when pulled towards an expert orientation, other-focus, process attunement, reflexivity and the ability to encourage reflection on the part of the coachee (e.g. Critchley, 2010; de Haan et al., 2010; Wang, 2013). Some contributions in the field of executive coaching research focus on the question of what is actually done in coaching – the elements of the coaching assignment as it were. Common elements are found to include giving and interpreting feedback, problem-identification, goal-setting, experimentation, and practice and evaluation (Wang, 2013; Thach & Heinselman, 1999).

Issues in coaching practice extend beyond practice skills – what coaches do – however, to the perceived qualities of the coach him or herself. As Wang (2013) puts it "coaching is more than a set of

skills and techniques: It is a different way of being, coming from a profound coherence between what the coaches do, what they say, what they believe and who they are. This internal consistency and congruence entails coaches' authenticity, which influences the way they exercise their skills and techniques" (Wang, 2013, p13). Credibility, trustworthiness, empathic understanding, common-sense, insightfulness, professionalism, respect, flexibility, an ability to listen and to encourage and contain emotions, and a courageous willingness to challenge are all cited as important qualities of the coach. (e.g. Dagley, 2010; de Haan et al., 2011; Passmore, 2010; Stevens, 2005; Wang, 2013).

Much of the literature of coaching in the business context is concerned with its efficacy – does it “work”, and if it does work, is it good value for money? Conclusions are mixed, and naturally dependent on what “work” and “value for money” are understood to mean. Once again in this area, there is a notable differentiation between conceptualisations of benefit as something experienced by the individual or something as experienced by the organisation. Taking the organisational perspective, a number of studies have attempted to use variations on return on investment (ROI) methodology to prove the effectiveness of executive coaching. The first reported study on executive coaching – an action learning study of a US public-sector health agency – claimed productivity increases of 88%, four times the increase attributed to traditional training alone (Olivero et al., 1997). Later studies made even greater claims (e.g. Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). However, De Meuse et al. (2009) and Grant et al. (2010) have both noted that ROI claims have been overstated and have outlined challenges and limitations of using ROI methodologies to assess the effectiveness of coaching. Some commentators have avoided this problem by taking self-reported assessments of benefits, including financial benefits, as a sufficient proxy for business improvement (e.g. Ashley-Timms, 2012; Gaskell et al., 2012; Leonard-Cross, 2010). De Meuse et al. (2009) however note the potential biases in such findings where research has been undertaken by consultant practitioners, and point out that most published empirical studies have used inadequate retrospective methodologies.

The organisational lens is not the only perspective on effectiveness however. Other authors emphasise the experience of the coachee as paramount in the assessment of success. De Haan et al. (2011) for example, studied what determines helpfulness for the coachee. Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006) reviewing extant studies and their own research on whether coaching “works”, concluded that in the sense that “everyone likes to be coached and perceives that it impacts positively upon their effectiveness...the answer is ‘Yes it does’”. In this last example, we can also trace a notable characteristic of the literature – it is almost universally positive about coaching as an experience for individuals (though one might ask if it would be published if it were not). Evidence of learning, in the form of knowledge, skill, self-insight or behaviour change, is also understood to be evidence of the efficacy of coaching, and several studies purport to provide such evidence (e.g. Swart & Harcup, 2013; Wasylyshyn et al., 2006)

The context of coaching is frequently cited as a factor in its success. Orenstein (2002) notes that executive coaching “encompasses multidimensional interrelationships among the individual, the organization, and the consultant [coach]” (Orenstein, 2002, p2). Several authors stress the importance of systemic and contextual sensitivity on the part of the coach, as pertaining to the “field” and therefore of relevance to the coaching assignment (e.g. Critchley, 2010; McKenna & Davis, 2009b). For coaching to be successful, it is suggested, the organisation has to be behind it, particularly in respect of confidentiality, executive accountability for follow through, senior leadership support, and integration with HR processes (e.g. Kiel, Rimmer, Williams, & Doyle in Thach & Heinselman, 1999). The readiness and suitability of the coachee to participate in and benefit from the process is also cited as a condition for success, and the appropriateness or otherwise of coaching as an intervention, compared to other possible approaches (Baek-Kyoo, 2005; Sherman & Freas, 2004; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). Similarly, the process of matching the right coach with the right coachee and the level of choice the coachee has generates much comment, with “right” appearing to be a function of style, developmental stage of the coach, intellect, gender, demographic commonality, learning style or simple “chemistry” (De Haan & Duckworth, 2013; de Haan et al., 2011; Gray & Goregaokar, 2010; Leonard-Cross, 2010; Passmore, 2010).

2.5. Coaching and talent management

As previously noted, in principle, a strong link exists between coaching and talent management. Bond and Naughton (2011), for example, note that coaching is widely recognised by professional bodies, organisations, the HR community, and coaches as an organisational tool to support the transition of employees from one level of leadership to another, though they assert that there is a gap between the espousal of this view and actual implementation of transition coaching in practice.

As we have seen, Dries and Pepermans (2007) cite coaching as one of a number of possible development interventions in the field. In theoretical discussion, coaching in talent management is seen as being valuable for all the same reasons as for executive coaching generally, but also particularly as supporting high potentials in transitions (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). It is also often seen as part of a wider development strategy for high potential talent, which might include other elements such as stretch assignments, formal learning and in-role learning (e.g. Bond & Naughton, 2011; Fulmer et al., 2009; Oliver et al., 2009).

A few empirical studies have looked directly at the topic of coaching in the context of high potential or talent management. Again, efficacy, in the sense of performance, forms a minor theme. From an organisational perspective, Dagley (2006) in a survey of human resources professionals found that “the biggest organisational benefits [from coaching] seemed to be in the development of the talent pool, and increased morale and talent retention” (Dagley, 2006, p43). Dubouloy (2004) suggested that

increases in self-efficacy were a key measure of the success of such programmes: “The knowledge about management [the coachees] have acquired, but even more so the self-knowledge, the self-esteem or just the self they have recovered, enables them to practice those strategic conversations with top managers which are the sign of power, of framing rules and sense-making” (Dubouloy, 2004, p491). Feggetter (2007), studying the impact of coaching for ten participants in an MoD high potential programme, noted very high levels of participant satisfaction and self-rated assessment of improvement and also tentatively suggested a correlation between coaching and the promotion of participants. Numbers were very small in this study however, and there was no control for the fact that selection for such programmes might itself indicate a pre-existing positive view of a candidate. Lueneberger (2012), linked high potential coaching, and individual engagement in a study of 89 high potential employees, concluding that the more of their time people are able to spend doing work they enjoy, the more engaged they will be. However, no indication is given of the distinctive contribution of coaching as an intervention or indeed its outcomes. In another small study of HR professionals in three multi-national companies, Salomaa (2014) set out to explore the use of executive coaching in the context of global talent management and how coaching was experienced by organisational stakeholders. She found that organisations with a more mature experience of coaching had clearer expectations of it, evaluated it more systematically and integrated it with business strategy and HR systems.

Some studies have suggested that high potentials value coaching. Thach’s (2002) action research study of both high potentials and executives undertaking coaching as part of the implementation of a 360 degree feedback programme found that participants appreciated coaching, and that there was a possible correlation between the number of coaching sessions received and self-reported increases in leader effectiveness. The CIPD (2010) study of talent management talent management discussed above, noted that 78% of respondents to their survey had undertaken coaching, and valued it over the formal learning elements of their development programmes. The opportunities to develop self-awareness offered by coaching were considered its most valuable aspect.

Helpful though these studies are in raising and answering specific questions, they cannot be described as collectively constituting a solid body of research-based literature in the field of high potential coaching. With the possible exception of the CIPD study, none of studies summarised here are based on firsthand accounts of the experience on the part of coachees and coaches. Such missing accounts have the potential to provide valuable insight into the phenomenon, and it is this gap which is addressed by this research study.

2.6. Summary and conclusion

From this review of knowledge relevant to this research study, it can be seen that in organisational life, the practice of “talent management” and the concepts of “talent” and “high potential” are highly

current and perceived as critical to managing organisational continuity and performance. In addition, we note that organisations and commentators conceive of “talent management” and “talent” in many different ways, and that there is no general agreement about their definition, scope, purpose or nature. Lastly, we note that the principal “voice” in writing about talent management has been that of the organisation, and that those of the individuals involved in it are scarcely evident. There is an implicit assumption that the ends of talent management are primarily for the benefit of the organisation. Individual benefit is assumed to be present, but subsumed into this organisational good. In a talent management context therefore, where expectations are different for different stakeholders and outcomes are decidedly uncertain, expectations of what coaching might be expected to achieve are likely to be even more varied and nebulous than in a general business context.

In the field of coaching, it has been noted that executive coaching is poorly defined, but overwhelmingly perceived as positive, irrespective of perspective. It is often conceived of as a relationship-based activity in which coaches use process skills to support the coachee’s learning and development, but practices differ widely depending on the background, skills, and orientation of the coach. It can be seen that both the purpose of coaching and measures of its effectiveness are capable of being understood in many different ways, and that no single method of evaluation is more widely employed than that of asking participants whether they felt that they had benefited from it. Applications appear to be understood as supporting learning and transition, improving performance, and acquiring and deploying new skills and knowledge. However, there is no template, and certainly, though coaching is widely used in high potential development, very little is known about its deployment from the perspective of those involved.

We can trace a key axis of differentiation in the debate over the purpose of both talent management and executive coaching. On the one hand we have the organisational perspective, where coaching and/or talent management are seen as being undertaken for reasons of organisational good, with participants who are inhabiting an organisational persona and whose interests are aligned with that of the organisation. On the other hand, we have the individual perspective, where coaching is an activity undertaken by individuals for multiple reasons and which may impact them in many aspects of their lives and where talent management is experienced in various complex ways, which might or might not be aligned with the organisation’s expectations. It would be a false dichotomy to assume that individual and organisational interests cannot and do not significantly overlap: Many coachees in executive coaching undertake the activity to improve their working practice, and many organisations are concerned holistically with the congruence, well-being and growth of their employees. But this axis of differentiation is important in the context of this study as it highlights a gap in our insight into the subjective experience of both phenomena.

In summary therefore, as a result of this review of the literature, a number of key debates and issues in the theoretical fields of talent management and executive coaching can be noted which have relevance to this research study. We see that:

- Talent management and executive coaching practices are both on the rise in terms of their deployment in organisations and the two fields come together in the widespread use of coaching as a talent management intervention – a practice I have designated as “high potential coaching”.
- Notwithstanding this increased incidence of high potential coaching, there are ongoing debates as to the purpose, efficacy, underlying philosophies and characteristics of both the talent management and executive coaching phenomena.
- A normative and prescriptive tone in existing theoretical talent management literature suggests that the interests and perspectives of people designated as high potential are identical with those of organisational stakeholders.
- There is a lack of empirical research in both fields which might inform theory development, and such empirically-based insight as does exist, does not indicate any level of consensus about important debates. There is, however, a plethora of practice-based input of variable rigour and disinterestedness.

Most importantly for this study, it is clear that the individual perspective on these issues – experience voiced in the first person – is almost entirely lacking from the literature. We have little awareness, for example, of how our high potential coaching participants experience their high potential designation, or of how they experience coaching in the talent management context. We do not know whether coaches see their practice in this area as being different from that in others, and if they do, how it differs, or what they perceive to be the purpose of high potential coaching. Such gaps in knowledge are important because without this insight, any development of theory in these areas is only partially informed. The subjective perspective is a crucial element without which issues and debates are incomplete. The contribution of this study is therefore to begin a process of providing the missing first person perspective, and this visual conceptual framework summarises the context and potential contribution of this research:

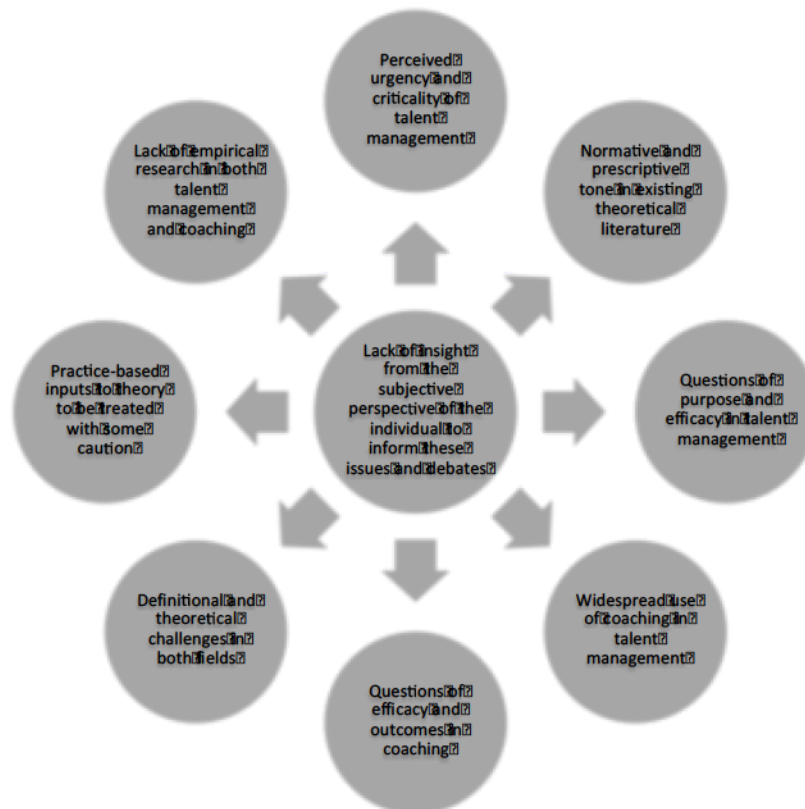


Figure 2.4 Conceptual framework of key debates and issues and gaps in existing knowledge

3. Methodology

In this chapter, I will situate the research question: “High Potential coaching: The experiences of participants and coaches” in an interpretivist ontological paradigm and a social constructionist epistemology. I will outline some of the research methodologies suited to this framework and which were considered for this project. I will describe the selected methodology, IPA, in some detail, summarising its philosophical roots and addressing a number of critiques of the approach. I will explain the specific methods used in this project, including the approach to sampling, to participant recruitment, to data collection, and to data analysis. I will consider measures of quality in IPA research and the ethical challenges of this project, and how I have attempted to address them. Finally, I will discuss the role of the researcher in IPA and reflect on the process of research, including some of its practical challenges.

Ontology and Epistemology

This research is conducted within an interpretivist paradigm and assumes a social constructionist epistemology. Henwood and Pidgeon (1992), note that the interpretivist paradigm arises from a long tradition of critique of the scientific method in which reality is understood to consist of facts which

can be objectively observed. For decades, if not centuries, commentators have noted the limitations of this approach in relation to the observation and understanding of human activity. As a result, an interpretative paradigm has emerged, which is characterised by:

- A commitment to constructivist epistemologies
- An emphasis (in some cases) on description rather than explanation
- The representation of reality through the eyes of participants
- An emphasis on the meaning of behaviour in context and in its full complexity
- a view of the scientific method as generating working hypotheses rather than immutable facts
- An attitude towards theory generation which emphasises the emergence of concepts from data rather than the imposition of a priori theory
- The use of qualitative methods for research

(Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992).

Within this paradigm, a social constructionist epistemology “invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us” (Burr, 2003, p3). For social constructionists, ‘reality’ is not a phenomenon which exists in the world, awaiting our ability to observe, measure and confirm it, as it might be within a positivist paradigm. Rather, while acknowledging the brute reality of the physical world, social constructionists contend that both it, and non-physical human experience, can only be *understood* through a process of human meaning-making. Knowledge is therefore constructed, not revealed. This seems to me to be above all explanatory of my own experience, in which the sense I make of events or phenomena is constantly revealed through discourse as being different to yours, but that, also through discourse, we may develop a shared, or at least overlapping, sense of what such phenomena mean to each of us and to both of us together.

Social constructionism is close cousin to constructivism, but contrasted to it in that constructivism “points up the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other” (Crotty, 1998, p58). The ‘social’ element of social constructionism, on the other hand, emphasises the consensual and social aspects of this process and, is also inextricably influenced by the cultures into which we are born – cultures themselves being a dynamic interplay of multiple shared constructs, built up over time. As Crotty puts it, social constructionism “emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world:” (Crotty, 1998, p58). The constructions which result from our meaning-making process therefore are constantly fluid and changing over time and with circumstances. As we shall see later however, social constructionism

has various “shades” which privilege more or less the deterministic role of culture and language in the shaping of human experience.

Burr identifies four key assumptions of social constructionism: “A critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge...historical and cultural specificity...[that] knowledge is sustained by social processes [and that] knowledge and social action go together” (Burr, 2003, pp2-5). These assumptions invite us to challenge the view that knowledge is based on unbiased, objective observation of the world, remind us that the meanings assigned to phenomena are specific to the times and places in which they occur, emphasise the social nature of constructions and communication of shared meaning, and suggest that the constructions we share generate the social actions we take

Some of the key features of the social constructionist perspective can be illustrated through reference to this research project and its context. It has already been noted in reviewing the literature that the construct of “talent management” appears to have come into being in the course of the last fifteen years as the result of a rough consensus of meaning between a considerable number of protagonists who have an interest in the performance and continuity of large organisations, typically those modelled on western concepts of organisational design, purpose, and management. Thus the term has historical and cultural specificity. We have also noted that talent management programmes have become a commonplace of organisational life, promulgated through the spread of “best practice” in consulting, HR and leadership, a fact which illustrates that social action follows on a social construction. So we can see that constructs such as ‘talent’ and ‘high potential’ can be understood as culturally-informed, linguistically communicated artefacts of a particular consensus of meaning which abides within (some) organisations at this point in history and which lead to the development of talent management and talent development activities as a form of social action. Similarly, we can trace a shift in the understanding of the construct of coaching over time. One of my research participants noted that she started her career engaged in “role consultation” because at that time, “coaching” was a term used only in sport. This shift in meaning has been both linguistic and situational. In a couple of decades, the label “coaching” has swallowed up the label previously employed for similar practices in organisations, and our understanding of where a phenomenon we call coaching can apply has broadened beyond the field of sport to the field of work, even though practices in the two fields might be widely different. As with talent management, coaching interventions are now widely deployed in organisations; another example of social action arising from the evolution of a shared, social construction. Thus we can see, with direct reference to the field of study, that concepts which have significance and which lead to actions which have impact on our lives are not fixed, immutable, and “discoverable” in an external world, but are constructed through interpersonal exchange, facilitated by language at an interpersonal and societal level.

The emphasis given in social constructionism to the constructed nature of reality is of great significance in this research. It is already clear that organisations and professionals do not all have the same understanding of the nature of talent, talent management and coaching, or of their purpose, application, and utility. These are not coherent, consistent constructs which endure over time and across different settings – they are constructed in time and place by the protagonists involved, and the shared nature of the construction may be both fragile and fleeting. For example, what I as an HR professional think of as “potential” may be quite different from the construction of the person being assessed for it, their manager or the senior stakeholders of the business. In reality, this is indeed often the case, and activities such as “talent reviews” and “calibration exercises” are common interventions aimed at achieving a level of consensus both about the criteria by which potential might be identified, and about individuals who might or might not have it. Stakeholders engage in talent management with very different agendas, and the subjectivity of assessments of talent and high levels of uncertainty in business mean that talent management processes are highly susceptible to manipulation for various ends. Indeed, some of these manipulations are so well known as to have achieved the status of shared constructs in themselves. Managers who seek to palm off an unsatisfactory employee onto another team by talking up their abilities and achievements dishonestly are said to be “burying their dead in other people’s gardens” for example, while those who resist taking on employees they see as unsatisfactory may exercise their “OMDB”, or “over my dead body” veto. It is commonplace in talent management that someone who is assessed as having high potential in one round of assessment by one set of stakeholders and in one business context may find that they are assessed quite differently in the next round or by another set. This leads to the kind of counter-intuitive, but not uncommon, events such as members of a high potential cadre being let go when a crisis hits the business or leadership changes.

Given the fragility of talent management constructs, it is of great interest how coachees and coaches in this field – who arrive also with their own constructs not only of high potential, but of careers and coaching – make sense of what it means to be in their position. How coachees learn, for example, what other key stakeholders mean by designating them as high potential, what they intend for them, and what their intentions might mean in practice. It is also of interest how people designated as high potential navigate the inherent conceptual uncertainties involved and assimilate these constructs into their own lives and their sense of self. Coaches, working in different organisations, must also somehow manage the inevitable variation in meaning between them and between coachees and their sponsoring organisations.

Qualitative research

My interpretative and social constructionist paradigm leads me to frame my research question in such a way that it is best answered by a qualitative approach.

Moustakas (1994) describes the common features of qualitative research theories and methodologies as including:

“focusing on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts
...searching for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations
...obtaining descriptions of experience through first-accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews
...regarding the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behaviour and as evidence for scientific investigations
...formulating questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement and personal commitment of the researcher
...viewing experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole”
(Moustakas, 1994 , p21)

These features point to qualitative research as best suited to reflect a social-constructionist position on the experience of phenomena such as coaching, being a coach, being a coachee, or being considered to be “high potential” and is therefore an appropriate approach for this study.

3.1. Methodologies considered

A number of qualitative methodologies consistent with my ontological and epistemological perspective were considered, and ultimately discarded in favour of IPA. Discourse analysis was not suited to the research question, which is concerned primarily with how phenomena are experienced cognitively and affectively, not with how they are brought into being through language (Smith, 2011). Heuristic enquiry demands a personal identification with the research project and was therefore inappropriate. Although I have been a coach to many high potential nominees, I have not recently been coached in that context myself, and heuristic enquiry could only therefore have covered half of the research question. The most likely alternative candidate to IPA appeared to be grounded theory, in the form promulgated by Charmaz. This constructivist grounded theory approach seemed to offer many features which aligned well with the research aims, with my own ontological and epistemological positions and research style. It accommodates a constructivist epistemology, which, as we have seen, is close cousin to a constructionist epistemology. It is an interpretative method and it has a strong history in psychological research. Willig (2013) and Smith et al. (2013) point out the many similarities between IPA and grounded theory. Both methodologies aim to produce a conceptual framework to represent a person’s or group’s view of the world, and they both use

systematic textual analysis to identify themes or categories at progressively higher levels of abstraction to produce some form of general understanding or insight. However, Willig (2013) also highlights the differences between the two methods, which centre around their approach to theory development: “Grounded theory aims to identify and explicate contextualized social processes that *account for phenomena*. By contrast, IPA is concerned with gaining a better understanding of the quality and texture of individual experiences; that is, it is interested in the *nature or essence of phenomena*” (Willig, 2013, p99 [author's emphasis]). In relation to the research question, which focuses on subjective experience therefore, IPA seemed the better choice of methodology. Nevertheless, while theory-building seems a step too far, in terms of my personal orientation towards the research topic, neither is mere description enough. Smith and Eatough (in Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008) suggest that there are choices to be made about the degree of interpretation undertaken in an IPA study from, at one end of a continuum, “rich experiential descriptions” of the phenomenon under investigation to, at the other, the researcher “building an alternative coherent narrative from the messy sense-making of the participant” (Eatough and Smith in Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008, p189). If I were to position myself on this continuum, it would be at the latter end.

3.2. Interpretative phenomenological analysis

IPA is a relatively recently developed approach to qualitative research, having been promulgated primarily by Professor Jonathan Smith in the late 1990s. It was developed in reaction to what was believed to be the neglect of subjective experience and personal accounts in contemporary psychology (Eatough & Smith, 2008). To date, IPA has primarily been employed in research in health sciences. Indeed, Smith’s paper of 2011 identified 293 papers reporting IPA studies to date, of which only 18 have core topics which might fall outside the health sciences (it is difficult to be definite in all cases) (Smith, 2011). A review of a database search of doctoral theses on the Electronic Theses Online Service in October 2014 supported this finding of an emphasis on health sciences, particularly health psychology. Only five items were returned for a search on “interpretative phenomenological analysis” or “IPA” and “coaching” and none of these appeared to refer to studies undertaken in a business context. That said, the corpus of research using IPA for studies outwith health sciences is a growing one; several doctoral and masters theses undertaken within the Oxford Brookes University Business School for example have utilised this methodology. The choice of IPA for this project therefore is somewhat unusual when set against its roots, but by no means unique.

As a variant of the phenomenological method in psychological research, IPA shares the aims of other methods in seeking to develop a deep understanding of the nature of the experience of research participants. Smith describes it as “an attempt to unravel the meanings contained in accounts through a process of interpretative engagement with the texts and transcripts” (Smith, in Willig, 2001, p53). In the next three sections I will describe how IPA’s philosophical roots support this claim.

Phenomenology

IPA claims strong roots in the phenomenological tradition in philosophy. Philosophical phenomenology, as conceived by Husserl in the early 20th century “is interested in the world as it is experienced by human beings within particular contexts and at particular times” (Willig, 2001, p51). It is not concerned with what we *believe* we already know about the world and its phenomena. Husserl argued for a return to “the things themselves” – phenomena as directly experienced – as essential to an understanding of them. Phenomena become manifest through the *intentionality* of the observer. In this meaning “intentionality” is the observer’s “mental orientation (e.g. desires, wishes, judgments, emotions, aims and purposes)” (Willig, 2001, p51). From a phenomenological perspective, there is no world “out there” which is separate from our experience of it, because all objects and subjects manifest as something, and this manifestation constitutes their reality at any one time (Willig, 2001). Phenomena and the observer’s intentionality towards them are inseparable: “It makes no sense to think of the world of objects and subjects as separate from our experience of it” (Willig, 2001, p51). Thus “self and world are inseparable components of meaning” (Moustakas, 1994, p28).

We might reasonably ask ourselves therefore, how an observer/researcher can untangle his or her intentionality from the phenomenon observed to arrive at “the thing itself”. Husserl, for whom the ultimate aim of phenomenology was to arrive at an understanding of the essentials of a phenomenon, urged that the observer employ a discipline of *epoche*; “bracketing” (setting on one side) their preconceptions, prior understandings, beliefs, and assumptions about the phenomenon under observation. Coupled with rich description (phenomenological reduction) and an investigation of the structural factors which account for what is being experienced (imaginative variation) this process enables the observer to understand the essence of the phenomenon – “that which is common or universal, the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is” (Moustakas, 1994, p100). IPA however follows Heidegger rather than Husserl in suggesting that the interconnectedness between the phenomena and those experiencing them are so enmeshed that rather than aspiring to identify essentials, the observer/researcher can only hope to explore what Heidegger calls “factual” existence – “the particular, concrete, inescapably contingent, yet worldly, involved aspect of human existence in contrast to the ‘factual’ nature of inanimate existence” (Moran, in Eatough & Smith, 2008, p180). According to Eatough and Smith “IPA explicitly attends to a ‘hermeneutics of factual life’ through a method which asserts that events and objects which we are directed towards are to be understood by investigating how they are experienced and given meaning by the individual” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p180). Indeed phenomenological psychology, as opposed to philosophy, is generally “more concerned with the diversity and variability of human experience than with the identification of essences in Husserl’s sense” (Willig, 2001, p53).

In common with other phenomenological approaches, IPA holds that “there is nothing more fundamental than experience and the primary concern is uncovering/expressing/illuminating individual subjective experience” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p181). IPA research focuses on all aspects of lived experience in relation to a particular phenomenon “from the individual’s wishes, desires, feelings, motivations, belief systems through to how these manifest themselves or not in behaviour and action. Whatever phenomenon is being studied, the emphasis is on ‘what is it like to be experiencing this or that for this particular person’” (Eatough & Smith, 2008 p181). This question is certainly appropriate to this study, with its emphasis on exploring subjective experiences of the phenomenon of high potential coaching.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, began with an interest in the interpretation of biblical texts, but has developed a much broader application, particularly in the human sciences, where it is seen as providing a necessary alternative to established methods of researching the physical and non-human world. Modern hermeneutics argues that, unlike physical entities or animals, human beings are capable of reflection, of long-term planning, of imagination, and of interpretation of themselves and the world around them. Research into human existence or social processes must take these factors into account.

As to the question of what is to be interpreted, for Dilthey, the “father” of modern hermeneutics, ““lived experience” was the primary, first-order category that captures an individual’s immediate, concrete, “experience as such,””(Tappan, 1997, p647). He argued that lived experience consists of three elements which are indivisible – cognition, emotion, and volition, and moreover that it is in the context of an immediate lived experience that these three elements interact (Tappan, 1997). Eatough and Smith describe “lived experience” as the experience of “the embodied, socio-culturally and historically situated person who inhabits an intentionally interpreted and meaningfully lived world.” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p181).

Heidegger is seen as making a key contribution to hermeneutics as understood in IPA. In particular, Smith et al. note that for Heidegger, “phenomenology is concerned in part with examining something which may be latent, or disguised, as it emerges into the light. But is also interested in examining the manifest thing as it appears at the surface because this is integrally connected with the deeper latent form – which it is both a part of, and apart from” (Smith et al., 2013, p24). In other words, phenomena appear as “the things themselves” but may be varied by the *ways* in which they appear. Hermeneutics is the method by which this variation may be studied and understood, and this underlines the nature of the hermeneutic approach as distinct from that of mere description.

IPA proponents also look to Heidegger to address the question of the observer's prejudice in observation. Heidegger suggested that interpretations are based on the "fore-structures" of the interpreter, that is, their prior understandings, assumptions, biases, and preconceptions. However, he argued that attention to the new object, rather than to the observer's preconceptions, facilitates illumination of those preconceptions. As Willig notes, "few, if any, phenomenological researchers in psychology would claim that it is possible to suspend all presuppositions and biases in one's contemplation of a phenomenon. Rather, the attempt to *bracket* the phenomenon allows the researcher to engage in a critical examination of his or her customary ways of knowing (about) it" (Willig, 2001, p53). The suggestion here is that "bracketing", rather than a process in which the researcher attempts to put his or her preconceptions on one side (as in Husserlian phenomenology), is a process by which the researcher identifies and reflects upon those preconceptions and their possible implications for the hermeneutic process. As a result, as Smith et al. put it "while the existence of fore-structures may precede our encounters with new things, understanding may actually work the other way, from the thing to the fore-structure. For example, when encountering a text, I don't necessarily know which part of my fore-structure is relevant. Having engaged with the text, I may be in a better position to know what my preconceptions were" (Smith et al., 2009, p25).

Schleiermacher, who is viewed as another key influence on IPA, argued that while a writer may convey an explicit level of meaning in a text in terms of the things said, another level of meaning can be derived through the writer's selection of language, which reflects his or her intentions, interpretations, biases, and particular social and historical context, whether consciously or unconsciously applied. So the reader of a text may be able to understand something about its author which may not be understood by the author themselves. As Schleiermacher put it, with careful analysis, the interpreter may achieve "'an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself'" (Schleiermacher, in Smith et al., 2009). This is a highly significant claim for IPA. On it hangs the researcher's justification for a reading of accounts which goes beyond mere witnessing and description and for adherence to a hermeneutics of questioning (Smith et al., 2013). I will discuss the implications of this stance in detail in section 3.3.

A key concept in hermeneutics is that of the hermeneutic circle. This idea proposes that understanding is derived from an iterative interpretation of the whole of a text in terms of its parts and its parts in terms of its whole. Dilthey puts it as:

"The whole of a work must be understood from individual words and their combination, but full understanding of an individual part presupposes understanding of the whole... [Thus] the whole must be understood in terms of its individual parts, individual parts in terms of the whole... Such a comparative procedure allows one to understand every individual work, indeed, every individual sentence, more

profoundly than we did before. So understanding of the whole, and of the parts, are interdependent” (Dilthey, in Tappan, 1997 (his elisions)).

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that the concept of the hermeneutic circle offers a way into thinking about method for researchers using an IPA frame: “It is a key tenet of IPA that the process of analysis is iterative – we may move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data, rather than completing each step one after the other... The idea is that our entry into the meaning of a text can be made at a number of different levels, all of which relate to one another, and many of which will offer different perspectives on the part-whole coherence of a text” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p28). So IPA claims to operate a double hermeneutic, in which the researcher “is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of x” (Smith et al., 2009, p35).

A possible risk in the hermeneutic process lies in the question of the boundaries of the unit of social construction under investigation. As a researcher, am I concerned only with the constructs reported by participants that arise from their experience and with my own similar experienced-based constructs? Or is the research incomplete without examination of the new set of constructs created through our participation in the research? A radical social constructionist position risks embroiling the researcher in an “infinite interpretative regress, analysing their own analysis and then analysing their own analysis of their own analysis to demonstrate the layers of construction” (Wetherell, in Burr, 2003, p157). In practice, this is unlikely to happen in the context of a doctoral research thesis, if only for practical considerations of time and limitations of word count.

Idiography

IPA has an “idiographic sensibility” (Smith et al., 2013, p37) and focuses on the particular rather than on the general or nomothetic. This commitment to particularity takes two forms. Firstly, IPA seeks to give detailed, nuanced accounts and readings of each participant’s lived experience. Secondly, it focuses on the experiences of particular individuals, in particular settings. Participants in an IPA study are understood to represent a perspective, not a population as a whole (Smith et al, 2013), not even the small population of the sample group. According to Smith, “the best IPA studies are concerned with the balance of convergence and divergence within the sample, not only presenting both [sic] shared themes but also pointing to the particular way in which these themes play out for individuals” (Smith, 2011, p10). This commitment to idiography is practically enabled by the use of a ‘case-by-case then case comparison’ discipline in the treatment of data. Researchers are required to “[do] full justice to each individual in a study before attempting cross case analysis at within and between levels” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p183). This method, in relation to this study, is expressed in the diagram at Fig. 3.1.

As noted above, theory development is not the aim of IPA. Rather, both researcher and reader are expected to connect the findings of an IPA study to existing literature to shed light on existing research (Smith et al., 2013). Note that light is shed *on* existing research, not *by* existing research. Each idiographic account is considered to add to our corpus of knowledge, but not to be subject to being tested by it. Generalisability is limited to tentative within-study comparison of themes and relies on the reader making links between the evidence presented, their own experience, and their knowledge of existing literature.

Critique of IPA

In common with other qualitative methods, IPA must be understood as being situated in the centre of a post-modern “crisis of representation”, in which researchers struggle with debates about the “representableness” of experience, the role of language, and the “distorting” and “compromising” effects of the researcher’s own being. Radical critics of representation, see it as “politically, socially, linguistically, and epistemologically arbitrary. It signifies mastery... It signals distortion; it assumes unconscious rules governing relationships... [It] is fraudulent, perverse, artificial, mechanical deceptive, incomplete, misleading, insufficient, wholly inadequate for the post-modern age”. (Rosenau, in Schwandt, 2007, p264). Moreover, they would argue that there is “no direct, unmediated link between inscriptions of a particular text and the ‘real’ world of experience. There are no real-world referents (no such thing as ‘experience’ as an object) to which the language of descriptive and explanatory accounts of human actions can be mapped and against which it can be judged” (Schwandt, 2007, p48). IPA, in its conscious self-positioning within the hermeneutic tradition, aligns itself with what Schwandt (2007) calls a more “optimistic” strand of theory, which, while acknowledging the importance of examining the rhetoric of representation, does not concede that its dilemmas absolve the researcher’s responsibility to describe and explain. IPA’s focus on meaning-making (as opposed to attempting a direct representation of experience), and adherence to a hermeneutic discipline is a way of mitigating the deficiencies of attempts at representation. If the researcher is acknowledged as an interpreter of the participant’s process of meaning-making, issues of representation are side-stepped, where reflexivity is also part of the researcher’s approach. Smith et al. (2013) make a further call on hermeneutics to explain IPA’s stance on representation. They note Ricoeur’s distinction between a hermeneutics of empathy, in which an attempt is made to reconstruct the original experience in its own terms, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, in which theoretical perspectives from outside the research project are used to illuminate the phenomenon under study. Smith et al. claim a middle ground for IPA between these two positions, characterising IPA as employing a combination of a hermeneutics of empathy and a hermeneutics of questioning (Smith et al., 2013). “Thus the IPA researcher is, in part, wanting to adopt an ‘insider’s perspective’..., see what it is like from the participant’s view, and stand in their shoes. On the other hand, the IPA researcher is also wanting to stand alongside the participant, to take a look at them from a different angle, ask

questions and puzzle over things they are saying. Here the analysis may move away from representing what the participant would say themselves, and become more reliant on the interpretative work of the researcher" (Smith et al., 2009, p36). Again we can see here that the avowedly interpretative nature of the IPA researcher's stance obviates claims of "pure" representation.

Willig (2001) notes three "limitations" in IPA which are rooted in the crisis of representation. Firstly she notes that in relying on semi-structured interviews, diaries, and other forms of descriptive accounts, IPA assumes that language provides the tool with which experience can be captured: "In other words, IPA relies upon the representational validity of language" (Willig, 2001, p63). However, it can be argued, as in the case of various types of discourse analysis, that "language can never simply give expression to experience. Instead, it adds meanings which reside in the words themselves and, therefore, makes direct access to someone else's experience impossible" (Willig, 2001, p63). An account may therefore tell us more about "the ways in which an individual *talks about* a particular experience within a particular context, than about the *experience itself*". This is a variation of the crisis of representation, and, as we have seen, IPA's interest in meaning-making and rejection of essentialism means that the ways in which people *talk about* their experiences is fundamentally of interest. It is grist to the mill of a hermeneutics of questioning. In reflexive engagement with an account *and* with how it is told, the IPA researcher is exploring the process of meaning-making in action. Proponents of IPA acknowledge that people telling stories of their lives are not merely attempting to recount events with accuracy – they "may want to achieve a whole host of other things with their talk such as save face, persuade and rationalize, but there is almost always more at stake and which transcends the specific local interpretation" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p185). Moreover, comparison with other accounts of the "same" phenomenon illuminate the rich diversity of meanings-made.

Willig further suggests that "the availability of a particular way of talking about an issue also provides the categories of experience, and that, as a result, language *precedes* and therefore *shapes* experience" (Willig, 2001, p63). For IPA authorities however, though language is acknowledged as important to our understanding of our lives, they are nevertheless more than the language we use: "[IPA] sits at what might be called the light end of the social constructionist continuum maintaining that seeing the individual's lifeworld merely as a linguistic and discursive construction does not speak to the empirical realities of people's lived experience and their sense of self" (Eatough & Smith, 2008 p184). This issue unfolds an important point about IPA's stance on social constructionism. As noted above, this epistemology has varying levels of adherence to the deterministic nature of culture and language, and for IPA, social constructionism is of a weaker form than might be assumed in, for example, discourse analysis. Smith et al. say that "IPA subscribes to social constructionism but to a less strong form of social constructionism than discursive psychology and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. And Mead...is a powerful theoretical touchstone. Mead argues that while humans come into

and are originally shaped by pre-existing cultural forces [e.g. available language], they have the possibility to rework the constitutive material, through symbolic or cognitive activity as part of developing as individuals" (Smith et al., 2009, p196). From this perspective, human beings are "creative agents who through their intersubjective interpretative activity construct their social worlds" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p184). Eatough and Smith quote Rosenwald's poignant explanation of this position: "If a life is no more than a story and a story is governed only by the situation in which it is told, then one cannot declare a situation unliveable or a life damaged". In fact, IPA researchers conceive of people as "appropriating, refiguring and discarding the linguistic conventions and discursive practices of [their] culture" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p184). Their lives therefore are "imaginative enterprises" (Reissman, in Eatough & Smith, 2008, p185), in which language does not constrain its constitution, but on the contrary facilitates a dynamic interplay of meanings made, connected, disconnected, imagined, recalled, anticipated, accepted, and rejected.

Secondly, Willig critiques IPA on the grounds of the suitability of accounts. In essence, this is a question of "how successfully are participants able to communicate the rich texture of their experiences to the researcher? And how many people are able to use language in such a way as to capture the subtleties and nuances of their physical and emotional experiences?" (Willig, 2001, p64). IPA guidance offers little in response to this challenge, beyond an emphasis on identifying research participants who "can grant us access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study...[and] for whom the research question will be meaningful" (Smith et al., 2009, p49). Smith et al. note too that IPA requires "'rich' data... [meaning that] participants should have been granted an opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length" (Smith et al., 2009, p56).

Thirdly, Willig calls into question the value of a research method which focuses on experience as articulated by research participants but which "does not tend to further our understanding of *why* such experiences take place and *why* there may be differences between individuals' phenomenological representations. That is, phenomenological research describes and documents the lived experience of participants but does not attempt to explain it" (Willig, 2001, p64). She suggests that the conditions which give rise to the perceptions of research participants' experiences may lie well outside the arena of the research project, in the participants' history, or in their particular social or cultural setting. IPA's adherence to the primacy of the idiographic account, and explicit rejection of a hermeneutics of suspicion, which involves the use of theoretical (and therefore explicatory) perspectives from outside the research project (Smith et al., 2009) give some weight to this critique. However, IPA is avowedly and deliberately not focused on explication but on illumination. As regards literature, the suggestion is that "through [post facto] connecting the findings [of IPA research] to the extant psychological literature, the IPA writer is helping the reader to see how the [individual] case can shed light on the existing nomothetic research" (Smith et al., 2009, p38).

Willig also challenges IPA's claim to being a phenomenological method on the grounds that it is avowedly concerned with cognition. Some aspects of phenomenology, she argues, are not compatible with the notion that understanding cognitions allows us to have insight into experiences and actions. This is because phenomenologists "challenge the subject/object distinction implied by cognitive theory. They aim to transcend the separation between 'the knower' and 'the known', between 'person' and 'world'. Phenomenology is concerned with knowledge that is non-propositional; in other words, its objective is to capture the way in which the world presents itself to the individual in an immediate (unmediated) sense, including 'vague feelings, pleasures, tastes, hunches, moods and ideas on the margin of consciousness'... These pre-cognitive aspects of experience are seen as central precisely because they are inarticulate and unfocused. As such, they provide an existential backcloth for our cognitive efforts to make sense of the world. Therefore it could be argued that genuinely phenomenological research should not study people's cognitions; instead, it should aim to understand lived experience" (Willig, 2001, p65). IPA authorities reject the suggestion that phenomenology is only concerned with pre-cognitive (or in their terms, 'pre-reflective') experience: "from the perspective of IPA, cognitions are not separate functions but an aspect of Being-in-the-world" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p183). IPA practitioners consider "the natural attitude of everyday experience, which is the site for phenomenological inquiry, to have a wide spectrum or bandwidth and that it contains within it both pre-reflective and reflective activity" (Smith et al., 2013, p188). This reflective activity includes, for example, remembering, fantasising, reflecting, making judgements, coming to conclusions and having volition – all of which are cognitive processes (Smith et al., 2013).

IPA in this research project

The purpose and design of this research project sits firmly within the philosophical parameters of IPA. My interest is in the meaning made by participants in high potential coaching – the phenomenology of the experience – and the diversity and variability of their experience. In the introduction to this thesis I described some of my fore-structures in relation to this study, in my observations from the perspective of myself as a manager of talent development programmes, and as a coach. Similarly, conducting a review of existing literature before embarking on data collection can be understood as a process of developing fore-structures. It is also part of the hermeneutic process, in that doing so had already begun to change my understanding of issues through the process of identifying and framing key debates and themes. By this we can see, for example, that in noting the theme of elusiveness of definitions of talent and talent development in existing literature, my puzzlement as a practitioner is already informed by the knowledge that this is a known problem in the field. We can also see the double hermeneutic process in action – I am making sense of the literature making sense of the topic under study. The iterativeness of the hermeneutic process and its idiographic focus is facilitated by the data analysis process described below and by the treatment of the results. We will see how, in

generating themes at various levels, the whole makes sense of the part and the part of the whole. In presenting my findings, I will exercise a hermeneutics of empathy, in attempting a faithful representation of participants' meanings-made, but also a hermeneutics of questioning in evaluating and comparing their accounts. In the closing chapters of this thesis I will return to these issues and examine how this research has acted on my own fore-structures and assumptions about high potential coaches, coachees and coaching, and will begin to close the hermeneutic circle by considering how this research informs themes and debates in existing literature.

3.3. Personal reflections on research design and methodological challenges

Over and above theoretical challenges to IPA, some issues have emerged for me from its practical applications, and I will briefly discuss these here.

IPA calls for participants to articulate their experiences in such a way as to convey their unique experience and the meaning made of it. As noted above, the methodology had its genesis in health psychology research and is still most commonly used in such settings. We might imagine that accounts of experiences in contexts such as recovery from substance misuse, parenting a child with cancer, or diet failure (all recent IPA studies) would result in highly personal accounts, probably with a high level of emotional content. From my own experience, I would suggest that, in a business setting, it is more challenging to facilitate participants to move out of a predominately cognitively-oriented stance in which they *give opinions* about their experiences and to facilitate them to describe the more personal and emotional aspects of that experience.

IPA requires rich data, and the business of managing and analysing volumes of it is not to be underestimated. In response to the criticism of IPA as requiring participants to communicate "the rich texture of their experiences" (Willig, 2001, p64), I would say that participants in this study seem to have no difficulty in so doing. They provided more than twelve hours of in-depth insight and the lenses through which their accounts might be understood were legion. Appendix 10 shows the treatment of one stage of analysis of half of the emergent themes identified. Other stages involved numerous spreadsheets and mind maps (see appendix 11 for an example of the latter). Handling data volumes would undoubtedly be easier with fewer participants than in this case, but the argument for larger samples is, in my opinion, that they give scope to explore the diversity within a homogenous sample, and the divergence and convergence around themes which was so much a feature of this study. Very small samples – of one or two participants – would, I suggest, change the nature of the analysis process, for example opening up more opportunities for exploration of the use of language than was practicable in this case.

More fundamentally, it could be argued that there is an essential tension between the small sample numbers required to maintain IPA's idiographic sensibility and the potential for convergence of views with larger numbers. Idiographic approaches mean that large samples are both unnecessary and impractical from the point of view of the detail of analysis required. IPA research is theoretically committed "to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context" (Smith et al., 2013, p29). But it could be argued, taking a nomothetic stance, that convergence around themes might be anticipated from larger numbers, and that the divergence uncovered here would be "ironed out" in the process. Such arguments suggest a latent assumption that "truth" is discoverable, through agreement indicated by frequency, and that idiography is inessential. But this is not the case from an IPA perspective. IPA themes emerge from divergence of views as well as from convergence, and are not an aggregation of participants' views, but the work of the researcher. The IPA researcher's contribution is to generate themes which are faithful to the idiography of participants, but sufficiently abstract as to lift findings above a mere description of individuals' experiential phenomena so that they, not participants' accounts, constitute a cautious intra-sample generalisability (Smith et al., 2013).

Data volumes are not the only issue however: Staying close to the data – and thereby to the idiographic sensibility of IPA – while identifying and aggregating higher-level themes, involves some difficult, not to say agonising, choices. From the super-ordinate theme stage onwards, the researcher is imposing a framework on the data rather than uncovering what lies within it, and finding a strategy is a challenge. A breakthrough realisation was that a theme could be revealed at a higher level through divergence in perspectives as much as by convergence. In the end, and consistently with IPA's hermeneutic principles, themes emerged through my own engagement with the material – from the ways in which it resonated with me and surprised me and generated connecting patterns in my own sense-making across cases and samples. To talk of a theme emerging from accounts is not therefore to suggest simply that it has been mentioned many times, but that in some cases that it has been generated through my response to accounts. For example, coaches in this study did not tell me that they conflate their sense of self-as-person with their sense of self-as-coach. Rather, this important theme is derived from my interpretation – from a hermeneutic questioning in the Schleiermacherian tradition about the psychological framing which lay behind what they *did* say. My experience of the hermeneutic process of interpretation has brought home to me that it is the IPA researcher's responsibility to mine the gold in the account. Interpretation is not transliteration – it is a shaping process which contributes to findings and does not merely convey them.

IPA authorities do suggest that density of data has some role to play in providing evidence of a theme (see page 57). In practice, these guidelines appear to be designed as a check and balance between authorial position of the researcher and the accounts themselves. While the researcher brings

interpretation to accounts, without which they would be *just* accounts, the requirement to evidence a theme based on a number of sources means the accounts themselves provide a grounding check on interpretation, and obviate the risk of the researcher departing into flights of fancy. My experience in practice is that while this guideline is useful at the point of identifying emergent themes, many, if not most, higher level themes are found beyond the numbers. In these cases, the source of the theme is the researcher's abstractive interpretation, and the analysis relates to how participants' accounts constellate around it, not to how many replicate it.

As a result of my experience with this study, I would echo calls for IPA researchers not to be overly cautious about interpretation (Smith et al., 2013). Through the hermeneutic process, I have been the thirteenth participant in this research. The reader is the fourteenth, and is invited to bring their own interpretative faculties to bear on the choices made in this process.

3.4. Method

In this section I will describe the specific method used for sampling, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis, before giving some brief reflections on the data analysis process.

Sampling

A purposive sample of six coaches and six coachees was selected for relevance and homogeneity. IPA's purpose is to study detailed accounts of individual experience with a number of iterations of detailed analysis. Therefore small numbers are appropriate and there are no requirements to adopt sampling strategies which would be relevant to studies in which statistical analysis is used. Guidance from IPA authorities is that between four and ten interviews are appropriate for a professional doctorate (Smith et al., 2013), so at first glance, the sample size for this study may seem a little high. However, I chose to apply this sample guidance to each of my two discrete groups of participants – coachees and coaches – as I felt that this would enable me to generate rich data for intra-group comparison for both groups, as well as opportunities for inter-group comparison.

IPA calls for homogeneity in sample groups, on grounds that where differences are minimised, those differences which seem to express the individuality of the participant are allowed to come forward. To this end, my coachee participants were all:

- Employed in large, private sector organisations
- Designated as high potential, or on a succession plan or (in one case) had been assessed as to their potential and not considered to be high potential
- At middle to senior levels of management

- Nominated on the basis of having had at least three coaching sessions

Coach participants were all:

- Experienced coaches, with several years of practice
- Self-identified as having worked with clients considered to be high potential

Coaching assignments were either undertaken as a part of a formal talent development programme or one-off assignments.

Two coachees and three coaches were women. All participants were between 35 and 65 years old.

An important feature of sample selection in IPA is that participants should be capable of and willing to reflect on their experiences and to articulate their reflections. To ensure that this was the case, I telephoned each participant beforehand to discuss the research and the interview process and to assess their level of articulateness and engagement with the topic. As might be imagined, people considered to be highly capable by large organisations were typically very articulate and all seemed suitably engaged. Levels of reflexivity were variable however, and this variation will be reflected in the analysis.

Participant recruitment

Coachee participants were identified via my own networks of HR practitioners in three different organisations. Rather than asking them to make nominations, which might have felt coercive to participants, I asked these organisational gatekeepers to forward a pre-prepared email and participant information sheet to all eligible participants in their high potential development programme, or to those who had received coaching as a result of their status as a high potential. This email asked participants to contact me directly, rather than through the organisational “gatekeeper” (see appendix 3 for a sample of such an email and appendix 4 for the relevant participant information sheet). In doing this, I attempted to minimise the risk that gatekeepers would know who participated and that participants would therefore not feel coerced to take part.

Three participants were from one organisation, two from another, and one from a third. Organisations were very different in their nature and can be briefly characterised as follows (organisational names are pseudonyms):

Name	Core business	Key characteristics
Daruma	Automobile manufacturer	Multinational, headquartered in Asia but with a substantial presence in the UK and Europe. c7,000 employees in the UK, primarily in manufacturing, but also engaged in technical development, sales, and marketing.
Abode	Home and general merchandising	More than 1,000 stores in the UK and Ireland and a substantial online sales presence. FTSE 250. 47,000 employees.
Protect	Life insurance, pensions, and financial services	Multinational, headquartered in the UK. FTSE 100. c22,000 employees in the UK.

Table 3-1 Participating organisations

Coach participants were again identified via my own networks and in this case, approached directly. I had worked with two of the coaches previously, and two were currently my supervisors, but none was dependent on me professionally, or likely to be so. Both the invitations to participate and the participant information sheet made it clear that there would be no effect on our relationship either as a result of taking part or of declining to take part. Neither of the coaches with whom I was in a supervisory relationship felt that there was a professional conflict of interest involved (see appendix 4 for the relevant participant information sheet).

To assist the reader in retaining an idiographic sense of the participants in this study, very brief biographies of all participants are given below. All names are pseudonyms.

Coachee participants:

Name	Organisation	Brief biography
Alice Abbott	Abode	Head of Marketing. Has spent most of her career in Abode. Has a trading background. Mid-forties.
Mike Kent	Protect	Head of IT. Nine years in Protect. Has spent most of his career in IT procurement and supply management. Early forties.
Robert Pulteney	Abode	Quality assurance specialist with a retail background. Currently Head of QA at Abode. Mid-fifties.
Andrew Ryan	Daruma	An engineer by background. Most of his career in Daruma. Various roles in quality assurance and R&D. Early forties
Zena Sackville	Protect	Risk Director at Protect. Background in risk and engineering. Mid-forties.

Simon West	Protect	IT Programme manager, Protect. Background in project management. Late forties.
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Table 3-2 Coachee participant biographies*Coach participants*

Name	Brief biography
David Smith	An independent coach and psychotherapist for seven years. Has an existentialist orientation. Prior to that held L&D and OD roles in one company for most of his career. Late fifties.
Gillian Green	An independent coach and director of a coaching consultancy for more than twenty years. Previously in a corporate role in management development in retail. MBA from University of Edinburgh. Late fifties.
Jenny Williams	An independent coach and coaching supervisor since 2007. Previously held OD roles in the NHS, management consulting and retail. Has an MSc in Group Relations from the Tavistock Institute. Late forties.
Martin Templeton	A self-employed coach since 2008. Prior to that, spent 30 years with one employer, in both HR and operational roles. Early sixties.
Stephen Caulfield	An independent coach and coaching supervisor for 15 years. Qualified as a psychotherapist with a gestalt orientation. Late forties. MSc in organisational change, MSc in Gestalt Psychotherapy.
Sarah Robins	15 years as an executive coach and director of a coaching consultancy. Previously held corporate roles in management development. Late forties.

Table 3-3 Coach participant biographies

Participants contacted me directly, by email or in person, and expressed a willingness to participate. They received further briefings and had opportunities to ask questions about the process before interviews took place, and all participants were aware that they were free to disengage from the process, without prejudice at any point. Candidates who met the criteria for inclusion were selected on practical grounds of availability, and in the case of coachees, two otherwise suitable candidates who came forward were rejected for this reason.

Interviews took place at various locations. With organisational participants, interviews were in private meeting rooms at a company office building. Coach interviews were in serviced meeting rooms, booked and paid for by the researcher. Most interviews were between 60 and 90 minutes in length, with the shortest at 55 minutes.

Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, before being analysed in several iterations, in line with IPA guidance.

Rich data is the desideratum of qualitative research. In an IPA context, this means that participants are expected to be granted an opportunity to tell their stories at some length. To this end, a semi-structured interview process was used for data collection, as is usually the case in IPA (Smith et al., 2013). Reid et al. (2005) detail the suitability of interviews to IPA aims, in that “they are easily managed; allow rapport to be developed; allow participants to think, speak and be heard; and are well suited to in-depth and personal discussion” (Reid et al., 2005, p22). Participants were asked open questions to prompt them to discuss their experience. Although pre-prepared follow up questions were available, they were not always used, and other non-planned questions which seemed helpful to develop participants’ accounts were also employed. Similarly, the sequence of questions was not always the same. See appendix 5 for a schedule of pre-prepared questions for each group of participants.

Recording and transcription

Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and uploaded to a private shared file on the internet which was accessible only by me and the transcriber. The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement (see appendix 6 for a copy) to ensure the non-disclosure of any identifying information to a third party.

Transcripts were reviewed while I listened to the recorded interview and transcription errors and lacunae were corrected.

Data analysis

As can be inferred from descriptions of IPA’s interests, its method of data analysis employs an inductive approach. Single-case observations lead to delineations of idiographically-rooted patterns of meanings-made, in the form of emergent and then super-ordinate themes. In cases where, as in this instance, there is more than one research participant, analysis of each individual case is exhausted before an attempt is made to identify cross-case themes. This is a tentative process which “begins with the detailed examination of each case, but then cautiously moves to an examination of similarities and differences across the cases, so producing fine-grained accounts of patterns of meaning for participants reflecting upon a shared experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p38).

Specifically, data was analysed in six stages, following Smith et al. (2009) (with an additional stage of identification of patterns across samples). These stages were:

1. Reading and re-reading of transcripts, with a return to audio files where they might provide clarity or helpful information about tone and delivery

2. Initial noting to examine semantics, content, and language (see appendix 8 for an example)
3. Development of emergent themes (see appendix 8 for an example)
4. Identification of “super-ordinate” themes – patterns between emergent themes. These super-ordinate themes were recorded and collated on spreadsheets
5. Identification of sample-level themes across cases (see appendix 9 for a full schedule of themes)
6. Identification of cross-sample themes at the discussion stage

Stages 1-4 were conducted case-by-case before moving to stage 5. At each stage, analysis was rooted in, and trackable back to, original text in the transcript, which is a key method to both check accuracy and to retain the idiographic character of the analysis (see appendix 8 for an illustrative extract from an analysed transcript). All the cases from one sample were analysed to the “cross-case patterns” stage before the next sample was analysed and the identification of themes across samples was the final stage.

This process can be expressed diagrammatically as follows:

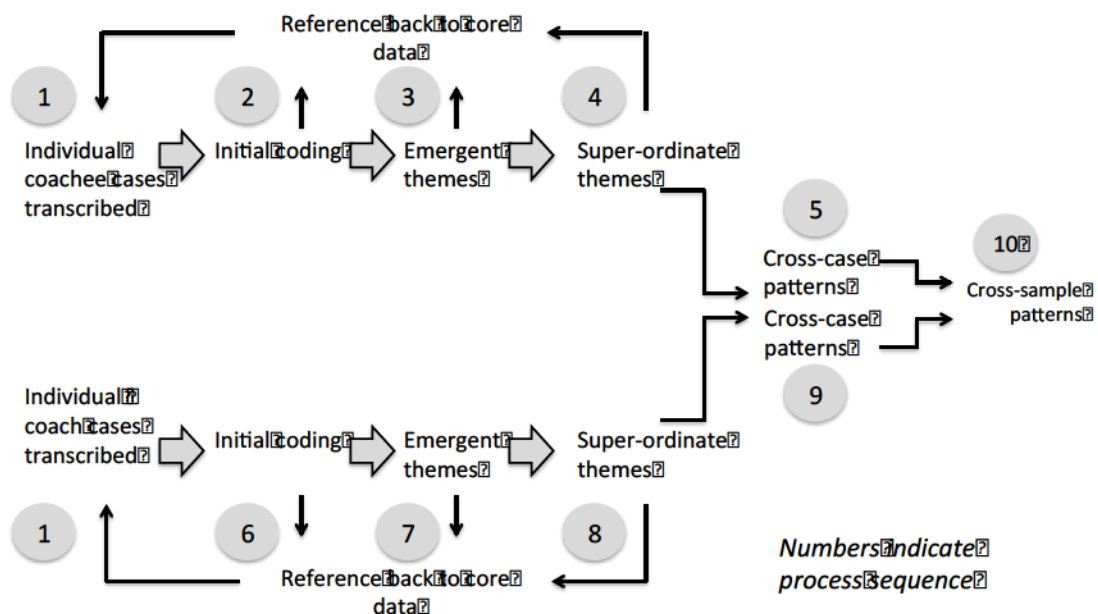


Figure 3:1 Diagram of data analysis process

The role of the researcher in IPA

The hermeneutic nature of IPA is probably its most contentious feature, particularly the avowedly interpretative role of the researcher. Ultimately, I consider myself to be the *author* of my research, as opposed to a position of witnessing, recording, and describing the accounts of participants. As we have seen above, the philosophical roots of IPA, and the methodology in practice as promulgated by its authorities, both permit and encourage this authorial stance. Indeed, it is suggested that “novice [IPA] researchers tend to be too cautious, producing analyses that are too descriptive” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p103). My position is one in which I acknowledge my involvedness with the research process, and recognise that this involves “making the data meaningful and, therefore, *adding meaning* to the data” (Willig, 2012, p6 [my emphasis]). However, my interest in the idiography of my research participants’ experience, means that I also work from a commitment to witness and to faithfully report their contribution.

An IPA-based study allows for an iterative, but broadly chronological process in which the researcher moves through stages of bracketed witnessing, to a hermeneutically-involved, interpretative state of authorship. This seems to be consistent with the hermeneutic principle of IPA which calls for an interpretative stance which is explicitly authorial – Smith et al. suggest that “the analyst is implicated in facilitating and making sense” of the appearance of phenomena (Smith et al., 2009, p28). The word “implicated” carries some weight; as Willig points out, it implies that analysis is dependent on the researcher’s own conceptions and standpoint, and demands a reflexive attitude (Willig, 2001).

Reflexive capabilities are not even mentioned in Smith et al.’s list of the qualities required by IPA researchers (Smith et al., 2013), but reflexivity must be part of the hermeneutic process if I am to understand the influence of my own process in data analysis. Schon proposes that from a post-modernist world view, subjective knowledge, scrutinised through reflexivity, makes a legitimate contribution to interpretations and decisions in practice (Schon, in Etherington, 2004). I have reflected on the issues involved in developing and presenting such knowledge in Chapter 7.

Quality measures

Measures of quality in qualitative research need to be congruent with paradigms within which it is conducted. So, for example, the researcher in qualitative research is not conceived of as an objective observer, who is capable of describing and reporting phenomena without “contamination”. On the contrary, as we have seen, the researcher is seen as intimately involved with data and, in some methodologies, as a contributor to it.

As general guidance for measuring quality in qualitative research, Patton (1994) describes high quality qualitative data as “credible, trustworthy, authentic, balanced about the phenomenon under study, and fair to the people studied” (Patton, 1994, p51). Salmon adds rigour of method, the undertaking of analysis (i.e. not just recording and reporting) and substantiveness to this list (Salmon, 2003).

Specifically in relation to IPA, IPA authorities claim that the methodology advocates many of the principles of ‘good practice’ which are markers of quality in qualitative research, such as those promulgated by Elliott et al. (1999). In a similar vein to Patton and Salmon, Elliott et al.’s guidelines include owning one’s perspective, situating the sample, grounding in examples, providing credibility checks, coherence, accomplishing general versus specific research tasks, and resonating with readers (Elliott et al., 1999).

IPA authorities also turn to Yardley’s broad principles for assessing the quality of research (Smith et al., 2013). Below, I have tabulated Elliott et al.’s criteria, given IPA’s particular “take” on them, as described by various IPA authorities, and outlined how my own research project has addressed them.

Quality criteria	IPA	This research project
Context		
<p>Sensitivity to context, for example by attention to the socio-cultural milieu in which the study takes place, to existing literature or to material obtained by participants (Yardley in Smith et al., 2009).</p> <p>Situating the sample: demographic and descriptive data about the participants is provided. Grounding the data by providing examples (Elliott et al., 1999)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some cases the very rationale for using IPA is the result of sensitivity to context and a desire to engage closely with the idiographic and particular. (Smith et al., 2013) • Sensitivity to context is also demonstrated through skilful handling of the interview process, in which the researcher needs to show empathy, put the participant at ease, recognise interactional challenges and negotiate the power issues at play when the research expert meets the experiential expert. (Smith et al, 2013) • Sensitivity to context continues through the analysis process, in which the researcher applies “immersive and disciplined attention to the unfolding account of the participant and what can be gleaned from it” (Smith et al, 2009 p180) • A good IPA study will include verbatim extracts from participants’ material to support the analysis made, thereby ensuring that participants’ voices are heard and that the reader is 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The aim of this research project was explicitly to study individual and unique experience. This was ensured through the sampling and participant recruitment strategies (see section 3.5) • The semi-structured interview process allowed for flexibility and the process of participant engagement and treatment was such as to put participants at ease and to abstract rich, high quality data (see appendix 8). • Adherence to the disciplines of data analysis required in an IPA study ensured that accounts were carefully scrutinised from a number of angles for the meanings they could afford (see chapters 4 and 5). • A considerable number of verbatim extracts are given to support findings (see chapters 4 and 5). • Demographic details of participants are given in this chapter. More descriptive data about each participant

	<p>able to understand the interpretations being made. (Smith et al, 2013)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contextualisation is clearly understood to be a requirement of IPA: "The analyst should provide a rich, transparent and contextualized analysis of the accounts of the participants." (Smith et al, 2009 p51). Sometimes, extra data, such as participant observation and the sampling of media representations can be a way of using cultural resources in the process of making sense of the data. Case notes may also, with permission, be used. At the very least, the researcher's notes on the interview and the quality of the interaction with the participant will be useful. (Smith et al., 2013) 	<p>is given in chapters 4 and 5). Themes were conceptualised in whole accounts, as demonstrated by the inclusion of verbatim quotes (see Chapters 4 and 5)</p>
<i>Rigour and thoroughness</i>		
<p>Commitment and rigour (Yardley in Smith et al., 2009).</p> <p>Providing credibility checks by checking understandings with the original informants or others similar to them; using multiple qualitative analysts; applying and comparing two or more qualitative perspectives or triangulation with external factors or quantitative data. (Elliott et al., 1999)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment will be shown in the researcher's attentiveness to the participant during data collection and by the care with which analysis is conducted. (Smith et al., 2013) Rigour is demonstrated in the thoroughness of the study, for example in terms of the suitability of the sample, the quality of interviews and the completeness of data analysis. (Smith et al., 2013) Researchers can facilitate an independent audit of their research by retaining data so that it preserves the chain of evidence from original documentation through to a final report and could hypothetically be checked through a 'paper trail' and/or asking another researcher to conduct an independent audit, or asking research supervisors to conduct mini audits of initial codes, categories and themes against sample transcripts provided by the researcher (Smith et al., 2013) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As above, the treatment of candidates was respectful, thoughtful and empathic. An analysis was conducted thoroughly and systematically and with attention to the interpretative quality of IPA (see chapters 4, 5 and 6) The lead investigator (Doctoral supervisor) of this project was asked to conduct a mini audit of the write up of the first case to check the analytical process I applied.
<i>Coherence and transparency</i>		
Transparency and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transparency is demonstrated by 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A detailed account is given in

<p>coherence (Yardley in Smith et al., 2009).</p> <p>“Understanding is represented in a way that achieves coherence and integration while preserving nuances in the data. The understanding fits together to form a data-based story narrative, ‘map’, framework, or underlying structure for the phenomenon or domain” (Elliott et al., 1999 p222-223)</p>	<p>the researcher’s careful description of the participant recruitment and data analysis processes. (Smith et al., 2013)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coherence is a function of coherence of argument, logical themes, clear treatment of ambiguities and contradictions and the degree of fit between the research undertaken and the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of the methodology applied. Additionally, the reader should be aware that they are “positioned as attempting to make sense of the researcher trying to make sense of the participant’s experience” (Smith et al., 2009, pp182-183) 	<p>this chapter of both the participant recruitment and the data analysis processes employed in this project.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numerous drafts of this thesis have been written and reviewed by myself and by the other principle investigators (Doctoral programme supervisors). This has been undertaken with a view to ensuring the coherence and logic of the arguments made and their congruence with both IPA methodology and its underlying philosophical assumptions and that evidence of the underpinnings of IPA appears in the final draft. • The readers’ role as an interpreter of the material presented is explained in section 3.3.
<p>Contribution and generalisability</p>		
<p>Accomplishing general versus specific research tasks “Where a <i>general</i> understanding of a phenomenon is intended, it is based on an appropriate range of instances (informants or situations). Limitations of extending the findings to other contexts and informants are specified. Where understanding a specific instance or case is the goal, it has been studied and described systematically and comprehensively enough to provide the reader a basis for attaining that understanding. Such case studies also address limitations of extending the findings to other instances” (Elliott et al., 1999, p223)</p> <p>Impact and importance: Tested by whether the research tells the reader something interesting, important or useful.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small samples are selected, to enable detailed accounts of individual experiences. IPA can be effectively conducted on single cases (Smith et al., 2013). • IPA is positioned in the second of these two possible stances. Understanding is limited to the sample under study, with any tentative claims for generalisability being secondary. The task of generalisation is left to the reader. “It is...possible to think in terms of theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalizability. In this case, the reader makes links between the analysis in an IPA study, their own personal and professional experience, and the claims in the extant literature. The analyst should provide a rich, transparent and contextualised analysis of the accounts of the participants. This should enable readers to evaluate its transferability to persons in contexts which are more, or less, similar. Further points which situate the sample in relation to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The sample size in this study is somewhat large for an IPA, but by no means the largest: sample sizes in IPA projects have varied from one to thirty, with up to forty-eight transcripts being analysed (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) See Chapter 7 for a discussion of the issues involved in handling larger sample sizes. • Population generalisability is not claimed. Rather, this research seeks for theoretical generalisability, in which the reader can relate the evidence presented to their own experience and to existing literature (see Chapter 6). One of this project’s aims is to enhance professional practice by providing greater insight into the experiences of participants in high potential coaching programmes. Implications for practice and contributions to theory are discussed in Chapter 7.

<p>(Yardley in Smith et al, 2009)</p> <p>Resonating with readers: “material is presented in such a way that readers/reviewers, taking all other guidelines into account, judge it to have represented accurately the subject matter or to have clarified or expanded their appreciation and understanding of it” (Elliott et al., 1999, p224)</p>	<p>the extant literature will help the reader to make that assessment. The effectiveness of an IPA study is judged by the light it sheds within this broader context.” (Smith et al., 2009, p51)</p>	
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Table 3-4 Quality criteria

In relation to IPA in particular, rather than qualitative research in general, Smith suggests four criteria to be met by an acceptable IPA study:

- A clear adherence to the phenomenological, heuristic and idiographic principles of IPA
- Transparency of method
- A coherent, plausible and interesting analysis
- Sufficient sampling from the data to show the density of evidence for each theme:
 - Up to three participants – extracts from every participant for each theme
 - Between four and eight participants – extracts from at least three participants for each theme
 - More than eight participants – extracts from at least three participants for each theme plus a measure of prevalence of themes, or extracts from half the sample for each theme

Meeting three further criteria transforms a study from ‘acceptable’ to ‘good’.

- A well-focused, in-depth study
- Strong data and interpretation
- A paper which is engaging and enlightening.

(Smith, 2011)

Ethics

Patton points out that “qualitative methods are highly personal and interpersonal, because naturalistic inquiry takes the researcher into the real world where people live and work, and because in-depth interviewing opens up what is inside people, qualitative inquiry may be more intrusive and involve greater reactivity than surveys, tests, and other quantitative approaches.” (Patton, 2015 p496).

These ethical issues were certainly experienced in this study. Although there were no special physical risks in the data collection process - on the face of it, interviews were a pleasant chat between two well-behaved individuals - there were undoubtedly risks involved. As Patton notes, interviews are interventions. "They affect people" (Patton, 2015 p63). There is a possibility that participants will be transformed by the experience. It is also true that discussing highly personal questions of career ambition, career failure and how one is seen by important stakeholders has the potential to invoke shame and anxiety in participants. This issue is further complicated by the fact that it is in the nature of exploratory research which relies on semi-structured interviews that it is impossible to know beforehand what will come up in discussion. (Patton, 2015; McLeod, 2013)

Interview-based data collection therefore opens qualitative research to a distinctive set of ethical challenges. But these extend beyond the immediate encounter between participant and researcher to issues of informed consent and challenges around confidentiality and the potential for post-facto harm to researcher and participant in terms of the psychological legacy of the study. Taking an ethical position in which risks are balanced with potential benefits (to participants as well as to the researcher's own ends) is therefore a critical part of the design of a study such as this. Patton offers a checklist and guiding principles for qualitative researchers which is a starting point for thinking through ethical issues in design, data collection and analysis and reporting (Patton, 2015). These are tabulated in table 3.5, with an indication of how the design of this project addresses the issues raised:

Patton's Checklist	Patton's Guiding Principles	Research Design
Explaining purpose – how will you explain the purpose of the inquiry and the methods to be used in ways which are accurate and understandable?	Be clear, honest, and transparent about the purpose	Participant information sheets (Appendix 4) covered the nature and purpose of the study and explained the interview method clearly and in an appropriate level of detail. The information sheet also explained that participants would be asked to think broadly and deeply about the issues being studied, to prepare them for a wide-ranging and potentially deep-diving discussion.
Reciprocity – what's in it for the interviewee?	Honour the gift of the interviewee's time in a meaningful and tangible way	Participant information sheets honestly acknowledged that there were no certain benefits to participating in this study. They also pointed out however that there was a possibility that talking about their experiences might be a helpful reflective experience.

		Participants were also reminded that they would be contributing to research, with the long term goal of helping to improve practice.
Promises – if you make promises, keep them	If you make promises, keep them	Promises made to participants and participating organisations around confidentiality and anonymity have been fully honoured.
Risk assessment – in what ways, if any, will conducting the interview put people at risk?	First, do no harm	<p>For coachee participants taking part in this research, there was a possible risk that any negative experiences they recounted would be attributable and recognisable within their organisation, and might cause their organisational stakeholders to regard them less favourably. Given the small numbers involved, it was impossible to remove this risk entirely, and it was flagged to participants in participant information sheets. However, this risk was mitigated by giving pseudonyms to participants, organisations, idiosyncratic functional names (i.e. not generic functions such as HR and R&D), identifiable development programmes, role titles, and to other people named in accounts. Feedback to participating organisations was given at the level of the whole research project without identifying information for individuals or organisations.</p> <p>A further risk was that, in common with any phenomenological exploration, participants might experience negative emotions as a result of discussing their experiences. This risk was mitigated by informing participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence, reason, or notice and by providing signposting information for them to raise concerns with the Oxford Brookes Ethics Committee or with my two doctoral supervisors. For coach participants,</p>

		there was a further risk that their professional standing might be compromised through a breach of client confidentiality in the process of giving their accounts. In introducing interviews, I invited coach participants to give real names or pseudonyms as they thought fit, and, as I could not know what strategy they had chosen, I gave pseudonyms to all clients and organisations in their accounts.
Confidentiality – what are reasonable promises of confidentiality that can be fully honoured?	Know the legal and ethical dimensions of confidentiality	As noted above it was impossible to remove the possibility of identifiability of participants altogether and the risk was mitigated by giving pseudonyms in accounts. Feedback to participating organisations was given at the level of the whole research project without identifying information for individuals or organisations. Additionally, the transcriber, who had access to pre-anonymised data, was asked to complete a transcriber confidentiality form (see appendix 6)
Informed consent – what kind of informed consent, if any, is necessary for mutual protection?	Know and follow the standards of your discipline or field	Participants' ability to give informed consent was facilitated by the participant information sheets. Additionally, I telephoned or met in person every participant to explain the project and how they would be required to contribute. That was also an opportunity to invite and to deal with any questions they had about the process. Challenges around the impossibility of giving fully informed consent before the fact (McLeod 2013) were addressed by asserting participants' right to withdraw from participation at any point.
Data access and ownership – who will have access to the data? For what purposes?	Don't wait until publication to deal with data ownership issues; anticipate data access and ownership issues	Participants were informed that the data collected for the project would be published as part of this thesis and might also be used at academic conferences and in papers, in a book and/or online. They were therefore aware of

	from the beginning	how data would be used. No special issues of data ownership were anticipated or encountered. Data and codes in hard copy format were kept in a locked filing cabinet and files with identifying information were password protected on my and the transcriber's laptops. Data is stored in line with data protection requirements and will be destroyed after ten years.
Interviewer mental health – how will you and other interviewers likely be affected by conducting the interviews?	Fieldwork is engaging, intellectually and emotionally. Take care of yourself and your coresearchers	In section 7.4 below, I give some reflections on the personal experience of this research journey, which touch on this point. Throughout the study I had access to confidential discussions with my research supervisors, and was able to discuss my more personal feelings with them, as well as issues relating directly to the research study. I also continued to be in supervision as a coach. In my modality of psychological coaching, supervision is broad-based and encompasses the whole person of the coach. It is not narrowly confined to issues arising directly from coaching assignments. Where I was experiencing issues of confidence, self-doubt, frustration or confusion as a result of the research process therefore, I was able to raise and discuss them (while maintaining confidentiality) in the supportive setting of supervision
Ethical advice – who will be the researcher's confidant and counsellor on matters of ethics during the study?	Plan ahead and know who you will consult on emergent ethical issues	My research supervisor provided guidance and support on ethical considerations.
Data collection boundaries – how hard will you push for	Know yourself. Err on the side of caution. Don't let the ends justify	IPA seeks rich data. This means that participants are encouraged to reflect on their experiences and to think broadly and deeply

responses from interviewees?	the means in overstepping boundaries.	about them. This is not the same as ticking a box in a multiple choice question in a survey – As Patton (2015) notes, it involves the possibility of much more personal disclosure and the potential for vulnerability. The requirement for broad and deep thinking was made known to participants in both the participant information sheets and the pre-interview phone calls and meetings. But in interviews, it was a matter of judgement as to how far participants might be encouraged to discuss highly personal matters. In gauging how far to go, I relied heavily on my training as a coach to build trust and rapport, and to notice when I was experiencing resistance and receptivity. I used my training in phenomenological noticing – what is going on in the here and now – and non-invested questioning to facilitate exploration at depth. But, just as in a coaching assignment, where there was genuine unwillingness to go further, I did not push participants. I believe, however, that my coach training gave me a useful sensitivity to the issue of the boundaries of comfort and discomfort for participants.
Intersection of ethical and methodological choices	Include ethical dilemmas faced and handled in your methods discussion	This section covers of this thesis covers ethical dilemmas and how they were addressed.
Ethical versus legal – what ethical framework and philosophy informs your work and ensures respect and sensitivity for those you study beyond whatever may be required by law?	Don't make up ethical responses along the way. Know your profession's ethical standards. Know what the law in your jurisdiction requires.	Both the Oxford Brookes Ethics Committee approval process and the ethical guidance of my profession (see below) helped me to formulate a proactive ethical stance for this research project.

Table 3-5 Patton's (2015) ethical issues checklist and this study's responses

McLeod suggests that ethical good practice in research is a collective responsibility, which does not solely rely on the personal integrity of the researcher, but distributes responsibility for ethical oversight between the researcher, the sponsoring institution and the researcher's supervisor. A proposal for this study was submitted to the Oxford Brookes University Ethics Committee before any participant recruitment was begun and the project, and the approach to managing potential risks, was approved.

We can also add to McLeod's list the oversight of any professional body to which the researcher belongs which operates a code of ethical guidance. Although largely still unregulated, there are sustained efforts in the coaching field to professionalise the discipline, including requirements for members of professional bodies to adhere to guidance relating to ethical practice. As a member of the Association for Coaching (AFC) I subscribe to a code of ethics which gives me an ethical framework in which to practice. But ethical practice is not confined to the coaching room, or to work which happens directly with coachees and commissioning clients. It involves issues of professional conduct which permeate all activities which have relevance to the coach's role: "Members are expected to behave in a way that at all times reflects positively upon, and enhances the reputation of, the coaching and mentoring profession" (AFC & EMCC, 2016 p4). In addition, the AFC code of practice requires me to address possible conflicts of interest, to be aware of the possibility of their arising, to deal with them quickly and to disclose any possible conflict to those involved.

In the context of this research, I adhered to this guidance by:

- Preserving the confidentiality of participants through pseudonymising their contributions and changing any identifying details, as discussed above.
- Including information about anonymisation of data in participant information sheets.
- Discussing the confidential nature of the research and my plans to preserve confidentiality with participants and giving them the opportunity to raise any concerns (none were raised).
- Ensuring that I had no current commercial relationship with any of the participating organisations which nominated coachee participants
- Discussing possible conflicts of interest with participants with whom I did have commercial relationships (two coaches who were my supervisors). Neither participant felt that these relationships were a barrier to their participation or likely to affect their contribution in any way, nor were any concerns raised after the event.

The professionalisation of coaching is a joint enterprise which requires not just adherence to guidelines on the part of members of professional bodies, but their active contribution to the reputation and standing of the discipline. Recognising this fact, the AFC have given this requirement ethical force: "Members will endeavour to make a contribution to the coaching and mentoring

community appropriate to their level of expertise. This may take many forms e.g. informal peer support to fellow coaches and mentors, advancing the profession, research and writing etc.” (AFC & EMCC, 2016 p5). Conducting this research can be seen therefore as part of my contribution to the ongoing project of the professionalisation of coaching and as an act of ethical practice.

Reflections on the data collection process

Perhaps the most surprising challenge of the research, to me as a novice researcher, was that of access to participants in the coachee group. As an experienced HR practitioner, with a wide network of ex-colleagues in a variety of organisations, I thought that it would be relatively easy to engage both organisations and participants. This proved not to be the case, to the extent that at one point, I thought that the research would prove impossible to conduct within the parameters of this doctoral programme. Access problems were of various kinds, including:

- Organisations being in the process of revising and reviewing their talent programmes and not feeling confident that they could provide access to the right kind of participants
- Organisations not running coaching programmes as part of their talent development
- Organisational gatekeepers who were running talent development programmes, with coaching as an element, feeling that asking participants to take part in research would be an undue burden on already over-committed employees
- Organisational gatekeepers expressing a firm interest in participating, but then failing to engage

It has been suggested that organisations are unwilling to put forward their high potential employees as research participants: “Many organisations are unwilling to expose their high potentials to researchers... There are still many organisations that deem it undesirable to be fully transparent about their high potential policies. A typical belief is that high potentials would become arrogant and complacent if they were to be informed of their status within the organisation, which is often referred to as “the crown prince syndrome” (Göbel-Kobialka in Dries & Pepermans, 2007, p86). Organisations are also believed to fear that employees not designated as high potential will be disengaged or will be hard to retain as a result of high potential policies (Snipes, in Dries & Pepermans, 2007).

While both of these arguments are highly plausible, it has also been suggested that HR practitioners commonly do not universally use research-based evidence for their practices, even when research-based practices can be demonstrated to have a positive impact on business performance (Tenhiälä et al., 2013). My own experience suggests that the discontinuous, overloaded, volatile and sometimes irrational nature of organisational life is such that participation in research which cannot demonstrate direct, *immediate term* value in ways which make sense to the organisation (for example, in the redesign of a development programme so as to improve outcomes in the short term) is of low

priority. Dries and Pepermans contend that organisations are very interested in research in the form of consultancy, for which they will often pay a high price (Dries & Pepermans, 2007). I would agree with this, and add that organisational interest in *academic* research is, however, much harder to engage.

Sample suitability was a second challenge, again in relation primarily to the coachee participant group. Despite careful briefing of both gatekeepers and participants themselves, it was still possible to find in one instance, on beginning the interview, that a participant was not only *not* considered to be a high potential, but knew that she was not and indeed had insisted on coaching in response to her rejection from a high potential development programme. Again in this instance, turnover of gatekeeper staff with current knowledge of the population was probably the cause, but in other cases, it was not uncommon to find a degree of uncertainty about whether or not a potential participant was eligible. This points, in my view, to the essentially uncertain and constantly fluctuating nature of talent assessments, a phenomenon discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

3.5. Presentation of findings

In the next two chapters I will present the findings from this study that are germane to its purpose: To explore the experiences of coachee and coach participants in high potential coaching. Findings are presented as a series of themes derived from grouping the super-ordinate themes arising from the each of the participants' accounts. It is important to acknowledge that not all these themes related directly to high potential coaching, if that is understood as having a narrow focus on the coaching assignment and participants' thoughts and feelings about it. Some themes explore, for example, participants' experiences of being considered to be high potential in general, or of coaching practice, without immediate reference to high potential coaching assignments. However these themes are included here because they provide important illumination of participants' perspectives on directly related issues – the high potential participant cannot be separated from his or her understanding of “highpotentialness” or the high potential coach from his her conceptualisations of coaching practice. Significance has therefore been interpreted broadly, while always with a directly traceable reference to the research question.

Each theme is presented in a separate section. A full table of themes with a wider sample of illustrative verbatim quotes is given in appendix 9. At the end of each section, the findings presented are briefly summarised. Where participants are quoted, their initials are given in brackets along with the line number in the transcript of their interview at which the quote can be found.

4. Findings – Coachees

Introduction

The themes which emerged from data analysis of coachee accounts which are presented here are:

- High potential careers: Ambition, sacrifice, risk and opportunity
- Experiences of coaching: Chit chat and challenge
- Experiences of the coach: Connection and rapport
- Being a high potential: Being in the game
- The different self

4.1. High potential careers: Ambition, sacrifice, risk and opportunity

“Should I be moving on? Should I be promoted?” (RP, 567)

In this section, I will discuss four super-ordinate themes:

- Ambition as problematic and issues of alignment and misalignment
- Pressure to make sacrifices and how participants respond to them
- Personal constructs of ambition
- Balancing risk and opportunity

Ambition appeared to be by no means a simple matter for participants in this study. Two features of the construction of ambition and careers seemed to create difficulty. One was the degree to which participants incorporated externally referenced constructs into their own constructs of success. In other words, if I have a construct-in-mind of “ambition” as a restless striving for responsibility, status and money, I will see myself as not ambitious if my motivations, aspirations, and desires are not of this kind. The other problematic feature is how participants perceive others’ beliefs about ambition, again, especially when they perceive them to be different from their own: *“That’s how things operate here, you know, motivation is about getting more money and you know, status”* (RP, 1091). Some participants respond to this perceived dissonance between the external and the internal by concealing their misalignment, or by avoiding the issue, others by rejecting notions of ambition and career progression altogether *“it’s not about the ambition”* (AA, 83).

In some cases, the impulse to take on more responsibility, to do bigger jobs, and to make the effort and sacrifices required fluctuates over the course of a working life. For Alice, coaching legitimated a focus on herself which had been hitherto inadmissible:

‘for the first time in my career, being selfish, because what I found in my role is it’s always about delivering the task, then it was about making sure the team were okay, and then really there wasn’t any time left over for me’ (AA, 807).

For Zena, the demands of having young children had left no energy or time for ambition, and caused her to doubt her own motivations and drives. Coaching normalised her experience:

“I think [the coach] did me a real favour shining a light on that because it’s not the kind of thing people are comfortable about talking about in the organisation” (ZS, 374).

Over time, as this circumstance changed, so did Zena’s sense of ambition: *“I just stopped being so tired and my ambition started to come back”* (ZS, 401).

Participants’ accounts often revealed an underlying sense of needing to be wakeful and alert to time passing in one’s career, which caused a fretful sense of urgency: *“You don’t want to sleepwalk through your career, and I maybe should have got out of what I’ve been doing a year or 18 months earlier”* (MK, 22) and *“I was at the point where I’d been pushing myself to do something else because personally I think as a manager, three, five, five years maximum and you should be moving”* (AR, 344). For these participants at least, experiences of careers were seldom restful and leisurely.

For many participants, there was a sense of a career as something needing to be managed, and which sometimes wasn’t managed well *“if I leave it for much longer I won’t be able to move, that was my, crude, that was as far as, that’s the granularity of my career development plan”* (RP, 510). Anxiety manifested in doubtful self-questioning: *“Should I be moving on? Should I be promoted?”* (RP, 567) or, as above, in a defensive rejection of received notions of ambition as *“selfish”* (AA, 1053). For Mike, promotion offered an opportunity to briefly take his foot off the gas:

“I suppose what I’m in my mind at the moment or in my plan it’s about solidifying, consolidating in my current role and making sure I’ve the skills and capabilities. So that discussion about ‘right, where do I go next’, is probably one that’s in my mind 12 to 18 months down the line” (MK, 157).

But even for Mike, theoretically at least, careers are conceived of as needing constant attention *“you started thinking, what you should be doing all the time with your career, thinking about where am I going, what am I doing”* (MK, 5). Self-confidence however, could overcome anxiety and even obviate careful planning:

"I very much have a mindset of if I'm supposed to be HPP [High Potential Person] then put me in a position, just put me in, I'll sink or swim. If I, if I sink then that's my level. I need to go back to the shallow end but if I swim, put me in the deeper end" (AR, 770).

Externally-referenced constructs of ambition and career progression can be freighted with negative connotations: Selfishness, as above, or as laying one open to being misconstrued: *"I'm embarrassed about talking about career progression because it's perceived to be that I want to earn more money..."* (RP, 1082). On the other hand, not being seen to be ambitious is also problematic:

"other senior members of the team may regard [not wanting promotion] as lacking ambition and as a result I may lose out on opportunities which don't necessarily involve a grade change" (SW, 402).

Simon demonstrates the highly personal nature of constructions of ambition. In his case, it is a desire for satisfying and fulfilling work and for a good level of reward, but without the sacrifices and demands of higher levels of responsibility. However, implicit in his account is a belief that this is not a shared construct – organisational stakeholders will have a different sense of what it means. So problematic is the misalignment between his personal construct of ambition and his belief about his stakeholders' understanding that it has to be kept secret. *"I have asked [my boss] not to make that more widely known on the basis that I believe that could be regarded as a negative thing" (SW, 394).*

Perhaps surprisingly for a population of putative high potentials, aspirations focused not on promotion for status, money, or power, but on a desire for interesting and challenging work, suitably rewarded:

"I am quite happy at the level I am operating: That doesn't mean that I am wanting to stay in the same role indefinitely, or in the same environment, or any of those things. I continually want to be working on something regarded as important and significant in the organisation so it's of value, something that is challenging and complex, and interesting" (SW, 366).

Money appeared to be less of a motivator than a "hygiene factor" (Herzberg, 2003):

"I wasn't really bothered about the money, if you know what I mean. That wasn't, that's not my motivation, and it hasn't been, so I've never been, actually...I've always wanted to just be challenged and happy in what I'm doing" (RP, 527).

A sufficient level of reward was crucial however:

“the thought of having enough to put petrol in my car and my month’s shopping, and not having that spare money to say ‘do you fancy going away at the weekend’...and just doing it, that, I don’t think that would be much fun” (SW, 594).

Some participants experienced a constant tension between their idea of future senior roles as demanding, and their current access to confidence and energy.

“I see some of the directors and executive members here, where, you know they’re on the phone at midnight, 2 o’clock in the morning, crack of dawn, work, work, work, that doesn’t appeal to me” (SW, 383).

Senior roles require sacrifice and could be frightening: *“It would have been an enormous job, it was absolutely terrifying if I’m honest” (ZS, 460).* And it is not only the individual who is potentially negatively impacted, but the family as a whole:

“I considered the risk from a personal point of view because my family’s quite old. We’re only a small family and my parents, my dad’s turned 70 and my mam’s 65 so, I’ve got an 11-month-old daughter so I actually considered more at this point, is it better that I don’t pursue a career and let them have more time with their grandchild?” (AR, 439)

Moreover, participants often had a keen sense of the risks involved in career moves, for example of being seen to be presumptuous:

“if I stick my head above the parapet, people may say, what, she thinks she’s good enough to get to the next level? Really? And so I was there to be shot down. So from a confidence point of view I really felt that I was putting myself out there for people to say, yes I think you can do, or no you can’t, and how was I personally going to cope with that. And sometimes it’s easier not putting yourself out there to get the negative feedback” (AA, 218).

There was also a concern about losing one’s financial security:

“I joined Protect not long before they closed the final salary pension scheme...that’s not a benefit that you want to give up quickly in this day and age at this age, so that’s one thing that’s definitely keeping me tied” (SW, 522).

Indeed, the risk can be experienced as potentially catastrophic: *“The story I play to myself is, I guess is, if I’d make this one decision wrong I’ll be sacked or lose my job or be selling the Big Issue” (RP, 573).*

Nevertheless, sometimes the impulse for self-actualisation was sufficiently strong to overcome perceived risks. Participants gave compelling accounts of a need to live up to what they felt to be their potential:

"I actually feel that I was holding myself back, let alone before other people even started on me. And so the great thing for me has been realising, God what can I do, if I have this 'you can do it' attitude?" (AA, 1094)

"Did I want to be someone else's no.2 because I'm really good at it, yeah, or should I take some responsibility and put my head over the parapet and move on. And I've decided to do that" (ZS, 470).

There are aspects of more senior roles which are intrinsically attractive too: *"I do see the benefit of progressing in that it gives me the opportunity, that broadening of bandwidth, and the intellectual challenge that would come from that is also attractive, that's the main reason for me wanting to do it" (RP, 1060).*

For some, increased confidence is a key feature of the conditions for unlocking one's potential: *"It's unlocking that self belief. I have the talent in me, what coaching enabled me to do was to pull it out and to have that self belief and to really feel that I could do it" (AA, 915).*

Participants in this study were all regarded by their organisations as having the potential to progress their careers. Some had been promoted, some had not. Some were looking for progression and some were not. Some were staying in their organisations and some were leaving for opportunities elsewhere. There are no clues for practitioners in this study as to a recipe for high potential career success. Rather the findings are that: how to think about and approach managing a career is problematic for some people designated as high potential. Being seen to be ambitious can have negative connotations, but not being seen to be ambitious can also have drawbacks. For some, ambition comes and goes and careers need constant attention. Forging a satisfying career can involve creating a delicate balance of multiple factors, as a highly personal and dynamic response to opportunities available, sacrifices required, one's own and one's families' needs, risks of failure and an impulse for self-actualisation. As people designated as high potential move through family life stages and their own maturing process, and as features in the system change around them, so their sense of themselves in relation to externally-referenced concepts of ambition and career can change dynamically. There is little evidence of a stable, steady, consistently forward-looking conceptualisation of career progression or of ambition. Rather we see idiosyncratic constructs of "ambition" and "career" which come into and out of focus over time and which are problematic or helpful at different points in the participant's life.

4.2. Experiences of coaching: Chit chat and challenge

"I felt outside of my comfort zone, which was a great thing to do" (AA, 557)

This section deals with three themes, under the broad heading of experiences of coaching:

- Experiences of challenge, comfort and discomfort
- Coaching as a safe and supportive environment
- Lukewarm responses and low expectations of coaching

At the simplest level, all participants in this study were positive about coaching – some had advocated for it in their networks – though their levels of enthusiasm were varied. Experiences of coaching overall varied widely too. Some participants experienced coaching as life changing, but at the other extreme, the impression given by others is of coaching experienced much like a warm bath – a feel-good, occasional indulgence. Participants polarised around themes of the experience of comfort and discomfort, safety and unsafety, resistance and susceptibility and the risks inherent in coaching. They converged around their perceptions of insight, perspective and self-awareness as key features of coaching, around the value they attributed to it, and around a sense that a coaching assignment could be timed optimally.

A key theme is the tolerance of discomfort and what it enables, with some participants experiencing discomfort as a necessary condition for growth and learning. It would be inappropriate in a study of this kind to seek any kind of scientific correlation between experiences of discomfort and the level of change experienced, but it is possible to trace a tentative connection between the two. Participants who experienced their coaching as disruptive to their sense of comfort and safety (within tolerable bounds), also reported having made significant changes, particularly in the areas of self-insight and personal growth. Alice and Robert both discussed feeling out of their comfort zones during coaching: *"I didn't want to feel safe and closeted because then I felt that I wouldn't really be trying things that were a bit uncomfortable"* (AA, 561). At the other end of the spectrum, Simon and Andrew experienced no such sense of disruptive challenge *"No, no. I'm not sure there's much that makes me feel uncomfortable"* (AR, 871).

For Alice, discomfort was present from the start, even in the process of forming a relationship with the coach who, after all, was a stranger at first: *"I was feeling a little bit uncomfortable meeting a total stranger that you're then going to bare all of your secrets and concerns and, and stuff to"* (AA, 293). More often, however, comfort and discomfort were a function of the degree to which participants experienced challenge from the coach, or at least were prepared to work with it:

“it wasn’t all fluffy ‘How did you enjoy the course?’ It was the ‘So, what will you do? What will you be doing tomorrow? What are the actions you’re going to take’ and really forcing me to think about how if you want to, how you’re going to change” (MK, 336).

In these circumstances, coaching can be experienced as being on the very edge of safety: *“So it was semi-safe in terms of it was a safe environment, but in a lot of cases I felt outside of my comfort zone, which was a great thing to do” (AA, 557).*

By contrast however, a notable theme revealed coaching experienced as an undemanding, casual activity. Participants talked about assignments in which the features of structure which are part of the professional, and ethical, training of coaches seemed to barely register. Frequently there appeared to be no clear contract for learning:

“we sort of agreed the areas that we wanted to work on and he shared with me my boss’s views and what my boss was wanting or expecting and so it was just through that sort of dialogue but we never had any sort of formal or informal contract” (SW, 696).

There was a casual approach to scheduling in which assignments drifted on, sometimes over years, and perhaps petered out without formal closure. In some cases, internal stakeholders seemed to lose interest entirely after the initial phase of agreement and left coach and coachee to their own devices:

“the lady who organised it for me, she left, so I kept going. And periodically I would say, in a fit of honesty say ‘do you know I have a coach’?...so actually I think I went under the radar and actually that suited me because it wasn’t entirely clear to me whether I would have fit the criteria for carrying on with the coach” (ZS, 975).

There appeared to be little or no evaluation of assignments – at least visibly to the coachee. The tone of coaching too, seemed often lacking in purpose. Andrew experienced coaching as a pleasant chat: *“I would say it’s a, it’s an open relationship, very casual, relaxed. I’ll normally turn up late then we’ll discuss for about 15 minutes what she’s been up to and where I’ve been in [country] and then we’ll have a chat and that’s generally about it” (AR, 925);* Simon’s experience was not dissimilar: *“I might have one or two things that I specifically wanted to raise with him as well that I would have jotted down but usually there will be no more than two to three things that today I wouldn’t mind if we could have a chat about” (SW, 873).*

None of this is to suggest that coaches are necessarily approaching these assignments without an intention of purposeful learning. Indeed, there are indirect hints that coaches experience the coachee’s non-engagement as resistance:

“he’ll ask probing questions, he will look for response and commitment but I get the impression if I didn’t want to follow through or do anything then more likely the conversation between James and I would be from him to me is ‘do you think this is working? is it something that’s really adding value, do you think it’s run its course, you know, do you want to continue with that?’” (SW, 977).

So if we assume that coaches are working with a commitment to challenge, we might wonder why participants either do not notice it, or do not choose to take the challenge up. One possibility is that some coachees have a low tolerance for discomfort and may choose not to make themselves vulnerable and to confront difficult issues, as Simon demonstrated:

“Is it challenging? It’s not a difficult conversation, so it’s not challenging in this is really hard work as such, it’s not challenging in a demanding type way. Is it chal....It’s as challenging as I want it to be I guess in terms of challenging my thinking, if I really want to challenge myself in my thinking then it can serve that purpose. If I choose not to really want to open up and if I really don’t want to confront certain things or deal with certain things, then it doesn’t need to be, so I guess it’s as challenging as the parties want to make it at that point in time” (SW, 958).

Another possibility is that coachees have a different paradigm for coaching, and possibly for learning as a whole, to that typically held by coaches and learning professionals. Certainly expectations of development, based on previous experiences, seem to be low, and responses lukewarm: *“I expected the programme to be very much like previous leadership programmes and development programmes that I’ve been involved in, been quite, do I better describe it as hints and tips and ways of doing things?” (RP, 42)* and *“I quite enjoyed the first session. These are never ideal in terms of timing are they, in terms of they always seem to come right in the middle of things” (SW, 104).* Coachees may not have an expectation of challenge at a fundamental psychological level, as demonstrated in this mutually perplexed exchange with Mike (interviewer in bold):

“So you’re asking how the coaching has changed my thinking, my feeling or my behaviour, which one is...?”

Yes.

My feelings about how I feel about myself?

Yes.

OK.

Not just how you feel about yourself but your emotional responses to things.

I don't think that's changed much because the coaching really wasn't addressing that" (MK, 769).

The ways of resistance can be complex and subtle. In the context of a discussion about feeling uncomfortable in coaching, Andrew talked about someone on his development programme who had demonstrated openness and vulnerability to an unusual degree in the organisation, and about how he had thought that he should live up to this example (interviewer in bold):

"Because it's very easy to sit in the coaching session and talk about things that actually really aren't you and say you know, I need to do this and that's not what you need to do. So I think on the coachee's side, as long as you're open about it, I don't think, I don't feel there really would be an uncomfortable point."

Do you feel you have done that?

I like to think so, yes. I'm not sure how you ultimately decide you have other than an personal opinion but I'd like to think I was open especially at the point when I was moving job, erm because frankly the point I was moving job I was starting to question well is my future really at Daruma? Should I be looking to other places like [a competitor], should I be trying to go, force moves into other areas so I'd like to think I was quite transparent on that" (AR, 889).

The shift of focus is subtle, but by redefining vulnerability as honesty, Andrew has effectively defended himself against discomfort while allowing him to present himself as fully engaged in coaching.

We might wonder what motivates a participant who does not have high expectations of coaching to take part in it. Perhaps a clue is in Mike's sense that coaching is a low risk commitment in terms of the visibility of potential failure?

"it was a no-lose scenario really wasn't it? So if I walked in and after one or two sessions and thought this just isn't working, just go right thank you very much for your time, it's not quite working out and move on. So I wouldn't, I wouldn't see the risk of not doing it" (MK, 530).

Other coaching participants, however, had a readiness for disruption, catalysed by a sense that something in their mode of relating to the world was hindering them, which allowed them to respond to the coach's challenge:

“what I had been doing wasn’t working and I wanted to work out what I could do to make it work again or what else I should be doing to get it to work if you see what I mean. So yes, all of those little things helped, yeah. I think I wanted to disrupt what was happening so in a controlled way, yeah. And I think that actually Louise was very successful in that. I know by inching me over the line in different areas, she made me look at the world in a different way” (ZS, 783).

A willingness to take risks with one’s equilibrium may be related to the degree to which participants feel safe in the hands of the coach: *“I felt that I could be completely transparent with him and completely open and honest” (RP, 484)*, which results from a personal encounter with the coach: *“So I was already inclined to think this is somebody I can learn from, but actually would I like their style? So the emotional side came more at the first meeting because you can’t get that from a sheet of paper” (AA, 324).*

A widely-cited benefit of coaching was more developed insight, perspective, and self-awareness – in other words, ways of seeing the world and one’s place in it. Coaching helped to develop an ability to read between the lines of the organisation’s coded messages: *“And so she helped me interpret some of, you know, the organisation’s support for me which I hadn’t, I hadn’t registered before so, you know, the sort of signals” (ZS, 162).* It developed empathy to understand others’ reactions and positions: *“How do you think the other person felt and thought about that situation and if you were just like a fly on the wall, you are watching the two of you, what would they think and see in that situation?” (SW, 907)* and promoted self-awareness as a diagnostic tool: *“It made me more self aware, and by using that self awareness I was able to realise things and adapt and change quicker than I would have been able to if I hadn’t have known to be more self aware” (AA, 902).* For Mike, self-awareness extended into being able to develop an ability to continually and consciously monitor his behaviour:

“there’s this constant sort of dual thing going on where I’m talking or interacting or presenting and there’s a little part of me going ‘You went too fast; you’re fiddling’ and so there’s that constant sort of I guess loop going on that wouldn’t have happened before” (MK, 629).

Coachees converged around an appreciation of coaching, irrespective of the level of learning or change that they had experienced. Some were highly positive: *“Actually I feel like it’s been a really, really positive experience for me” (AA, 699)* and indeed in some cases, like Zena, advocated for coaching: *“I think it was really positive for me and as I said, I recommended it to my boss when she kind of got into trouble. And I would do it again” (ZS, 1129).* Others were more moderate in their appreciation, like Andrew, when asked to quantify the benefit he felt he had gained:

"I tend to grade things down so the inside of me says 10% but I'll be more generous, maybe it must be 20-25 just simply by reinforcement. But again with my people that I've worked for previously and the people that have worked for me previously, I have quite a good network of people to bounce stuff off, so the things that I've discussed, it's not stuff I just kept to myself; it was stuff I'd already bounced off different people in the organisation who I trust so maybe that gets me to the 80, 80-85% level and then okay the cherry on the cake of confidence level was the reflection with the coach, somebody external. So definitely a benefit" (AR, 975).

The sense here being that coaching is experienced not as a place where secrets are told, as with Alice, but where thinking which has been freely aired elsewhere in his network is given a final test against an external perspective.

Andrew, whose coaching was offered as part of a time-limited development programme, also offered an interesting sidelight on the timeliness of coaching interventions. Asked whether he would undertake coaching again, he suggested that he would have liked to bank the opportunity for a period in his career when he would have felt more need of it: *"I guess at some point in my future career I'm going to have a bigger headwind than that so maybe I should have, maybe if I could have kept that card and dealt it into the game at some point"* (AR, 958). This sense that the timing of coaching can be more or less helpful is echoed by Alice, whose coaching was not tied to a development programme, but who felt the need to pause and take stock:

"So at the moment I've really seen the benefits of coaching, so would wholeheartedly recommend it. But because I felt that Suzanne and Audrey had got me to a position where the end goal was to get the promotion, was to move into the new role, I got there. What I wanted to do was to basically reassess in that situation" (AA, 454).

The timing of a coaching assignment therefore seems to have some relevance to the impact felt by participants.

In summary, in terms of their experiences of coaching, participants were spread across a spectrum of readiness for a level of discomfort and vulnerability. At one end of the spectrum, it is of overriding importance that everything is held in stasis – coaching cannot be permitted to be uncomfortable and participants are defended against challenge. At the other, the expectation is that coaching is a place where secrets are told and vulnerabilities are exposed in service of possible change. The impact of coaching is widely varied, with life-changing transformation on the one hand, and no felt sense of impact whatsoever on the other. There may be some broad relationship between impact and willingness to be vulnerable. Insight, perspective, and self-awareness of various kinds are widely

recognised within this sample as an outcome of coaching. Participants, in varying degrees, valued their coaching experience and (sometimes with caveats) would undertake coaching again, provided that the timing was right.

4.3. Experiences of the coach: Connection and rapport

“For me he’s demonstrated that he wants to help” (RP, 470).

This section explores how coaching participants experienced the coach. There are six super-ordinate themes:

- Connection and rapport
- Perceptions/conceptualisations of the coach
- The coach as a trustworthy friend and champion
- The coach as credible, admirable and skilled
- Demographic affinity
- Utilitarian conceptualisations of the coach

Participants held a range of conceptualisations of the coach, from the relational to the utilitarian. Where the coachee valued a quality of warmth in their relationship with the coach highly – which did not always appear to be the case – it was because a relationship of trust facilitated openness and honesty and supported vulnerability. In forming successful relationships, the credibility and personal relatability of the coach were the most important conditions. These led to a receptive admiration on the part of the coachee and gave the coach license to challenge and question. In addition to these relational orientations, there were a number of utilitarian conceptualisations of the coach as someone to be made use of. The two conceptualisations were not mutually exclusive, though participants tended to initiate their accounts of the value they gave to coaching with one or the other.

Perhaps the single most important aspect of participants’ experiences of the coach was their perceptions of connection and rapport – the ability to get on with the coach. These two features appeared to serve a function as a necessary condition of success for a relationship: *“We sort of realised that we could actually talk to each other and get on” (RP, 121).* Coaches were seen as having expert skills in building good relationships: *“I think [the relationship is] good but clearly he’s a professional coach so I’d expect him to strike up a good relationship with me” (MK, 489).* Coaches were seen as purposively using their relationship skills as a functional tool in an assignment:

“I think what I found was really great was that she tailored our coaching sessions to how I was feeling, and knowing what I was like, getting to know me and knowing how I would

basically respond to things...and actually because she'd established that rapport with me she got the best out of me by doing that and tailoring the approach" (AA, 368).

A sense that the coach cared for and appreciated the client was facilitative: *"He's certainly given me the impression he genuinely cares about me and my progression, and is interested and, in helping. He's not just doing a job" (RP, 474).* Coaches could be champions and cheerleaders: *"I think simply someone giving me some positive feedback was really important, really helped me and she was doing that" (ZS, 282).* But a relationship did not have to be warm to be successful: *"She wasn't warm, but that was fine, it was practical you know, sensible but helpful" (ZS, 341).*

Notwithstanding coachees' appreciation of the coach's positive orientation towards them, we must wonder, in light of some coachee's characterisation of coaching as a "pleasant chat" (see section 4.2) whether a focus on building connection and rapport sometimes backfires on coaches. In some instances it would almost appear that, rather than a working relationship directed towards learning, the business is paying for the coachee to have a friend: *"I actually bumped into James, he was here earlier, and we said you know, we haven't caught up for a while, it would be good to catch up" (SW, 1021).*

Admiration of the coach was also an important condition for a positive response to coaching. Usually this was in the form of appreciation of the coach's credibility in terms of having held senior roles in business, as Simon explained:

"He'd worked in a senior role in business in a not dissimilar type of environment. He wasn't somebody that, don't take this the wrong way, that had done some qualifications in it, but didn't have you know, would say that because you have read it a book or it's a theory type thing, it wasn't airy fairy, you know this guy has actually done it himself, he's got some real life experience, you know of value, and he's been successful in his own right doing his first career, so that's sort of what made him credible" (SW, 794).

Credibility gave the coach permission to offer their experience: *"It doesn't feel condescending or patronising for somebody to say I have been there, done that, I have got more experience, I have got more life than you, and that all felt more credible to me" (SW, 808),* but coaches could also have credibility in terms of their personal authenticity and good faith: *"He's genuinely authentic as well, you know. For me he's demonstrated that he wants to help" (RP, 470).*

Demographic affinity was also an important feature of the coach's relatability. Participants talked about the fact that being a similar age to their coach gave them similar frames of reference: *"I think it was, it was, erm, you know there was, there was a, when I say we were the same age in terms of*

cultural references I guess, so social references" (RP, 445), and about the value of gender identification:

"I think because some of the elements of what I was wanting to understand was around how as a woman were you successful in getting on at a senior level, it actually made it more authentic that she'd actually faced some of the things I was facing, and she'd come through it and she'd come out the other end" (AA, 352).

Life-experience affinity could also be valued: *"One of the things my coach was really, really good at was helping me understand the dynamics of being a working mother, partly because she'd had children herself"* (ZS, 235) and of being at a similar level of cognitive ability: *"You always have to have someone who's as clever as you so that's the other thing I would need I think. I'd like a clever person"* (ZS, 559).

Coaches were seen as having useful expertise: Relationship building, as we have seen above, but also skills in interpreting the system *"she helped me interpret some of, you know, the organisation's support for me which I hadn't, I hadn't registered before"* (ZS, 161); in seeing issues at more than face value: *"You know he sort of hears one thing but sees another and challenges me for that reason"* (RP, 467); in listening and asking useful questions: *"He's a great listener and he can ask, he asks, he, you know he appears to ask the right question at the right time"* (RP, 462) and in giving feedback: *"One of the things that surprised me about my coach was how much feedback she gave me"* (ZS, 114). Technical expertise however, was not highly valued: *"The coach isn't helping you, isn't going to help me with, you know, the technical aspects of my job"* (ZS, 549) and the tools and models coaches sometimes introduced in coaching featured very little in participants' recall of coaching: *"I don't really remember any of the other, you know, I couldn't write any of her models so there's nothing that I use explicitly in what we did"* (ZS, 1104).

There were some notably utilitarian conceptualisations of coaches. Coaches were valued – often as a function of their being external to the organisation – for their ability to benchmark and sense test ideas: *"If an external coach is challenging that back to me and they can't rip it to shreds then OK, there must be some logic in it"* (AR, 801). Another typical utilitarian conceptualisation of the coach was as a sounding board: *"It's just a completely open conversation, private conversation that allows me to get a bit of a sounding board, sometimes just a little bit of a sense check..."* (SW, 888). Coaches were also seen as taskmasters, keeping coachees on track with their action plans: *"If you've got a coaching session in the diary you've got nowhere to hide. So you commit to do certain things as a result of the conversation you had with your coach, and if you don't hand your homework in, in a way, or demonstrate that you've actually done something..."* (RP, 762), as teachers: *"I looked at her experience*

and thought this is somebody that I can learn from" (AA, 320), and in some cases as substitute line managers: *"I mean in many ways Louise was acting as the line manager would"* (ZS, 958).

So participants' constructs-in-mind of coaches polarised to a large degree around relational conceptualisations and utilitarian conceptualisations. Where the relationship was valued, it could be seen as being in itself instrumental to learning and to a successful coaching assignment. Where utilitarian conceptualisations were top of mind for the coachee, there was an emphasis on the role of the coach – as teacher, sounding board, substitute line manager. The coach's credibility was key for many, and demographic affinity was important. Above all, connection and rapport was vital to the viability of the working relationship for many participants .

4.4. Being a high potential: Being in the game

"You have to play the game, and whether anybody likes it or not, it is a game" (AR, 1170)

In this section, I will examine the various ways in which coachees experienced being a high potential, based on six super-ordinate themes:

- Relationship with the organisation
- Benchmarking oneself
- Managing one's reputation
- Effects of the organisation's views on the self-concept: Self-criticism and not being good enough
- Not knowing and second guessing
- Attitudes to talent management

Broadly, participants can be seen to have experienced their relationships with their organisations across a spectrum of increasing agency, from being passive and infantilised, through a contractual focus, and game playing, to being powerful and self-directed. The table below illustrates these different perspectives.

Relationship with the organisation	Passive and infantilised	Contractual	Game playing	Powerful and self-directed
Characteristics	Passive - not knowing, not being told, being done to, being used to further someone else's agenda, being vulnerable to organisational politics	Self-interested - seeing the relationship with the organisation in contractual terms – a bargain in which effort is traded for reward	Cynical - seeking and seizing opportunities to further one's own interests irrespective of the organisation's	Agentic - relating to the organisation from a position of confident self-worth, actively shaping the relationship
Illustrative comment	<i>"I don't know is the answer to that question. My boss hasn't really shared that with me" (RP, 280)</i>	<i>"I am either going to go away and do the same thing for less money...or going to earn more money but they are going to want a lot more blood" (SW, 544)</i>	<i>"You have to play the game and whether anybody likes it or not, it is a game" (AR, 1170)</i>	<i>"If I was staying, I could have had a serious conversation about what would it take for me to be your CRO and what are you going to do to get me there so that when the next one goes, I am, I am the natural successor" (ZS, 991)</i>

Table 4-1 Spectrum of high potentials' relationships with organisations

These positions were not necessarily static, or even mutually exclusive, but sometimes changed over time or as factors in the system changed. In some cases, coaching and development was experienced as helping the participant to move across this spectrum from left to right, often through processes of reframing, confidence building, and awareness-raising. Robert, for example, felt empowered as a result of his development programme and coaching to visualise a different future:

"So I think I'll be more out there, I'll, and they'll see a different person, or perceive a different person actually. And I think I'll become a better performer, whatever that means, however you want to measure that, erm, because erm I'll be more comfortable, erm, be more real myself" (RP, 935).

Where participants felt that career progression was competitive, there was a tendency to benchmark themselves against others. Mike had realised how few the opportunities were at the top of the organisation:

“what I’m more acutely aware of now is the need to be thinking about career and development and where you want to go because actually those opportunities are pretty few and far between. As you go further up the organisation, they become even, even more few and far between and I guess more competitive to get” (MK, 666).

Andrew benchmarked himself not just against his competitors, but against a notional ideal of a high potential: *“We were so under the water and trying to deliver business objectives with a lack of headcount and I couldn’t actually change the organisation as quickly as I wanted and I actually considered well, should I be HP1 for this?” (AR, 446)*

As one feature of their relationships with the organisation, participants in this study were highly concerned with their organisational reputations. Reputations needed to be safeguarded and promoted, partly because they were so vulnerable to organisational politics and to factors outwith the participant’s control, as Zena evidenced in discussing her reaction to realising that she was not selected as a member of the talent pool:

“Well I suppose, I suppose so my first reaction was well, we’ll all get over it you know. A new leadership programme will come in and I’ll get assessed in a different way and then I suppose, so that was when, that was with the boss who then got fired if you see what I mean so then, when he went suddenly obviously I had to reinterpret all his positive statements because of course they would be discounted in the organisation and then I guess when I got my new, when the new person came in and she brought in outsiders into the team as it were and questioned whether I had a role you know, it made me think gosh actually this stuff does matter, yeah, so I need to do something about it” (ZS, 249).

Reputations therefore had to be managed: *“It became much more how can I manage all those players in my environment and how can I do much more in the way of...self promotion isn’t the right word but make myself more aware in the way people are aware of me in a positive type way” (SW, 722).* They might need to be actively changed: *“I had to get people to reappraise me because they’d seen me as a safe pair of hands, somebody who was really good at the job and wanted to keep on the team, but they never necessarily, certainly for the last few years, seen that ambition to get to the next level” (AA, 127).* Sometimes, realisation about the importance of reputation took a while to dawn:

“I can anticipate a joke and I will laugh out loud and [two stakeholders] said you’ve got to stop that, that people make negative comments about it and that they use it as a way of you know, as a way in to criticising you, which I thought is interesting, and I suppose again five years ago if someone had said that to me, I would have said well that’s just ridiculous but I

know that fitting in is important now and making people feel comfortable is important” (ZS, 694).

Coaching was sometimes a place in which this issue was tackled: *“And that’s what the coaching is there to help address. What I need both for my goal and my own personal success is that I, you know, a good reputation with the people who are important to IT and IT is important to them” (MK, 729).*

Talent management processes, including the experience of being judged not to be high potential, were often a catalyst for foregrounding reputation in participants’ awareness. The judgements made in talent management processes could have a painful impact, when they were experienced as dissonant with the participant’s self concept: *“Really useful to be able to talk to Suzanne about the situation, how I was feeling, because it really knocked me, it knocked me personally” (AA, 617)* or where there was a felt sense of inaccuracy:

“there was a bit of me which believed that I wasn’t as good as these people but there’s you know, there’s a rational bit going actually your work is better, you know, people like working for you more, you’re more consistent, you know what I mean? There’s a little voice in my head going this doesn’t add up while at the same time actually I could see why those people were on the Vienna talent groups” (ZS, 66).

Participants’ accounts often revealed a murky and confused picture of communication between individual and organisation around talent management judgements. There are judgements withheld: *“It’s really difficult to get transparency in succession planning. I try with my team to be as transparent as possible, but I have little or no discussion with my boss” (RP, 289)* and highly subjective judgements by important stakeholders, such as Alice’s example of a talent rating apparently motivated by disgruntlement:

“He didn’t feel that I was in the +1 box, he took a little bit longer to reassess that I was ready for that level... I’d had a meeting with him and it hadn’t gone well, so we replayed that meeting ...But what I learnt was that he doesn’t like being put on the spot and what I did was put him on the spot...and he did feedback afterwards, not directly to me, but that he felt he’d been a bit too harsh in that meeting, and that perhaps, and he’d been feeling ill, so perhaps he hadn’t handled the meeting in the best way. But I got that feedback secondhand rather than firsthand.”

There is a significant amount of not knowing and second guessing about whether one is considered talent: *“I think I was, not sure whether I still am.” (SW, 278)*, and in some cases, a lack of “felt-fairness” in talent processes which led to disillusionment:

"the scales sort of fell from my eyes...I thought these people were marvellous because I had been told they were marvellous and there was a little niggle at the back of my head saying well if they're so marvellous, why aren't I so marvellous too?...and if I'm honest, I look at the three men that I know who are on the Vienna kind of talent team and they have characteristics which look really similar to me, you know that they all make problems into strategic issues; they're articulate. You like hanging out with them, they're good company. They have charisma and they all get bored easily. There's not much follow through. So they'll do a job for 18 months and they'll move on and other people mop up. So you know so I suppose that's what I, I started to see well this is what is valued, and this is some of the tail end of it if you see what I mean" (ZS, 807).

Disillusionment could also become full blown cynicism:

"you realise that people who've been on the HPP course in that area haven't been the ones that have been promoted and it's very much been that guy's done that job for longer therefore he's the one that's promoted or that person... shouldn't be. It should be diverse, it shouldn't be just the same guy, they should be more diverse. So then you kind of think is it just a, is there any real impetus behind it? Ultimately will it end up like everything in terms of it's the Emperor's New Clothes, it drops off so has it got a limited shelf life, a limited product life cycle" (AR, 1155).

It was striking, however, how ineffective talent management processes appeared to have been in furthering participants' career goals. These processes are designed to identify, develop, and retain individuals with talent, to safeguard the future of the organisation. In some cases however, talent management was discredited, as we have seen, and had even caused the participants to become a problem to their organisation:

"it appears to be very much of a political thing of once you get on it at HP2 then they'll start to discuss what training or development and you can then have kind of a little bit of a black hole for 2 years because you can stay in there and OK as long as you're delivering. If your performance drops off, OK they can take you off HP2, take you off, but then after 3 years then it becomes a bit of a discussion well does he move up a box or not and if not why not and then it becomes a very much of a political situation where maybe the business doesn't want to say 'Don't move him up because we haven't invested any time with him' and HR doesn't want to say 'Don't move him up because we haven't invested any time with him'. Nobody really wants to say 'Don't move him up because he's not capable' because then both people have made the wrong decision. So almost by default I think there's a risk you can flop over

into HP1 which then becomes a greater problem because after 2 years in the HP1, they're trying to move you into different areas but the function won't let you go because you're too valuable to the function and they haven't got a succession chain. HR doesn't have enough leverage to actually move you and actually you might not be ready for a general manager's role anyway" (AR, 362).

In other cases, talent management was irrelevant to the participant, either as a result of a mismatch between the aims of the processes and the individual's secret or overt aspirations (e.g. Simon's aspiration to not be promoted), or because participants took their careers into their own hands. Zena, for example, had been rejected from a talent development programme but had, through her own agency, and with coaching support, arrived at a position where she was confident enough to take a more senior role in a different organisation. That said, even participants, when in 'organisational leader' mode, would advocate for formal talent management processes: *"And we're also doing agilities models which we'd not previously had to the level that we've got, so we're actually showing people what good looks like and if you want to get to the next level what the difference is and therefore what to work on and what the enablers are" (AA, 989).* Alice's own progression had nothing to do with such models and tools, and everything to do with an internal motivation towards growth. Her account neatly encapsulates the dissociation between organisationally-led conceptualisations of talent management and those based in the real-world experience of participants, even of those who take the organisational line.

Notwithstanding frustrations and disillusionment, for some, it was preferable to be on the organisation's talent radar than off it. For some, as in Simon's case, it is because being off the radar disbars one from opportunities for interesting and challenging work. In others, it is part of a relationship with the organisation which is conceptualised as a game, where each side competes for the balance of benefits: *"You've got to play the game. No training is bad so I get the benefit of that. Meeting new people is good because it gives me a bigger network. And you have to play the game and whether anybody likes it or not, it is a game" (AR, 1170).*

As we have seen above, the literature on high potential programmes largely represents participants in talent management programmes – where they feature at all – as passive recipients of processes, as being frustratingly unreceptive to development, or as vaguely dangerous to the organisation's stability in being "flight risks". When listening to participants' own voices however, and hearing how being a high potential (or not) is experienced, we find a much richer and more dimensional picture. Participants emerge as powerful and powerless, as clear sighted to the point of cynicism and as experiencing career progression as a competition – the war to *be* talent, if you will. Many emerge as proactively managing their reputations so that they represent themselves optimally. And as much as people designated as high potential can be victims of unclear, vague, and confusing talent

management processes, so are some of them themselves capable of exploiting the lack of clarity in such processes to further their own ends. In some cases, so agentic and self-directed are these individuals, so capable of exploiting the opportunities around them, that one wonders what being part of a high potential programme does for them which they could not do for themselves.

4.5. The different self

"I feel I blossomed, I, I've metaphorically I've grown as a person. I was standing taller, and people could see it." (AA, 820)

This section deals with participants' experience, and non-experience of a changed sense of self. There are three themes:

- Transformation/not transformation – purpose and meaning
- Re-evaluating the self
- False selves, congruence, and the whole self

A theme which emerges powerfully from the data is that of the coachees' polarised experiences of personal change. Some participants experienced a profound shift in their sense of self and of themselves in the world as a result of their coaching and high potential development, while others seemed scarcely touched by it. There appears to be some relationship between actual change and confidence to change, as well as a relationship between change and conceptualisations about what coaching is for.

For Alice and Roger for example, there was a sense of coaching unlocking latent talent through instilling self-belief, and for Alice, the pay off was that coaching changed every aspect of her being in the world – her feelings and thoughts about herself, her physical presence, and her energy:

"I feel I blossomed, I, I've metaphorically I've grown as a person. I was standing taller, and people could see it, people were really noticing my posture, my engagement, my enthusiasm"
(AA, 820)

Where deep change occurred, it involved deep challenges to underlying emotional and psychological motivations:

"It's really challenged me to think about my motivation and the way that I am... It's very much looked about internal motivation and the background and my life experience to date that has led me to act in the way that I do, and I think I've fundamentally, I am still re-

evaluating that and understanding my purpose, understanding why I behave in certain ways"
(RP, 40).

This sense of a changed self was not limited to the workplace, but extended into the participants' whole life: *"I'm more focused on what I want, what's important to me, so as well as doing a lot of the conscious realising things and being intentional in work, I think it's made me more focused out of work in terms of knowing what's important"* (AA, 838)

For some participants however, there was no such transformatory change, and the sense of self appeared to remain fundamentally untouched. This might be because of a resistance to the *idea* of being changed *"I don't think I've changed as such, I'm more confident of my abilities. I'm more confident about what I do well."* (ZS, 658) (what is this, if not change?), or because coaching simply reinforced a pre-determined sense of direction: *"I think the coaching was good at that point because it reflected back what I was planning to do and reinforced it"* (AR, 956); or because of a fatalistic sense of the impossibility of change; *"I think I can't change [negative perceptions] where I am now because once you've got [them] you can't change them unless the regime changes or unless you go elsewhere... so I don't think the coaching could help with that"* (AR, 818); or because the conceptualisation of coaching was bounded in such a way that fundamental psychological issues were not on the agenda, as with Mike above. For some participants, a rigid, perhaps even complacent sense of self, mitigated against change:

"I think I am very self aware, that doesn't mean that I am good at fixing those things that I have awareness of, but certainly I don't believe I lack awareness, I am aware and that just makes me very uncomfortable sometimes with some of my perceived gaps or weaknesses but no, I don't think it's changed my perception of who I am or told me anything I didn't know about myself" (SW, 1209).

A theme emerged across participants about being seen differently – in other's eyes and/or in one's own. Here, the sense is not of personal change, but of a shift in the participants' sense of their position and relative worth in the landscape of work and home. Zena described, for example, how the coach helped her to recalibrate her perception of herself: *"She helped me shift how I was seeing myself in that organisation"* (ZS, 168). Being seen differently could be confirmatory evidence of the changed self: *"Quite a few of the comments I had was 'What the hell's happened to Alice? Suddenly she's woken up and she's decided she's ambitious'"* (AA, 818). Sometimes this new perspective resulted in a re-evaluation of the self: *"I have realised that in many ways I'm a role model of a working parent"* (ZS, 378).

Another theme which emerged was one of the split self, in which participants coped with the demands of different settings by splitting off different aspects of their personality. For Alice, this was a helpful conceptualisation of herself at home and at work:

"I think in terms of work. I like to feel that I'm a very authentic person, but at work I tend to, you know, I just keep going and going, and I can be quite relentless. And if I was trying to do that in my home life as well I'd just burn out. So actually for me I think it's really important that at work I can be a certain persona but still true to myself and my values. And when I'm at home, I'm actually still the same person, still the same values but I don't feel the need to be the leader, to feel that everything is resting on me" (AA, 875).

Whereas for Robert, the splitting process was less comfortable: *"I'm respectful of senior people and I act in a different way I think, and I'm not myself" (RP, 954)* and there was an aspiration to be more congruent *"I will erm, be seen to communicate in different ways. I think I will act in different ways and be, erm, er, I use the word authentic, but the real me" (RP, 935).* Coaching was a setting which had the potential to allow the true self to emerge, although as we have seen not all coachees saw it in this light or used it for that purpose: *"Because it's very easy to sit in the coaching session and talk about things that actually really aren't you and say you know, I need to do this and that's not what you need to do" (AR, 889).*

A transformed sense of self was by no means a given as an outcome of coaching. It was experienced by some participants, but resisted, or not conceived of as a potential outcome by others. Some participants experienced changes in the way they were seen, in their own eyes or in others', and some engaged with issues of congruence and authenticity. While coaching was seen by some as an arena in which to explore these issues, for others it was no such thing.

4.6. Summary

This group of six individuals who had experienced coaching in the context of talent management evidenced a wealth of different orientations towards their organisations, their careers, their coaching and coaches, and towards their own self-concept. While there is demographic homogeneity in the sense of the similarity of their circumstances, little homogeneity emerges at the psychological level.

What does emerge however, are a number of themes, in respect of which participants converge and diverge. In this chapter, I have firstly explored the range of participants' conceptualisations of career and ambition, and have noted that both can be problematic at the individual level. We have seen that ambition is a highly personal construct, not always involving features which would be recognisable from an organisational perspective, and that participants can have a sense of ambition as coming and

going in their lives as their sense of themselves and themselves-in-context changes. I have discussed the delicate balancing of risk and opportunity which can be a feature of high potential careers and the sense that some participants have that careers need constant attention. I have described participants' experiences of coaching, including a sense of comfort and discomfort, and posited a possible relationship between discomfort and change. Insight, perspective, and self-awareness have emerged as valued aspects of coaching for many. Most participants valued coaching, though with varying levels of enthusiasm. Participants appeared to experience coaches either relationally or from a utilitarian conceptualisation. In the former case, the relationship can be seen as being in service of learning. Utilitarian conceptualisations, in contrast, focus on the coach as playing various roles. The coach's credibility is key for many participants, and demographic affinity is one aspect of it. Above all, connection and rapport are vital to the viability of the working relationship in the perception of most participants. People designated as high potential have a range of different orientations towards the organisation, differing in their degree of agency. Preoccupations with reputation management have been explored, as have perceptions of talent management processes, which in many cases revealed a high degree of misalignment between participants' perspectives and those of the normative literature. I have discussed some participants' ability to exploit a lack of clarity in talent management for their own purposes. Finally, it had been observed that a transformed sense of self was not a given outcome of coaching, but could be experienced in some cases. We have learned that some coachees experience change as reflected in the ways they see themselves, or are seen by others, and that some engage with broad, whole-life issues of congruence and authenticity, though these are not universal concerns.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how coaches see this area of work, before discussing conclusions from a comparison of the two perspectives in my discussion chapter.

5. Findings – Coaches

In this section I will present the findings of this study in relation to coaches. As with coaching participants, I will do this by discussing five sample-level themes which emerged from data analysis:

- Coaches ideas about coaching: Freedom to work
- Views on the organisation: On the outside looking In
- Coaches views on talent management and experiences of people considered to be high potential
- The focus of the work: A clearer view
- Personal investment in coaching: Technicians of the human soul

As with the coaching participant sample, these themes were derived from a thematic grouping of the super-ordinate themes arising from the each of the coaching participants' accounts and the same treatment of themes in regard to comprehensiveness applies.

Again, each major theme is each presented in a section below, preceded by a table which shows the contributing super-ordinate themes, and examples of illustrative verbatim quotes. Finally, the findings from this sample group are briefly summarised. The attribution of quotes is treated as in the previous chapter.

5.1. Coaches ideas about coaching: Freedom to work

"I would say it is eclectic in order to get away with doing whatever I like" (JW, 82)

This section deals with coaches' ideas about coaching. There are three main themes:

- Ideas about coaching practice, and the distinctiveness or otherwise of high potential coaching
- Doing good work
- Methods of practice

Some coaches felt that there were differentiating factors in high potential coaching which contrasted with other contexts. However they gave no strong indication of working differently as a result. Coaches appeared to be divided in terms of their disciplines of coaching practice, depending on their training. They drew on a range of psychological and non-psychological sources. They were evaluative about their work, having a felt sense of what was good and bad. In terms of methods of work, they had differing views about the value of a structured process at an assignment level – varying around

their sense of its utility to their own way of working. They used a range of process tactics and diverged somewhat around their use of tools and models. The coaching relationship emerged as a key theme in their conceptualisations of good coaching, and phenomenological approaches appeared to be a key tool. The overarching themes here were of a desire for freedom and latitude to do good work conscientiously and on one's own terms, of a reluctance to be constrained, and of a powerful relational orientation.

Coaches differed somewhat in their views as to how or whether high potential coaching differed from other areas of coaching practice. Martin and Sarah, for example, felt that high potential coachees were more receptive and willing to be coached than other clients: *"They aren't quite so wedded perhaps to certain ways of looking at the world than they are when they're that much further down in a career"* (MT, 199). Gillian thought that people designated as high potential were generally young, and therefore simply had more to learn. However, no very strong sense emerged of coaches seeing themselves as working differently with this client group. The impression given was one of coaches seeing their practice as capable of flexing to accommodate the high potential coachee, not of high potential coaching as a discrete and distinctive activity. Jenny encapsulated this:

"So I'd have to go, is that a high potential bit, so I just had to think there for a moment when you asked about it, yeah okay so that would slot into that piece. So that tells me that in that way it can't be that different or else I would have a little flag that went, oh yes that's a different thing" (JW, 308).

For some coaches, an explicit practice commitment to a disinvestment in outcomes, to a phenomenological mode, and to a readiness to encounter what turned up enabled them to hold context lightly. The coachee being considered to have high potential, and the organisation's expectations, were simply another factor in the field:

"what makes the difference is the field, not the discrimination between coaching somebody who's not identified as high potential and coaching somebody who is identified as high potential. It's not so much the classification but it's the field conditions that operate at that point and in that moment in time in that context and what that then calls forth in me and in my practice and you know a bit, the gestaltist in me is kind of naturally quite suspicious of anything that tries to pin anything down and reify something" (SC, 944).

Imposed expectations resulting from the design of some talent management and coaching programmes could make them less satisfying than other work however. For David, pre-determined expectations were an affront to his desire to make a broad contribution:

"Compare [being involved in the set up of a programme] to being asked as a coach to come in and work with somebody who is high potential who's on a programme, has been in existence for some time, there's an expectation of what the coach will do, what the coachee will do. I found that more, not more, less satisfying actually. It felt more transactional even though the work wasn't necessarily transactional" (DS, 46).

For Gillian it created a distracting soundtrack in her head as she worked:

"sometimes with high potential programme, somehow it feels a bit rushed, and so I feel we sometimes have to get into that outputty thing. So I've got another thing going on in my head is, this can't just be a conversation Gillian, you know, he needs to have an action plan, I know that's what they're going to, you know, I'm going to be quizzed, he's going to be quizzed, where's the action plan. So from that point of view very programmatic coaching I find that's one of the shortfalls" (GG, 643).

There is a hint here that these constraints are perceived as being more likely to occur in a talent management context, but not that they are inevitable, or that they are experienced differently as constraints for that reason. We might imagine that any programme designed in this way would be experienced similarly. The issue therefore appears to be not one of a differentiated high potential coaching practice, but of the impact of external factors such as programme design on a practice which is largely similar in different settings.

Coaches in this sample had varying levels of psychological training: Stephen, David, and Jenny were all trained coaches, but Stephen and David were also trained psychotherapists and Jenny was training to be a process work practitioner. Martin, Gillian, and Sarah were trained as coaches, with no higher level training in psychology. I draw no evaluative conclusions from this in terms of one kind of training creating better coaches than another, but, without it being a hard and fast rule, the coaches' level of training did seem to create a watershed in terms of their conceptualisations of their practice. Coaches saw themselves as working with motivations, drives, emotions, and cognitions – the 'stuff' of psychology as it were. The key difference between the two groups seems to be the degree to which coaches use psychological concepts to *explicate* practice. On the one hand, psychology informs a foregrounded practice, on the other, practice is a lens on a foregrounded psychological orientation. In the former case, psychological theory seems to have been a helpful part of training, and perhaps a feature of practice-in-mind, but, explicitly at least, to show up rarely in practice or as a framing device. Where this is so, accounts of coaching lead with what might be called applications of psychology, such as balancing challenge and support, rather than fundamental theories:

"The phrase I often use is that I like to create a balance of support and challenge within the coaching environment... I tend to create quite an intense, sort of intimate coaching space with somebody and I am much more looking to find their sweet-spots, their kind of spike, look at where they're coming from, really understand them, and THEN apply that to the challenges they face. And within that, to challenge where appropriate" (SR, 30).

By contrast, some accounts are permeated with fluent, natural-seeming references to theoretical positions, giving an impression of coaching practice as just another way of being psychological:

"I draw on lots of different psychological and theoretical perspectives on human development, integrate my psychotherapy training which is Gestalt, so that's the phenomenological orientation of that and making meaning making a central feature of the coaching project is very central and then how I go about making meaning is very much in the context of a sort of a collaborative enquiry with coachees" (SC, 49).

Notwithstanding that they were highly reflective about it, there was a tentativeness in coaches' descriptions of their practice, and much qualification. This may be attributable to a reluctance to be pigeonholed, as in Jenny's tongue-in-cheek statement: *"I would say it is eclectic in order to get away with doing whatever I like"* (JW, 82), or perhaps to a commonly-shared sense that practice changes over time, and was therefore not capable of being pinned down: *"Well, it's evolving always."* (SC, 47) Perhaps too there was some tentativeness for some coaches about formal psychological and philosophical frameworks:

"I am probably more now influenced by philosophy than I am by psychology in terms of my approach and working in the present and being in the present moment and the constructs around that we put round ourselves, notwithstanding that there are the psychological bases to those but there's quite a lot that I think you take from philosophy" (MT, 76).

Coaches cited wide-ranging sources of inspiration, cherry picking what worked for them:

"...mine had got everything in it from formal trainings like the group psychodynamic end, organisational psychodynamic role consultation end of things, so system psychodynamics – big influence, to process work and process oriented psychology, which is what I'm studying now, and there's a big element of both of those things in there, right through to stuff what I've randomly read. So poetry, literature, basically stuff you know kind of about who it is and how it is to be a human being in the world, all comes into it" (JW, 91).

It may be indeed that eclecticism in practice makes simple, succinct definition difficult and when it comes to engaging with clients, coaches are pragmatic about how they explain themselves:

"I guess what's more important to people in organisations is what else you've done rather than what else you're informed by usually. So I'll talk to them about the sorts of people I've coached and the sorts of things that I've coached people on in a way which is comprehensible to them" (JW, 162)

Psychological influences cited included Gestalt, process work, systems, and group psychodynamics, existentialism, phenomenology, humanism, Jungian psychology, body psychotherapy and positive psychology. It was notable that coaches in this sample primarily cited influences which take a deep and broad view of human psychology – stretching back into the past and encompassing the whole life of the individual – rather than cognitive and behavioural approaches which focus on modifying unhelpful cognitions and/or presenting behaviour without looking for root causes in the psyche.

The ability to do good work was connected with the coach's freedom and a sense of permission and licence to work at depth. Stephen was on the look-out for conditions which provided an opening for working in this way:

"So part of what makes them high potentials is their drive but also potentially that can become an Achilles heel because it can interfere with their ability to bear and tolerate moments of not knowing. So I like that that can also provide a way into working with more psychological processes around resilience and self-esteem and identity and self image" (SC, 154).

For Jenny, freedom in practice was linked to being able to bring any and all of her influences to bear in service of the client:

"I've been doing some Shamanic training recently, not transferring things from that work into my coaching would be problematic, the point where I go, oh I don't know if I ought to be doing this in a coaching session, at the point where it's really clear that that is what's needed in that moment, if I don't do it then I'm holding something back from the client. So those internal struggles about that and the keeping stuff in boxes and the Great God of Coaching, they're the things that are challenging" (JW, 1115).

Coaches had a subjective approach to evaluation, consistent with a desire not to be pinned down and to the slipperiness of understandings of practice. A sense that good work had been done seemed to suffice in most cases: *"Because ultimately it's what sense they make of it that's that's important. If*

they make sense of it or that's helpful to them, that's fine." (MT, 804). For Stephen, a gestalt of impact was a measure of successful work:

"And these are my criteria these days for an effective outcome. They're kind of as much aesthetic as they are scientific and quantifiable. They're about a whole, a whole sort of gestalt of impact really and it might mean, it might lead to a very, very observable, palpable shift in behaviour; it might be very, very silent and invisible at one level to the system but profoundly meaningful to the leader, erm which in turn you know brings about a shift in their resolve or their commitment which ultimately benefits the organisation" (SC, 622).

Gillian thought that there were some shortcomings to subjective evaluation however;

"you can tell that they think you've done a good job when, 'Gillian could you coach...?', and then you get someone else who's either tricky or good, and so you get repeat business which is pretty indistinct way because you might be colluding with the people and actually they think you're a lovely person but you're not actually making anything change" (GG, 945).

At the individual assignment level, most coaches held the idea of a structured coaching process lightly. Structuring elements such as contracting, goal setting, action planning, and review appeared in their accounts as taken for granted and even essential, but did not seem to feature as intrinsically pivotal to their conceptualisations of their work – the sense was that the coaching process is not coaching. For some, structured approaches provided a sense of security in the early days of coaching which was no longer needed as confidence and experience grew:

"when I first went into a coaching relationship in 2008, I regarded it as 'I am a coach' and I've got this bunch of tools that I've learnt about and some experience and I have an approach and let's start. And that has has has, I'm not saying that I don't still have, you know, things that I do and elements of practice and elements of process and all the rest of it, erm but they're much less important now than the fact that it's just sort of who I am. And those sorts of boundaries have become less important to me" (MT, 763).

There was a similar view about tools and models:

"I think in the early days I used the tools, the psychometrics, as a bit of a comfort blanket, in as much as if that's what the, you know, if that's what the Myers Briggs said then I coached the profile rather than the person in front of me to be perfectly honest, and I see that in our own coach, the coach programme, I can see that with new coaches that the tools are everything when in fact the tools are a bit of a comfort blanket really and they're a useful

conversation starter but I don't feel anything like as dependent, and that's been a big shift in my coaching over the last 20 years" (GG, 88).

Nevertheless, structured approaches could provide a supporting scaffold for the coach less comfortable with messiness:

"I always do to keep the structure, because being in the ENTP, I could easily not have the structure. But funnily enough actually the T side of me, just, I know it makes sense to always stick to process. Stick to process Gillian whenever something's getting interesting and confusing for me, I think stick to process, don't move away too far" (GG, 495).

How coaches thought and felt about their clients was in itself a working method. They scrutinised and adjusted their feelings about the client, typically striving to sustain a positive orientation. Sometimes a conscious adjustment involved some effort:

"I just couldn't switch off that sense of a little bit of judgement. But, what I could do, having made that, is then kind of level the playing field (sorry, awful clichéd expression), by, you know... I truly do think, when you do coaching, you have to have unconditional positive regard. And I do have that" (SR, 451).

Empathy with the client also had the status of a working method. Coaches empathised at a direct, personal, emotional level: *"It comes back to empathy in a way in as much as I know I can get upset about myself if I'm talking about certain things" (MT, 296)*, or at an understanding level: *"I was thinking, I can't bear to be in the same room as that for very long, but it's the incongruence that creates that, and once you, once you can get beyond that level then there's something there which is actually very admirable" (JW, 855)*. They were concerned for their clients and cared for their wellbeing: *"I'm sort of guided by, you know, it's a principle of beneficence" (MT, 638)* and, as we shall see in section 5.5, were committed to do no harm in their interventions.

Relationships were crucial: *"I guess I've become aware of the power of the relationship much more than I ever have been" (DS, 685)* and conceived of as critical to the coachee, not just to the coach:

"People are more interested in how I make them feel in the moment that I'm with them, and erm erm erm really that's what I rely on I suppose because I work so relationally, I'm much more interested in the person and feeling that I am somehow going to be a useful relationship for them to have for whatever purpose, and a reliable relationship for them to have" (JW, 234).

It should be noted here that Jenny is describing herself *as* the relationship, not just as being in relationship. She embodies “relationship” for her client. The relationship is the medium through which the client can access the coach’s contribution: “[They] have an experience of being in a relationship with a supportive other who doesn’t have an agenda other than collaborative enquiry and action learning” (SC, 815), and model healthy relating, where coachees lack models: “Quite often people’s experiences in organisations leave them a little bit bruised in the relationship area I think, and that’s forgetting all of the personal stuff that they might have about relationships before they even get to organisational life.” (JW, 240). In the interests of the relationship, coaches work to create a close connection: “So I tend to create quite a intense, sort of intimate coaching space with somebody” (SR, 34).

Phenomenological sensitivity was also key to understanding the client: “The stuff that is happening right in the room at that moment either inside the client or in their imaginative world or in our interaction or in their cognitive process, that’s the core of where the juice is of the person” (JW, 97), and coaches would use their own phenomenological experience to further their understanding:

“I was feeling myself being hooked in because you’re so receptive, you know, you’re so pleasant and indeed asking me all these questions, writing everything down, it makes me feel tempted to go into this mode, so it makes me wonder what must other partners and clients, how does that play out with them” (GG, 549).

We have seen in this section that coaches do not appear to see high potential coaching as a highly distinct area of practice in terms of the way they work, though it can bring some extrinsic challenges which are different to those in other contexts. Coaches appear to be divided around the ways in which they see coaching practice in the context of a broader psychological understanding. We have seen that they often see themselves as drawing on eclectic sources for their practice, and that this appears to make practice rather hard to describe and communicate. Most coaches value their freedom to work at depth and to bring all their influences to bear. In many cases, they hold formal evaluation lightly, but have a felt sense of what good work is. They vary in their views on the value of structure in their work. The quality of the relationship with the client is crucial for most and coaches can draw in various ways on phenomenological information to inform their understanding.

5.2. Views on the organisation: On the outside looking in

“One of the things I’m interested in is I suppose unlocking the potential of a whole system and that includes everybody potentially in the system” (SC, 878)

This section deals with coaches ideas about the organisations they work with, based on four super-ordinate themes:

- A focus on the whole system
- Collusion and triangulation
- The unbounded role
- Truth telling

Coaches in this sample consistently evidenced sensitivity to the systems context in which they were working, though their attitudes and feelings towards those systems, and elements within them, were varied and sometimes ambivalent. They experienced uncomfortable pressures to collude, either with the organisation or with the coaching client. They conceptualised their roles as having the potential to contribute beyond the boundaries of the coaching assignment in some cases. In some cases too, they saw themselves as truth-tellers, calling out examples of egregious unfairness or deliberate obfuscation.

In most instances, coaches were ambitious to make a contribution at the systemic level. Sometimes this was through the agency of the individuals in the system, as summarised by Stephen: *“One of the things I’m interested in is I suppose unlocking the potential of a whole system and that includes everybody potentially in the system”* (SC, 878). In others, the desire was to influence directly. Indeed for some, an assignment was not satisfying unless it allowed for this possibility of a higher level contribution:

“I’m also very attracted to work where there is an opportunity to influence the organisation beyond just the coach/coachee work and to somehow have a relationship with the organisation which shares learning from the coaching in a different arena. And so that “coach for hire” type of doesn’t always do that” (DS, 113).

The characteristics of this impulse to make a contribution were differentiated by the degree to which coaches felt themselves, or desired to be, involved in the organisation. For some, it was borne out of a self-concept as systems specialists, *“so I you know, I have sort of a particular view of organisations as complex adaptive systems, so probably quite more post-modern, post-conventional, less mechanistic linear assumptions about organisations”* (SC, 81). For others the stance was less theoretical and disinterested and appears to have arisen from a more managerial/leadership mindset of seeking to directly influence the organisation, with emotional investment in it:

“So the work I’m doing with an electronics company I’ve got, which is a much smaller company, it’s intimate, there’s a sense that I can feel a sense of influence at several levels

with the client, the coaching client and also with the organisation and there's a valuable interplay between those two things" (DS, 121).

There was a sense that coaches felt that they had a unique insight, not available to other actors in the system: *"I think coaches, my experience, coaches quite often get to see more of the reality of organisational life and the impact that it has on human beings than any other people in organisations. We get to see something of the human soul"* (JW, 1016). A whole-organisation perspective was also valuable as providing essential diagnostic insight for coaching assignments:

"in this case the board is actually quite stifling and holding a lot of power and responsibility, and [high potential coachees] don't quite see what opportunities there are for influence in leadership in the way that the board is sending them the message that there is, so there's a bit of a mismatch and that's what's creating a bit of frustration" (DS, 432)

In some instances, the impulse to make a contribution at a systems level led to an unboundedness about the coach's role, which felt more or less comfortable, depending on the concept-in-mind of the role of a coach. Jenny, for example, was happy to combine her executive coaching role with that of a quasi-OD director, and, in this instance, experienced no tension in doing so: *"They've never felt themselves to be big enough to have their own OD person, they've always bought it in...I coach all of the internal board, and giving them some advice on developmental issues generally"* (JW, 475). Sarah, on the other hand, felt compromised in her understanding of her role and the ethical risks she was taking in giving performance feedback to a coachee:

"I've ended up sometimes feeling that I have to step outside of the coach role and do a little bit more of a picking up job before then... Sort of... You know, I mean, and actually it is a coach role, it's just... You're taking a bit of a risk as a coach, really, by doing that" (SR, 580).

A key issue, as identified in section 5.1 above, is that of where coaches perceive their loyalties to lie when dealing with actual or potential misalignment between the interests of coachees and the organisation. The opportunities for a sense of divided loyalties are self-evident in a process in which a coach works confidentially with an individual on an assignment paid for by an organisation which may have an interest in specific outcomes. Invitations to collusion, and organisational set ups were legion: *"He was quite an indiscreet HR sponsor, if the truth be told. So he was constantly saying 'What do you think? What do you think? What do you think?' And I, my preference was to talk about the people that I thought shone out, rather than that didn't. So that's how I handled it."* (SR, 473)

For Martin, if sides needed to be taken, he knew which side he was on:

"for me by my, the individual sitting opposite me has primacy so I always work from the perspective and I contract as honestly as I can with organisations around the fact that, that I'm meeting the individual's needs, not the organisation's needs. And yes, the organisation is paying me but on the basis that if I'm meeting the individual's needs ultimately it will be in the interest of the organisation" (MT, 437).

Client-centredness was even potentially subversive:

"Well when you're in a room with another person and there's just the two of you and you're bound by confidentiality, then what happens happens. And I, because my primary loyalty and interest is always to the person who I'm in that room with, always, and I'm always clear about that with organisations, who always nod and go, oh yes of course because they don't quite understand what it means I think. Then wherever the person ends up going is where I end up going with them, and quite often that will not be really what the organisation might expect is happening in that room, I suspect" (JW, 893).

Stephen noted, however, that tensions between organisational and individual agendas were potentially creative:

"So you know there's that tension between the organism's right to integrity and the organisation's right to integrity and that, the anxiety often is where there's divergence and it can feel like one or t'other is threatened but I actually think if there can be a holding of that tension transparently, then I think both coachee and system stand to benefit enormously because it generates new perspectives and new knowledge" (SC, 664)

Coaches evidenced a consistent vigilance about these potential tensions and the risk of being compromised by them. They dealt with the risk in a variety of ways, for example by using practice methods of contracting and agenda agreement: *"You know pretty much in the usual ways with you know conversations, contracting or scoping or alignment or misalignment conversations with whoever the key players are in the piece."* (SC, 636), or by driving out hidden agendas by close questioning:

"I kept saying over and over again 'look I can give that feedback that you're telling me you've given to her, I can give that feedback to reinforce. I could find out if that's how she's, it's landed. Is that what you want me to do?' 'Absolutely Gillian, I absolutely know it's landed.' And then I said, 'so this is what I would be saying then as part of this. I had a conversation with Jerry and Jerry says this so how does that...' 'No, no don't have that conversation, don't have that conversation.' And so, you know, I've headed it off by really clarifying with the

client what exactly do you want to happen here because do you want her to get that feedback now via me, or do you going to have that conversation first?" (GG, 779)

Indeed, coaches often saw it as part of their role to be truth tellers – outing misalignments and political manoeuvring, especially where they felt it was potentially damaging to clients:

"I was raising the fact with the MD and the HR person that actually this person wasn't surely being coached because they were high potential despite what was being said, actually they were being coached because they had major problems and they had psychological problems and they were getting therapy somewhere else, and I was a way of managing the impact of this person on the organisation, and it wasn't really fair for them to be coached under the aegis of a high potential programme when the person was being coached as a person who was a problem, there needed to be some kind of honesty about it" (JW, 957).

Telling the truth could be seen as facilitative to greater alignment between coachee and organisation, as Gillian illustrated:

"I think I am sensitive about recognising where the company wants the person to be, recognising where the individual is, and in a really honest way, squaring those by squaring with each of them that we need to get this aligned. You know, so I don't operate with a different agenda going on, and then don't tell them" (GG, 772).

For most, the sense of being made use of to further an agenda was confronting to their construct-in-mind of good work:

"I started to feel as if I was probably being, I was probably being a bit disingenuous by going this is good work and useful work that I could do because yes it did help the individuals, but quite often it was kind of erm aimed a particular point in a particular way, it didn't necessarily fit with what the individual really needed coaching on at that point. So I either ended up coaching the individual in something that wasn't quite in line with the programme or I ended up coaching the person and probably both of us thinking, yeah this is a bit unsatisfactory really in some way" (JW, 323).

It could be experienced as a confrontation to one's values:

"what I find confronting is where there clearly is a marked dissonance and where the organisation is enlisting my services with a very clear mandate to whip the other, the individual into shape. I find that personally problematic, for a host of reasons erm...not least

because I think if there's that degree of expectation and coercion then it's a value of mine that, you know, I don't believe in that degree of coercion" (SC, 708).

For some, the challenge was so intolerable that it caused them to avoid the risk altogether:

"I have turned down an assignment where I'm being brought in or I've been suggested to be brought in where effectively the organisation is doing it to say 'Well there you go you see, we gave him a coach and it did...you know we've tried everything so, [claps hands] we have the opportunity to exit'" (MT, 702).

It was notable though, that where a coach felt more aligned with the organisational perspective, co-option was not so confronting *"where I happen to agree with the organisation's working models of leadership or agree or am interest...or find them interesting it's not so demanding" (SC, 723)* and the coach could even represent the company to the coachee:

"I felt a real challenge as a coach, when a coachee would arrive in the company and would begin to really find it, slag it off, this isn't working right, nobody gets anything done round here, and it would be a very critical view of the business. And whilst I could see that organisationally a lot of what my coachee clients might well be observing was accurate. I think having got the real depth of insight at [company] that I had in that case gave me a lot of confidence to be able to say hold on a minute let's just look behind the obvious here. What might be going on here? How is this environment that you are finding so challenging, what are you learning from this? What is it asking of you?" (DS, 307).

Many coaches in this sample had an awareness of the systems context in which they were working and often had a desire to contribute at a systems level, either through the agency of their coaching client or directly by intervening. Coaches could see themselves as having a unique perspective from which to contribute and a permeable sense of the boundaries of their role which gives them latitude to act in a variety of ways which are not always confined to the coaching assignment. Some experience difficult dilemmas around divided loyalties and pressures to collude and they have various ways of dealing with them, of which truth-telling is one and a primary loyalty to the coachee is another. These dilemmas can manifest in the high potential coaching context when coaches are drawn into politicking around high potential nominations particularly where they experience this as inappropriate or unfair to their coachees. Coaches are not necessarily totally client-centred however, and can line up on the side of the organisation where it speaks to their own values and interests.

5.3. Coaches views on talent management and experiences of people considered to be high potential

“Rickety rungs and dodgy, dodgy moments” (SC, 266)

In this section I will explore coaches’ experiences of talent management programmes and people considered to be high potential. There are four themes:

- Experiences of talent management
- Experiences of coaching in talent development programmes
- Experiences of people designated as high potential
- Experiences of the coachee seeing the coach

Coaches were ambivalent about talent management. They were critical of political manoeuvring and the short-sightedness of some decisions, but had a pragmatic understanding of the pressures which led to them. Coaches were concerned that talent management approaches paid too little regard to possible negative impacts on the coachee:

“that’s where I start to fall out a bit with talent and potential programmes because there’s not quite enough thought given to that human element of what if we expose these things about people to themselves. What if we make them feel vulnerable. How are we going to deal with the fall out?” (JW, 859).

Stephen noted that talent development programmes lacked any element of risk assessment:

“I was thinking about how erm in lots of the personal development work I’ve done over the years that’s more psychological or transpersonal, there’s always when they take you on, you have to fill out a very detailed form about your mental health and how you’d look after yourself if things got really rocky and if you didn’t make it, what would it mean and I don’t know any high pot programme that asks that question. There’s kind of in the discourse, there’s just an assumption that you know success is the only possible outcome” (SC, 300).

Just as coaches found talent management decisions problematic on occasions, so they converged around a theme of frustrating experiences of the structure, focus, and pacing of talent development programmes. Sarah was critical of the way talent management programmes were managed: *“You know, most talent development programmes that I’ve been part of, there’s usually a number of people and usually they’re much better managed at the beginning of the programme than they are by the end” (SR, 283)*, and Gillian shared her concerns about poorly thought-through design

"we did 32 individuals over 20 days, each of them got two sessions. Each session was two hours long. Did I think that the organisation, there was room for triangulation or, no, it was like, you know, connecting with someone quickly on Myers Briggs and 360 degree feedback and then making sure they had an action plan at the end of it. And it was fraught with difficulty because some of them were experiencing a complete misalignment between how they, view of themselves and indeed been told they're on a high potential and then getting feedback that didn't match that" (GG, 794).

Stephen too felt that the design of some talent programmes was at odds with his conceptualisations of the conditions for development:

"And some programmes that I've been associated with you know, they have particular stage gates almost where you do this, you have all of this suite of psychometrics done and then if depending on that, you progress to the next stage and then on the basis of how you do that, you progress. So on the ladder, for people, there are rickety rungs and dodgy, dodgy moments erm and that that that I think can be a particular feature of being hot housed in that way. It's like there isn't quite so much internal space to discover your own process as it unfolds. There's a kind of a pressure to get some places fast and when one of the developmental movements is around changing one's internal mental constructs, mindset, identity, these things don't necessarily happen quickly or at the pace that the structure of the programme might insist upon" (SC, 261).

Such programmes could also be constraining on the freedom to do good work:

"There needs to be a bit of space for [a broader dialogue] to happen so that I can also coach the person to what they actually want and need coaching on at the moment as part of that process. And if you've got a very boxed-in idea and a kind of check box output thing going on alongside that, that can really get in the way of it so it's why I always have a bit of a, [sniffs] what is there room for in this for human beings alongside the legitimate organisational purpose that's required?" (JW, 708).

As a result, sometimes coaching was seen as not the best intervention where there was an expectation of moving quickly through a development agenda: *"I don't think coaching's necessarily what's being looked for quite often, they might be better off developing, I don't know, having some other kind of development work supporting people in that context where it is much more...tchk tchk tchk..." (JW, 720).* Just occasionally, coaches experienced pressure from the coachee, which was rather discomfiting:

"I remember having one specific conversation with somebody about it, who was saying: 'Oh, oh, you know, it's been good, but I didn't quite get what I needed to get'. And 'Well, what did you want to get?'. He said: 'Well I wanted you to tell me what I need to do to get promoted'. Yeah...It's an astonishing thing to have somebody say that to you at the end of a programme" (SR, 298).

War stories of organisational U turns and playing politics with talent management were common: Sarah was sufficiently frustrated with a talent decision about a coachee to remonstrate with the client:

"With one person, you know... it was real sort of, you know, possible kind of chief exec, really high potential and chair had asked her if she was up for it, and, you know... And we've been working to that for a good while, and then today it's a... 'Well, we don't think so really, we don't think she's really got it in her you know, and she's never really [done] the P&L stuff'. And I thought she has, she's been running a P&L for years, how can you say that? And I know this HR director well and she said: 'Yeah, but she can't do the city stuff'. And I said: 'Well, no first appointment CEOs can do the city stuff, unless they've been a CFO. You knew that. So you could support her. You could support her to do that. So why have you gone cold? 'Cause you could do that. You could put her on a course to do that. There's people that can teach you how to do that, in fact a CFO can do that with her if she's the CEO for a period of time. You know, come on'. And she said: 'Well, no... We think first appointment's somewhere else, we think we're not at a first appointment CEO kind of stage'. Which is an interesting one then, it gives you, you know... You kind of had somebody for a couple of years working towards that, arguably within that organisation, that's why they're supporting her. And then, kind of, you know, she'll have to go elsewhere to get that" (SR, 649).

Sometimes the politics of the situation are an open secret, in which the coach is implicated:

"I feel a little bit set up you know when they've been told they're a high potential, the feedback doesn't match that at all, and why were they put on the programme, you know. But the HR people know, so they usually tip me off and say this is going to be really uncomfortable Gillian because actually they're saying they're high potential but you know what, they're not" (GG, 830).

But coaches were also pragmatic about the pressures on organisational stakeholders which led to political manoeuvring, recognising that it takes some courage to stand up to them:

"I feel bad for the individual, you know, I feel the organisation's failing them a bit here. I would prefer people to be more honest, but I'm also pragmatic Alison and I can see why they do that. And so I stand back and I think well even if, because one or two of them were clearly not high potential but no-one's had the guts to say they're not" (GG, 811).

There was a sense amongst these coaches that high potential programmes were essentially based on the promotion of the organisation's agenda, not on the needs of individuals, but also that this was a legitimate endeavour: *"I don't think high potential programmes I mean are there fundamentally to be grounds for growth and learning for individuals, they're there to serve the primary task of the organisation, or they should be" (JW, 688).* Gillian's ideas about the purpose of high potential coaching come purely from an organisational perspective:

"I think high potential coaching is to get them there faster. You know, it's to invest in them" (GG, 739),

However her account also hinted at high potential programmes as a kind of fantasy of order and predictability which actually had nothing to do with the realities of career success:

"I said 'look you're not getting anything out of this are you?', and he said...it was literally after the first session, he came in, he was completely cynical about the whole programme, at the end of the day for him and his experience is correct, at the end of the day you get made a partner because you bring in the money so it's nothing to do with all this crap" (GG, 264).

Notwithstanding their understanding of organisational pressures, it is not surprising, given what we have seen of coaches' identification with their coachees' interests that they should sometimes find themselves at odds with an organisation's aims, even where such aims are acknowledged as legitimate:

"And so I think you know, as a coach and as an organisation we might sometimes be at odds with each other in that I respect the organisation's reason for being there and what it wants to do with people, but I can't quite support that in the moment in a coaching session because I am not the organisation, and I have a broader interest in that human being who is in front of me" (JW, 688).

Indeed for Jenny, this was such a difficult issue that she had chosen not to work on high potential programmes any more. Sarah's tactic was to use her reputation and leverage with the organisational client to advocate for a coachee who she felt was under-appreciated

"I think it's part of what I'm there to do. Not from a... whoop whoop, you know, hasn't he done well, you know, but it's a... let's talk about what Milo did when he spoke at the European Convention for la di da. You know... Milo, do you wanna talk through how you got people on side, before you've even got there? So partly that's just making, prompting him to sell, to say well actually I did do... But, you know, it's making them hear it, making them see it, through a certain lens" (SR, 1187).

Some coaches had a textbook construct-in-mind of people designated as high potential: *"He erm...he's...he's really keen to get feedback, very extrovert, talks a lot, thinks through things, very structured, organised, and quite a straightforward person, you know" (GG, 318) and "so you're often sitting with somebody that's highly engaged. There's often a sense of urgency and pace, which I respond very well to, I really like that, as a coach. And there's often, you know, they are quite keen to do stuff, you know" (SR,270).* But they differentiated between these "real" high potentials and political nominees, who could make for disengaged clients, and could themselves play politics: *"The right thing to do here, for everybody involved is to front this up and say "why are you doing this?", and he said, "because I'm being made to" (GG, 304).* For, other coaches, potential is an altogether more fugitive concept. For Jenny, it is only in the eye of the beholder: *"My fundamental take on potential is that potential is projection. I think when you look at somebody and go he's got potential, generally there's a lot of projection in that" (JW, 649).* For others, potential is a sui generis construct within an organisation at a moment in time, not a stable, consistent and objective reference point. As a result, an individual can be a high potential in one organisation, but not in another:

"You know, if he had stayed at that organisation, he certainly wasn't a high potential. There's a whole piece around here in terms of what we what we sort of mean by this and certainly my experience would be that I've come a way, a long way from a sort of...which is where organisations still you know instead of saying well what's high potential? People need to define it and in defining it, you can define it in ways actually which might be meaningful organisationally because that's what the organisation wants... 'This is what's important to our organisation to drive it forward and de facto if these people have got buckets of this, they've got potential and if they show lots of it early on, they're high poten...' whatever, that whole thing is is pretty flawed relative...it may not be flawed for that organisation at that moment in time but it may be flawed relative to that individual in terms of who they actually are and what they can actually potentially achieve" (MT, 898).

Being designated as a high potential is recognised as being potentially problematic:

"when people are being fast-tracked or being singled out, it can be hugely motivating for them but it can also be quite anxiety-making given that a lot of them have "be perfect"

drivers. So part of what makes them high potentials is their drive but also potentially that can become an Achilles heel because it can interfere with their ability to bear and tolerate moments of not knowing” (SC, 151).

People designated as high potential however were not helpless victims of their circumstances: *“And she was also ‘I kind of want babies at some point, so maybe I’ll do it now quickly, before [my boss] gets a, before he, the next sort of possible job for him comes up’. Or whatever. And she was also very canny” (SR, 764).*

It has been seen that coaches could be ambivalent about talent management, being concerned about the potential for negative impacts on and risk to their clients. Some found talent management programmes badly managed on occasions and sub-optimally designed in terms of leveraging the benefits of coaching. Coaches were pragmatic about the politics they saw being played out. Around “highpotentialness” and talent as concepts, they varied in their conceptualisations, sometimes seeing potential as a discoverable “out there” set of qualities and sometimes as a projection on the part of organisational stakeholders.

5.4. Focus of work: A clearer view

“I think good work for me...is building a relationship where the individual can come to make use of coaching to have an experience of some kind of expansion” (SC, 609).

This section discusses how coaches see the focus of their work with people designated as high potential. There are two themes:

- A clearer view – growth, congruence, self insight, the whole self
- Receptivity and readiness

A theme which emerged powerfully from coaches’ accounts was an aspiration for their coaching clients to grow as human beings. Sometimes this idea of growth figures as expansion – the client figuratively grows in ways which seem almost physical:

“I had a client...and where we started was very much in the context of, you know, ‘I’m a high achiever and I’m very good and I get things done’, but very low levels of emotional control for all sorts of reasons and actually just taking a wider more expansive feel about where does this fit in your life and how important is this, diffused quite a lot of that” (MT, 803).

In talking about an “expansive feel”, Martin conjures an image of the coachee’s *sensing* of themselves spreading out into their lives. In the creation of a roomier, less tightly-bounded sense of self, somehow the tension and driven-ness of high achievement dissipates. For Stephen too, the expanded person was a better person:

“I think good work for me is building a relationship with a leader in the context of coaching, and this would apply also to the high potential work, is building a relationship where the individual can come to make use of coaching to have an experience of some kind of expansion. I mean that’s very high level and generic but where they have an experience of being changed in the process for better” (SC, 609).

“Some kind of expansion” is enough – there is no prescribed way of growing. Rather the sense is that any growth is good growth. Embedded in these conceptualisations was an assumption that personal growth was a legitimate object for coaching. Perhaps not surprisingly therefore, a narrow goal focus, on the part of coachee or organisation, though it could bring clarity for some, was seen as antithetical to good coaching by other coaches:

“I think what did affect the work was often what often felt to me to be a preoccupation with a very clear goal which is ‘I want to make partner’ and no-one ever put it this way but it was almost like ‘And if you don’t help me make partner, you’re not much good as a coach’. So the kind of broader learning that we might experience in a coaching relationship could have been a risk in that situation” (DS, 78).

It follows that many coaches saw themselves as working at the level of the coachee’s self and with their whole life: *“I like to keep things quite spacious so that we can really track what of the client’s narrative is revealing of certain aspects of their sense of self” (SC, 73).* Though happy to do it, Martin saw that such work as at the edge of his construct-in-mind of coaching:

“I was really dealing at the boundaries of where coaching begins and ends relative to dealing with broader fundamental issues around that individual in terms of... in terms of going through their life story and what happened to them, what they thought made them who they were” (MT, 267).

For David, such work appeared to be a natural outcome of coaching:

“so if we’re working on fear of failure, my experience is that often clients will often, if if, that they will take that quite holistically, beyond the boundaries of their organisational, their professional life so I had a guy the other week who said, you know where I experience this

most is in the relationship I have with my wife. So it becomes a much more holistic stance that we take with each other" (DS, 445).

David felt that this came particularly naturally when working with high potential clients:

"Now I'm not saying that that doesn't come up in non-hipo work, but I think my experience has been that in working with people for whom there's a real expectation of performance, there also tends to be quite a focus and a desire to embrace them as whole beings, not just as professional people who turn up at work. And that is incredibly welcomed by the coachee, that actually I can talk about me here without having to pigeon hole me and only talk about the me that it's working for, [company] or [company] whatever it might be, I can talk about the whole me" (DS, 452).

An interesting linguistic elision has developed here; what David appears to be saying is that the organisation's expectations were that coachees would be embraced as whole beings. What is also tentatively revealed however is David's own desire to embrace the whole person in his coaching relationship.

Much as they appeared to enjoy it, working at deeper levels of sense-making with the client was not taken for granted. Rather, coaches saw themselves as hinting, inviting, and communicating their willingness to take on deeper issues. Stephen's account in particular evoked an impression of his wanting to be invited over a threshold into a more meaningful space: *"I do find ways to communicate that those more personal and private gremlins can be explored if the client wishes to, clients will often talk about that" (SC, 308).* Ultimately though, for Stephen and for others, it was the client who set the direction *"wherever the person ends up going is where I end up going with them" (JW, 899).*

The primary way in which expansion and growth are facilitated is through the coachee's development of clearer insight. This might be said to be the focus of change for most coaches. Insight might be about the coachee's own self: *"So I'm interested in people seeing more of themselves in whatever context they're in" (JW, 662),* about their circumstances, about the system in which they work or about their whole-life story. Clearer insight can be promoted through a disruption to a coachee's taken for granted self-concept:

"you might see somebody who's been some kind of blue eyed boy or blue eyed girl and followed their leader. And you sort of, you know, you're kind of prising them apart saying "what about you, what are your thoughts, how will you do this?" And I really love that kind of moment to something where they stop and think 'God...'" (SR, 541).

It may come through a higher level of engagement with already-known self-knowledge: *"It was stepping it from awareness to real insight in terms of potential impact...They were getting it but they weren't really hearing it"* (MT, 232). Or it may arise from slowing down the impulse to action in the interest of a fuller experience of a different sense of self:

"I try and say, look you know, at the end of this session I'm very happy that we talk about actions for you to go away with, but I do want to live a little bit longer with experiencing who you are and what you are before we jump to that, because we could be jumping to the wrong conclusions" (GG, 382).

For Stephen, coming at an issue from several directions increased insight:

"So you know normalising those experiences of not knowing, those experiences of uncertainty, maybe educating them around the mechanics of the super-ego, giving them a way of understanding and thinking about their experience of doubting, working with them to explore what their real motivations are, what failure would mean, how they would support themselves" (SC, 284).

Metaphors of unpacking and exploring were common, and the sense was of the client's orientation towards an issue changing as a result of a clearer, less occluded view: *"But through the processes of unpacking that and exploring it, it usually shifts"* (MT, 423).

If insight-building was a primary focus of coaching, knowledge and skills acquisition was very much secondary – none of the coaches talked at any great length about imparting models and theories of leadership or management. Models and business theories might be an additional resource:

"so if you're sort of thinking about well what might help an individual in that situation other than to deepen their own awareness and insight around it, then introducing to them something like the ladder of inference or something like that, as a tool, is quite a useful thing for them to do" (MT, 647)

There was however a sense that for most coaches, this was second order work: *"So I sometimes do some basic business education in coaching managers, give them some theory and some quick lessons on dealing with difficult people, or thinking about management levels or whatever"* (JW, 665).

As well as the more expanded sense of self at the broadest level, coaches turned their insight building focus on to some specific issues. Stephen had a particular interest in shame, which formed a lens through which he saw his work: *"Because I'm really interested in shame process, to help clients*

understand how they're constructing an image of themselves as inferior can be really helpful" (SC, 312). Sarah frequently worked with clients' confidence: *"I think there are people that are blocked through confidence issues, which are wonderful to fall upon as a coach and unpick with people"* (SR, 998).

For Sarah, a more conscious and intentional approach to relating could give a client greater choice:

"he wasn't belligerent, that's far too strong, but he was a bit like 'well if they don't like it they don't like it. I'll go somewhere else'. I'm like, "no, make yourself more likeable, you're really likeable, make these people like you. You've got no choice, you know, there's no point in being a little rebel, just, you know, you're here, dress the part, do the job, be as good as you can be. If you leave – you leave, but don't leave because you've alienated people. Leave cause you wanna leave"" (SR, 1161).

For Gillian, greater clarity of insight helped clients feel a more comfortable sense of alignment of organisational expectations:

"Everybody's perception is right yeah? So that is the company's perception. That is that person's perception, and how do I align those perceptions, not to make them fall into line and not to make the company see but to make them see, coexist comfortably, and what part of this that the company perception would help to, if there's a blind spot for them, what part of that....And I like, I I I like the challenge to align that" (GG, 760).

For Stephen, a capacity for ongoing reflexivity is a psychological support to the client's changing self in context: *"One of the things that I'm personally really interested in is how individuals experience themselves in their context and how they support themselves psychologically to adapt and to remain thoughtful under pressure"* (SC, 134), and the exploration of negative experiences could be turned to good account in helping the client to deal with experiences of failure:

"it kind of was able to catalyse a really fruitful conversation about how they experienced notions of limitation in themselves, how they, um what their experience was of not being rated as high as their peers, what they could learn from that about their susceptibilities in that area" (SC, 349)

Not all clients were receptive to coaching however, or at least to coaching on the coach's terms, and coaching was not always the right intervention. For Jenny, prospective clients could be mistrustful, or downright resistant:

"The people who really prod [about qualifications] are quite often people who are more suspicious of what the coaching's for I think, people who want to know if your psychological qualifications mean that there's something wrong with them, or the people who, or the people who want to, who don't really want coaching, who want to use your lack of qualifications as a reason not to really engage with the coaching" (JW, 261).

The sense was that coaching couldn't be done where the coachee didn't want to do it: *"And so quite a few of them were people that were a bit uncoachable actually really and they told us, they briefed us that they were uncoachable but they had to offer it. And so that that was quite tricky."* (GG, 996). Martin noted that people designated as high potential were mistrustful of organisations' motives in running high potential development programmes, and that their mistrust militates against receptive openness:

"They don't...particularly when I'm working on development programmes, they don't trust the organisation. Once they don't trust the organisation, they don't trust the organisation" (MT, 454).

For Stephen, coaching could be the wrong kind of intervention for some people:

"given her personality, even though it was not a remedial contract, she heard it and experienced it as 'there's something wrong with me' because of her own kind of maturity and identification with an idealised image of herself, so that anything that suggested she wasn't functioning as was required was quite painful for her" (SC, 218).

It has been noted here that many coaches had growth as a primary goal of coaching in terms of their own aspirations for their clients, but that such an effect was not taken for granted. Insight generation was seen by some as being helpful for focusing on a range of issues, such as shame, confidence, relationships, and failure – in that sense, "insight" was an enabler for wide-ranging conversations. Knowledge and skills acquisition, and the deployment of models and theories, were very much secondary in most coaches' thinking about their work. Some coaches noticed that not all clients were receptive to coaching, and that it may not even have been the right intervention for some.

5.5. Coaches' personal investment in coaching: Technicians of the human soul

"I can't believe I'm getting paid for this" (MT, 101).

In this section, I will explore the ways in which coaches make sense of their coaching at a personal level. There are four super-ordinate themes:

- The joy of coaching
- How can I help?
- The coach, me
- How the coachee sees me

Coaches in this study loved coaching: *"Well the first thing I want to say is I really enjoy it you know"* (SC, 109). It gave them intense pleasure: *"So you ask what's it like, it's an incredible privilege, it's incredibly interesting, absorbing, challenging"* MT, 103), and it also drew the best out of them: *"I don't really have bad days coaching, cause it really is my thing and, you know, I'm often in flow"* (SR, 901). They enjoyed opportunities to relate in a special way:

"I just really enjoy I get a lot for my personally for myself from being in this sort of space in terms of having the opportunity to have conversations with people, to listen to people, to engage with people, to work with people, to form a relationship in this particular way with people over a period of time and that that the sense I make of that is I just get, I derive a huge sense of satisfaction from that, almost no matter what the outcome of the coaching assignment is" (MT, 929).

Coaches could be stimulated by difficult situations. *"You know, you know, you know that I'm not one not to shy away from things that are complex and messy. In fact, I sort of wake up, I kind of go a bit sleepy when things are just run of the mill"* (SC, 693).

Notwithstanding this pleasure in coaching, it seems to bring with it a tension around a paradox of impact. It is common for coaches to hold a theory in mind that it is the coachee who succeeds or fails:

"what do you think your role in this is anyway relative to what you're doing relative to what they have to do? And I always remember Tim Gallwey saying at a talk once that, which is quite grounding when you're starting as a coach, it doesn't really matter what you do, they'll get there anyway or they'll just get there by a different route" (MT, 125).

The espoused belief that "it doesn't matter what I do" may be a useful defence against self-doubt and hubris. On the other hand, what does it say about the coach's impact? Stephen felt that he had risen above the issue: *"I still will obviously work to my best ability and bring the best of myself to the extent that I can to all my client engagements but I'm less attached to the outcome being a reflection on me because the more systemically I think, the more I see there are so many variables"* (SC, 591). But for others, what emerges from time-to-time is a kind of psychological sleight of hand, in which coaches downplay their contribution, while taking a secret pride in it: *"And when clients have said... 'Ah, you*

know, you did it again!' I always, ALWAYS say it isn't about me, it is about them, the coaching just brings out what's good about them and... But I've always also secretly been a bit chuffed" (SR, 383).

From coach participants' accounts, coaching seems to appeal to a powerful motivation to help. There is a notable and touching theme of care for the client. Sometimes this emerges as a construct-in-mind of coaches as supporting their clients: *"I think they would see me as [pause] as supportive and through my own personal style, and this is probably a strength and a weakness, as sort of being on their side"* (MT, 579). Indeed Jenny figuratively takes the burden of her clients' problems: *"But I think people feeling pretty quickly that you, that really whatever they want to bring is permissible and that you are a reliable person to bear the weight of what their concerns are"* (JW, 244). On the other hand, working with people relationally and at depth means that the potential to do harm is alarming: *"I was kind of going, oh my God, what if he doesn't come back from the car park, what if he never comes back into the organisation again and I've just broken their best sales guy?"* (JW, 798). Coaches will go to some lengths to protect the client from reputational or psychological damage, as illustrated by Gillian, who decided not to report back that a coachee had shouted at her and behaved inappropriately:

"I just thought, she's been sent to me by the chief executive because she's blown up at people and she's now blown up at me... well, I just thought do you know what she'll get fired. So I just thought I can't, I don't want to go that far. I don't want to hold out that far that I'm actually going to go back to the organisation and tell them on that occasion that I didn't want to continue coaching, so I said look, as far as I'm concerned, let's consider it over. But I'll leave you to inform the organisation" (GG, 904).

Coaches do not appear to be only motivated simply by a disinvested desire to help others however, or by a desire to deploy a set of process skills. Coaching is a satisfying and pleasurable experience for coaches themselves, and they are deeply involved at a personal level. Coaching is not just done *by* the coach, using tools and skills as a carpenter might do carpentry. Coaching *is* the coach. Coaches deploy their own beings in their work, at every level – cognitive, emotional and behavioural. They are highly self-attuned, monitoring themselves as one might a scientific instrument, and using their readings to further the work: *"I didn't have the faintest idea what to do and I just stayed with that and spoke it out and said 'For some reason, I haven't got the faintest idea what I might want to do next other than tell you that's where I am' and then that kind of opened things up"* (SC, 393). It would be fair to say as a result that coaches are self absorbed: *"I like to talk to me about me very early on and capture my thoughts"* (GG, 540). This is perhaps unavoidable, when thinking about themselves is a discipline of the practice:

"So self reflection is very important, it tells me, whether that's on my own or it's in supervision or it's in as part of the training that I'm doing, kind of working out what's going on with me, how do I feel about what I'm doing, what is it my clients need from me, what are they asking for, what am I prepared and able to give, all of that and being really rigorous about that I think is part of it" (JW, 1048).

Coaches aspire to congruence between their practice and their sense of self:

"I'm able to access more of myself in my practice and secondly I'm able to, I suppose it's saying the same thing, sort of bring more of myself sometimes to my practice. Erm, it helps from an energy point of view I think, because it's one continuous stream rather than I'm sort of in this particular box at the moment" (MT, 772).

For David, his best work involves a revelation of himself in response to the other:

"if the client is really prepared to embrace their fears as well as their intentions, 'I really want this, and I'm really scared that I don't, I'm really scared that I'm going to screw it up'. That is such a gift to work with, and I think that, for me, asks something of me that is equally quite embracing and doesn't just hide behind the mask of I'm the coach. I have to reveal myself too, as well I think" (DS, 701),

For Jenny, congruence is a pre-requisite for healthy functioning: *"So the more of myself I kept out of it the more burnt out I got, that's very interesting. It's like being able to bring all of this into it and think about it in this way just makes it feel a lot lighter" (JW, 1182)*

Becoming a coach appears to catalyse a process of growth and maturation for the coach, a movement towards psychological congruence and a more resolved sense of oneself in the world. Coaches seem to find this process fascinating. All of them said that they enjoyed being interviewed for the opportunity it afforded to think about themselves, two asked for copies of their transcript: *"It's very interesting thinking about this, I love thinking about what I'm doing" (JW, 976).*

Notwithstanding their self-absorption, coaches' care and appreciation for their clients is palpable. They see themselves as having special relating and supporting skills. At worst, they seek to do no harm and at best, they offer to contain their client's most sensitive vulnerabilities. For Jenny, her work as a coach goes beyond a concern for the client's psychological wellbeing, and takes on a quality of priesthood: *"So I think a coach is as much a technician of the human soul as anything else, because we don't really have them anymore in our culture, and I think it's quite often the closest that you get"*

(JW, 1025). This is a striking claim, and perhaps a long way from what a client might expect when commissioning executive coaching.

There is a theme of coaches having a sense of themselves as specially skilled and able to work with the most tender parts of the client's psyche. Stephen saw himself as a container for strong emotion: *"And I think just being able to talk about those more private fears with somebody who can demonstrate some kind of understanding of them can be hugely supportive"* (SC, 315). Martin meanwhile took pride in being able to respond to people becoming emotionally overwhelmed without becoming overwhelmed himself:

"Erm, it doesn't embarrass me. Erm, I cry quite easily myself. It doesn't embarrass me, it doesn't worry me. My concern when somebody gets upset in a coaching session like that is, erm, that they can feel that that, the environment that they're in it's an OK place for them to have that outlet of emotion. It doesn't require either apology or explanation from them unless they feel the need to either apologise or explain, so we will go there if they need to go there; we won't if they don't" (MT, 281).

Jenny takes the responsibility of her superior skills seriously:

"although there is a mutuality in there and I don't infantilise my clients, I still have power that the other person doesn't, and I have rank, psychological rank, spiritual rank, all sorts of rank that the other person doesn't have in that moment, and so I have to be responsible about the way that I exercise that" (JW, 1157).

For David, the client being laid open, fully exposed and trusting the coach with their deepest vulnerabilities was facilitative to good work:

"for a lot of people who are investing in a coaching relationship when there's a lot at stake like this, that those relationships that really work best, when they do give you blood and guts, they really reveal themselves, and I think in having the trust to reveal themselves and the courage to say I'm really struggling with this, that you can work with that" (DS, 672).

It was notable that credibility, which was so important to coachees, was specifically mentioned only once by a coach, and then as something she felt she had lacked in the past. For Jenny, gaining a licence to operate was a question of having the right experience to reassure the coachee:

"They're sometimes very interested in your experience in related industries, or if they've got an issue about status then your level, the level that you've worked with people at, and I

sometimes have found myself being sucked into doing you know, client boasting, where you're saying of course when I coach directors in er....., and you think oh hang on a second why am I doing that then, and it's because the client's looking for some reassurance from you that you've coached pretty senior people before and you know your stuff" (JW, 253).

For Gillian, it was experience which made her a safe pair of hands for the commissioning client: *"And I do get given the tricky ones because I'm a more experienced coach, and they know that I'm not going to lose sleep because I'm not going to worry that I've done something wrong" (GG, 847).*

Just as it did for coachees, age, and the relative age of coach and coachee, emerged as a theme from coaches' accounts. For Gillian, her age was an aspect of her relatability and credibility: *"I've always felt that there's an age thing with coaching, that I operate within sort of 10 years on either side of my own age, you know" (GG, 1032).* For David, his age was permissive of a certain style of coaching:

"I'm also conscious that I'm now in a situation where at 58 I'm a lot older than most of the people I'm coaching. And there is an element of mentoring in here. There is an element in here of sage-like wisdom, that I'm quite comfortable in being in that space if that's where we go, which I would have never done before" (DS, 687).

Gillian found that younger coaches related to her, disconcertingly, as though she was a parent: *"I'm coming to terms with the fact that at the end of the day I am more experienced and older than these people, and you know, at some point they can't help but associate me with their mum, and, you know, but I dislike that intensely" (GG, 433).*

"Being mum" gets in the way of what Gillian saw as a more healthy and appropriate relating style: *"I find it easier to maintain my adult-adult transactions when I'm coaching people who are [more senior]" (GG, 681).* For Stephen, the relative age of coach and coachee had led to unhelpful projections on to the coach of being an expert:

"I think when a high potential coachee is very expert identified which might also be a feature of the system that they're in and so they will project that onto the coach and particularly if they're quite young high pots then they might still be inclined to see development as a more hierarchical kind of process rather than a more collaborative less hierarchical" (SC, 407).

This projection of the coach-as-expert, whether prompted by age or as part of the coachees' construct-in-mind of coaching, created a dilemma for coaches by confronting their own constructs-in-mind of coaching as predicated on coachees finding their own answers through intersubjective and

collaborative ways of working. As a result, although giving advice from a position of expert knowledge and greater experience was part of the coach's repertoire, it could be rather agonising:

"I mean clearly we're we're, the whole point is for them to take it back to their own understanding, their own knowledge and if there are gaps, what they might do to deepen that or understand it or to play the scenario but sometimes I will go into OK so I'm going to, you know, let me put that hat on for a moment. This is how I'll react just to give them a perspective. In some instances where individuals genuinely are lacking a piece of information that I have got, or I might have, then I will offer it to them but it will always only ever be as an offering, not 'You should do this', it will always be 'That's interesting. Erm, er, this is something that I may have experienced' or 'This is something that I may have encountered and this is how it was for me'" (MT, 623).

For Sarah, her clients' projections on her as an expert and expectations of direction led to a power struggle, in which her construct-in-mind of coaching came into direct opposition with that of her coachee:

"And I said: 'What have you brought to the table today what you'd like to work with?' 'I don't know. What do you think we should be working on' and I was going 'well what do you...' So, and I said, said: 'Look, you know, from a coaching perspective, the previous sessions have been quite structured, we've worked on some things, we are going to work on... I'm really interested to hear what you have been doing on those it's going to be much more about what YOU bring to the table.' And I knew he didn't really like that, but I still thought I was doing the right thing" (SR, 347).

So we see that coaches love coaching, and feel that it draws the best out of them, although they can experience paradoxical feelings around their impact. Most coaches are motivated to help their clients (or at worst, to do no harm) and see their own selves as the instrument of their work. Most coaches see themselves as fully involved in coaching – the coach *is* coaching – and coaching for some has the quality of a calling for the cure of souls. As a result, coaches can be self-absorbed and aspire towards ever-greater congruence. Coaches can see themselves as having and exercising special skills. They experience various projections from their coachees, from being mum, to being expert.

5.6. Summary

In this chapter we have seen that coaches do not appear to feel strongly that their coaching practice with high potentials is different from work with other types of participants. We have seen that they see their practice as calling on many different sources, sometimes as situated within a broader

psychological orientation towards the coachee and drawing on eclectic sources. As a result, it can be hard to describe. For many, practice appears to evolve and change over time. Coaches vary in the degree to which they value structure in their work, but typically believe themselves to become less structurally-dependent as they grow in experience and confidence. Most value their freedom to work at depth and to bring all of their influences to bear. Typically, they are not highly concerned with formal evaluation but have a felt sense of good work. The quality of the relationship with the client is crucial to most and coaches rely on its phenomenology for material for the coaching agenda. We have seen that coaches can see themselves as having a systems focus and a desire to contribute at a systems level. They do not always draw tight boundaries around their role and this gives them freedom to act in various ways which might not on the face of it appear to be part of coaching. While typically seeing themselves primarily on the coachee's side, they can take the side of the organisation where there is a difference of interests, when the organisation speaks to their own interest and values.

Coaches can experience difficult tensions around collusion and co-option, and have various ways of dealing with them. They are often ambivalent about talent management, noticing many potential risks for their clients. That said, they are pragmatic about the politics they see being played out. Coaches can be frustrated by overly-constrained output requirements in talent development coaching, seeing them as mitigating against good work. Their orientations towards the condition of being considered to be a high potential and to the concept of "talent" are varied. They sometimes identify with more textbook conceptualisations and sometimes see them as ephemeral constructs which make more or less sense to actors in the process in a specific context. Coaches frequently conceptualise coaching as having the potential for the client's sense-making and growth across their whole lives. They often see insight generation as a helpful enabler for focusing on a range of emotional and psychological issues. Knowledge and skills acquisition for the client very much takes second place. Some coaches noticed that not all clients were receptive to coaching, and that it was not the right intervention for some.

Coaches found coaching deeply pleasurable, although they could also experience paradoxical feelings around their impact. They appeared to be strongly motivated to help, or at worst, to do no harm. We have seen that coaches identified with coaching at a personal level, using their sense of self to as medium for their work. As a result, they can be highly reflective about themselves and aspire towards ever-greater congruence. Coaches often saw themselves as especially skilled, though the ways in which they saw themselves was not always reflected in projections from their coachees.

6. Discussion

This study set out to explore the experiences of high potential coaching on the part of coaches and coachees, with a view to contributing to ongoing issues and debates. My aim was to listen to the individual and collective voices of the actors involved and to interpret the meanings they made of this phenomenon and its context. I hoped thereby to inform theory development in talent management and executive coaching, which would otherwise be incomplete. In this chapter I will summarise and discuss my findings, with reference to the debates and issues raised in existing literature and throughout this discussion, findings will be related to the literature analysed in Chapter 2. It is normal in an IPA study however, for unexpected directions suggested by close analysis of data to prompt the introduction of new literature at this stage. As Smith et al. put it, “the interview and analysis will have taken you into new and unanticipated territory” (Smith et al., 2013 p113). That is indeed the case here, and it is worth signalling these new introductions, with some explanation as to why they have been included.

Before doing so however, it is also worth reiterating that the purpose of an IPA study is to shed light *on* existing research, not to be illuminated by it. A phenomenological enquiry precedes any theoretical explanation of the phenomena which emerge: In Husserl’s terms, we have to identify “the things themselves” (Husserl, in Smith et al., 2013 p12) (or as much of them as we are able to discern) before we can seek to explain them. That philosophical stance informs this chapter: Findings should be understood as contributing insight to various theories and literatures, but not as being comprehensively explicable by any single body of theory. As noted above, this is the nature of theoretical generalisability in IPA: The reader relates the evidence presented to their own personal and professional experience and to existing literature and can judge the contribution of this study in terms of the light it sheds in this context (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

As Smith et al. also suggest, this new engagement with the literature is selective not exhaustive: “There will be a large number of literatures...that you could connect your work to. You need to select some of that which is particularly resonant” (Smith et al., 2013 p113). In this instance, this broadening of perspective as a result of the findings of this study leads to discussion a deeper interrogation of some of the literatures already discussed (executive coaching and talent management), the extension of the discussion into some cognate literatures which seem to offer an opportunity for useful “dialogue” with these findings (general business coaching and development theory) and the introduction of framing notions from some which are entirely new (identity theory and career theory).

More specifically, firstly, it emerged from this research that some participants’ experience of coaching involved a transformation at the level of their sense of self (see section 4.5). This study is not an

exploration of identity creation, but literature which discusses the nature of the subjective sense of self and the creation of identity certainly seems informed by these findings. Some framing concepts from a social constructionist perspective from identity literature are therefore discussed.

Secondly, a key finding of this study was that participants' experience of being a high potential involved variations in the ways in which they saw themselves in relation to their organisation, the importance of reputation and the symbolic importance of coaching. That merits a somewhat more thorough interrogation of the coaching and talent management literatures, from which different themes have already been mined, for what they might say on the topic of the organisation-in-mind of participants.

Thirdly, a strong theme from these findings is that there is a disjuncture between the subjective experience of being talent managed and rhetoric around the intended effects of talent management programmes. This has prompted an exploration of literature which looks at "the less celebrated facets of careers" (Baruch & Vardi, 2015 p1) and which tackles this disjuncture head on.

Finally, coaches' interest in coaching the whole person, in congruence and self-directedness prompts a brief exploration of literature which conceptualises coaching as a developmental intervention in the context of adult development theory.

Formulating this discussion is a challenge, and not just because of the intrinsic difficulty of such work. As an IPA study, this research involved a deep engagement with the individual and collective voices of participants. The meaning that has been made emerges from the accounts and the hermeneutic process. Now comparing these findings with existing literature involves engaging with material of a quite different nature. As Smith et al. put it, "the register changes" (Smith et al., 2009, p112). Not only is existing literature, particularly in the talent management field, for the most part prescriptive and normative, it is also often theoretical, detached, and objective. There are few other first person voices to be heard. Working with the existing field creates an ineluctable pull towards a similarly objective stance and a felt-pressure to explain findings from a theoretical perspective. This disengages the researcher from the subjectivity of the process of interpretation and the idiographic nature of her material, and indeed from the goals of an IPA study. This is not to argue, of course, that this is an exercise which should not be done. IPA findings must, metaphorically, engage in a dialogue with existing theory. Otherwise they could not contribute to knowledge. Indeed, such "dialogue" is part of the double hermeneutic of IPA. This study changes the forestructures of the reader and therefore their future consideration of issues in these fields. Nonetheless, it is an inherent challenge of this methodology to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity as research positions at this point.

This chapter has five main sections:

- An overview of themes arising from analysis
- Constructing reality around high potential coaching
- Being a high potential, ambition, and talent management
- The purpose and nature of coaching
- It's one continuous stream – the coach's experience of coaching

The selection of topics for discussion is not intended to be comprehensive in the sense of encompassing every finding from this study. Rather, it presents those findings at a level of abstraction and distillation which renders them discussable in relation to existing literature. In situating this discussion of these meanings-made within our existing knowledge – our forestructures – I am engaging in a double hermeneutic on a broader scale than that of the individual research participant or individual study.

6.1. An overview of themes arising from analysis

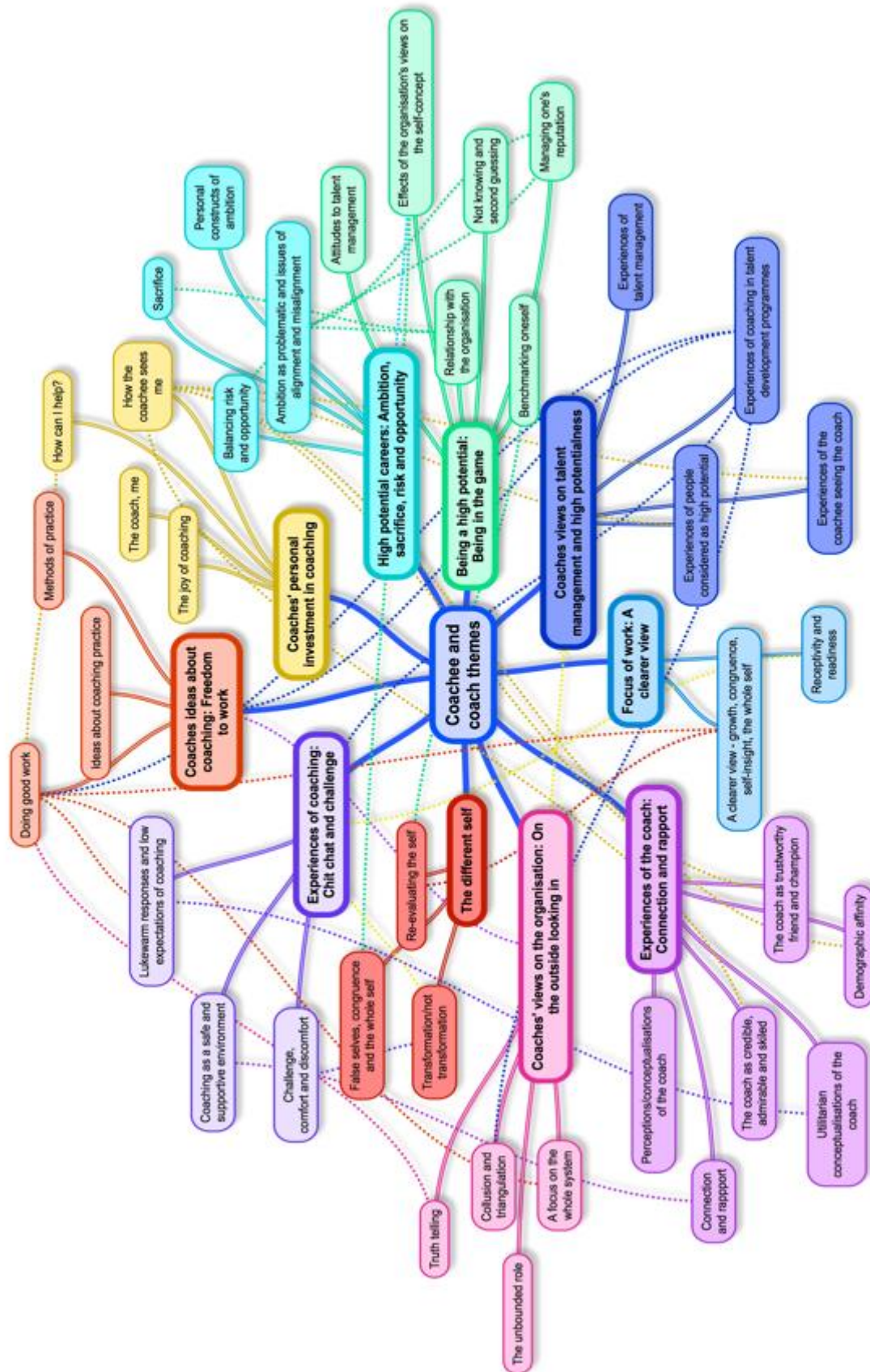
The large number of emergent and superordinate themes generated by IPA analysis can be confusing, and a visual depiction in the form of a mind map (Fig. 6:1) is a helpful way to provide an overview of the final schedule. This graphic presents the themes derived from both coach and coachee accounts at superordinate level (presented in the diagram as wide-bordered nodes, in bold text, and connected with the central node by solid lines). These superordinate themes are further connected with their contributing emergent themes (by same-colour double lines).

A visual depiction in this form offers more than a quickly accessible summary of themes however. By presenting all the themes together, it also provides a new dimension to the analysis by depicting the ways in which they – as nodes on the mind map – can be seen as cognate to and/or connected with each other. It also emphasises the choicefulness of the IPA process and the finesse exercised by the researcher to sort themes so that there are meaningful boundaries between them.

Comparison between this diagram and the mind map of themes from a single case (Appendix 11) also gives an indication of how the process of interpretation in IPA moves through stages of abstraction. It clearly shows how, in moving to a higher level of interpretation, the IPA researcher is not merely selecting from or distilling existing themes. Rather, s/he is, in effect, generating new themes, rooted in earlier levels of analysis but not simply a reduction of them. Each diagram records one layer in what can be seen as a many-layered analysis, but the artefacts of each layer are distinctive to it.

In this graphic representation, we can also begin to see for the first time the ways in which themes connect at an inter-sample level (represented by dashed connecting lines). These connections by no means represent all the ways in which themes might be seen to be related however, and in that way, they again expose something about the idiosyncratic nature of the analytic process in IPA. They reveal – through omission as well as through inclusion – the researcher’s choices. Such a diagrammatic representation therefore graphically uncovers the *process* of choice and, in effect, the researcher’s mental mapping of the issues under examination.

The resulting diagram is notably messy. It’s clear that an IPA study does not result in an understanding of participants’ sense-making which is reducible to a neat pattern of connectedness in which every node contributes equally to the whole. Nor does it lend itself to expression as a process, in which elements of a phenomenon can be seen as causing or leading to other elements. But nor are the nodes in this diagram random samples from participant’s accounts, randomly grouped. There is a process of meaning-making at work here, just as individual participants accounts provide detectable meaning-making about the phenomena being studied. In its messiness therefore, this diagram can perhaps be seen as capturing the somewhat paradoxical nature of meaning-making: It is essentially dynamic, idiosyncratic and fugitive, but results in a *sui generis* order and coherence.



6.2. Constructing reality around high potential coaching

I noted in Chapter 2 an axis of differentiation around subjective and objective conceptualisations of talent management which had emerged from a review of existing literature. It is clear from this study that the subjective perceptions of actors in high potential coaching are multiple and dynamic, even at the individual level. Listening to individual voices, we can hear that they vary in relation to many factors. There is no single, stable state of “highpotentialness”, for example. Rather, the reality we see constructed by coaches and coachees is ever-changing and multi-faceted. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, it is possible to see responses to a designation as high potential as impacting participants in terms of their sense of personal identity – the ways in which they see themselves, and see themselves as similar to or different from others around them in terms of attributes and skills and/or social roles (Gray et al., 2015). This is true of both coachees and of coaches. This study’s finding in relation to the “different self” and the variability of responses to designations as a high potential are an example in the former case, and the identification of coaches with coaching at a personal level an example in the latter. Through this lens, we can see refracted notions of identity as “multiple, mutable, and socially constructed...helping to connect different experiences and to reduce fragmentation in feelings and thinking” (Gray et al., 2015, p4). These findings also speak to conceptualisations of the subject, as described by Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2014) which question notions of a stable, unified self and conceive of it rather as a shifting phenomenon, in a constant process of formation, defined positionally and relationally and constituted by both the material and social world (Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2014). From this subjective perspective, “highpotentialness”, and other key constructs such as “talent” and “career” figure as a series of partially overlapping, dynamically-changing constructions in the minds of the various actors in the phenomenon which contribute to a sense of self.

Ariss et al. encourage researchers to understand talent management as a relational concept, taking into account “relationships among individual, organizational, institutional, and national/international contexts that shape the management of talent” (Ariss et al., 2013, p4). Coaching too can be understood as regarding “the organization and its components as active participants rather than as contextual backdrop” (Orenstein, 2002). For the actors in this study, constructs of talent management, talent, and coaching are indeed contextual, but not in terms of a simplistic, undifferentiated context at the individual level. Rather they figure in the multiple contexts of, for example, here-and-now lives, lives-in-reflection, and lives-to-be; lives as a working person, as a parent, as a congruent or incongruent human being, even as a technician of the soul. At the level of the subject therefore we find a confluence of multi-contextuality and a changing sense of self, responding to organisational and other external intentions and motivations as they shadow forth in the mind of the individual. While therefore broadly supporting the view that talent and talent

management are contextual concepts, unique to the organisation and its setting, these findings add a further dimension which emphasises the essential subjectivity of experiences of context.

From a social constructionist perspective in an IPA study, we do not expect to nail some objective truth about the “real” nature of phenomena. Rather, as has been the case here, the aim is to identify some of the significant constructs-in-mind of the various actors in it and to point to their potential to influence behaviour, and to be dynamic and fugitive. This is a direct challenge to the normative nature of the talent management literature noted above (Thunnissen et al., 2013), which suggests that talent management practice writes on an individual as on a blank canvas, that people designated as high potential are a form of undifferentiated human capital, capable of being manipulated as other forms of capital might be (Nijs et al., 2014), or that people designated as high potential will identify their interests directly with those of the organisation. It also suggests that for organisations to create their own definition of talent (Tansley, 2011; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013) will involve much careful and ongoing sharing of understanding and perspectives between those designated as high potential and those interested in developing or harnessing their talent.

6.3. Being a high potential, ambition, and talent management

Levinson notes that “an organization has “latent” as well as “manifest” structure: It has a many-faceted emotional climate; it tends to “demand” varied forms of interpersonal allegiance, friendship, deference, intimidation, ingratiation, rivalry, and the like” (Levinson, in Orenstein, 2002, p362). These findings suggest that talent management processes, and the process of engaging in talent development coaching, are not immune to communicating such demands. Rather they exemplify the phenomenon. We see how the disjuncture between overt and covert organisational demands results in mixed messages and confusing signals. And we see how putative high potentials respond to both covert and overt demands by approaching talent management variously as a game it is important to play, a route to important rewards, a feedback mechanism, a competition, and a reflection of the culture of the organisation with which they are identified or not identified. ‘Talent’ is something they have or don’t have, or don’t have enough of, or don’t have enough of at the right time. It is ‘what’s valued round here’, or it is an organisational fantasy. For coaches, ‘talent management’ may figure as a legitimate pursuit for the organisation at the level of its espoused aims, as an outworking of pressure on organisational stakeholders, as representing risk or opportunity for their clients, or as an opportunity to do enjoyable work. For some, there is an element of emotional labour involved in being a high potential, that is “the organizational requirement to express or display emotions that are considered to be organizationally appropriate, while managing or suppressing those that do not comply with organizational expectations” (Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2014). This can be traced, for example, in Roger’s unwillingness to talk about growth and progress for fear of being misunderstood:

“I'm embarrassed about talking about career progression because it's perceived to be that I want to earn more money” (RP, 1082).

Ambition seemed to be a key factor in response to organisational demands around designations of high potential. Without wishing to suggest a direct causal link, a felt sense of being ambitious appeared to be related to the value or otherwise of being considered high potential. Where they felt themselves to be ambitious, participants wanted to be considered as high potential as an end to fulfilling their ambitions. Where they did not, the value of being considered to have high potential decreased. This variability in the importance of being considered to have high potential is broadly explanatory of Ready et al.'s contention that people designated as high potential, as well as finding themselves delisted by external forces, might also delist themselves from the rolls of talent (Ready et al., 2010). Constructions of ambition, as we have by now come to expect, are highly varied and subjective, being associated with confidence, readiness for personal growth and learning, perceptions of competition for opportunities, access to interesting work and/or status and/or higher levels of reward through career progression, but also with a desire for money, with selfishness, and with risks of exposure, sacrifice, and failure. Ambition can be experienced as directly conflicting with a sense of one's private self. Participants' accounts often reflected a process of reconciliation of these various factors, resulting in idiosyncratic conceptualisations of ambition which provided a tolerable psychological fit with related frames of value and the self-concept. As these conceptualisations resolved, so did “highpotentialness” swim in and out of focus for the individual. Campbell and Smith's contention that being a high potential is important to those so designated (Campbell & Smith, 2010) appears therefore to be supported, but with the additional insight that it is more or less important at a point or points in time, and for a multiplicity of reasons, at least partly related to subjective constructs of ambition.

For those for whom having and retaining a designation as a high potential was important, there were hints of its being underpinned by understandings of the designation as a factor in a form of social exchange (Dries, 2013), or in the individual's contribution to the psychological contract, as suggested by Sonnenberg et al. (2014). This suggests a human capital construction on the part of people designated as high potential, in which one's talents and capabilities are traded with the organisation in return for desired benefits (de Vos & Dries, 2013). An insight from this research is that what is of primary importance in this social exchange is reputation. Reputation was pivotal in the political aspects of talent management and gave participants license to negotiate. It had to be carefully fostered, managed, and, if necessary, realigned. But it did not necessarily have to reflect a settled intention to respond to organisational demands. In this sense, reputation management can be seen as a form of “surface acting” (Grandey, 2003), in which participants work to create a desired impression. In one case at least, reputation was a tool in a kind of “political misbehaviour” (Baruch & Vardi, 2015), which involved deception as to the participant's real motives and aspirations. For some participants,

having a reputation for being talented was therefore a means to an immediate or short-term end, access to opportunities and reward which were sufficiently compelling to keep them in the organisation. For others however, it was a means to a wider goal. Here, the opportunities available through promotion and career success were valuable as offering a chance to stretch, grow, and develop. In both cases however, reputation was the ante which allowed them into the game.

It has also been suggested that people designated as high potential may experience some pressure to perform, and some concomitant anxiety (Campbell & Smith, 2010). Where a sense of anxiety does emerge from this research, it does not appear to relate to performance, as in the sense of needing to maintain externally imposed standards – if anything, this seems to be taken for granted. Rather, anxiety coheres around issues of motivational alignment and misalignment with organisational expectations, being understood or misunderstood and balancing risk, sacrifice, and opportunity. Huang and Tansley (2012) have noted the negative experience of people designated as high potential of demands for engagement in stretch projects, mobility and work-related travel. The unpalatability of such sacrifices, and the risk in declining to make them, is certainly reflected in this study.

In reviewing the existing literature in preparation for this study, it was clear that there were conceptual and definitional problems associated with talent management and the question of who is considered to be talented. Sonnenberg et al. summarised the problematic issues:

- Lack of clarity in the definition of talent
- Changes in the environment that impact on the definition of talent, but with a time-lag on the talent management processes
- Limited explicitness by the organization on who is considered as talent and why
- Divergent perspectives of the actors involved
- Organizations not living up to their promises or issuing empty promises to their talented employees (Sonnenberg et al, 2014 p274)

This study suggests that a lack of stable organising frameworks at a concept level is reflected by coaches' and coachees' perceptions of inconsistency and lack of clarity at the level of implementation. Walker and LaRocco's contention that talent designations are subjective, and that they do not necessarily endure (Walker & LaRocco, 2002), also seem borne out by participants' experiences of puzzling definitions of talent, politicking, and important decisions motivated by face saving. Huang and Tansley's findings about rhetorical obfuscation around talent management (Huang & Tansley, 2012) are certainly supported by this study – coachees and coaches noted (and indulged in) doublespeak, fudging, mixed messages and emotionalisation around talent management. The suggestion that secrecy and rhetorical obfuscation afford room for actors to manipulate (Huang & Tansley, 2012) is also borne out and coaches, in their truth-telling mode, were sometimes moved to

call out such manipulations and obfuscations. There is a reflection here too of the findings of the CIPD study (CIPD, 2010) which found that people designated as high potential perceived a lack of clarity about expectations from their talent programmes and wished for more transparency around selection.

Baruch and Vardi provide a helpful framing in describing what they call the “dark side of contemporary careers” (Baruch & Vardi, 2015, p1). In this argument, organisational ‘misbehaviours’ which are counterproductive, deviant, insidious, and unethical are all prevalent in organisations and “are inescapable and inevitable career related experiences in work organisations” (Baruch & Vardi, 2015 p6). Such a dark side certainly seems evident in this study. Coaches reported finding the human consequences of some organisational practices hard to stomach. Coachee participants reported poor management of talent development programmes, secretiveness, and lack of transparency, and even talent processes which seemed to work against the interests of the organisation and its good people. The resulting exasperation and confusion of putative people designated as high potential about issues which were, after all, important to them, could quickly turn to cynicism and to criticism of talent management approaches, a finding fully aligned with Baruch and Vardi’s contention that “false hope related to positively loaded career promises might convert to frustration and reduced ambition” (Baruch & Vardi, 2015 p2)

6.4. The purpose and nature of high potential coaching

Coaching was important for people designated as high potential for various reasons. One was symbolic – having a coach was a signal that one was sufficiently well-regarded to justify investment and is therefore congruent with conceptualisations of the coach as a status symbol (e.g. Bono et al., 2009; McKenna & Davis, 2009) and of coaching as being an important part of one’s differential treatment as a high potential (Campbell & Smith, 2010). For others, and perhaps more commonly, coaching was intrinsically valued and conceived of as providing opportunities for developing insight and self-awareness (CIPD, 2010), making sense of one’s situation (Grant et al., 2010), developing reflective capability (Wasylshyn et al., 2006), enabling a more authentic expression of the self (Dubouloy, 2004) and achieving an overall alignment across all the dimensions of one’s life (Lazar & Bergquist, 2003). In that sense, these findings are at least partially in line with existing commentary on the purpose and value of coaching and from a practice perspective, they can be seen as justifying the use of coaching to assist and support people designated as high potential, as in Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006) and Coutu and Kauffman (2009).

For coaches, conceptualisations of coaching as a meaning-making opportunity and one which promotes integration and internal alignment seemed to be highly relevant (e.g. Grant et al., 2010;

Swart & Harcup, 2013; Wang, 2013; Lazar & Bergquist, 2003. We have seen that many coaches felt that the design of talent development programmes was structurally and conceptually antithetical to growth and learning for participants, and that it sub-optimised the potential contribution of coaching as a learning experience. On the other hand, not all participants were motivated to learn – for some, learning did not appear to figure in their conceptualisations of coaching at all. Moreover, ideas about what was to be learned was a point of significant variation, from information about what it would take to be promoted, to self-knowledge to enable growth and expansion. In this study, knowledge and leadership skills acquisition did not seem to be front of mind for participants or coaches as the focus of work. This finding speaks forcibly to talent management practitioner literature which makes a broad-based assumption that coaching is “good” in the context of talent management, but which lacks insight as to how the contribution of coaching should be conceptualised and how such conceptualisations should inform practical design (Cappelli, 2008).

The existing literature does provide some thoughtful insight into optimal deployment of coaching in talent programmes: Oliver et al. (2014) suggest that “coaching resources are most effective when they are carefully screened according to the needs of the organization, organized into a network, and aligned to the talent development agenda of the company... ensuring that all key stakeholders are aware of and held accountable for their responsibilities is the other key to making the most of external coaching for developing high potential leaders” (Oliver et al., 2009, p214). This would certainly speak to coaches in this study’s sense that coaching was sometimes poorly managed and supported, but perhaps not to their sense that some talent management programmes were over-directive, with too many imposed requirements. Oliver et al. note that: “In the end, managing a coaching network is a delicate balance between control and autonomy” (Oliver et al., 2009, p213). But one cannot help but wonder whether even the minimal control mechanisms they propose might feel too much for some coaches’ sense of freedom, self-directedness and client-centredness. Broadly in this study, it seemed to be important to coaches to maintain a more or less liminal position, which gave them a unique insight from which truth could be told and which protected their client-centered position by avoiding over-identification with organisational goals. That said, they were willing to identify with the organisation’s interests where they found a resonance with their own values and aims. That there is a potential tension between the coach’s free-ranging aspirations and the organisation’s desire to control outputs is not a new finding; what is perhaps emphasised by these findings is the fact that identifying with the coachee’s interests ahead of those of the organisation is for some coaches, and in some instances, a position with moral and ethical weight.

I have noted that in some cases, coaching appeared to have a role in moving the coachee along a spectrum from passivity towards powerful self-directedness. Particularly for coaches, though also to a lesser degree for coachees, coaching provided a space in which this meaning-making process was an explicit goal. Coaches saw coaching as an opportunity for personal growth at a whole life level, for

engaging with important vulnerabilities and for tackling existential dilemmas. A generally client-centred stance meant that coaches would not impose their own paradigm on the coachee, but there was an underlying sense that coaching is more satisfying “when they do give you blood and guts” (DS, 672). Attempts at alignment, movement towards self-directedness and a striving for congruence are consistent with conceptualisations of coaching as developmental, that is, “involving changes in the organism manifested in a sustained, increased capacity of the client to engage with and influence their environment and to look after their internal needs and aspirations” (Bachkirova, 2011 p77). Coach’s notions of “good work” typically involved working at psychological depth with the coachee, were not highly goal oriented, focused on sense and meaning-making and encompassed whole-life, not just work-life issues. A conceptualisation of coaching as sense-making and choice-generating therefore appears to be important to coaches, as does a conception of their own role as encompassing the latitude and intention to coach the whole individual within an imposed framework of talent development coaching (Bachkirova, 2011, p78). It is notable though, that coaches had a sense of the potential of coaching, which at times was rather different to that of their coachees, and this raises issues in relation to the possibility of misalignment which certainly merits further exploration.

What constitutes success in a talent coaching assignment is not clear from this study. There is certainly little evidence here of the kinds of return in terms of performance improvement expected in ROI models of coaching value (e.g. Olivero et al., 1997; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001), although it is fair to say the design of this research study would not be likely to generate such evidence. Traces of evaluation by participants or organisational stakeholders were scant. Some participants did not seem to experience change at all, either in terms of levels of skill and knowledge or their self-insight. For these participants, as we have seen, coaching served a different purpose. A picture of coaching emerged from this study as a low risk choice for participants, as generally enjoyable and as having symbolic value which does not depend on its value for learning. Receptivity for coaching therefore cannot necessarily be conflated with receptivity for learning. This problematises conceptualisations of coaching as a learning experience, particularly if we understand that to mean an experience of following an orderly process of discovery, application, and integration (Griffiths & Campbell, 2009; Lazar & Bergquist, 2003)

But we might wonder whether there are any conditions for coaching assignments which suggest that learning is more likely to take place? The design and timing of coaching development programmes may have some impact. While there are some oblique hints in this study that good preparation work on the part of organisational stakeholders may have some beneficial effect, what seems to have most impact on the likelihood of learning is the internal motivation of the coachee. Cox et al. note that “the intention and readiness of the client for coaching are as crucial a contributor to success as the qualities of the coach” (Cox et al., 2014, p5), a contention which this research supports, where we

understand success as positive learning and change. Coachees' emphasis on connection and rapport also suggests that key to their appreciation of coaching are "the quality of the engagement with the coach and commitment to the process" (Cox et al., 2014, p5). It is also possible to notice in some participants a motivation towards growth and change across their whole lives. The fact that some coaching participants apparently felt no such motivation suggests that the coachee's level of adult development is a component in coaching (Cox et al., 2014). It appears that when good coaching coincides with a catalysing restlessness in the individual, transformation can result.

6.5. It's one continuous stream – the coach's experiences of coaching

Coaching was very important to coaches. As we have seen, it was highly enjoyable, it offered opportunities to be in flow, to do one's best work, to fulfill a desire to help and to bring influence to bear. It was notable that coaches identified with coaching not just as a profession, picked up and put down within working hours, but as an expression of themselves. To be a coach did not preclude failure, as well as success, and involved a process of development over time during which one's practice might change completely. The sense was of a coach-identity which reflected, more or less fully, the individual's sense of identity as a whole human being, and its changing form. This supports Wang's (2013) contention that coaching is a different way of being, which comes from coherence between what coaches do, say, believe and are. Gray et al. (2015) in a mixed methods study of 756 coaches in relation to their identity found "a moderate to complete overlap between the coaching profession and the sense of self for 65% of respondents" (Gray et al., 2015, p15), a finding which would be fully supported by this research study. They note that in their study, "[w]ithin many of the accounts there is a clear sense of protagonists' agency, linking the past, the present and the future into a continuous sense of self". This is highly resonant, for example, with Martin's comment about himself-as-coach: "*It's one continuous stream*" (MT, 772).

Coaching did not appear to present any constraint on the coach's sense of self, other than the chosen constraints of ethical practice. Rather, coaching allowed for a fuller expression of the self – the expanded self which coaches so wished for their clients. This hints that coaches in this sample share a conception of themselves as not engaged in a "dry and instrumental coaching process that keeps both parties relatively safe and protected from the risk of fully embodied relational engagement" (Critchley, 2010 p855). Indeed, where the assignment for reasons of constraint around outcomes and process was perceived as dry and instrumental, coaches were frustrated and bored. They appeared to align themselves much more with notions of themselves as coaches being fully involved and willing to "risk themselves by engaging their whole person in what is an unpredictable and intimate process" (Critchley, 2010, p855). Bachkirova argues that coaches intervene not only from a perspective of knowledge and understanding of coachees, but also from their own personal, resonating response to what they encounter in them (Bachkirova, 2015). These responses, and the coach's interventions, are

the expression of the coach's "life experiences, current worldview, and the stage of his or her personal learning journey" (Bachkirova, 2015, p5). On this basis, she argues, "it is possible to say that the coach is the main instrument of coaching" (Bachkirova, 2015, p5). This is strongly resonant of accounts by some coaches in this study of an aspiration towards congruence between the sense of self and self-as-coach. Moreover, the requirement, in such a conceptualisation for good use of the self as the instrument of coaching through "understanding the instrument, looking after it, and checking for quality and sensitivity" (Bachkirova, 2015, p20) accounts the self-absorbed reflexivity we have seen in the coaches in this study.

The importance of the coaching relationship and coaches' recourse to their own phenomenology suggest that coaches in this study typically identify with a model of relational coaching in which they "are engaged in a process of reciprocal influence, whether they like it or not" (Critchley, 2010, p855). De Haan and Sills, have suggested that "the relationship, through the eyes of the client, is likely to be the best predictor of successful outcome" (de Haan & Sills, 2010, no page numbers) and in this study a reliable relationship was indeed seen by participating coaches and some coachees as a threshold requirement for good work. References to reliability and trust resonate with assertions that coaching involves participants "feeling that the coach is fundamentally on their side and a trustworthy human being" (Bachkirova, 2015).

What also emerges however is the potential for tension between this orientation and the coach's relationship with the client organisation. It is not new news that coaches can feel under pressure to collude, either with the coachee or the organisation – such issues are a theme of coach training and are covered in foundation texts about coaching (eg O'Neill, 2007). These firsthand accounts, however, paint a vivid picture of the discomfort of such "triangulation" and the difficulty of the choices with which coaches are presented in balancing what they feel to be their responsibilities. That some organisational stakeholders are ambivalent about coaching is evidenced by efforts to control their practice (e.g. Oliver et al., 2009). We might wonder whether the potential for inconsistency in coaches' responses, where there are apparently competing interests between organisation and coachee as revealed here, might go some way towards explaining that ambivalence.

7. Conclusion

In this study, I set out to explore the question: “What are the experiences of coaches and coachees of coaching in a talent management context?” In this chapter I will explain how this question has been answered. I will return to the gaps in knowledge on which I intended to focus and describe how this research has addressed them. I will review the conduct of the research project as a whole, critiquing its design and the methodology used. I will explore its strengths and limitations and the further avenues for research which it suggests. I will discuss how this research contributes to talent management and coaching practice, and finally I will reflect on the process of research from a personal perspective.

7.1. *Theoretical contribution*

In my review of existing literature, I situated this study in the mid-level theoretical fields of talent management and executive coaching. I noted the rise of both talent management and executive coaching. I compared the nature and reliability of practitioner and academic literature and conceptualised the contribution of each. I identified debates and themes in these theoretical fields as reflected in the existing literature and issues arising from reviewing the literature as a phenomenon in its own right. These debates, themes, and issues and the gaps in knowledge which emerged were summarised in Chapter 2 above.

In Chapter 6, I have noted how the findings from this study can be considered as illuminating these debates, but also as suggesting that there are other fields in which they may make a contribution. This conceptual framework can be re-imagined therefore to accommodate this new insight as in Fig. 7.1.

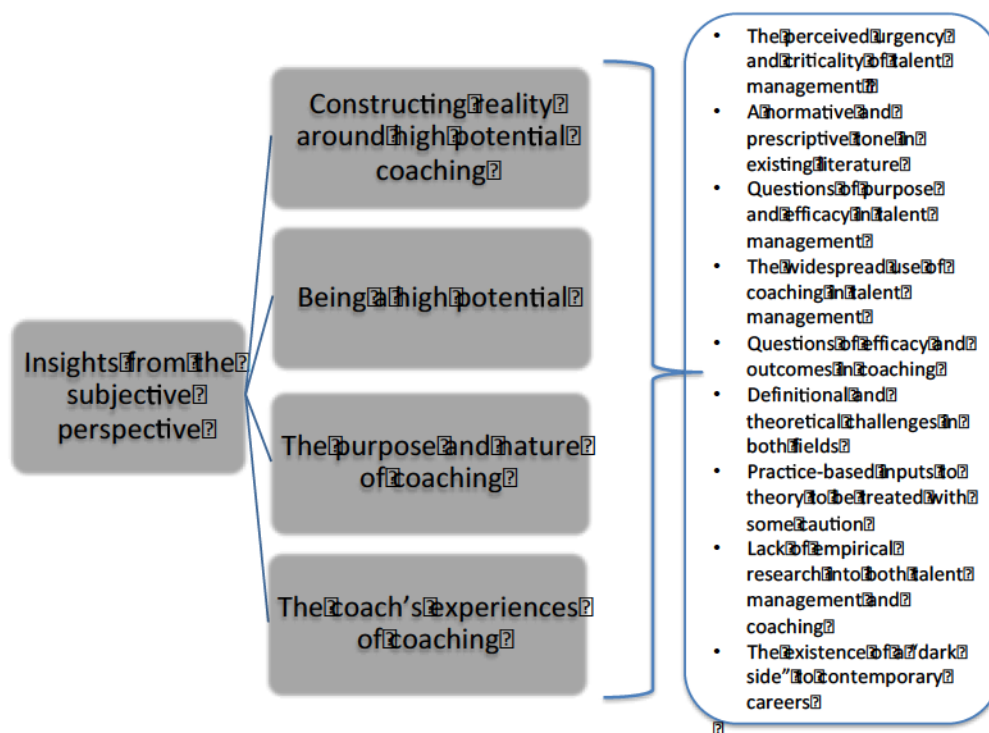


Figure 7.1 Revised conceptual framework

Some commentary may be helpful:

- The framework has been realigned to accommodate the inclusion of the discussion-level themes from this study and to illustrate how the process of thematisation mediates between raw data and theory, rendering it intelligible for use in the various discourses identified
- The sequencing of the elements of this framework, with an implied reading from left to right, is critical as representing the role of phenomenological insight in relation to theory. As discussed above, in an IPA study this is understood as a “data on theory” relationship, not a “theory on data” relationship
- Not all findings are represented. Thematising them here at a high level helps to illustrate the nature of themes in an IPA study and their potential to encompass multiple and multifaceted sub-themes in a succinct, overarching representation.
- The framework deliberately does not attempt to suggest a direct one to one or even a one to many relationship between themes and debates. Rather, the relationship is one to all, with findings having resonance across all debates, even though there may be some variation in salience.

McLeod suggests that the coherence of a research project is a moral issue: “a study which produces no new knowledge or understanding is basically wasting people’s time” (McLeod, 2013 p80). I believe that this study has made a substantial contribution to knowledge in providing a missing, and much needed, subjective perspective. It offers rich insight, both in the direct voice of participants and through the interpretive process which has thematised and conceptualised their contributions.

Specifically, this research:

- challenges implicit assumptions in the existing literature that the interests of organisations and their people designated as high potentials are the same
- contributes insight which may be useful for debates around the effectiveness of talent management by unfolding the responses of participants and the coaches who work with them
- suggests that for coaches, high potential coaching is not a distinctly different area of practice, drawing on a different theoretical base, but that they appear to see their practice as flexing to accommodate different conditions
- opens up new areas for debates, such as the issue of risk and opportunity for high potentials and the potential for differing views about the purpose of coaching for coaches and coachees
- contributes empirical insight into how coaches see themselves in relation to their practice and how they experience coaching at a personal level

The most significant findings from this study, which constitute this theoretical contribution, are that:

- The individual voices of participants in high potential coaching are highly diverse. Where participants shared common ground in one area, they differed in another. There is no single, shared construction of talent management, but a multiplicity of perspectives and perception of contexts. Each actor has a unique and dynamic view on the issues and responds from this unique perspective.
- Being considered to be a high potential is not always experienced as an unmitigated good. It involves risks of many kinds as well as opportunity. Its importance appears to be related to personal constructs of ambition, which fluctuate with time and personal circumstances. People designated as high potential expend careful thought on balancing risk and opportunity.
- Conceptual and theoretical challenges around talent management are reflected at the practice level in, for example, inconsistency in talent ratings and lack of clarity of purpose in talent management. Rhetorical obfuscation abounds, and the dark side of career management is evident (Baruch & Vardi, 2015). These factors can cause personal hurt and confusion and can lead to cynicism on the part of people designated as high potential.
- Reputation management can be highly important to those who wish to be considered high potential in providing a license to be in the game. Managing one’s reputation may even be seen

on occasion as being more important than responding to pressures to perform. Certainly the importance of impression management can lead to some gaming behaviours which militate against the espoused purposes of talent management programmes.

- Coaching is typically important to people designated as high potential, for instrumental and intrinsic reasons. Perceptions on the purpose and value of coaching are largely in line with commentary in the literature, except perhaps in relation to coaching as a learning process.
- Coaches do not appear to see high potential coaching as a distinctive area of practice. Rather, they appear to see their practice as capable of flexing to accommodate the high potential context as it might any other. Coaches do see the design and implementation of some talent development programmes as militating against good work however, by overly-constraining the coach's freedom to act as s/he sees fit.
- Coaches frequently conceptualise coaching as having the potential for the client's sense-making and growth across their whole lives. This is not always how clients see it.
- Receptivity to coaching does not always mean receptivity for learning and change, though where there is motivation in the client, great change can take place.
- Coaches experience coaching as highly pleasurable. For the most part, their sense of self and their sense of self-as-coach are indivisible. The coach *is* coaching, and coaches are often willing to bring a reflective and exploratory discipline to the maintenance of themselves-as-coach.
- Often, coaches and coachees seek trust and connection as a threshold requirement for a positive coaching relationship.
- For coaches, a primary focus on the coachee, rather than organisational stakeholders, can involve them in dilemmas around collusion and divergent interests which are difficult to reconcile.

7.2. Strengths and limitations of this research and future research avenues

IPA requires rich data, and I believe that this, along with in-depth analysis and sensitive interpretation are particular strengths of this study. In relation to Smith's four criteria to be met by an acceptable IPA study (Smith, 2011), I believe that this study demonstrates adherence to the philosophical principles of IPA, transparency of method, coherent, plausible and interesting analysis, and sufficient sampling to show density of evidence for themes. I hope that it also appears as a well-focused and in-depth study, with strong data and interpretation and that this thesis strikes the reader as engaging and enlightening.

In Chapter 3 I discussed the challenges of data handling and the intrinsic difficulty of structuring an analysis in IPA. Other limitations of this project, and future avenues for research, are:

- This research does not provide insight from the perspective of organisational stakeholders, particularly those in HR who design programmes and commission coaches and the line managers

who have to implement talent decisions. It is likely that these stakeholders would offer a highly valuable perspective on the issues discussed here ("*the HR people know*" (GG, 830)), particularly on issues of boundaries and expectations.

- This study captures a moment in time for each participant and It is clear that the sense made of phenomena changes over time – we know that from participants' reports of changes in their own sense-making. A longitudinal study in this area would provide further insight into how perceptions and conceptualisations change over time at the individual level and perhaps of the factors which catalyse change.
- This study was with unmatched pairs of coaches and coachees. As such it could not compare and contrast the meanings made by participants in relation to one another. Such a comparison would shed light on the divergence or convergence of perceptions between individual coaches and as could provide further valuable insight.
- These findings are "true" for this set of participants, in their context and this researcher in this research context. No theory is generated from this study, as is the case in all IPA studies (Smith et al., 2013). The aim here is theoretical generalisability, as noted above, where the reader makes links between the evidence provided, their own personal and professional experience and claims in the extant literature (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In those terms, I believe, this study can provide resonance with an informed reader's existing experience, and plausible expansion at the edges of knowledge.
- It is probable that I will have had some influence on my research participants: If coaches are subject to projections from coachees, so is a researcher likely to be as well. It is possible therefore that the participants will have modified their accounts according to their perceptions of me and what I wanted from them. It is also likely that I have projected some of my own assumptions on to participants. This could be seen as an unavoidable limitation in any qualitative research, and is one which I have attempted to minimise to the best of my ability. As a positive factor, I also believe that my background and experience in this area has helped participants to share their experiences with a depth which might not have been possible with a less-informed researcher.
- Coaches in this study worked in various modalities of practice. Tentative findings around the differences between coaches with higher levels of psychological training and those without suggest that this topic may merit further research.

More research in talent management is clearly called for, particularly studies of the subjective experience of the various actors in the process. This project contributes to a small corpus of existing research, but by no means provides the last word. Priority areas of further research in my view are:

- Research into the experiences of other stakeholders in talent management, particularly HR practitioners and line managers
- Longitudinal research into the changing perspectives of the talent managed, coachees and coaches
- Research into the experiences of participants in organisations with identifiably different philosophies of talent management

Other possible areas of interest, of secondary priority, are:

- Research into the experiences of those *not* selected as talent
- Research into how is talent management is experienced in the public or not for profit sectors
- Research into the experiences of participants who are recent graduates or early-career individuals rather than mid to senior level managers

Similarly, in the field of coaching, other lines of enquiry are suggested by this study. A priority is research into divergent expectations around the impact of coaching, as this is an important issue from a practice perspective and could provide a valuable input into coach training. Of lesser priority (given that this is a well-known issue) would be further research into the ways in which coaches experience pressures to collude. The experiences of internal coaches in this area remain largely unexplored and would be a fruitful area for further study although again, of secondary priority.

7.3. Implications for practice

HR and OD practitioners may wonder if the findings of this study are a counsel of despair. If responses to talent management and high potential designations, expectations of coaching, and understandings of learning are so varied and subjective, how does the practitioner intervene effectively? The call here is not for practitioners to give up however, but to find ways which embrace more fully the dimensionality of their interventions as experienced by participants. By providing a first person perspective from some of the actors in talent management, I hope to have alerted future researchers and practitioners to complexity and differentiation, and thereby to enable greater sensitivity and discrimination in talent management research and practice.

While it is unlikely that conceptualisations of talent management could ever be fully aligned amongst all the actors, some of the more egregious effects of misalignment – personal hurt and poorly directed investment for example – could perhaps be negated through a different approach to the

design and management of talent interventions. Bushe and Marshak (2009) note that a shortcoming of traditional, diagnostic OD practice is that “[b]ecause collective sensemaking about structures, processes, leadership actions, change models, interventions, and the like are idiosyncratic to whatever group or organization they are applied in, attempts to simply copy an innovation or change process from one system to another system, without thoughtful leadership adapting to local conditions, will usually result in unwanted outcomes” (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). This certainly seems to be true of talent management in its multiple contexts. It may be that more inclusive approaches, such as the dialogic approaches proposed by Bushe and Marshak in the context of change (Bushe & Marshak, 2009) would provide a helpful departure. Such approaches assume that “change comes from the emergence and widespread embrace by the whole system of stakeholders of new ideas, models, metaphors, and theories that “challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture,...raise fundamental questions,...foster reconsideration of that which is ‘taken for granted’ and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions” (Bushe & Marshak, 2009 pp355-356). There are some hints at a practice level that patience is running out with talent management processes in the war for talent mould, and some indications of a return to more inclusive, developmental approaches in the OD sphere advocated by Pfeffer (e.g. Bersin, 2014). If this is to be the case, research which, for example, brings thinking around talent management and contemporary OD together can only be of value. Rather than a drag and drop approach to talent and career management which simply takes the prescription of consultants and “best practice” and drops it into an organisation, inclusive approaches might facilitate an approach more sensitive to context and to a wider range of stakeholders’ interests and perspectives.

Findings from this research could help to further sensitise organisational stakeholders in talent management to the risks inherent in their interventions. This is true, for example, for the design of coaching programmes in talent development. It would be wrong to assume that the design of all such programmes is flawed only on the grounds that some coaches feel that some of them are constraining and counter-productive. After all, coaches are only one set of stakeholders in this process, and we have seen that they sometimes have conceptualisations of their role which are widely removed from helping coachees to prepare for the next leadership transition. But it is undoubtedly true that coaches can bring experience and perspective about the application of coaching and optimal conditions for its success which may not be available to organisational stakeholders. Oliver et al. note that coaches “bring in a wealth of knowledge and new perspectives that provide learning opportunities for individual leaders and the organization” (Oliver et al., 2009, p213), and suggest that coaches be encouraged to come forward with new ideas and suggestions. From this research, coaches’ systems-orientation, and desire to make a contribution at the system level, suggest that such involvement, handled well, will have potential value.

For organisational stakeholders, these findings suggest that there could therefore be value in reflecting the points listed below. These are not offered as a prescription – IPA studies do not justify this – but as issues and suggestions which merit consideration:

- There may be benefits in organisational stakeholders investing in getting to know putative high potentials, so they can understand their aspirations and promote candid conversations. Consideration should be given to ways in which the dark side of careers may manifest in particular organisational settings and to the possible impact of impression management on the accuracy of an organisation's assessments of potential.
- Organisations may wish to consider reviewing talent processes to ensure they are designed to spot talent at various career stages. A focus on building employee's confidence around their careers may be of benefit, particularly at critical points such as return to work after maternity leave. Processes may benefit from review to ensure that they allow for second chances and mitigate against hero to zero or zero to hero judgements.
- Talent practice would benefit from practitioners finding ways to promote dialogue between stakeholders in talent management so as to increase shared understandings of purpose and criteria and manage potential controversy.
- As part of the design of talent development programmes, the potential contribution of coaching should be considered, as should the risks of collusion, and the basis on which it should be evaluated. Coaches may have a valuable contribution to make to programme design. Certainly they will benefit from understanding the organisation's aims, through careful briefing.
- Most fundamentally, talent practitioners may wish to consider whether talent management processes, especially exclusive models, give better long-term outcomes than more broad-based, developmental approaches as discussed above.

For people designated as high potential, these findings provide some insight – both cautionary and encouraging – from the perspective of others so designated. Based on this study, people designated as high potential may wish to give thoughtful consideration to the following issues:

- Anyone designated as high potential would benefit from sharpening their understanding of the risks and opportunities involved in their designation, including those involved in being candid with organisational stakeholders about their aspirations. They would do well to be prepared for some inconsistencies and lack of clarity amongst stakeholders.

- Given the possibly high stakes involved in terms of career and self-confidence, people designated as high potential may wish to consider the meaning of their status in the context of their whole lives, as well as what sacrifices they may be prepared to make to protect it.
- Coachees on talent development programmes would benefit from consideration about long- and short-term goals and about how to invest in building a strong relationship with the coach.

In terms of coaching practice, this study has strengthened existing knowledge about the importance to the client of the relationship in coaching, the tensions between participants' agendas and perspectives, and the centrality of the coach's sense of self to coaching. Coaches might benefit from reflecting on these points in their reflective practice and/or in supervision:

- Coaches may wish to consider how their practice disciplines may help them to balance the potential tensions between organisational and coachee goals, how they might surface, and how they could explore ethical challenges with organisational stakeholders. Similarly, they may wish to reflect on their own definition of successful coaching, and how it might differ from that of the coachee and that of the organisation.
- In talent development assignments, coaches will wish to consider how coachees should/could be encouraged to explore their high potential designation and its implications – including the potential for friction with organisational objectives.
- Coaches may wish to consider the risks that being highly personally invested in their coaching role may cause coaching to become self-serving rather than in service of the client. Supervision can be used to reflect on and make sense of such issues.

7.4. Personal reflections

This project has naturally involved many personal demands of time, energy, focused concentration, and confidence. The stamina required for a long-term research project is not to be underestimated, but naturally too, it brings immense rewards and satisfactions.

I began my research journey with some experiences and some assumptions (some fore-structures, in Heideggerian terms) about talent management and coaching. As the hermeneutic circle closes and this study concludes, I notice that these assumptions have changed significantly. At a personal and practice level, as a corporate talent management specialist and ex-HR director, it is a somewhat bitter

reflection that I myself have undoubtedly done some harm through the implementation of talent management processes. I have also undoubtedly created opportunities and benefits however, and it is a consolation, in that context, to reflect on the resilience and self-reliance of coachee participants in this study.

Perhaps most significantly though, in terms of personal impact, any residual belief I had in the perfectibility of talent management as an OD practice has fallen away, and I have questioned the foundations of my practice in this area. This is no light matter for someone whose career is in the field and it will take some time, I think, for me to arrive at a professional position which reconciles my new insights with what is asked of me by clients and employers.

This study, as discussed above, is designed to illuminate our understanding and contribute to the evidence-base for the field, but not to prescribe a new way of doing things. Inevitably, this raises a “so what?” challenge. Solutions generation is privileged in organisational life as a way of managing internal and external volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity – the much-cited VUCA factors which have become a ‘trope’ of business discourse. To point out that there are problematic issues with a key organisational process (one, moreover, which has been seen as having the potential to *obviate* uncertainty) and not to be able to offer an alternative solution can be an uncomfortable position, which I have felt keenly from time to time. In the process of socialising my completed research however, I have learned not only to be much more relaxed about the “so what?” challenge, but to question its validity. There *is* no quick fix for the genuinely complex and difficult question of how organisations manage business continuity and future-proof their access to the right skills and capabilities. To rush to prescription on the basis of this research would not only be methodologically wrong, but would do violence to its spirit. To use these findings to facilitate an honest dialogue amongst practitioners, however, and to promote a more holistic and dimensional approach to the way people are managed is a good end, sufficient in itself, for this research study, and a good beginning in terms of contributing to changing practice for the better in this field.

As an executive coach, the accounts of coach participants in this study are richly resonant with my own experience, and have proved to be a support in what can be an isolating profession. As a result of this research, I treat the brief for a coaching assignment with more caution, asking more careful questions about the commissioning client’s expectations of me and of the coachee and being more sensitised to risks of collusion. I am also more aware that coachees may have different expectations of coaching from those I hold, and reflection on this divergence has become part of my practice development in supervision. Indeed, the insights I have gained from this research experience have further underlined my belief in the criticality of reflection in coaching practice.

As part of my research journey I have shared my research at various stages with practitioners and other researchers as follows:

- I presented my research proposal, research process and literature review to the Oxford Brookes Coaching and Mentoring Society in June 2014 and to the European Mentoring and Coaching Council Research Conference, also in June 2014
- I presented my findings to the Oxford Brookes Annual Coaching and Mentoring Research Conference in January 2016
- I presented my research to a seminar of senior HR and talent practitioners in January 2014 and to a CPD group of coaches, talent and leadership consultants in February 2016.

These have been exhilarating experiences. Not only has it enabled me to create many more networks and connections, but without exception, this research topic, particularly that part of it relating to talent management, has struck a chord with practitioners. If the test of an IPA study is resonance with an informed audience, this has been successful. Coaches and talent practitioners have come forward with their own accounts (some of them hair-raising) of how these issues have arisen in their practice and there has been a rueful recognition of the shortcomings and ethical and personal dilemmas in both the talent management and coaching fields. It has been satisfying to realise that this research is timely and can provide a contribution, and I will seek more opportunities to speak to influencers in the future.

At present, I have no formal plans to undertake further research, although there are several unexplored avenues discussed above which have the potential to provide rich insight. Rather, my focus at present is on reflecting on how to integrate my research findings with practice. I also plan to further publish my research. To date I have written two white papers for my own consulting practice and shared them with a variety of contacts. I have also been asked to submit an article to a key practice journal and will be publishing my findings in the Oxford Brookes International Journal of Evidence-Based Coaching and Mentoring.

At the beginning of this research journey, the process of design - selecting a methodology, considering and discarding options, aligning methodology with philosophical paradigm and jumping the hurdles of various approval committees – sometimes felt like a constraint on the initial enthusiasm I brought to the topic. While every challenge improved the quality of the study, it also trimmed the angles from which issues could be explored, and required compromises in the approach which sometimes felt demotivating. Data collection was an anxious business, not least because it is one which cannot be repeated – it has to yield good enough results first time. Data analysis was a slog, with several false steps and much confusion and self-doubt. The highly-structured guidance on the IPA research process available in Smith et al. (2009) was invaluable, but all the guidance in the

world cannot obviate the requirement to manage and analyse a mountain of data, and there is no help for it but to call on one's internal resources. From the writing up stage onwards however, I found that I moved gradually into a much more expansive and confident state in relation to my research, in which I ultimately experienced something akin to mastery of my material and process. It goes without saying that this confident mastery is a result of the rigour derived from the structural scaffolding of the research process – the ethical and methodological tests, for example and a systematic approach to the handling of data. Before I began this research, I felt like a seasoned pro, qualified to comment on issues in my field as a result of many years experience. But the confidence derived from having researched a topic to such depth, and to have passed the various tests and challenges to my thinking which are involved, is of a different order again.

8. References

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9. Appendices

9.1. Appendix 1: Web of science search parameters

Search date range throughout 2000-2013. Document type “article” throughout

Search Term	Web of Science Categories	Research areas	Total number
“talent management”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management • Business • Psychology applied • Public administration • Psychology multidisciplinary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business economics • Psychology • Public administration 	119

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9.3. Appendix 3: Participant invitation email

Dear colleague

[organisation name] is pleased to be participating in an important research project on coaching as part of talent management development programmes. The research aims to develop greater insight into this kind of coaching so that we can understand more about its role in people's development.

The research includes interviews with people who have been participants in such coaching programmes. Participation is entirely voluntary – you should not feel obliged to take part - and interviews are confidential. You do not have to tell us if you are taking part and your contribution will be anonymised so that you can feel confident about speaking freely and frankly.

There will be one interview with each research participant of between one and two hours, to take place at any time between January and August 2014. Interviewees will need to have had at least three coaching sessions as part of their development programme and to have good recall of the experience. They will be asked to speak freely and in some depth, so it will help if they have reflected on their experience of coaching and the use they made of it. The participant information sheet attached includes much more detail and should answer any questions you might have.

I have sent this email to you because you are likely to meet the criteria for participation. If you think you might want to contribute to this important research project, or have any questions about it, please contact the researcher, Alison Rose, directly, using the following contact information.

Email: 12081879@brookes.ac.uk
Phone: 07939355361

Best wishes

[HRD]

9.4. Appendix 4 : Coachee and coach participant information sheets



Participant Information Sheet

Research study - High Potential Coaching – the Experiences of Employees and Coaches

You are invited to take part in a study which aims to explore the experience of being a participant in a talent management coaching programme.

Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time, therefore, to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The core of this study is to explore the experiences of six people who are being coached as part of a high potential or talent management programme and six coaches who work on such programmes (but not matched pairs). The purpose of the research is to improve our understanding of the real-life experiences of participants and of how they see and use their coaching. Ultimately this insight may help us to design better coaching and talent management programmes.

With this in mind, you will be asked, in a recorded interview, to reflect broadly and deeply on your experiences. You will be asked to recount your experiences and explore what sense you make of them now. You will be free to speak frankly, within the limits of what you find comfortable, and should not feel that you have to represent any view or perspective other than your own.

The research is being undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate in the Faculty of Business, Oxford Brookes University. Data will be collected between January and August 2014, and analysed and included in a thesis by the end of 2015.

Why have you been invited to participate?

You are being invited to take part because you are, or have recently been, participating in coaching as part of a talent management programme. You have been nominated by someone in your organisation who feels that you have reflected on your experiences and would be willing to discuss them in some depth.

Do you have to take part?

No, it is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You should not feel obliged to participate because your organisation has suggested that you might wish to. If you do decide not to participate, you do not have to give a reason for your decision and there will be no repercussions for your standing as a programme participant or in any other sense. The person who authorised this contact with you has agreed to this stipulation. If you do decide to take part, you will be able to contact me directly without your organisation's knowledge of whether you agreed to participate or not. You will be asked to sign a consent form but you can still withdraw at any time, up to the point where the data has been analysed, even if it is in the middle of an interview, without giving a reason. If you do withdraw any unprocessed data will be removed from the system and not used in the study.

What will happen if you take part?

There will be an interview which will last for between one and two hours. With your permission it will be recorded. During the interview you will be asked about your experiences of your current development programme and your coaching. The intention is to facilitate your recounting of your experiences, thoughts and feelings about being in this role.

The timing and location of the interviews will be mutually convenient. You will be asked for your preferences. Ideally the location will allow both you and the researcher to feel comfortable and free from distractions.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

While there are no certain benefits to participating, it may be that talking about your experiences of being a coaching participant could be helpful to you in terms of your continuing reflection on the process. You will also be contributing to the overall purpose of the research, which is to provide greater insight into the experiences of people like yourself which may in turn help coaches and organisations to design better programmes in future.

Are there any risks?

You will not be obliged to discuss or disclose anything which you would find uncomfortable. Although the risk inherent in participation is low, it is possible that discussing your experiences may prove distressing. Every effort will be made to ensure your well-being. The researcher has completed ethical approval for this research and will have your interests and well-being as a primary concern.

Will what you say in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). Confidentiality and privacy will be ensured in the collection, storage and publication of research material. Names will be changed in all verbal and printed references. However, because the numbers participating in the research are small, there is a slight possibility that individuals may be identifiable, despite these best efforts. Please be assured that all possible precautions will be taken to ensure that this does not happen.

Data generated by the study will be retained in accordance with the Oxford Brookes' policy on Academic Integrity. The data generated in the course of the research will be kept securely in paper and electronic form for a period of 10 years after the completion of the research project.

What should you do if you want to take part?

If you decide to take part, please email or call me to arrange an interview. Interviews will be face to face and will take place somewhere private and convenient to you (in the UK). The researcher will travel to a suitable location to meet you if necessary.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be included in a thesis for a Doctorate in Coaching and Mentoring. They will also be used at academic conferences and in papers and may be used in a book and/or online.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The study is self-funded as part of a part-time Professional Doctorate in Coaching and Mentoring at Oxford Brookes' Business School.

Who has reviewed the study?

The research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee, Oxford Brookes University

Contact for further information

Alison Rose

Email:

Date: 16th January 2014

Any Concerns?

If you have any concerns about the way in which this study is being, or has been conducted, please contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk

You may also contact my Supervisors:

Dr Tatiana Bachkirova
Reader in Coaching Psychology
Department of Business and Management
Oxford Brookes University
Wheatley
Oxford
OX33 1HX
United Kingdom

tbachkirova@brookes.ac.uk

Dr Carmelina Lawton Smith
Senior Lecturer, Training and Development
Department of Business and Management
Oxford Brookes University
Wheatley
Oxford
OX33 1HX
United Kingdom

clawton-smith@brookes.ac.uk



Participant Information Sheet – Coach Participants

Study Title

High Potential Coaching – The Experiences of Participants and Coaches.

Dear Coach

You are invited to take part in a research study, one of the aims of which is to explore the experience of coaching participants in a talent management coaching programme.

Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time, therefore, to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The core of this study is to explore the experiences of six coaches who work with clients who are in talent management programmes and six people who are being coached as part of a such a programme. These do not have to be matched pairs. The purpose of the research is to improve our understanding of the real-life experiences of participants and coaches, and of how coaches see their practice in these assignments. At the moment, there is very little research-based insight into this kind of practice, and ultimately such insight may help us to design better coaching and talent management programmes.

The research is being undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate in the Faculty of Business, Oxford Brookes University. Data will be collected between January and August 2014, and analysed and published by the end of 2015.

Why have you been invited to participate?

You are being invited to take part because you are, or have recently been, a coach for participants in a talent management programme and because I believe that you have reflected on your practice in this area and might be willing to discuss it in some depth for research purposes.

Do you have to take part?

No, it is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide not to, your decision will have no impact on our relationship and you do not have to give a reason for your decision. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. You can still withdraw at any time, up to the point where the data has been analysed, even if it is in the middle of an interview, without giving a reason. If you do withdraw any unprocessed data will be removed from the system and not used in the study.

What will happen if you take part?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked, in a one to one interview, to reflect broadly and deeply on your experiences of coaching participants in talent management programmes. You will be asked to recount your experiences and explore what sense you make of them now. The intention is to facilitate

your recounting of your experiences, thoughts and feelings about being in this role. You will be able free to speak frankly, within the limits of what you find comfortable, and should not feel that you have to represent any view or perspective other than your own. You will not be required to identify specific clients, so there should be no risk to your professional confidentiality. Any clients you do name will be given a pseudonym in the published research and any organisations de-identified.

The timing and location of the interviews will be mutually convenient. You will be asked for your preferences. Ideally the location will allow both you and me to feel comfortable and free from distractions.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

While there are no certain benefits to participating, it may be that talking about your experiences of being a coach could be helpful to you in terms of your continuing reflection on your practice. You will also be contributing to the overall purpose of the research, which is to provide greater insight into the experiences of people like yourself which may in turn help coaches and organisations to design better experiences in future.

Are there any risks?

You will not be obliged to discuss or disclose anything which you would find uncomfortable. Although the risk inherent in participation is low, it is possible that discussing your experiences may prove distressing. Every effort will be made to ensure your well-being. The researcher has completed ethical approval for this research and will have your interests and well-being as a primary concern.

Will what you say in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). Confidentiality and privacy will be ensured in the collection, storage and publication of research material. Names will be changed in all verbal and printed references. However, because the numbers participating in the research are small, there is a slight possibility that individuals may be identifiable, despite these best efforts. Please be assured that every possible precaution will be taken to ensure that this is not the case.

Data generated by the study will be retained in accordance with the Oxford Brookes' policy on Academic Integrity. The data generated in the course of the research will be kept securely in paper and electronic form for a period of 10 years after the completion of the research project.

What should you do if you want to take part?

If you decide to take part, please email or call me to arrange an interview. Interviews will be face to face and will take place somewhere private and convenient to you (in the UK). The researcher will travel to a suitable location to meet you if necessary.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be published as part of a thesis for a Doctorate in Coaching and Mentoring. They will also be used at academic conferences and in papers and may be used in a book and/or online.

We would also be very happy to give you a summary of the research findings, which will be available in 2015. For a copy, please contact the researcher using the contact details below.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The study is self-funded as part of a part-time Professional Doctorate in Coaching and Mentoring at Oxford Brookes' Business School.

Who has reviewed the study?

The research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee, Oxford Brookes University

Contact for further information

Alison Rose

Phone:

Email:

Date: 23rd October 2103

Any Concerns?

If you have any concerns about the way in which this study is being, or has been conducted, please contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk

You may also contact my Supervisors:

Dr Tatiana Bachkirova
Reader in Coaching Psychology
Department of Business and Management
Oxford Brookes University
Wheatley
Oxford
OX33 1HX
United Kingdom

tbachkirova@brookes.ac.uk

Dr Carmelina Lawton Smith
Senior Lecturer, Training and Development
Department of Business and Management
Oxford Brookes University
Wheatley
Oxford
OX33 1HX
United Kingdom

clawton-smith@brookes.ac.uk

9.5. Appendix 5: Interview question schedule

Experiences of coaching in high potential development programmes

Coachee research participants

- Can you tell me about your experience of the development programme you're currently on?
- Can you tell me about your experience of coaching as part of this programme?
- What, if anything, have you found challenging?
- What, if anything, have you learned?
- What, if anything, has surprised you about this experience?

Coach research participants

- Can you tell me about your experience of coaching on high potential development programmes?
- What, if anything, have you found challenging?
- What, if anything, have you learned?
- How, if at all, has your practice changed?
- What, if anything, has surprised you about this kind of work?

9.6. Appendix 6: Transcriber confidentiality agreement

Oxford Brookes University & XXX Transcription Services

Oxford Brookes University acting as a data controller wishes to engage XXX Transcription Services of XXXX to provide a transcription service ("the Services") to facilitate a research project entitled: XXXXXXXX

In order for the University to utilize the Services, XXX Transcription may need to have access to some personal data ("**Data**") which data is protected under the Data Protection Act 1998 ("**the Act**").

These Data will include, but not necessarily be limited to:

- personal information (name and employing organisation) about interview participants in a Doctor of Coaching and Mentoring research project
- audio recordings of interviews to be transcribed

The parties agree that in respect of the Data, the University is the Data Controller and XXX Transcription Services is the Data Processor. XXX Transcription Services warrants to the University that it shall:

- (i) process the Data at all times in accordance with the Act and solely on the Universities' instructions and for the purposes of providing the Services to the University and for no other purpose or in any manner except with the express prior written consent of the Data Controller; and
- (ii) comply with the seventh Data Protection Principle by implementing appropriate technical and organisational measures to prevent unauthorised and unlawful processing of the Data and to prevent accidental loss, or destruction of, or damage to the Data; and
- (iii) in particular to ensure that any Data or information transported by or held on portable storage or portable processing media as part of the Services shall be encrypted to an appropriate standard and deleted from such storage media so that they cannot be recovered once that information or Data has been transferred to a more permanent and appropriately secured repository; and
- (iv) ensure that each of its employees, agents and subcontractors are made aware of its obligations with regard to the security and protection of the Data and require that they enter into binding obligations with the Data Processor to maintain the appropriate levels of security and protection of the Data; and
- (v) keep the information and Data supplied by the Universities in strict confidence and not divulge that information and Data whether directly or indirectly to any person, firm or company or otherwise without the express prior written consent of the Data Controllers except to those of its employees, agents and subcontractors who are subject to (iv) above or except as may be required by any law or regulation; and
- (vi) not process the Data outside of the European Economic Area except with the express prior written authority of the Data Controllers; and
- (vii) not copy or reproduce the confidential information or data or make any record or reformatting of it, save as is reasonably necessary for the purpose of providing the Services; and

- (viii) to comply with any request from the Data Controllers to amend, transfer or delete data and on completion of the Services to deliver to the Data Controllers or destroy, at the Data Controllers' sole option, all the Data Controllers' Data in its possession or under its control

XXXX agrees to indemnify the University for any fine it may receive from the Information Commissioner and/or pursuant to sections 13 and 14 of the Act arising from any breach by XXXX of the above warranties; provided: (a) XXXX has sole control of the defence and/or settlement of such claim to the extent possible; and (b) the University notifies XXXX promptly in writing of each such claim and gives XXXX all information known to the University relating thereto and (c) the University cooperates with XXXX in the settlement and/or defence of such claim and (d) the University mitigates its loss to the fullest extent possible and (e) the University makes no admission in respect of such claim.

The parties agree that any commercially sensitive information disclosed during the provision of the Services shall be treated with confidence and used only to the extent necessary to perform the Services.

For the avoidance of doubt these terms and conditions replace and supersede any other terms and conditions between the parties relating to their respective obligations under the Act.

9.7. Appendix 7: Consent Form



Research Project

"The Experience of Coaching by High Potential Talent Programme Participants and Coaches"

Alison Rose

Email: Mobile:

Please initial box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

I agree to take part in the above study

I agree that the interview will be recorded

I understand that confidentiality of data can only be protected within the limits of the law

I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been pseudonymised) in a secure location and may be used for future research.

Please tick box

Yes No

I agree to the use of pseudonymised quotes in publications

Please tick box

Yes No

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

9.8. Appendix 8: Sample transcript

	Transcript	Initial noting Black = descriptive or explanatory notes Red = use of language Blue = concepts or conceptualisations	Emergent Themes
210 211 212 213 214 215 216 217 218 219 220 221 222 223 224 225 226 227 228 229 230 231 232 233 234 235 236 237 238	<p>I'm trying to get at what motivated you to decide now is the time to go for something bigger. And I wonder what the personal impact on you...whether there was anything that you decided you erm...was there any level of sacrifice involved in that. Was there any level of, was it effortful. Was it a difficult decision to make, that's what I'm getting at.</p> <p>So for me it was a really difficult decision to make. Because it's so important to me that I love what I'm doing and genuinely love it, it was if I go to this next level I may not like it. And if I don't like it and love it then what's going to motivate me to come into work, and I work very, very long hours. I've always been committed, not frightened of hard work, but I got the reward because I did love coming into work and loved what I was doing. The real concern was, what if I don't get that buzz. What if I don't get that enjoyment from the new role. So there was that element of it. There was also another element with, if I stick my head above the parapet, people may say, what, she think's she's good enough to get to the next level? Really? And so I was there to be shot down. So from a confidence point of view I really felt that I was putting myself out there for people to say, yes I think you can do, or no you can't, and how was I personally going to cope with that. And sometimes it's easier not putting yourself out there to get the negative feedback. So there were a few reasons why I felt, you know, I took quite a while to decide did I or didn't I want to do it. But in the end the compelling need to learn and want to, you know I felt like I wasn't learning enough, overcame those reservations.</p>	<p>Deciding to go for promotion was a difficult decision. Uncertainty and possible loss in going for a promotion. Love. Values a role for what's intrinsically enjoyable about it – needs to love it. Creates risk around the unknown.</p> <p>Loving the work makes personal sacrifices worthwhile and creates motivation.</p> <p>Where will motivation come from if I don't love my work?</p> <p>Has had narrow limits for what she might love? Lots of questions, lots of potential risks, lots of uncertainty.</p> <p>Fear that people may already not think she's good enough. Fear of being found out. Fear of attracting ill will for over-reaching herself. Fear of negative feedback. Risk of being judged and found wanting. Risk has a personal aspect to it – not just about the ability or otherwise to do a job. Failure would be personally painful. Confidence. The decision made a big call on her confidence. Attracting attention is hard. Easier to stay where she knows she can do very well and be under the radar. Compelling need to learn. Desire to learn and grow can outweigh reservations. Actualisation (Wilber?/Torbert?)</p>	<p>Deciding to aim for promotion was a difficult decision. Involves possible loss as well as uncertainty.</p> <p>Risk. Have to feel that the risk is worth it.</p> <p>Loving work makes personal sacrifices worthwhile and creates motivation – where would my satisfaction come from if I didn't love my work?</p> <p>Part of the difficulty of the decision is in imagining herself enjoying the future.</p> <p>Many anxious questions.</p> <p>Fear that people may already not think she's good enough. Fear of being found out. Fear of attracting ill will for over-reaching herself. Fear of negative feedback. Risk of being judged and found wanting. Easier not to try. Risk has a personal aspect to it – not just about the ability or otherwise to do a job. Failure would be personally painful.</p>

239	And how is the new job?	She finds the enjoyment she looks for in the new role too.	Compelling need to learn. There is an urge to actualisation - which has been satisfied for now.
240			
241	Brilliant. Really, really enjoying it. From my point of view my		
242	background has been in trading for a long, long time, so to	Risky.	Risk in moving from a well known business
243	come out of the really fast paced trading environment, and to	Liberated. Sense of expansion and fulfilment. Waited too long?	environment to an unknown one.
244	be promoted but to go into a totally different department that		
245	I'd not really had any experience of was quite risky, but I feel	Seeing herself in a new way too?	Liberation. Sense of freedom and fulfilment. Somehow
246	absolutely liberated. I'm loving the higher level and seeing the		she was held down/held back/held captive by her
247	bigger picture and being at the heart of things, and I'm loving		previous role and standing.
248	being in a different department as well. So quite surprising how		
249	much I'm really enjoying it.		She sees herself in a new way – it's not just others.
250			Doubt – about herself, about what a more senior role
251	That's brilliant. That's great. It's paid off hasn't it, not surprising	Doubtful about coaching at first.	would be like, about coaching.
252	at all, great. So tell me about the coaching. Are you having		
253	coaching now?		
254			
255	I'm in a pause from my coaching, but as part of my		
256	development plan over the last year I did take part in coaching		
257	and I actually found it very beneficial. But I was quite dubious		
258	at the start of the process in terms of whether it would work	Sees herself as a genuine person and feared coaching might be	
259	for me or not.	"false"	
260			
261	What made you doubtful?	Had negative preconceptions/fears about what coaching would be	Had negative preconceptions/fears about what
262		like	coaching would be like
263	I'm quite a genuine person and it felt, when coaching was	Coaching as potentially "false" – contrasted with her genuineness.	Coaching as potentially "false" – contrasted with her
264	described to me, the sitting with somebody and discussing a	I would be creating situations for them to solve. Feared she might	genuineness.
265	problem with them, it just felt like that might be quite false,	have to make up an agenda – where is her sense of agency to say	
266	and was I creating situations for them to solve. But I could see	"this isn't for me" or "I want this out of this". Or did she fear she	
267	the value of it, I just didn't know whether I was going to get	might not have any problems she didn't already know the answer	Fears coaching will not connect with her genuine self.
268	that level of value from it, but actually I have to say I gave it a	to?	
269	try and I'm so, so glad that I did.	I could see the value of it, I just didn't know whether I was going	Feared she might have to make up an agenda for
270		to get that level of value from it. Saw coaching as theoretically	coaching – where is her sense of agency to say "this
271	Who did you work with?	valuable, but not necessarily for her.	isn't for me" or "I want this out of this". Or did she fear
272		Again – trepidation about the unknown/unexperienced. Does she	she might not have any problems she didn't already
273	I worked with a lady called Suzanne Thomas who was the coach	have to be in an experience to know what it's like for her?	know the answer to?
274	that was recommended to me by Sarah. And I think it's fair to	Was coached to get her to the point of working with a coach.	Coachee taking control of the agenda as problematic.
275	say that I had some coaching from Sarah as well to get to the	Reassured by finding coaching could be tailored to her needs.	Politeness/lack of clarity/assertiveness

276	process of going with a coach, because what she could do is	Expected to be moulded to a pre-determined model? That the	
277	tailor my needs and she could see that I needed help in certain	coach would be rigid?	
278	areas. And I also worked with a lady called Audrey Cox who	Risk in undertaking coaching – that it might be a waste of time.	Saw coaching as theoretically valuable, but not
279	was more of an impact coach as well.		necessarily for her.
280			
281	Gosh so two externals and an internal.		Again – trepidation about the unknown/inexperienced.
282			Does she have to be in an experience to know what it's
283	Yeah.		like for her?
284			
285	That's brilliant. So, how did you come to...did you have any	Internal HR person acts as coach. Great rapport. Hands off to an	Reassured by finding coaching could be tailored to her
286	choice about working with Suzanne or were you matched by	external coach.	needs. Expected to be moulded to a pre-determined
287	Sarah and her experience?	Rapport	model? That the coach would be rigid?
288		Coach from outside the business brings what? Perspective?	Risk in undertaking coaching – might be a waste of
289	I'd spent a lot of time with Sarah so I felt that I'd got a really,	Benchmarking?	time.
290	really great rapport with Sarah, so she originally started	Internal stakeholder bridges the gap.	Trusted and informed internal stakeholder as a guide.
291	coaching me. And so she, in terms of the formal coaching		Coach from outside the business brings what?
292	process, where she felt that I would benefit from somebody	Connection is important as a starting point. What is connection –	Perspective? Benchmarking?
293	outside of the business, knowing, assessing how I was and what	rapport?	Connection is vital – can't go forward without it. What
294	my development needs were she put forward Suzanne, but it		is connection – rapport?
295	was very much my choice. It was a look you go along, you meet		
296	her, and see if you've got that connection, and if you don't have	Discomfort.	Uncomfortable.
297	that connection that's fine we'll come up with somebody else,	Secrets	
298	but here's a starting point.	Concerns	
299		Bare	
300	And how did you find that first conversation?	Coach is a stranger at first.	Coach is a stranger at first.
301		Trepidation about what will be asked of me as a coachee. Fearing	Trepidation about what will be asked of me as a
302	Again I was feeling a little bit uncomfortable meeting a total	feeling exposed and vulnerable.	coachee.
303	stranger that you're then going to bare all of your secrets and	Coaching conceived of as a place where secrets are told.	Fearing feeling exposed and vulnerable.
304	concerns and, and stuff to. But actually for me, I actually felt	Contradictorily, she fears both that she will be laid bare and that	Coaching conceived of as a place where secrets are
305	that there was that rapport there from the start. So after the	the coaching will <i>not</i> be genuine.	told.
306	first meeting I felt like it was somebody I could work with, I	Rapport	Contradictorily, she fears both that she will be laid
307	respected what her experience was so I felt that I could learn	Rapport is confidence with the person.	bare and that the coaching will <i>not</i> be genuine
308	from her, but I was still a bit nervous in terms of how the actual	Nervous	Even where there is rapport, there may be
309	process was going to work. So I was confident with the person,	Unsure how it was going to work – how would she know?	nervousness about the process.
310	I was still a bit unsure in terms of, until we had our first official	Doubting value.	Caution, reservations.
311	coaching session how it was going to work, and how beneficial I		Rapport and confidence are linked.
312	was going to find it.		Lack of confidence means the engagement has to be

313		Contracting in first coaching session – not in chemistry session.	entered into step by step – trusted advisor introduces
314	Did you have a discussion in that first session about	Trust. Rapport.	to credible coach, coach creates trust and rapport,
315	confidentiality?		coach guides her into the process.
316			
317	Yeah we did. So it was very much in terms of contract and what		
318	she would do and what she expected from me, and within that		
319	was the confidentiality around it, and it was establishing that		
320	trust and rapport and what we would talk about, and how it		
321	would work. So there was quite a contract, not just about the	Crib sheet – briefing about the coach allows her to feel that she	
322	confidentiality.	has some useful information to hand.	
323			
324	Can you say a bit more about what you responded to in her.	Coach as someone I can learn from. Credibility is key. Having	Coach as someone I can learn from.
325	What was it that you liked about her?	worked at a senior level gives the coach credibility and makes	Credibility is key. Having worked at a senior level gives
326		them someone coachee can learn from.	the coach credibility and makes them someone
327	So initially I'd had her details through, so I'd had a crib sheet in	Emotional connection is important. Style/connection is as	coachee can learn from.
328	terms of what her experience was. So from that point of view I	important, or also important in addition to credibility.	
329	looked at her experience and thought this is somebody that I	Rapport relies on meeting.	
330	can learn from. This is somebody who's credible. This is	Emotional	
331	somebody who's worked at the highest levels and therefore I		
332	feel that I can learn from that person. And then it, the rest of it		There must be “emotional” connection as well as
333	came from the meeting. So I was already inclined to think this is		credibility.
334	somebody I can learn from, but actually would I like their style,		
335	so the emotional side came more at the first meeting because		All the stars have to be aligned for her to feel
336	you can't get that from a sheet of paper.		confident.
337			
338	And what did you see. How would you at that point if you	Gender issues made personal.	
339	describe the purpose of it?		
340			
341	In terms of the coaching?	Women can learn from the role modelling and teaching of other	Women can learn from the role modelling and
342		women how to get on.	teaching of other women how to get on.
343	Yeah.		
344			
345	Very much for me, the coaching was around being a woman in	In a male-dominated company, female role-models of success	In a male-dominated company, female role-models of
346	business, how I progressed at a senior level. How somebody	have to be sought outside the business.	success have to be sought outside the business.
347	who'd had experience of doing that outside of the organisation		
348	had done and the things that I could learn. And just genuinely	Sees her gender as a potential differentiator/potentially retarding	Sees her gender as a potential
349	how, wasn't just the gender thing but the gender thing was	her progress because she lacks role models?	differentiator/potentially retarding her progress

<p>350 quite a big part of, you know how women get on in business, 351 particularly because the company that I work for is quite male 352 dominated, there's not a lot of female role models at a senior 353 level. So I wanted to have somebody who could actually help 354 me with that, and then there were going to be other business 355 solutions along the way, so it was somebody I could relate to 356 just in terms of business problems as well because they had 357 quite a commercial background, so for me it was twofold.</p> <p>358</p> <p>359 Did it matter that she was a woman?</p> <p>360</p> <p>361 No not particularly. But I think because some of the elements 362 of what I was wanting to understand was around how as a 363 woman were you successful in getting on at a senior level, it 364 actually made it more authentic that she'd actually faced some 365 of the things I was facing, and she'd come through it and she'd 366 come out the other end. So for me it was easier to believe that 367 because she'd done it, rather than somebody telling me, and 368 whilst it might have been okay with a man telling me how he'd 369 observed women were getting on, it was the fact that she'd 370 experienced it, and she could tell me the emotions as well as 371 what was seen and observed.</p> <p>372</p> <p>373 Did you know anything about the model of coaching that she 374 used? Did you know anything about the kind of theories that 375 backed up her coaching or anything like that?</p> <p>376</p> <p>377 As we were going through things, I think what I found was 378 really great was that she tailored our coaching sessions to how I 379 was feeling, and knowing what I was like, getting to know me 380 and knowing how I would basically respond to things, so it 381 wasn't necessarily very formal in terms of we're going to use 382 this style, but there were definitely techniques that she was 383 using that I felt she was using. And actually because she'd 384 established that rapport with me she got the best out of me by 385 doing that and tailoring the approach.</p> <p>386</p>	<p>Coach is role model, teacher of business solutions and guide to women's career management. Coach fulfils a number of roles – depending on the needs and perspectives of the client.</p> <p>Authenticity through representational embodiment.</p> <p>Come through it – promotion as a testing experience. Coach's experience of similar issues makes her more authentic and believable – not theoretical. Authenticity and genuineness as a theme – touchstone for her. Another coach, working from a theoretical base, would be less credible. Emotions. How does it <i>feel</i> to be a successful person? To struggle for success? To hold ones confidence? This coachee needs to map the emotional landscape of career success, not just the practical action steps. Managing emotions, particularly negative emotions is an important piece of learning.</p> <p>Tailored Values coaching she sees as individually tailored to her – ie responsive, flexible, contextualised, taking her feelings into account. Being known by the coach enables good coaching – this develops over time and depends on rapport.</p> <p>Coaching needs to be unique to her.</p> <p>Conscious of the coach using techniques.</p> <p>Credibility + rapport + techniques + tailored approach brings out the best in her.</p>	<p>because she lacks role models?</p> <p>Coach's role is defined by coachee's needs. Can fulfil a number of different roles simultaneously</p> <p>Coach's experience of similar issues makes her more authentic and believable – not theoretical.</p> <p>Authenticity and genuineness are a touchstone for her Another coach, working from a theoretical base, would be less credible. How does it <i>feel</i> to be a successful person? To struggle for success? To hold ones confidence? Needs insight into the emotional landscape of career progression for women. Managing emotions, particularly negative emotions is an important piece of learning.</p> <p>A lot of factors need to line up for her to be confident to get going – has to be a coach who is credible, has to be someone with whom she has rapport, has to be a woman. Implications for the matching process?</p> <p>Tailoring – another factor. Needs a unique engagement - responsive, flexible, contextualised, taking her feelings into account.</p> <p>Credibility + rapport + techniques + tailored approach brings out the best in her and are conditions of</p>
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387	Did she ever say to you anything like, and these are just		success.
388	examples, I'm a gestalt coach or I use positive psychology, or	She doesn't mind noticeable techniques if there is rapport.	
389	I'm solutions focused, or anything like that?		She doesn't mind noticeable techniques if there is rapport.
390			Coach's modality is not important.
391	There were some elements of that, I can't remember what they	Coach's modality is not important.	
392	were.	Credibility and authenticity are the most important aspects of the coach.	Credibility and authenticity are the most important aspects of the coach – lived experience indicates credibility.
393		Qualifications are unimportant compared to an ability to perform a task well.	
394	And did they matter to you?		Her educational background makes it less likely she will see credibility as a resulting from qualifications.
395			
396	Not really. I have to say, the biggest thing that mattered to me	Her educational background makes it less likely she will see credibility as a resulting from qualifications.	Her educational background makes it less likely she will see credibility as a resulting from qualifications.
397	was the credibility in terms of her experience in real life		
398	situations, not the theory, the fact that she'd actually lived it,	Lived experience is an indicator of credibility, not qualifications.	
399	and just the rapport. Was this somebody that actually was		
400	authentic and credible and therefore I was prepared to listen		
401	to. The qualifications and everything didn't mean a lot to me,		
402	and because I don't have qualifications myself, I didn't go to		
403	university, for me that was less of an issue, because I think if		
404	you can do it you can do it well you don't need the		
405	qualifications to back you up.	Has created a mnemonic for her development plan.	Makes friends with her development plan!
406			
407	And how did the impact coach come about?	Different coaches are suited for different learning goals.	Different coaches for different learning goals.
408			
409	Just as part of my development plan I went through with Sarah		
410	in terms of the areas where we felt that I needed to work on.		
411	So I'd got, I called it my SADE, so there was strategic, there was	Promotion is a challenge in terms of having to do things you don't like doing.	Promotion is a challenge in terms of having to do things you don't like doing.
412	dealing with ambiguity, delivering through others, and there		
413	was executive poise. And as part of executive poise it was how		
414	you present yourself, what you do, and therefore the impact		
415	you have on others. And getting to a more senior level meant		
416	doing more presentations and engaging with an audience, and		
417	that was something that I really didn't enjoy doing and felt that		
418	I needed help and support with.		

9.9. Appendix 9: Coachee sample level themes and contributing super-ordinate themes.

Sample level theme: High potential Careers: Ambition, sacrifice, risk and opportunity	
Super-ordinate themes (coachees)	Illustrative verbatim quotes
Ambition is problematic – alignment and misalignment	<p><i>"I'm embarrassed about talking about career progression because it's perceived to be that I want to earn more money..." (RP, 1082)</i></p> <p><i>"other senior members of the team may regard [not wanting promotion] as lacking ambition and as a result I may lose out on opportunities which don't necessarily involve a grade change, ... so I believe they may make ill-informed decisions, which may not be in my interest" (SW, 402)</i></p> <p><i>"I just stopped being so tired and my ambition started to come back" (ZS, 401)</i></p>
Sacrifice	<p><i>"I actually considered...is it better that I don't pursue a career and let [my parents] have more time with their grandchild?"(AR, 439)</i></p> <p><i>"I see some of the Directors and Executive Members here, where, you know they're on the phone at midnight, 2 o'clock in the morning, crack of dawn, work, work, work, that doesn't appeal to me." (SW, 383)</i></p>
Personal constructs of ambition	<p><i>"I wasn't really bothered about the money, if you know what I mean. That wasn't, that's not my motivation, and it hasn't been, so I've never been, actually... I've always wanted to just be challenged and happy in what I'm doing" (RP, 527)</i></p> <p><i>"the things that really motivate me, are really enjoying what I do at work, and therefore it's not about the ambition, it's not about the grade, it's not about the money" (AA, 83)</i></p> <p><i>"I am very interested in doing different things I don't want to be held back with somebody interprets it in the wrong way." (SW, 409)</i></p>
Balancing risk and opportunity	<p><i>"I joined Protect not long before they closed the final salary pension scheme...that's not a benefit that you want to give up quickly in this day and age at this age, so that's one thing that's definitely keeping me tied" (SW, 522)</i></p> <p><i>"Did I want to be someone else's no.2 because I'm really good at it, yeah, or should I take some responsibility and put my head over the parapet and move on. And I've decided to do that" (ZS, 470)</i></p> <p><i>"If I stick my head above the parapet, people may say, 'what, she think's she's good enough to get to the next level? Really?'...And sometimes it's easier not putting yourself out there to get the negative feedback." (AA, 218)</i></p> <p><i>"The story I play to myself is, I guess is, if I'd make this one decision wrong I'll be sacked or lose my job or be selling the Big Issue" (RP, 573)</i></p>
Sample level theme: Experiences of coaching: Chit chat and Challenge	
Super-ordinate themes	Illustrative verbatim quotes

Challenge, comfort and discomfort	<p><i>"it's an open relationship, very casual, relaxed. I'll normally turn up late then we'll discuss for about 15 minutes what she's been up to and where I've been in [country] and then we'll have a chat and that's generally about it"</i> (AR, 925)</p> <p><i>"I was feeling a little bit uncomfortable meeting a total stranger that you're then going to bare all of your secrets and concerns and, and stuff to"</i> (AA, 293)</p> <p><i>"he doesn't let me get away with things, so he, he, he sort of asks me to delve in more deeply, and it's really challenging"</i> (RP, 464)</p> <p><i>"it wasn't all fluffy 'How did you enjoy the course?' it was the 'So, what will you do? What will you be doing tomorrow? What are the actions you're going to take' and really forcing me to think about how if you want to, how you're going to change"</i> (MK, 336)</p>
Coaching as a safe and supportive environment	<p><i>"I felt that I could be completely transparent with him and completely open and honest"</i> (RP, 484)</p> <p><i>"I suppose an element of it is frankly the time, you're taking time out of your day to focus on you. I think that's very useful as well"</i> (MK, 643)</p> <p><i>"So it was semi-safe in terms of it was a safe environment, but in a lot of cases I felt outside of my comfort zone, which was a great thing to do".</i> (AA, 557)</p>
Lukewarm responses and low expectations	<p><i>"so there's a bunch of you know really useful techniques I thought were quite thought-provoking"</i> (MK, 484)</p> <p><i>"so a lot of, some of the items I've covered in different training or different experiences so maybe from a pure training point of view, it's not so interesting."</i> (AR, 25)</p> <p><i>"I quite enjoyed the first session. These are never ideal in terms of timing are they in terms of they always seem to come right in the middle of things"</i> (SW, 104)</p> <p><i>"I expected the programme to be, very much like previous leadership programmes and development programmes that I've been involved in, been quite, do I better describe it as hints and tips and ways of doing things?"</i> (RP, 42)</p>
Sample level theme: Experiences of the Coach: Connection and Rapport	
Super-ordinate themes	Illustrative verbatim quotes
Connection and rapport	<p><i>"we sort of realised that we could actually talk to each other and get on"</i> (RP, 121)</p> <p><i>"it's imperative that you get that rapport, you've got to have somebody that you've got that rapport with because you want to have that safe but challenging environment"</i> (AA, 711)</p> <p><i>"she wasn't warm, but that was fine, it was practical you know, sensible but helpful"</i> (ZS, 341)</p>
Perceptions/ Conceptualisations of the coach	<p><i>"the coach isn't helping you, isn't going to help me with, you know, the technical aspects of my job; it's really about how to learn things or how to interpret things or how to get something on the agenda"</i> (ZS, 549)</p> <p><i>"I mean in many ways Louise was acting as the line manager would"</i> (ZS, 958)</p>

Coach as a trustworthy friend and champion - relationship	<p><i>"somebody independent to say actually Simon, you know in that case you are actually right, why would you so....what you should do is stand your ground"</i> (SW, 897)</p> <p><i>"He's certainly given me the impression he genuinely cares about me"</i> (RP, 474)</p> <p><i>"one of the things that surprised me about my coach was how much feedback she gave me, so she was really positive about me"</i> (ZS, 114)</p>
Coach is credible, admirable and skilled	<p><i>"But you can tell he's done it, for that reason he's really engaged with it and genuinely believes what he's talking about. So you feel that."</i>(RP, 481)</p> <p><i>"This is somebody who's credible. This is somebody who's worked at the highest levels and therefore I feel that I can learn from that person"</i> (AA, 321)</p> <p><i>"you always have to have someone who's as clever as you so that's the other thing I would need I think. I'd like a clever person... otherwise you discount their advice don't you and you don't want that"</i> (ZS, 559)</p>
Demographic affinity	<p><i>"when I say we were the same age in terms of cultural references I guess, so social references, erm liked doing the same sort of things"</i> (RP, 446)</p> <p><i>"there's not a lot of female role models at a senior level. So I wanted to have somebody who could actually help me with that"</i> (AA, 343)</p> <p><i>"one of the things my coach was really, really good at was helping me understand the dynamics of being a working mother, partly because she'd had children herself"</i> (ZS, 235)</p>
Utilitarian conceptualisations of the coach	<p><i>"I looked at her experience and thought this is somebody that I can learn from"</i> (AA, 320)</p> <p><i>"if an external coach is challenging that back to me and they can't rip it to shreds then okay there must be some logic in it."</i> (AR, 801)</p> <p><i>"it's just a completely open conversation, private conversation that allows me to get a bit of a sounding board"</i> (SW, 892)</p> <p><i>"if you've got a coaching session in the diary you've got nowhere to hide. So you commit to do certain things as a result of the conversation you had with your coach, and if you don't hand your homework in, in a way, or demonstrate that you've actually done something..."</i> (RP, 762)</p>
Sample level theme: Being a High Potential: Being in the game	
Super-ordinate themes	Illustrative verbatim quotes
Relationship with the organisation	<p><i>"you've got to play the game. No training is bad so I get the benefit of that. Meeting new people is good because it gives me a bigger network. And you have to play the game and whether anybody likes it or not, it is a game"</i> (AR, 1170)</p> <p><i>"success is driven by the individual not by the management"</i> (AR, 212)</p>
Managing one's reputation	<p><i>"It became much more how can I manage all those players in my environment and how can I do much more in the way of...self promotion isn't the right word but make myself more aware in the way people are aware of me in a positive type way"</i> (SW, 722)</p> <p><i>"I know that fitting in is important now and making people feel comfortable is important"</i> (ZS, 171)</p>

Benchmarking oneself	<p><i>"Why is he considered such a talent and I'm not? You know. And yet on the face of it I can't understand because when I look at my work, I think my work is better". (ZS, 259)</i></p> <p><i>"I'm now a Grade B but I'm the newest Grade B across the company ...I suppose I view my, my view at the moment is I've made it into that club if you will" (MK, 215)</i></p>
Effect of the organisation's views on the self-concept - Self-criticism and not being good enough	<p><i>"I think there was this frustration that I wasn't seen as valued" (ZS, 419)</i></p> <p><i>'I kind of challenged myself at that point to think well does that really make me HP1? Shouldn't an HP1 be able to change anything in any opportunity?" (AR, 460)</i></p>
Not knowing and second guessing	<p><i>"I think I was, not sure whether I still am." (SW, 278),</i></p> <p><i>"I don't know is the answer to that question. My boss hasn't really shared that with me" (RP, 280)</i></p>
Attitudes to talent management	<p><i>"we have a central HR function for managing talent but it doesn't have any real power across the business so it can't leverage moving people around the business so it has a nice training package... but they don't have an enabler to actually move the people around". (AR, 184)</i></p>
Sample level theme: The Different Self	
Super-ordinate themes	Illustrative verbatim quotes
Transformation/not transformation – purpose and meaning	<p><i>"I don't think it's changed my perception of who I am or told me anything I didn't know about myself." (SW, 1214)</i></p> <p><i>""he sort of took me from the detail into the sort of macro helicopter view in terms of what I actually wanted to do and challenged me, and that was a question that I'd avoided I guess" (RP, 125)</i></p>
Re-evaluating the self	<p><i>"I have realised that in many ways I'm a role model of a working parent" (ZS, 378)</i></p>
False selves, congruence and the whole self	<p><i>"Because it's very easy to sit in the coaching session and talk about things that actually really aren't you and say you know, I need to do this and that's not what you need to do." (AR, 889)</i></p> <p><i>"I'm respectful of senior people and I act in a different way I think, and I'm not myself" (RP, 954)</i></p>

Coach sample level themes and contributing super-ordinate themes

Sample level theme: Coaches ideas about coaching: Freedom to work	
Super-ordinate themes	Illustrative verbatim quotes
Ideas about coaching practice	<p><i>"Well, it's evolving always. So I think, I think that the easiest thing is as you know is to describe it high level as integrative and quite relational so in terms of, I mean I draw on lots of different psychological and theoretical perspectives on human development..." (SC, 47)</i></p> <p><i>"I would say it is eclectic in order to get away with doing whatever I like" (JW, 82)</i></p>

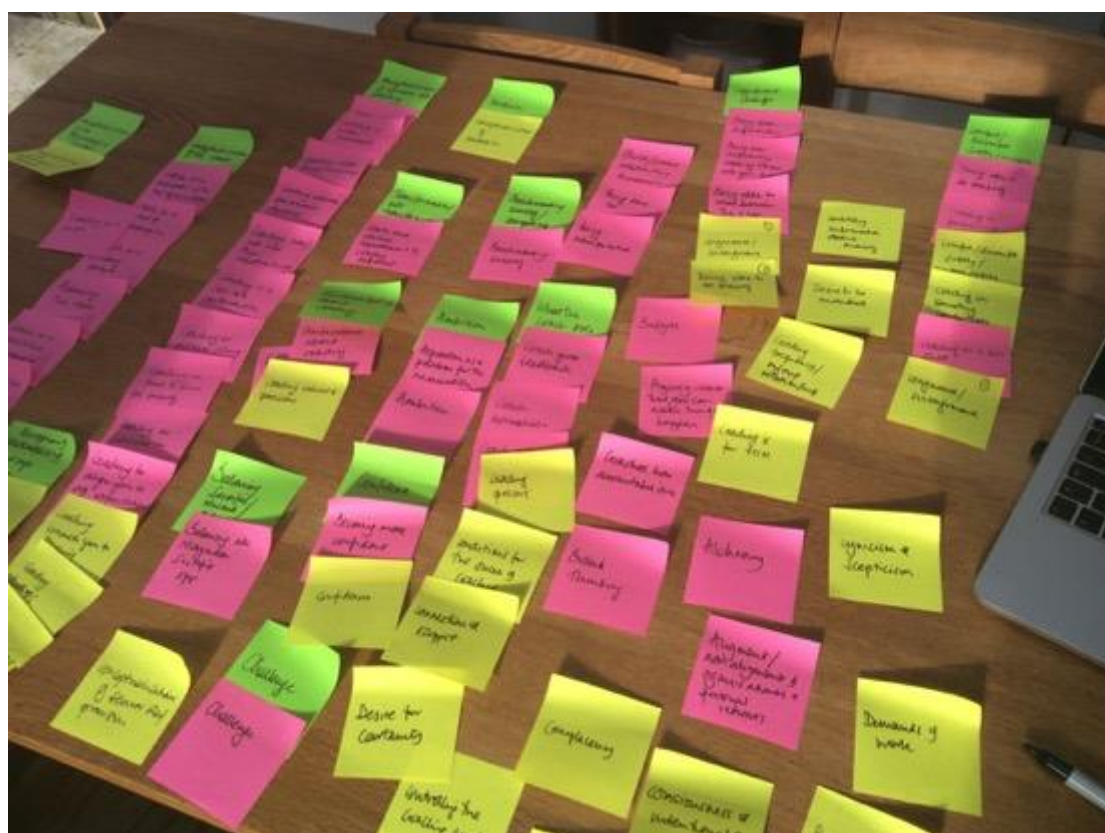
Doing good work	<p><i>"Because ultimately it's what sense they make of it that's that's important. If they make sense of it or that's helpful to them, that's fine."</i> (MT, 804)</p> <p><i>"you can tell that they think you've done a good job when, Gillian could you coach, and then you get someone else who's either tricky or good, and so you get repeat business which is pretty indistinct way because you might be colluding with the people and actually they think you're a lovely person but you're not actually making anything change"</i> (GG, 945)</p> <p><i>"for a lot of people who are investing in a coaching relationship when there's a lot at stake like this, that those relationships that really work best, when they do give you blood and guts, they really reveal themselves, and I think in having the trust to reveal themselves and the courage to say I'm really struggling with this, that you can work with that"</i> (DS, 672)</p>
Methods of practice	<p><i>"I really genuinely believe that it's more effective to work from someone's spike"</i> (GG 195)</p> <p><i>"I guess I've become aware of the power of the relationship much more than I ever have been"</i> (DS, 685)</p> <p><i>"So although I do, you know do, it's going to be a part of my role as a coach is to, is is is to challenge. I'm not the sort of, erm grab them by the throat, sort of give them a good shaking, the sort of approach which is which is deliberately erm unsettling or provocative"</i> (MT, 582)</p> <p><i>"the stuff that is happening right in the room at that moment either inside the client or in their imaginative world or in our interaction or in their cognitive process, that's the core of of where the juice is of the person"</i> (JW, 97)</p>
Sample level theme: Views on the organisation: On the outside looking in	
Super-ordinate themes	Illustrative verbatim quotes
Focus on the whole system	<p><i>"when I'm coaching somebody in that kind of programme, my idea about what's happening is that they are learning more about themselves in that organisational context so that they, not so that they can change anything necessarily but so that they can expand their view of themselves and the system that they're working in, and the world actually, generally"</i> (JW, 652)</p> <p><i>"They see in this case the board is actually quite stifling and holding a lot of power and responsibility, and they don't quite see what opportunities there are for influence in leadership in the way that the board is sending them the message that there is, so there's a bit of a mis-match and that's what's creating a bit of frustration"</i> (DS, 432)</p> <p><i>"one of the things I'm interested in is I suppose unlocking the potential of a whole system and that includes everybody potentially in the system"</i> (SC, 878)</p>

Collusion and triangulation	<p><i>"in the ones that I'd been involved in, there was quite a lot of lip service being paid to something, that it wasn't very respectful of individual difference and individual process."</i> (JW, 321)</p> <p><i>"I have turned down an assignment where I'm being brought in or I've been suggested to be brought in where effectively the organisation is doing it to say 'Well there you go you see, we gave him a coach and it' did...you know we've tried everything so, [claps hands] we have the opportunity to exit'."</i> (MT,702)</p> <p><i>"one of the issues has been the individuals that they've selected, because I've actually been briefed on one programme that this person is only being made a high potential because they've been open about the fact that he's not going to be interested in coaching but we have to offer him it, and he's got big billings..."</i> (GG, 243)</p>
The unbounded role	<p><i>"I've ended up sometimes feeling that I have to step outside of the coach role and do a little bit more of a picking up job before then... Sort of... You know, I mean, and actually it is a coach role, it's just... You're taking a bit of a risk as a coach, really, by doing that"</i> (SR, 580)</p> <p><i>"they've never felt themselves to be big enough to have their own OD person, they've always bought it in...I coach all of the internal board, and giving them some advice on developmental issues generally"</i> (JW, 475)</p>
Truth telling	<p><i>"it wasn't really fair for them to be coached under the aegis of a high potential programme when the person was being coached as a person who was a problem, there needed to be some kind of honesty about it"</i> (JW, 964)</p> <p><i>"I think I am sensitive about recognising where the company wants the person to be, recognising where the individual is, and in a really honest way, squaring those by squaring with each of them that we need to get this aligned. You know, so I don't operate with a different agenda going on, and then don't tell them"</i> (GG, 772)</p>
Sample level theme: Talent management and high potentialness	
Super-ordinate themes	Illustrative verbatim quotes
Experiences of talent management	<p><i>"that's where I start to fall out a bit with talent and potential programmes because there's not quite enough thought given to that human element of what if we expose these things about people to themselves. What if we make them feel vulnerable. How are we going to deal with the fall out?"</i> (JW, 859)</p> <p><i>"You know, most talent development programmes that I've been part of, there's usually a number of people and usually they're much better managed at the beginning of the programme than they are by the end."</i> (SR, 283)</p>

Experiences of coaching in talent development programmes	<p><i>"So I've got another thing going on in my head is, this can't just be a conversation Gillian, you know, he needs to have an action plan, I know that's what they're going to, you know, I'm going to be quizzed, he's going to be quizzed, where's the action plan. So from that point of view very programmatic coaching I find that's one of the shortfalls" (GG, 645).</i></p> <p><i>"I remember having one specific conversation with somebody about it, who was saying: "Oh, oh, you know, it's been good, but I didn't quite get what I needed to get". And "Well, what did you want to get?". He said: "Well I wanted you to tell me what I need to do to get promoted". Yeah... It's an astonishing thing to have somebody say that to you at the end of a programme." (SR, 298)</i></p> <p><i>"they are typically very pleased to be there, because they feel chosen, they feel selected. Certainly at the beginning of the programme, that can change a little bit by the end if promotion hasn't materialised or if potential hasn't actualised" (SR, 261)</i></p>
Experiences of people designated as high potential	<p><i>"they aren't quite so wedded perhaps to certain ways of looking at the world than they are when they're that much further down in a career." MT (199)</i></p> <p><i>"My fundamental take on potential is that potential is projection." (JW, 649)</i></p>
How the coachee sees me: Experiences of the coachee seeing the coach	<p><i>"sometimes I think there is a temptation for them to put you as a coach more in a position of expert and in a mentor type of role which I don't experience that when I'm coaching people that are further down in their career, it's just, that isn't the dynamic, it's much more naturally adult adult." (GG, 674)</i></p>
Sample level theme: Focus of work: A clearer view	
Super-ordinate themes	Illustrative verbatim quotes
A clearer view – growth, congruence, self insight, the whole self	<p><i>"And so it was stepping it from awareness to real insight" (MT, 236)</i></p> <p><i>"So I'm interested in people seeing more of themselves in whatever context they're in." (JW, 662)</i></p> <p><i>"I think good work for me is building a relationship with a leader in the context of coaching, and this would apply also to the high potential work, is building a relationship where the individual can come to make use of coaching to have an experience of some kind of expansion." (SC, 609)</i></p> <p><i>"And you sort of, you know, you're kind of prising them apart saying: "What about you, what are your thoughts, how will you do this?" And I really love that kind of moment to something where they stop and think 'God...'" (SR, 543)</i></p> <p><i>"So I think I'm saying that I have noticed that with most of my high potential candidates they will tend to, and I'll encourage them probably, to have a much more holistic approach to the work than just purely a professional, this is my role" (DS, 472)</i></p> <p><i>"I think there are people that are blocked through confidence issues, which are wonderful to fall upon as a coach and unpick with people." (SR, 998)</i></p> <p><i>"most of their expertise has gone into technical solutions, so the degree to which they really need to work at influencing and kind of building some sense of finesse around being able to work with different levels of relationship and different levels of hierarchy and in a supplier in a client organisation is quite small. So most of the coaching work tends to be in that arena" (DS, 401)</i></p>

Receptivity and readiness	<p><i>"And so that lack of self awareness can be a good and a bad thing, you know, when they're younger from a coaching perspective. So that is the difference. It's where they are in their journey. They're feel more elastic, more plastic, more willing to try, take more risks, all that kind of stuff, is is really nice."</i> (GG, 1025)</p> <p><i>"They don't...particularly when I'm working on development programmes, they don't trust the organisation"</i> (MT, 454)</p>
Sample level theme: Coaches' personal investment in coaching: Technicians of the human soul	
Super-ordinate themes	Illustrative verbatim quotes
The joy of coaching	<p><i>"it's fantastic. It's a trite thing to say but for me it's a real privilege"</i> (MT, 100)</p> <p><i>"Well the first thing I want to say is I really enjoy it you know"</i> (SC, 109)</p> <p><i>"And actually that's quite joyful because there's that sense of helping someone discover their talent actually is really, really nice"</i> (GG, 1019)</p> <p><i>"I find it very self-vaedictory in terms of you know, it sends me back lots of nice signals to me that make me feel good about myself and that's great."</i> (MT, 940)</p> <p><i>"I don't really have bad days coaching, cause it really is my thing and, you know, I'm often in flow."</i> (SR, 901)</p>
How can I help?	<p><i>"But I think people feeling pretty quickly that you, that really whatever they want to bring is permissible and that you are a reliable person to bear the weight of what their concerns are."</i> (JW, 244)</p> <p><i>"And I think just being able to talk about those more private fears with somebody who can demonstrate some kind of understanding of them can be hugely supportive."</i> (SC, 315)</p> <p><i>"I was kind of going, oh my God, what if he doesn't come back from the car park, what if he never comes back into the organisation again and I've just broken their best sales guy?"</i> (JW, 798)</p>
The Coach, me	<p><i>"So I think a coach is as much a technician of the human soul as anything else, because we don't really have them anymore in our culture, and I think it's quite often the closest that you get."</i> (JW, 1025).</p> <p><i>"I didn't have the faintest idea what to do and I just stayed with that and spoke it out and said 'For some reason, I haven't got the faintest idea what I might want to do next other than tell you that's where I am' and then that kind of opened things up"</i> (SC, 394)</p>
How the coachee sees me	<p><i>"sometimes I think there is a temptation for them to put you as a coach more in a position of expert and in a mentor type of role which I don't experience that when I'm coaching people that are further down in their career, it's just, that isn't the dynamic, it's much more naturally adult adult."</i> (GG, 674)</p> <p><i>"I'm coming to terms with the fact that at the end of the day I am more experienced and older than these people, and you know, at some point they can't help but associate me with their Mum, and, you know, but I dislike that intensely"</i> (GG, 433).</p>

9.10. Appendix 10: One stage of treatment of half of emergent themes



9.11. Appendix 11: Example of a mind map used during data analysis

