Academic Paper

How Could Coaching Help Gay Men with Gay Aspects of their Professional Lives?

Mat Daniel ✉ (Mat Daniel Consulting)

Abstract

To examine how coaching could support gay men with gay aspects of their professional lives, constructivist grounded-theory was used to identify that the key is creating conditions where being gay could (not should) be discussed. This requires a strong coaching relationship. The topics discussed may be offshoots of gay identity, rather than directly linked to it. The coachee might bring up their gay identity as a topic for discussion, or, depending of coach's philosophy, purpose of the assignment, and contracting in place, the coach might broach the issue. Suggestions are made for best practice when coaching gay men at work.

Introduction

Despite advances in equality in many countries, gay men continue to face challenges at work. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other minority sexual identities (LGBTQ+) staff are more than twice as likely to experience discrimination as straight employees (Fevre et al., 2009; Public Health England, 2014), and face discrimination in recruitment too (Drydakis, 2014; Flage, 2020). Discrimination influences their career decision-making (Chung, 2001; Fielden & Jepson, 2016), with over a third of gay men stating they would avoid certain jobs due to their sexuality (Ragins, 2004). Some perceive that sexuality restricts career progression (Burke & White, 2001; Gabrani & Pal, 2019), and that heteronormative practices lead to inability to access privileged circles (Trau & Hartel, 2004; Valentine & Wood, 2009). A third of straight people would be unhappy with a gay physician or manager (Ellison & Gunstone, 2009; Lee et al., 2008). Recent positive societal changes might, paradoxically, make it more difficult to discuss discrimination (Harries, 2014), but discrimination is, if anything, under-recognised (Greenland & Taulke-Johnson, 2017; Kirkwood et al., 2013) and under-reported (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018; EU-FRA, 2013; Jones & Williams, 2013).

Gay men face a life-long need to manage their gay-identity in a heteronormative workplace (Lidderdale et al., 2007), but external discrimination is not the only issue they face. Whilst sexual attraction distinguishes gay from straight men, the consequences of this difference are minority stress (Meyer, 2003), internalised homophobia, prejudicial events, expectations of rejection, and minority identity status itself, which all have wide-spread ramifications (Gonsiorek, 1995) that result in gay identity being much more than just about sexual attraction (Odets, 2020). Indeed, adjustment to this stigmatised identity is considered the primary developmental task of gay youth (Hetrick & Martin, 1987), but gay identity development is complex (Gedro, 2009; Ragins, 2004) and often delayed or out-of-synchrony with professional identity formation (Brekhus, 2003; Hostetler, 2009). Gay men have to develop, manage and integrate their gay identities in heteronormative workplaces, something that is additional to the workplace-related identity work undertaken by other employees (Caza et al., 2018).

Just coming-out isn't enough for psychological well-being (Odets, 2020), and there are benefits to identity integration, congruence, self-acceptance, and honesty (Ragins, 2004; Taylor, 2011). Indeed, much coaching literature focuses on integrating multiple competing identities. Greater importance of and commitment to LGBTQ+ identity is associated with more community belonging, identity-pride, identity-contentment, and purpose (Collict et al., 2021; Hinton et al., 2021; Mohr & Kendra, 2011). Greater integration of personal-gay and professional identities is associated with perceived positive work environments, and higher use caring leadership behaviours (Henderson et al., 2018), whilst the visibility of successful LGBTQ+ role-models itself foster acceptance in non-LGBTQ+ colleagues (Wittlin et al., 2019).

Coaching has a proud tradition of supporting under-privileged groups, and despite LGBTQ+ coaches being proportionately represented in the coaching community (Passmore et al., 2021), there has been little research examining LGBTQ+ issues in coaching, with Passmore (2021, p. 49) noting that coaching 'has been blind' to sexual orientation. A number of non-research publications, written by LGBTQ+ coaches, offer general suggestions on coaching gay clients (Warren, 2013), or present the individual coach's model (Lopata, 2022; Tennyson, 2021), or emphasise an adult development approach (Bennett, 2022; Kajpust & Borman, 2022; Longo, 2022). There is also recent research from the gay coach's perspective, suggesting that the challenges inherent in being gay can actually translate into coaching superpowers (Roberts, 2022), whilst another paper describes the use of vignettes to establish that coachees' sexuality disclosure strengthens the working alliance (Ghama & Spence, 2020).

Research in mentoring suggests that mentoring of LGBTQ+ students offers support (Sarna et al., 2021), fosters resilience (Goodrich, 2020), and could target support for LGBTQ+ aspiring leaders (Lee, 2020). Having a gay mentor is important to gay people (Taylor, 2011), and concordant or affirming mentoring was noted to be particularly effective (Nauta et al., 2001; Russell & Horne, 2009; Sanchez et al., 2018). In therapy research, lesbian/gay/bisexual therapists may have specific qualities, but clients didn't see therapist's sexual orientation as particularly important (Bieschke et al., 2007). Instead, an affirmative approach by professionals competent in multiple cultures is recommended (Firestein, 2007; Potoczniak, 2007), with effectiveness of therapy being supported by avoidance of heteronormative language, bias, and assumptions (Dorland & Fischer, 2001; Hunt et al., 2006; Matthews, 2007), and by being supportive of LGBTQ+ identity (Lebolt, 1999) and willing to discuss sexual orientation (Mair & Izzard, 2001).

Gay identity is a potential cause of workplace challenges, and a target of coaching discussions. Given the paucity of empirical research on how coaching could help gay men deal with challenges at work, I investigated how coaching could help them with gay aspects of their professional lives, focusing specifically on issues arising from the gay identity.

Methodology

Grounded-theory enables exploration of previously little-understood processes, and leads to a creation of a theory that is grounded in data. My research explored participants' subjective experiences of their identities and their worlds, which thus aligned with a social constructionist perspective. I chose constructivist grounded-theory (CGT), which also recognises that my own emic position would influence the research; I managed this though memoing and reflective practice, facilitated by peer discussions and jogging. Alongside constructivist epistemology, I adopted critical realist ontology as I wish to produce transferrable knowledge of practical value to society; Charmaz (2014) also states that CGT creates generalisable but context-dependent knowledge.

I undertook intensive interviews with coaches and UK-based gay professional cis-men. Recruiting through LinkedIn, personal contacts, and direct organisational approaches means that I reach those coachees that are happily out, and those coaches that are interested in and willing to engage in sexuality discussions. CGT recognises that findings are constructed based on the world-views of the interviewees and myself, situated in our worldly contexts.

I used semi-structured interviews with five gay men that had workplace-related coaching that included a discussion around their them being gay, and five coaches (four gay men and one straight woman) that performed workplace-related coaching with gay men that included a discussion about the coachee's gay identity. I see including perspectives from both sides of the coaching relationship as important, and both were analysed together. Working inductively, transcripts were coded from the start, and constantly compared. When reviewing data from the ten participants, it was apparent that discussions were wide-ranging, and often unrelated to the gay identity. To specifically focus on gay-related aspects, I coded the initial ten transcripts again with a more focused approach; no new codes arose after the sixth participant. I then recruited a further four gay men that had not had coaching, and five coaches (two gay men, two straight women, one straight man), who helped me explore and refine the nascent theory. NVivo-1.6.1 (QSR-International) was used to store and manage transcripts, codes, and memos. I used Tracy's (2010) eight criteria to guide the quality of my research.

Findings

The map of concepts, categories, and themes is shown in Figure 1. The category gay topics contains the concepts of gay identity expression, and offshoots of the gay identity. The former is about obvious gay-related issues such as being-out and discrimination, but the latter is about issues that are not immediately linked to the gay identity. The gay identity may be irrelevant in coaching, or it may be central in coaching, or it may be that it is the offshoots that matter; the relevance of gay identity may also be more complex that a simple binary distinction.

Putting gay aspects on the agenda requires a strong coaching relationship. The concepts that enable this are safety, coach understanding coachee, coach sharing own experiences, and allyship. Working with gay aspects requires the coach to be self-aware, with some gay-related knowledge, and through linking coaching to gay aspects, and creating conditions where being gay could be discussed. Exactly how the coach works with gay aspects will depend on the coach's own philosophy, and the purpose of the assignment.

Detailed presentation of all concepts identified is beyond the scope of this paper. I focus on the concepts of gay identity offshoots, on creating opportunities so gay aspects could be discussed, and on linking coaching to gay aspects, as these appear to make greatest novel contribution to understanding coaching of gay men at work. After describing these, I return to the overall theory of how coaching can support gay men at work.

Figure 1: Map of concepts, categories, themes
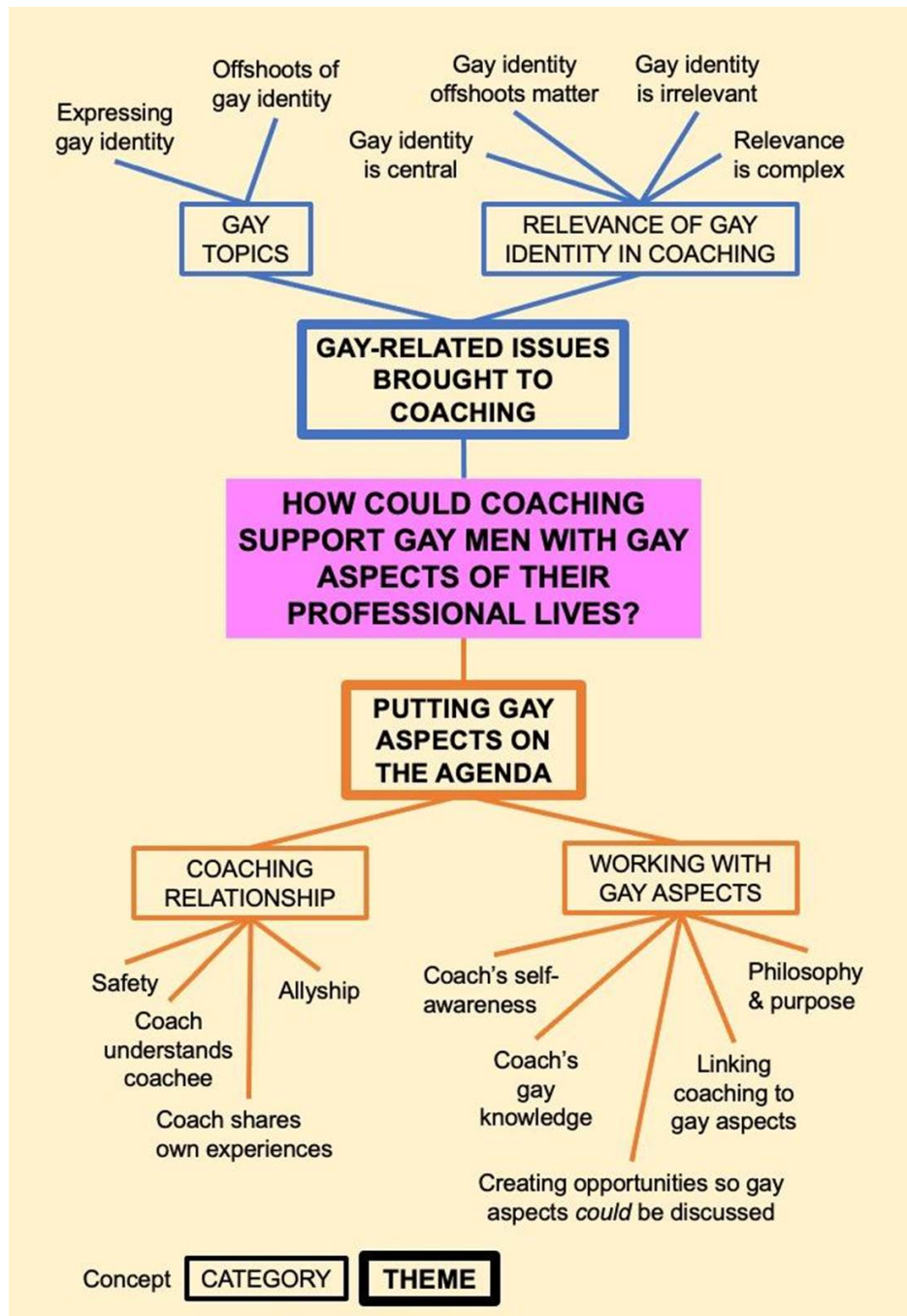
Offshoots of gay identity

A number of participants talked about obvious expressions of the gay identity, from discrimination, coming-out, and dialling-up/down aspects of their gay identity, to bringing one's whole-self to work, and role-modelling. Other discussion topics were superficially unrelated to being gay, but on deeper examination were, as interviewee Simon states, "offshoots" of the gay identity.

Rather than hiding just their gay identity, participants identified a tendency for gay men to hide other parts of themselves. Paul's experience of coaching gay men leads him to conclude that even out men "hide things other than their sexuality", with Keith describing this resulting from "a scar of that early not wanting to reveal anything". Freddie describes not "wanting to put myself fully out

there in case that was used in a negative way", yet he recognises that the resulting lack of rapport-building held him back, and coaching enabled him to "be more confident and make more attachments" at work. Lorraine's coaching helps gay men realise that fear of judgement may be as important as any actual discrimination, whilst Ben's coaching helped him recognise that, despite being different, he has "a right to be acknowledged, just like everybody else". These offshoots then are about hiding, lack of trust, being judged, and otherness.

Creating opportunities so gay aspects could be discussed

Irrespective of whether the coachee's issues are directly linked to gay identity or offshoots of it, the coach needs to specifically create opportunities where being gay could (not should) be discussed, because, in Keith's words, "it's quite a big thing talking about your sexuality". For Spencer it is important to "recognise it, create the opportunity to talk about it", and if the coachee doesn't see it as relevant then "at least you've demonstrated you've heard". Freddie reflects on his coaching with some disappointment because when it came to gay identity, "we ignored the opportunity to include it".

Being gay may be irrelevant to the presenting issue, so the key is, in Denis' words, "just creating that safe space so the coachee feels that they can share whatever they need to share". Simon advises that coaches should have "an understanding and awareness of it", but not "relate everything to it". John notes that coaching "is about dealing with an issue" and Spencer states "I just work with what they present". However, Paul notes that "the being gay stuff is always there somewhere under the surface".

Linking coaching to gay identity

If gay identity is relevant, the coachee might himself recognise this and raise it. However, if the coach wonders about relevance that is unrecognised by the coachee, what should the coach do? There is a tension between offering feedback and being coachee-led. Some coaches would use curiosity questions, Denis would ask "in a general way about how it might touch upon their… interactions with colleagues", and Michelle would "ask pertinent questions that will help you peel back the layers of that particular onion to get to where you should be". Some participant coaches recognised that frank challenge may be needed, but this requires support and permission, and Ian recommends asking himself "is this conversation really worth having?". Cliff notes that "it's not an offensive question when done in a relationship and an environment that supports somebody to be able to go: no, nothing to do with it". However, some coaches may choose not to bring up gay identity, either because they do not see this as their role, or because they worry about casting the coachee as a victim or making their gay identity a deficit. Whether the coach does raise the gay identity in coaching will then depend on the coach's own philosophy, the purpose of the assignment, and contacting in place.

Coachees appear to welcome and expect gay identity broaching by their coaches. Mark describes his coach "seeing significance within this", and Simon's coach made "links that I didn't realise were there". Henry would expect a coach to be "making suggestions about things which occurred to him or to her which hadn't occurred to me", and whilst he wouldn't want to be "challenged all the time", he notes that "if the coach is just supportive, what's the point of that?". How broaching is done matters. Lance suggests it should be done "sensitively and considerately", Adam recommends "empathy and compassion, but with honesty as well", whilst for Henry it should be "mildly challenging in a constructive way, rather than being negative or being overly affirmative" with the coach being neither "overly pushy" nor "overly reticent in making suggestions".

Discussion

Gay men face workplace challenges related to their gay identity. To investigate how coaching could help, I used constructivist grounded-theory and interviewed both gay men and coaches, to construct a theory of how coaching could help gay men with gay aspects of their professional lives. Creating conditions where gay identity could (not should) be discussed in coaching is key, and this requires a strong coaching relationship with an ally-coach. The topics discussed may be obviously linked to gay identity, or they may be its offshoots. If a possible link between presenting issues and gay identity isn't recognised by the coachee, the coach may wish to broach the subject, but whether they do or not will depend on their coaching philosophy, the purpose of the assignment, and contracting in place. The discussion focuses on the concepts of gay identity offshoots and on broaching, as these aspects of my research are of greatest theoretical and practical implications for coaching.

Gay identity offshoots

Gay identity offshoots are about hiding, fear of judgement, and distrust of others, which mirrors literature on minority stress where rejection expectation and hiding are common stress processes (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress refers to excess stress (e.g. discrimination, stigma, prejudice) that minority groups are exposed to, and is thought to explain the greater incidence of mental health problems in stigmatised minorities (Meyer, 1995). The root causes of minority stress are varied, and include negative regard from others leading to negative self-regard, lack of anchor for group and self-definition, micro-aggression, and mismatch between individual and their experience of society (Clark et al., 1999). Meyer (2003) divides stressors into objective (e.g. discrimination), and subjective (personal interpretation), the latter include rejection expectation, excess vigilance, hiding, and fear. Meyer (2003) notes that difficult life events experienced by gay men translate into a wider cognitive-behavioural predisposition, and also notes Allport's (1954) constantly-present vigilance as a defence strategy developed in response to stigma. Liyanage and Adikaram (2019) describe general social withdrawal occurring due to minority stress, whilst Goffman (1963) suggests that people transitioning between stigmatised and "normal" have an apparent personality change.

The impact on an individual will result from their personal experiences and predispositions, as well as from minority stresses in general (Dohrenwend, 2000), so gay identity offshoots will not be relevant in all assignments. They key for coaches is to be aware of the possibility that gay identity may be relevant, just not in an obvious way.

Broaching

Whilst creating conditions where being gay could be discussed is important, the interviewees had differing views on whether the coach could go further and raise the gay identity as relevant if they suspect that it might be. Some coaches see the creation of accepting condition as necessary and sufficient, believing that the coachee will raise anything relevant if the relationship is right. Others, however say that challenge as well as support is needed (Blakey & Day, 2012), and would, in a supportive way, bring coachee's attention to a possible link between their issue and their gay identity. The gay men interviewed expected their coach to raise it if relevant, and my research recognises that such broaching needs to be accompanied by a strong relationship, a curiosity question or a story may be useful, and the focus should be on system issues rather than individual deficits. The coach needs to be courageous to deal with issues that the coachee isn't aware of, and certainly courage is recognised to contribute to good coaching (Wood & Lomas, 2021). The coach's own philosophy, the purpose of the assignment, and the contracting in place will determine how the coach handles the possibility of gay identity being relevant without the coachee's recognition.

The concept of broaching originates in counselling, and refers to counsellor "efforts to discuss those racial, ethnic and cultural issues that are relevant to the client's presenting concerns" (Day-Vines et al., 2021, p. 348). Broaching creates stronger counselling alliances (Fuertes et al., 2002; Zhang & Burkard, 2008), fosters client disclosure (Thompson et al., 1994), and leads to better counselling outcomes (Knox et al., 2003), whilst counsellors' avoidance of race discussions frustrates their clients (Thompson & Jenal, 1994). Broaching may be under-used by counsellors; King and Borders (2019) wonder whether this is because counsellors perceive race to be irrelevant, but the observation that black therapists would broach race with every black client (Knox et al., 2003) suggests that broaching could be done more. Therapists have been criticised for ignoring gay identity as well as for making it into an issue that it is not (Kelley, 2015; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011), and this mirrors the dilemma of whether to broach or not that I identified in coaching. Counsellors are considered to have a duty to broach minority-related issues as part of their overall duty-of-care (Day-Vines et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020), but the coaching profession has not explored duty-of-care in the same way. Coaches do assess (Flaherty, 2010) and challenge (Blakey & Day, 2012), although I recognise that the coaches working on the facilitative end of the helping spectrum (Heron, 2001) may not view broaching as a duty.

If the coach decides to raise something as gay-related, broaching has to be done sensitively to avoid mistrust or perceptions that being gay is given undue prominence; an ideal outcome is one where, even if coach is wrong, the coachee welcomes the coach's willingness to raise and discuss gay issues. The coachee's reaction may also be useful data for the coach assessing how the gay man relates to their gay identity. Day-Vines et al. (2021) describe broaching as a process that starts with relationship building, progresses to assessment, then preparation, and finally delivery. King and Borders (2019) experimental study identified that broaching is perceived best when it includes a preamble as to why race may be important, and where counsellor mentions similarities as well as differences between the counsellor and the client. Whether broaching race in counselling fully transfers to coaching gay men is unclear; my study identified sensitive broaching as important, but exploring exactly how to broach in coaching requires further research.

A theory of how coaching could help gay men with gay aspects of their professional lives

Using "conditions where gay aspects could be discussed in coaching" as the central organising concept led to the construction of a theory of how coaching could help gay men with gay aspects of their professional lives (Figure 2).

At the centre of the theory is a need to create conditions where gay aspects could (not should) be discussed in coaching. This requires a strong coaching relationship. The coach needs to be aware of their own assumptions and prejudices, and should possess and demonstrate some awareness of the challenges faced by gay men. It also helps if the coach is a gay ally, actively demonstrating acceptance and support, and showing an interest in the coachees gay identity. In many ways, these items are similar to any coaching assignment, and will not be discussed in detail in this paper.

Once conditions where gay aspects could be discussed are established, the coachee may himself raise a possible link to his gay identity. Alternatively, the coach may wonder whether gay identity is relevant before the coachee is aware of a possible link. Whether the coach broaches gay identity as a possible factor will depend on the purpose of the assignment and the contracting in place, and also on the coach's own coaching philosophy and sexual orientation.

Figure 2: A theory of how coaching could support gay men with gay aspects of their professional lives
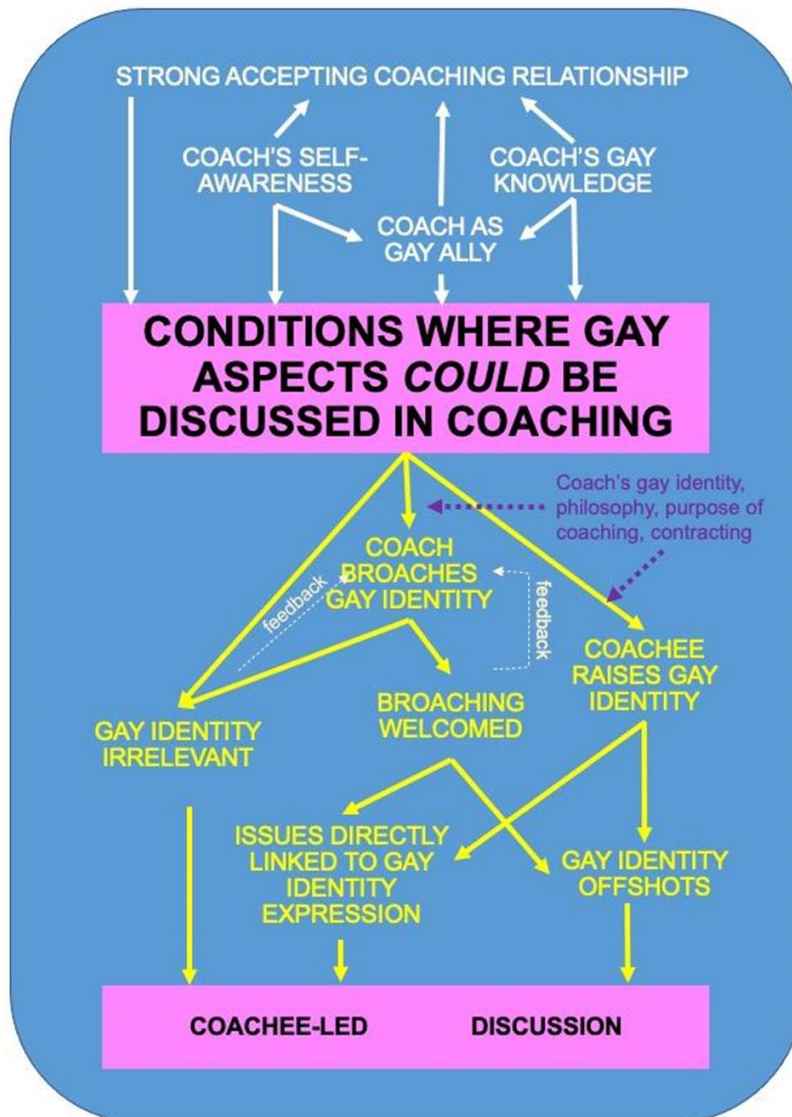

Gay related topics discussed may be directly linked to expression of gay identity, such as coming out or discrimination. However, some topics may not be directly linked to being gay, but are instead offshoots of the gay identity; examples include hiding and fear. Gay identity may be irrelevant in coaching, and if the coach does broach it then, in the context of a supportive relationship, it at least demonstrates their willingness to discuss gay-related aspects.

Conclusions

Helping gay men with gay aspects of their professional lives requires coaches who have considered how they might work with gay men in advance, who establish strong coaching relationships, and who broach the gay identity if appropriate and supported by their philosophy, the nature of the assignment, and contracting in place. Figure 3 illustrates some suggestions for practice for coaches wishing to work with gay men.

Figure 3: Suggested practice when coaching gay men in workplace contexts
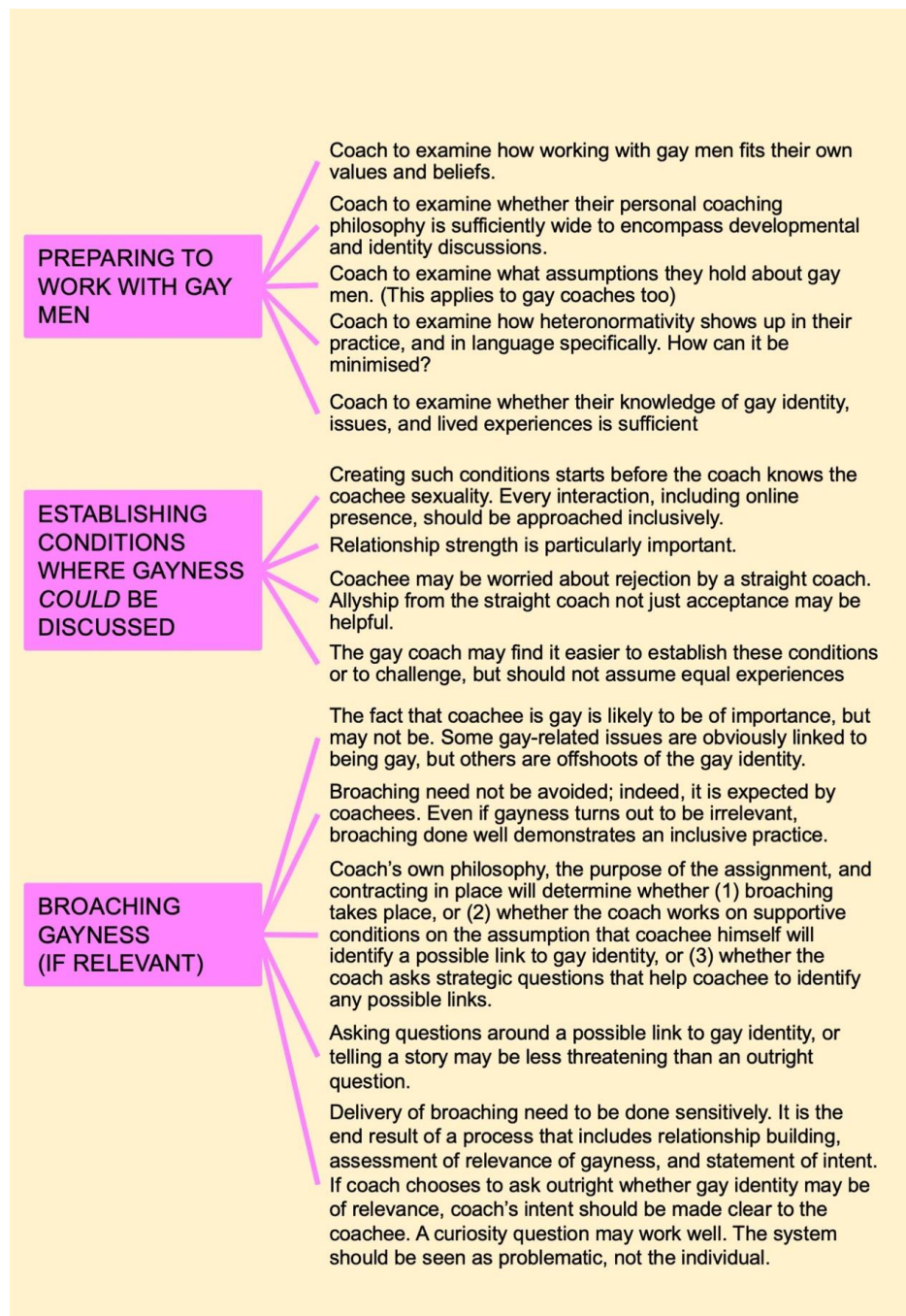
My theory represents what I constructed with my participants in our worldly contexts. Constructivist grounded-theory recognises that my findings may be transferable to UK-based coaching practice, but whether it translates to other contexts requires further investigation. My findings are based on interviews with gay men aged 28-56 years, many of them in relatively senior positions, and whilst this may reflect typical coaching clients, this group is also less likely to be troubled by their gay identity than people who are younger (Hetrick & Martin, 1987), or in less-skilled occupations. My recruitment would also reach those that are out and engaged in gay-related networks. On the other hand, the men that chose to participate were likely ones that viewed gay identity and coaching as important. For coaching to do most societal good future research should focus on younger gay people and gay manual workers as those groups are more likely to need support than the demographic that I studied.

Social constructionism recognises that my constructions originate from a world shared with my participants, yet my participants outlined a range of different views, suggesting that the world from which I am constructing the theory is itself fractioned. Future work could stratify participants by identity salience, perspective on the self, and coaching philosophy, and examine the impact that this has on how coaching could support gay men. However, the downside of that is that it produces something that is too specific to be of generic applicability. My own work hopefully outlines a perspective on coaching gay men that captures a range of coachees' and coaches' preferences and experiences, and the philosophy/purpose concept recognises the existence of differing opinions in my work.

I was surprised that so little has been written about coaching gay men to date. The coaching community clearly recognises that different groups face different challenges, evidenced by the research with executive women (Skinner, 2014; Snape, 2021), although research around allyship is only just appearing (Chiu, 2022). If we believe that different groups have different needs, future coaching research needs to ensure that it pays equal attention to all groups; ideally, this should be research done by outsiders as well as insiders. The impact of equality/diversity training in coaching could be explored too, broaching research would be welcome across a range of topics, and discussing duty of care would be important as the coaching profession matures.

There is currently no published empirical research about coaching gay men, and my own work then represents a rare study of how coaching could help this disadvantaged group at work. The theory constructed provides insight into this process, and hopefully helps coaches deliver a great experience for the gay men that they coach.

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About the author

Mat Daniel, MMEd MA PhD, is an NHS consultant, medical educator, and a career development and leadership coach for physicians. His coaching helps doctors manage career transitions, challenges, and opportunities so they excel, create meaningful careers, and develop their emotional intelligence, relational mastery, and systemic leadership.