Exploring the Link between
Identity and Coaching Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores the beliefs and assumptions that executive coaches hold about their coachees' identities and how they perceive that this impacts on their coaching practice. The research explored how coaches approach the construction of personal identities through the life narrative. The methodology adopted was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). The findings indicate that coaches recognise that their coachees hold multiple and shifting identities including professional, social and personal identities. Coaches tended to see identity as a "subtext" to their coaching practice.

Key words*: Identity, coaching practice, life narrative.

Introduction

The person-centred foci of coaching has been long established (Rogers, 2004) along with the transformative power of the coaching interaction. Yet, from the extant coaching literature, little of this appears to be expressed, embedded or explored within the context of identity construction or transitioning identities. This is quite puzzling, particularly as a coachee's personal, professional and social identities are so implicitly bound up with aspects of the person and the "self" (Jenkins, 2004), and so could be seen as central to the coaching dynamic. There has also been a clear recognition as expressed by Weick (1995, p. 20) that "sense making is grounded in identity construction" and "identities are constituted out of the process of interaction" thus also implying that identity construction is an integral process to the dialogic nature of coaching.

An alternative perspective however, could be that, in reality, coaching practice is being framed and embedded within a deeper recognition of the coachee's identity than the extent of the focus within the coaching literature might imply. Therse is certainly a tradition within existentialist coaching for exploring meaning and purpose within coachees' lives which is integral to their personal identity (van Deurzen & Adams, 2010). Amongst some coaches, exploration of the life narrative, often regarded as an expression of the autobiographical self as an embodiment of personal identity, is a common practice (McAdams, 1993). From these observations, this research sought to explore, within the lived experience of six executive coaches, what assumptions and approaches they may have about their coachees' identities and how this impacts on their coaching practice.

As with any research project, there were parameters and limitations which were recognised from the outset. The research would be situated within an executive coaching context in which coaches were likely to be engaged in coaching conversations with coaching agendas that would be implicitly or explicitly addressing issues around identity construction and transition as well as tensions between competing identities in relation to coachees' personal, professional and social

identities. One of the major recognised limitations of the research was that it would be focused on exploring the lived world of the coach only through the use of interviews. Ideally, this phenomenon would have been explored more widely through multiple methods including observation, diary inputs from both coaches and coachees to understand more richly how issues in relation to coachees' identity impact on the dynamics of coaching practice

The theoretical underpinning for this research drew initially from the emergent debates about identity construction. This included considering how personal identities are framed within the different sociological, psychological, philosophical discourses as well as within neuroscience (Baggini, 2011; Damasio, 2010; Hogg & Terry, 2001; Lawler, 2008). The psychological literature tended to focus on the individual self-concept (Baumeister, 1999) whereas the sociological literature focused more on classification theories and the relationship of the individual to the social collective and degrees of personal agency (Jenkins, 2004). The focus within the neuroscience literature was more on the relationship of the mind, consciousness and identity (Damasio, 2010, Dennet, 1991; Feinberg, 2010). Whilst such debates are overly simplistically presented here, the research chose not to draw from any one disciplinary focus of identity particularly since the overall purpose of the research was to understand how coaches work with their own constructs of identity within their own coaching practice. One of the purposes of the underpinning literature review therefore, was to enable the researcher to understand some of the roots and implications of constructions of identity which coaches may be adopting.

Drawing from the literature however, some assumptions were evident including that people have multiple and competing identities (which include personal, social and professional) and that these are continually shifting and being reconstructed (Lawler, 2008). Focusing further on aspects of identity construction pertinent for executive coachees within the world of work, performative aspects of identity (Goffman, 1959) and impression management and identity (DuBrin, 2010; Synder 1974) were considered. Goffman recognised the multiplicity of roles that are performed in various situated contexts and that such performances involved the crafting of social interactions and the monitoring of the impressions made. Goffman argued that these performances create public and private identities. Diamond and Allcorn (2009) also focus on what they call "private selves in public organisations" and how the relational elements of personal identities translate themselves through the well-crafted interactions of the public persona. Goffman (1959) argues that roles, statuses and relationships are socially constructed and so role performances become deeply ingrained within the social self and into the process of "being". The work of Craib (1998) on roles and identity was also considered. Executive coaching is undertaken within the socially constructed world of the organisation. Some coachees will be bring well-crafted and performed identities that have been socialised and constructed within the managerial world to the coaching context and some may be experiencing tensions between the public and privates identities

Many coachees in executive roles are also members of senior leadership teams and work management teams that will interact with their social and personal identities. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) underpins how social identities are constructed within groups. Flaherty (2010) has also explored aspects of this within a coaching context and considered how this might interplay at an individual level. The process of identity negotiation (Swann, 1987) whereby team members assume negotiated roles to create the "interpersonal glue" of the team can create tensions for coachees dependent on their sense of security in relation to the roles adopted and proximity within the team (Ting-Toomey, 1993) and its congruence for them in relation to personal and professional identities.

The competing nature of identities was also considered through the prism of potential conflicts between personal and professional identities for coachees, for example between coachee's personal identity as a parent and his/her professional identity. Internal dissonance and tension could also be experienced when personal identities conflict with the way that professional and social identities are being renegotiated in time of major cultural and leadership change within an organisation (Czarniawska, 1997; Parker, 2000). Research on "managerial identities" through narratives (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Knight & Willmott, 1999, 2002; Moss-Kanter, 2003; Reedy, 2009) also highlighted recurrent themes around trust, alienation, power, uncertainty, pressure underpinning some of the dynamics as managers negotiate between a multiplicity of identities particularly in strongly normative organisational contexts in times of organisational change. Much of these identity dynamics may well be pertinent to the coaching agenda of executive coachees.

In times of radical organisational change, with the obvious example of a redundancy situation, personal identities can also be very threatened particularly if they have been constructed and defined around work identities (Lawler, 2008). The literature on career derailment (Casserley & Megginson, 2009) also recognises that for some early career professionals an over-identification with work as a defining aspect of their personal and professional identity can also be one impacting predictive factor for derailment and burnout. These threatened identities could be integral within a coaching scenario.

The final strand of the theoretical framework related to the role of the life narrative within coaching practice. It is recognised that humans are uniquely autobiographical. This provides the semblance of a coherent and unified person over time and so performs an important psychological process. However, it is also clear, owing to the selective working of episodic memory and our own social and cultural interpretation and construction of such memories and imperfect recall, that the structuring of the autobiographical narrative by a coachee is likely to be selective and highly subjective. As McAdams asserts 'We do not discover ourselves in myth; we make ourselves through myth' (1993, p. 13). Ricoeur also highlights that we interpret later life events in the light of earlier ones and interpret the self in terms of emplotment of events 'we read time backwards, reading the end into the beginning and the beginning into the end' (1984, p.183). The focus of the research then was to understand how coaches work with the narrative self as an expression of personal identity - how they listen to its tone, themes, reference points and how they focus on creating new chapters and exploring possible selves (Rossiter, 2007) or experiment with new working identities (Ibarra, 2003).

The underpinning literature review provided a rich picture of a multitude of potential issues, tensions around identity construction, identity negotiation whilst recognising that identities are drawn from and interact within multiple contexts. There was less indication from the literature of how coaches may be working with identity, perhaps through developmental life-stage frameworks as McAdams (1993) suggests, or perhaps as central themes within a person-centred philosophy or perhaps incidentally through the coaching conversations as issues and coaching goals are explored

Research Methodology

The purpose of the research was exploratory and situated within an interpretivist paradigm, that is that the views and experiences of different coaches were likely to be multiple and constructed through their own social and psychological frames of reference. The research was therefore qualitative and inductive. The aim of phenomenological research is to understand the essence of experience about a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007) and so to describe the lived experiences which are rich in relation to all senses, attitudes, emotions, opinions. Different approaches within phenomenological research could have been adopted including a Husserlian (eidetic) approach as

research presented without explanation (through the researcher "bracketing" all assumptions, judgement, personal values through epoche) or following a more Heideggerian interpretative (hermeneutic) approach (Silverman, 2006) where the researcher's pre-understanding is partially adopted to add to the interpretative process of the data analysis. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) was finally adopted as the research methodology. This draws on the Heideggerian approach and combines an empathetic hermeneutic "insider's perspective" (Conrad, 1987) with a more questioning hermeneutic enabling more critical questions of omissions and motives, for example.

As Smith & Osborn (2008, p. 56) advise "probably the best way to collect data for an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study ... is through the semi-structured interview". The design of the interviews and framing of the questions needed to enable an understanding of the phenomenon and the coaches' lived experience of it and thus focused on asking respondents to describe their experiences and to follow-up with open-ended and non-directive questioning asking for examples, emotional responses and sense-making reactions. Given the focus within IPA methodology on an empathetic hermeneutic, an interview technique was adopted which enabled "imaginative self-transposal" and "cooperative exploration" (trying to reach a shared understanding) through a conversational approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith *et al.*, 2009). Establishing rapport is key to this form of data collection (Mason, 2001; Silverman, 2006) although questioning to check understanding of meaning of experiences and also understand responses through the social, professional and psychological worlds informing the coaches, would be important. Each interview was conducted without reference to the other interviews and digitally recorded (with permission) and then fully transcribed. Six interviews (between 35 and 50 minutes) were undertaken. Within the selection of participants, criteria were included that ensured that the executive coaches had at least two year's coaching experience (so they would have experiences to draw from). This would ensure the participants were a fairly homogeneous group aligned to the purpose of the study. It was recognised though that this was a non-probability sample and not representative of the broader community of coaches (Creswell, 2007).

Within the selection of participants, there were internal and independent coaches and some were academics as well as coaches, some had a strong Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) orientation, one was a performance executive coach. Some have clients in the corporate private sector and others in public sector. Therefore the group was homogenous in some respects (as executive coaches) but in other dimensions, it was not. Some individual variance added to the rich data generated by the research. However it also needs to be recognised that even for this small participant group, potentially their lived experience could be very different and the emerging themes may vary. The purpose of this research was to understand the experience of this particular group (even if their experiences are very differently constructed) rather than to make more general claims for the research. Informed participant consent and other ethical dimensions were considered in the conduct of the research.

Having collected the interview data, a process for data analysis was adopted as informed by IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The identification of "initial themes" through a free textual analysis richly embedded in the participant's text was drawn into "cluster themes" for each script. This is an iterative process and it is recognised that the researcher is adopting an interpretative process but constantly checking her own sense-making against the raw data. The cluster themes identified for all the research participants were then drawn into major themes, whilst still ensuring these can be traced back to the original data sources. From these major superordinate themes, a narrative was produced which outlines the meanings inherent in the participants' responses: "the themes are explained, illustrated

and nuanced" (Smith et al. 2008, p76). In the discussion section, the narrative and lived experience of the research participants is further considered in relation to the extant literature.

Research Findings;

Drawing from the research, the main findings are presented under thematic headings:

Coachees' identity as a construction

There was a consensus that coaches felt that their coachees did hold multiple, competing and transitioning identities. For example coach F suggested:

We are changing identities as we move through the day. Different interactions... the coachee assumes one identity with me as their coach but perhaps a completely different identity with their team, their boss, their family (Participant F)

Although there was recognition that concepts around identity were integral to the coaching process and dynamic, the coaches did not feel they framed their coaching work in relation to notions of identity construction or competing and transitioning identities. These coaches all felt that this was a "subtext" to their work, a "background canvas", or "not something I've focused on..." (Participants A, C, E).

All the coaches did speak though about trying to understand their coachees as a *"person in context"* and helping them to understand their lives and key challenges, being experienced particularly within the work context. Many though framed their coaching in relation to specific coaching goals. Some coaches held clearly articulated views about identity construction and considered that their coachees had "*a sense of self which was socially and culturally mediated*" (Participant B). Some coaches emphasised that their coachees' personal identities drew from their values, self-beliefs and self-concept (Particpants A, E). So there was perhaps a slightly stronger focus on the psychological constructs than the sociological for those coaches.

Most of the coaches talked about personal agency and believed that their coachees possessed a capacity for change and were able continuously re-frame their identities with some autonomy which would tend to align with the coaches developmental foci within their coaching practice.

Coaching the Professional Persona

Some coaches talked about some of the challenges for them of coaching the "professional persona" of their coachee, described as *"the suit and script" (Participant* A), as against the private self:

The Professional identity is so well crafted – you just get the mask and the suit. You try and build trust so that the bravado of the workplace does not carry over into the coaching (Participant A)

open up a chink in that professional identity to talk about what was going on beneath it (Participant F)

you are only ever working with as much as the coachee is prepared to share about their identity (Participant E)

Some coaches felt that perhaps this "*professional exterior armoury*" (Participant E) may be more prevalent with coachees in some corporate contexts where the professional and social identities have become so deeply embedded through deep socialisation and the environmental impact of the workplace. However, they also felt this may be an over-generalisation. Some coachees in this context also seemed very fluid in their movement between identities (Participant A, E).

The coaches own understanding of some of the work dynamics also drew them into exploring some of the challenges and impacts of this with their coachees.

> *I think institutionally, identities matter, I think people are sometimes accepted or not by their identities.... fitting the mould* (Participant F)

Threatened Identities and Identities in Crisis

Within the examples of coaching practice discussed with the coaches, several spoke of coaching conversations which had focused on "identities in crisis." These included coachees living under the threat of redundancy or experiencing threats to their professional and personal identities particularly when those identities had become largely defined by their working roles and status.

> *this may depend on how far their professional identity matters to them and how realistically and fluidly they have framed it* (Participant A)

The coaches also cited examples of coaching conversations with coachees experiencing times of deep organisational cultural change in organisations, when identities could be under challenge and threat.

> *.... it can be difficult if you are at odds with the new world...some can accommodate, let go, acknowledge and move on. Others struggle and tend to be very challenged as to who they are. ..... it can be difficult when you feel ambivalent about an organisation which you have invested so much of yourself in over some time.* (Participant F)

> *in times of organisational change, identities come to the fore. Roles are changing....you can have lost anchors, lost security – goalpost and success measures can change. There's a lot to navigate....and then you might want to relook at those identities.* (Participant A)

Some coaches also talked about some internal turmoil experienced by some of their coachees where they were "*confiding that they are adopting a public identity whilst preserving a private self*" (Participant E). These were again often within periods of organisational change. Some coaches spoke about coaching interactions with coachees who felt they were being over manipulated within working relationships in times of uncertainty and were aware of "*the public roles we play... but at what personal cost to ourselves*" (Participant C). Thus they experienced internal dissonance between private and public identities.

Competing Identities and Identities in Flux

Several coaches described how their coaching practice focused on supporting some coachees who were experiencing conflict between their different identities, such as personal (family) identities and professional identities and which could be generating significant stress and dissonance for the

coachee. Some conversations focused on helping the coachee to explore the meaning of both identities with the coachee as well as exploring well-being and workload management.

Different identities were competing for time and exploration and many coachees want a clearer sense of their own identities and do not have a clear hierarchy of identities (Participant B)

Some coaches also described coaching conversations which had explored tensions between executive's personal and social identities. This occurred particularly within leadership teams where internal dissonance was emerging and they were seeking to renegotiate roles within the collective team to ensure clearer alignment between private and social identities.

some people's identity is very mixed in and influenced by the workgroup that they belong to... they make sense of the world in relation and communication within the group. Sometimes some of the relationships are quite toxic and dependent relationships without them realising the impact... some people are very socialised into the norms of the group and culture and this is who they are becoming....for some people, this can create a deep crisis if this process becomes conscious. (Participant A)

Transitioning identities

There were also examples of coaching practice where a coachee was transitioning between identities as they took on new professional roles, joined new organisations and experienced the socialisation and acculturation processes in building new social identities within work. Many coaches recognised that career transitions can be demanding and confusing for their coachees and often the "sense-making" conversations are framed around coaches beginning to work towards reframed identities:

Whilst new environments offer opportunities to explore new identities, the pull to fit in and belong can also be internally challenging particularly where the new social norms and the team behaviours and dynamics are quite puzzling to work out. (Participant F).

Life Narrative:

All the coaches felt that coachees' life stories were constructed narratives, but there was variance across the coach's practice about asking for or listening to the life narrative. Some felt this was outside the boundaries of the coaching contract and they did not ask the coachee to talk about their life narrative, some asked for critical life episodes rather than a life story and some coaches advised that they spent a significant time on this (much of the first coaching session) and considered it to be an important base for the coaching process and relationship. It was difficult to really understand why these coaches were adopting quite different approaches although this probably overlaps with conceptions of the role and boundaries of coaching. Some felt that that the "life story" is the coachee's story (Participant F) and did not engage in any interpretative dialogue with their coachees over this, whereas other coaches pointed to listening at a more intuitive level:

Words at one level, emotions at another, how they are engaging with the story – I am listening beyond the words. The Coachee is self-evaluating their own story – its construction, the fuzzy thinking. (Participant A)

Some coaches felt that the life stories could be framed *"with some spin ... reducing the cognitive dissonance"* (Participant E) although others highlighted that telling the life story enables coachees *"to consider other possibilities that could have existed within that life" (*Participant C). Some believed that the life story and narrative could be very powerful, *"self-revelatory"* (Participant B), and reveal notions of how coachees construct their personal identities and self-concept.

Value of identity as a construct and the boundaries of the coach;

Whilst all of coaches recognised that issues around identity were implicit in their work, the lived experience of these coaches was that for some, there was some tension and wariness about adopting a wholly holistic approach to their coaching practice which overtly framed itself around the dynamics of identity. The coaches talked about "*coaching boundaries*" and "*contractual obligations*" and having "*limited coaching time*" to work with the coachee through the coaching agenda and some concern expressed about *"... not wanting to upseat deep psychological baggage outside the coaching agenda"* (Participant A). This was also experienced in the variation of practice in relation to listening to the coachees about life story. Some of the concerns expressed by coaches were *"not to get too drawn into hooks of interpretation... unfortunately there's limited time within the coaching"* (Participant E). This may point to a particular framing of the coaching dynamic or may reflect the pragmatic reality of some coach's work.

When asked how they worked with their coachees in relation to the range of identity issues raised within the coaching agenda, most coaches described a very facilitative dialogic approach *"supporting them to explore and make sense of their worlds"* (Participant B). Some used psychometric tools within their practice. No-one referred to any particular influences from literature on identity and coaching.

Interestingly some coaches within the interviews, did reflect on the impact of their own identity (personal and professional) within the coaching dynamic focusing on trying to be a "neutral canvas" "a low-key projection" "park their values" (Participants B,D,F) which would be interesting to explore further but perhaps is also indicative of wanting to put identities in the foreground.

Discussion and Conclusion

Across the many examples shared by the coaches about their work and coaching practice in this research, issues in relation to identity construction, identity negotiation and social identities all seem to have relevance and be integral to coaching conversations within their coaching practice. In some respects the study demonstrates that there can be a linkage between the coaching agenda and extant research and literatures from other disciplinary discourses which can inform and could build the rigour of coaching practice.

But some deeper issues were also raised through the research which are also worthy of further reflection. One of these is how coaches see their coachees particularly in an executive coaching context. Some interesting identity dynamics were revealed as the coaches described some of their coachees as coming to the coaching process through their professional identities ("*suits and scripts*") rather than through their personal identities. The research may raise challenges about the scope and level at which some coaching interventions can work. If coachees' identities are seen as deeply socialised and moulded within the organisational and social context, perhaps much of the coaching will be focused at the behavioural level particularly if coaching is bounded and time-limited. On the other hand, some coaches recognised that coachee agendas in this context can be focused on the

identity conflicts of "*private selves in public organisations*" and this may need to be understood further in realising the power of the coaching dialogue.

This research was able to reveal many examples where coaches recognise issues and conflicts relating to identity dynamics within their coaching practice. However, there is still considerable scope for further research to try and explore whether there is value for coaches in seeing these dynamics more clearly through the lens of identity and what this might add to their practice. Further research could heighten awareness, inform practice, build new models of practice and contribute to the theoretical and empirical base for coaching practice. The research also revealed that there is still debate about the scoping of coaching – its purpose, boundaries and remit in different contexts and how deeply and broadly it is framed. Is understanding coaching work around identity dynamics beyond the boundaries and framing of coaching? It is still not entirely clear why identity construction has not been more deeply embedded in the coaching literatures.
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Identity has become a subject which is richly debated across multidisciplinary discourses and this research has enabled some of those discourses to be considered within the ontological reality of the coaching dynamic. Given the nature of coaching as working with the self and its person-centred focus (Rogers, 2004), the aim of the research was to gain a deeper appreciation of how identity interplays with coaching practice. Findings highlight that, within the lived world of some executive coaches, coaching relating to different dimensions of identity construction is prevalent. The research also raised a number of questions including asking what value there may be for coaches and coachees in framing the coaching dynamics through the lens of identity; particularly as for the coaches in this study identity was seen as the "subtext" and "background canvas"?

The limitations of this study have been acknowledged. It was framed from the coaches' perspective through open questions within a semi-structured interview and whilst many of those questions were about the lived experience and coaching conversations of the coach, this may not have revealed exactly what is happening within the coaching practice. One direction future research could take, would be to ask coaches and coachees to explore on-going coaching interventions in a diary format and then to explore between these two accounts, how far such reflections reveal the transformative impact for the coachee of having a focus on identity dynamics. This may then progress the debate as to whether aspects around identity should remain a "subtext" to the work of the coach.

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