

Academic Paper

Why gay men make great coaches: how the experience of developing a positive gay identity impacts coaching practice

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Abstract

While studies on the experiences of gay men working in the helping professions have explored the personal strengths and attributes they bring to their work, there is limited literature about gay men working in coaching. This heuristic inquiry provides insight into how nine gay male coaches felt their experience of developing a positive gay identity impacted their identity as a coach. The findings reveal a parallel between the experience of 'coming out' about sexuality and the process that coaching can facilitate in supporting clients to 'come out' about their challenges and ambitions. This is the first qualitative study to explore the experience of gay male coaches and has the potential to be of interest to coaches who identify as being from other minority groups.

Keywords

coaching, coming out, gay men, helping professions, gay identity

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Introduction

The impact of prejudice, homophobia and shame from internalised homonegativity on the lives of gay men is well documented. The 21st century has seen a shift of tone in starting to explore how minority strengths can mitigate the effect of minority stresses. Self-acceptance, self-compassion and resilience have been shown to positively impact the wellbeing of gay men and are discussed in texts such as *The Velvet Rage* by Alan Downs (2012), *Straight Jacket* by Matthew Todd (2016) and *Out of the Shadows: Reimagining Gay Men's Lives* by Walt Odets (2019). While research has looked at the experiences of gay men working in a range of helping or nurturing professions, there is no literature about gay men working in coaching outside of sports coaching. In this article I summarise the existing literature on gay identity development with a focus on the 'coming out' process. I then outline the findings from the research study, followed by a discussion on the parallels between the coming out process and the coaching process as well as the personal

insights and strengths the gay men interviewed had gained from developing their positive gay identity and how they felt this impacted their identity as a coach.

Minority stress to minority strengths

Given the homophobia, stigma and internalised homonegativity experienced by many gay men, it is understandable why literature on the mental health and wellbeing of gay men comes predominantly from a psychological or psychosocial perspective. The minority stress model developed by Meyer (2003) is the most commonly employed framework for understanding mental health issues in sexual minorities and outlines how stigma, discrimination, victimisation, expectations of rejection, concealment of sexuality and internalised homophobia can all lead to social isolation, shame, low self-worth, hopelessness, depression, anxiety, substance abuse and suicide risk. However, the 'deficit' focus of research has been challenged in an attempt to explain why gay men can experience a sense of wellness despite the fact that they are subject to adversity and marginalisation (Beard, Eames and Withers, 2017; Handlovsky *et al.*, 2018). Perrin *et al.*, (2020) introduced a minority strengths model outlining how personal and collective strengths in minority populations create resilience and positive mental and physical health. This represents a shift in tone and focus. 'Negative' experiences are viewed as contributing to development of a positive gay identity, with literature focussing on the intrapersonal and interpersonal insights, strengths and attributes required, revealed or developed as a result. In short, positive identity development is seen as buffering the effects of sexual minority stress (Bruce, Harper and Bauermeister, 2015).

Belonging to a community, creating families of choice, forging strong connections with others, serving as positive role models, developing empathy and compassion, living authentically and honestly, gaining personal insight and a sense of self, involvement in social justice and activism and freedom from gender-specific roles are all seen as examples of how the development of a positive gay identity can impact wellbeing (Riggle *et al.*, 2008). Gratitude (Kaniuka *et al.*, 2020) and attention to the positive runs strong as a theme for supporting gay men to 'flourish' (Klibert, Choudhury and Yancey, 2021).

Developing a positive gay identity

Throughout the late 20th century, theoretical models (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Cass, 1984a; Cass, 1984b; Troiden, 1988; Eliason, 1996; Fassinger and Miller, 1997b) developed to outline the stages or phases individuals go through in developing a positive gay identity. These are framed around the process of 'coming out' or revealing sexuality (to oneself and to others), (self) acceptance and self-actualisation, involving the transformation of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours from those of the dominant culture (heterosexual) to those of a minority culture (gay).

The coming out process calls for self-inquiry, self-reflection, and ultimately self-acceptance, the meaning of which can be constructed differently for different people (Camp, Vitoratou and Rimes, 2020). However, the happiness from living an authentic life sought by coming out can also mean the potential sacrifice of elements of a current or 'old' identity via rejection of past ways of living, relationships, beliefs, support structures and life goals (King and Smith, 2004). So self-acceptance of sexuality, while ultimately contributing towards a positive gay identity, is not without risk nor consequence.

The experience of coming out has been shown to strengthen the ability for gay men to be self-compassionate and show empathy for others (Riggle *et al.*, 2008) and give personal insight which can be used to cope with psychological distress arising from minority status (Sugianto, Susetyo and Hardjanta, 2019). Greene and Britton (2015) found that the internalisation of positive care was found to facilitate subjective happiness for gay men, and those individuals who are fully out (to themselves and to others in all aspects of their lives) were found to have higher levels of self-compassion (Crews and Crawford, 2015). Appreciation of gay identity can provide insight and

awareness which could help make meaning out of life and circumstances (Riggle *et al.*, 2008). Acceptance of emotions and processing them in an insightful manner has been shown to buffer the negative impact of prejudice and hope and optimism can support gay men to maintain psychological health when faced with prejudice (Kwon, 2013) turning challenges into opportunities and strengths (Asakura and Craig, 2014).

Beyond the theoretical models however, the real-world experience and journey of the individual is key in developing a positive gay identity and it is interesting to look at this through a coaching lens. Arguably both journeys follow a developmental or transformational process requiring self-inquiry, self-reflection, self-acceptance and change of outlook, sometimes a change in relationship with others and reconstruction of values and beliefs and repositioning of the self in the world.

Gay men in the helping professions

I was interested to look at how gay men apply the personal insight and strengths they recognise or develop through their experience of developing a positive gay identity to other areas of life. For example, how might this influence the type of work pursued or influence professional identity in a chosen work role?

There is an absence of literature about the experience of gay men working as coaches with the exception of the prejudice faced by gay sports coaches (Cunningham and Melton, 2012). I therefore looked wider for insight from other helping professions which typically involve supporting, caring and nurturing of others.

Research has shown that gay men feature highly in 'nurturant' occupations (Hewitt, 1995) and that gay men bring a distinct set of skills to task independent occupations or those that require a level of social perceptiveness and that this is developed as a result of social adaptation to discrimination (Tilcsik, Anteby and Knight, 2015). Social perceptiveness in this context is interpreted as being learnt behaviour to self-protect, look out for signs of potential danger or to identify similarity with others with observant skills often heightened given the pressure to conceal sexual identity or because sexual identity is not assumed.

Having personal mastery or viewing one's life chances as being under personal control, has been shown to positively impact happiness (Greene and Britton, 2015). It is suggested that through the coming out process, gay men can 'live a calling' (Allan *et al.*, 2015) due to feeling less constrained to traditional career expectations and instead pursue careers which are of greater intrinsic interest (Schneider and Dimito, 2010 cited in Allan *et al.*, 2015).

Research on the experience of gay men working in helping professions includes gay men working as teachers (Waldo and Kemp, 1997; Skelton, 2000; DeJean, 2007; Ozturk and Rumens, 2014; Hooker, 2018; Simons *et al.*, 2021); healthcare workers and nurses (Harding, 2007; Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009), social workers (Senreich, Straussner and Cooper, 2020) and psychotherapists (Porter, Hulbert-Williams and Chadwick, 2015). While these studies have not always focussed on the positive, research has shown how gay men working as mentors can provide positive role models for other gay men and feel valuable themselves in impacting future generations (Sheran and Arnold, 2012).

Given the absence of literature on the experience of gay men working as coaches, understanding the intersection of developing a positive gay identity and development of coaching identity and practice was a key driver for my interest in the research topic.

Research Methodology

I approached this research from the position that there is no one reality of the experience of developing a positive gay identity nor is there one reality of developing a coaching identity, and that people interpret their experiences according to the meaning they give them. Qualitative research methodologies have been suggested as appropriate when there is little research on a phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) and are argued to recognise perspectives of marginalised groups given the exploration of subjective meaning (van den Hoonaard, 2008 cited in Sultan, 2020). This seemed relevant to the research topic given the focus on exploring the experience of gay men (a minority group) and the absence of literature and research on gay men working as coaches. As a gay man and a coach, I met the requirement that 'the investigator must have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14), I chose heuristic inquiry to allow both for investigation of personal experience and with others who have undergone a similar experience (Mihalache, 2019).

I posted a summary of my research aim on LinkedIn and eight individuals responded. Within Heuristic research, participants are referred to as co-researchers and including myself, the team of nine co-researchers all identified as being gay men and as working in a coaching capacity. From the outset, co-researchers expressed excitement at the opportunity to reflect on the concept of a positive gay identity and how their experience might impact their coaching identity and practice, often stating they had not having previously considered this in depth.

Heuristic inquiry felt like the natural methodology for me to use for this research. Throughout the research process, the co-researchers remain close to depictions of their experience, 'telling their stories with increasing understanding and insight' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 19). I felt this to be of great importance given the personal nature of the topic. I considered Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as an approach but did not feel I could (nor would I want to) bracket my own experience given one of my drivers in doing this research was to find out about the experiences of other gay men working as coaches and how this mirrored or differed to my own. I also considered taking an Auto-Ethnography approach but similarly rejected this on the basis that the focus would be purely on my own experience.

It was important to me to remain aware of how my personal interest in the topic and personal experience might risk confirmation and/or orientation bias, either by giving greater weight to the themes that emerged which resonated with me or by overly focussing on the positive elements of the findings given the positive nature of the research question. Reflexive journaling helped to mitigate this risk as it gave me a channel for reflection on the stories I was hearing. This in turn helped give fair representation of the experience of each co-researcher while maintaining the holistic essence of the group experience (Sultan, 2020).

The data collected via individual interviews (via Zoom) was analysed according to the phases and processes of heuristic inquiry as outlined by Moustakas (1990). I felt the validity of the findings was enhanced by initially carrying out a self-interview to test the flow and structure of the questions (Mihalache, 2019). The individual depictions of each co-researcher created from the interview discussions were shared with co-researchers to check for accuracy. A composite depiction was then created to reflect the shared meaning of the phenomenon. Emerging themes were captured based on common words, phrases and concepts.

Findings

My data analysis focussed on *how* the action or activity undertaken contributed to developing a positive gay identity and *how* this impacted coaching identity and practice. Table 1 outlines the main findings from the data analysis in this context, presented here with no hierarchy of importance as per the heuristic principle of attributing all data equal value (Sultan, 2020). While some of these experiences can be viewed as universal experiences (i.e. not unique to gay men), the findings revealed how the journey to a positive gay identity impacted identity as a coach.

Table 1: The experience of developing a positive gay identity and the impact on coaching identity and practice

Experience informing development of positive gay identity	Impact on coaching identity/practice
Being or feeling judged	Being non-judgemental of client and what they bring
Search for a positive role model	Being a role model for my client ('showing up as me')
Hypersensitivity to others	Observing, listening, watching, sensing what's happening for the client; Self-awareness
Overcoming people pleasing tendencies	Being empathic with boundaries
Feeling like an outsider, not fitting in	Supporting client if they want to step off the expected path/do something different
Challenging what is presented to me as 'normal'	Support client to look through a different lens, an alternative view
Not conforming to gender stereotypes; Embracing different 'traits' or sensibilities	Flexibility across the gender binary – in connecting with people and helping client embrace different 'traits'
Resolving shame from internalised homonegativity	Emotional intelligence - 'what's mine and what's yours'
Self-acceptance, self-compassion	Acceptance of others, compassion for others
Resilience	Belief in client's ability to be resilient; Being resilient with/for the client
Personal responsibility for change	Belief in client's ability to change
Own lived experience of change	Passion for change, using own experience for benefit of client
Acceptance of being gay as part of integrated self	Viewing client as a whole person
Ambiguity/having to conceal sexuality	Adaptable to different situations/people
Connections with diverse community/network	Openness to difference
Non-linear journey to positive gay identity	Appreciation of continuous journey for client

Discussion

With such rich data I felt it was important to focus on the main two themes common across the co-researcher team that linked directly to coaching.

1. The journey to developing a positive gay identity and parallels with the coaching process
2. The insight and strengths gay male coaches bring to coaching practice

Parallel between coming out and coaching process

A striking revelation from the research interviews was the parallel drawn between the process of 'coming out' and the coaching process, with both seen as requiring critical reflection, offering the potential for transformation and being a powerful process of reinvention.

Ryan, one of the co-researchers, articulated this clearly when he said:

"...as coaches, maybe we're encouraging people to come out about lots of things. To come out about insecurity in leadership, to come out about unhappiness in a personal relationship...we're actually inviting clients in many ways to come out about an infinite number of things. And we've been there, we've done that, so...we've got a kind of innate ability to handle that".

Co-researchers talked of the journey they were on in understanding their experience of being a gay man in the world, and it was clear that this was personal and unique. In this context, the concept of achieving a positive gay identity was seen as self-limiting if seen as simply something to 'tick off' and the term gay identity was criticised for suggesting identification with an external label or a socially constructed version of what a gay man was supposed to be. Co-researchers felt that the term gay identity was insufficient in describing them as their whole person - the journey to self-acceptance as a gay man involved acceptance of their whole self in which being gay was integrated. This mirrored the critics of early gay identity development theories who looked beyond sexuality to the complex and contextual experiences of the individual journey and the way that belief systems, culture or the social environment affect individual development (Paul and Frieden, 2008).

The findings confirmed that self-acknowledgement and self-acceptance of being gay and revealing this to others was seen as a key catalyst to the development of a positive gay identity. Self-inquiry, self-reflection, self-compassion and self-acceptance informed, and were informed by, the coming out journey and this journey was constructed differently for different people.

In considering the questioning and self-analysis coaching facilitates and the transformational nature of some coaching models, it could be argued that the two experiences – coming out and coaching – take the individual through a similar process. The Cass model for example (Cass, 1979) outlines the journey of developing a gay identity through identity confusion, identity acceptance and identity pride, ultimately resulting in identity synthesis - in which individuals are willing to disclose their *sexual orientation* and can deal with the range of positive to negative reactions this may elicit from others (Mobley and Slaney, 1996). Replacing the words *sexual orientation* here with 'decision', 'goal' or 'objective' translates directly as an aim of the coaching process.

Exploration of the self and how one sees oneself in a particular situation, within a structure such as the family or an organisation or in the wider world, is the foundation of many approaches to coaching. The findings revealed how co-researchers experienced developing their positive gay identity and specifically *how* this happened - through self-reflection, self-analysis and self-acceptance; viewing the world through a different lens; finding courage to take a different path; and finding resilience to deal with the consequences of making a decision.

Coaching Superpowers?

One co-researcher spoke of the 'superpowers' gay men bring to coaching as being innate to experiences of being gay men and therefore taken for granted or difficult to recognise 'because it's really difficult to see what is right in front of your face'. The findings highlighted how gay men view the world differently to the dominant heteronormative view. Co-researchers talked of challenging what is presented as the norm or the expected pathway for them to take. This resulted from recognition of feeling different and not fitting in and embracing 'outsider' status due to feeling or being made to feel 'othered' as a gay man. Co-researchers described how this translated into looking at a situation, problem or person from different angles. This gave opportunity to question or challenge the coaching client if they struggled to see an alternative pathway to what they had accepted as the norm or recognise why they struggled to fit in to a situation or followed/resisted an expected path. Looking at life through a different lens or having a bigger frame facilitated a systemic view on a situation or problem, seen as useful from both a coaching and a coaching supervisor position.

Looking at life differently as a gay man is implicit within the literature on gay identity development. The findings highlighted the courage required to take a different path through coming out about sexuality. Research by Higgins, Sharek and Glacken (2016) highlighted courage as a strength fostered by development of a positive gay identity. Similarly, courage is mentioned frequently in the coaching literature. Courage has been found to enable coaches to deliver their best work (Lomas,

2021) and coaching has also been shown to help clients grow courage (Jarosz, 2017). Given the significance of the step taken through coming out and the process of self-inquiry and self-acceptance that gay men experience in embracing an alternative to the heteronormative world presented to them as the expected norm, as the findings show, the courage to look at life through a different lens is something gay men have lived experience of.

Adaptability and flexibility were both strong themes emerging from the findings. Adaptability was seen as originating from having to adapt to different people and situations, either due to having to conceal one's sexuality or from non-assumption of sexuality. This impacted interpersonal relationships, both positively and negatively and the findings also highlighted adaptability as a strength, fostered through openness to difference by exposure to a diverse friendship group or through inclusion within the wider LGBT+ community. Flexibility emerged specifically in the context of flexing across the gender binary, manifesting from non-conformance to gender stereotypes and labels and exploring and embracing (albeit stereotypical) masculine and feminine sensibilities. This openness to traversing genders translated into coaching practice in terms of giving unique insight into both male and female worlds, facilitating easier connections with clients of different genders and role-modelling confidence to explore different gender sensibilities or 'traits' with clients.

That this was seen as a positive was interesting given the literature on gender non-conformity in gay men, particularly in early life, and the correlation with stress, stigmatisation and bullying (D'Haese, Dewaele and Van Houtte, 2016; Van Beusekom *et al.*, 2018; Hart *et al.*, 2019). The findings showed that embracing of different so-called gender traits had developed parallel to development of a positive gay identity. Intrapersonal and interpersonal pressure to conform to masculine stereotypes (and to conceal 'feminine' stereotypical traits) had been overcome. One could go as far as saying that comfort in traversing genders gives gay male coaches opportunity to benefit clients exploring their perceptions of their own gender and gender role expectations, especially when identity is under threat (Sealy and Singh, 2010; Vandello and Bosson, 2013; Vescio *et al.*, 2021).

The existing literature on gay identity development and on minority strengths highlighted how connections with a diverse range of people and groups, often within the gay community, positively impacted wellbeing for gay men (Hill and Gunderson, 2015). Conversely the findings highlighted how exclusion (felt or actual) from the gay community was also shown to negatively impact the wellbeing of gay men. Inclusion and openness to clients from different backgrounds (and their stories) emerged in the findings, perhaps as a result of these experiences. While the gay coach-gay client relationship was not the focus of the research, research has shown that the reaction of coaches to disclosure of sexual orientation by their clients mattered and strengthened the coach-client working alliance (Ghama and Spence, 2020). The findings showed how gay male coaches who had developed a positive gay identity were open and accepting of their clients in such a scenario.

One of the most enlightening areas of the findings linked the experience of being hypersensitive to others and to surroundings, particularly growing up as gay child/adolescent and pre-coming out, with the observant skills the co-researchers felt they brought to their coaching practice. Hypersensitivity was seen primarily as a protective, self-defence mechanism in order to stay safe. It was often unconscious and manifested through alertness to danger and the potential threat of discrimination, homophobia and violence. The findings revealed how such a hypersensitive state of being originated and manifested. For example, subtle questioning to test level of prejudice, acceptance or similarity; a heightened sense of self-awareness of one's own and others language used/not used, body language, eye contact, tone of voice; and awareness of surroundings. The findings showed how this learnt behaviour translated into the coaching relationship in a positive way. For example, subtle and sensitive questioning of the client, observing what's going on for them, the micro-movements in their body language and facial expressions, their tone of voice, the words said or not said. The findings also showed how self-awareness and emotional intelligence had led to co-researchers setting boundaries around 'what's mine and what's yours' which gave

awareness of not getting in the way of the client's process. The process of developing a positive gay identity was also shown to be a catalyst for resolving shame from internalised homonegativity, which in turn helped prepare coaches for potential triggers or countertransference that client work may reveal.

While interpersonal skills in coaching are referenced in abundance across the coaching literature, I feel the findings of this research are of interest as they present an original view and give insight into how and why the gay male coaches included in the study felt they brought their interpersonal skills to their coaching practice based on their experiences as gay men.

Conclusion

This research shows how the personal insight and strengths recognised and developed through coming out about being gay both supported the development of a positive gay identity and informed coaching identity and practice. Parallels were drawn with the process and experiences clients go through in 'coming' out about their aspirations, goals and challenges in coaching. Personal insights and strengths often came from turning a negative experience into a positive one. Doing 'inner work' was seen as key and taking responsibility for this was often a reaction to not having a positive role model to identify with and having to find one's own path. Co-researchers felt their experiences helped them become role models in how they 'showed up' as individuals in and outside of the coaching relationship. Personal experiences manifested as a desire to help others get to a better place with co-researchers drawing on individual lived experience to do this. Co-researchers described observational and listening skills, developed initially as defence to homophobia, trauma, rejection and harm threatened or experienced growing up gay and these interpersonal skills were seen as transferable to coaching in a positive way. The research offers an original contribution to the coaching literature and one that can provide insight and inform the development of coaching practice for other gay men and potentially any individual who identifies as being on the journey to developing a positive identity.

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