

Academic Paper

# Understanding relationships in online group coaching for leaders working remotely in Canada: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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## Abstract

Although existing group coaching literature has highlighted the importance of the group itself in advancing outcomes, extant research has not studied in depth how this occurs. This qualitative research aimed to address this gap by exploring leaders' experiences of interpersonal relationships during participation in an online group coaching intervention while working remotely in Canada. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse data gathered from semi-structured interviews with each of the seven participants. The findings are presented through four themes: being with others, a safe haven, exchanging support, and developing group bonds.

## Keywords

group coaching, positive relationships, positive psychology, coaching, leadership

## Article history

Accepted for publication: 10 January 2023

Published online: 01 February 2023



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Published by Oxford Brookes University

## Introduction

Approximately 32% of Canadian workers were working remotely at the beginning of 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2021). One of the most significant concerns of working remotely is a lack of social connection and a decreased sense of belonging (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). Previous research on social isolation and loneliness demonstrated associations with poorer mental and physical health (Leigh-Hunt, Bagguley, Bash, Turner, Turnbull, Valtorta, & Caan, 2017), and reduced affective commitment, affiliative behaviours, and performance in the workplace (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). As organisations consider ongoing remote working arrangements, a critical need exists to determine support mechanisms that strengthen connection and wellbeing in the workplace. It is proposed that group coaching is one medium Canadian organisations can adopt to enhance

wellbeing and a sense of belonging which ripple beyond the coachees (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2013, 2017).

## Literature Review

### Group Coaching

Empirical research on group coaching is quite limited despite gaining popularity among organisations (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2017). Most coaching research focuses on dyadic coaching (Brown & Grant, 2010), which can be resource-intensive and does not generate connectedness among peers (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2021). Unfortunately, research and advancement of group coaching is impacted by a lack of conceptual clarity, such as the interchangeable reference of group and team coaching. Rather than focusing on optimising team functioning (Hawkins & Smith, 2007), group coaching includes individuals with similar aims being coached together where challenges, learning, and knowledge of all group members can be leveraged to support development of each person in the group (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2017).

The absence of conceptual clarity has also led to diverse processes and methodologies (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2017), with some empirical studies referencing group coaching despite more closely referring to other small group learning processes such as facilitation and training (Fusco, O'Riordan, & Palmer, 2015; Grajfoner, 2009). Other empirical research includes interventions encompassing multiple components (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2021; Brandmo, Aas, Colbjørnsen, & Olsen, 2019), making it difficult to delineate the outcomes specifically related to group coaching. Further, very few studies relate to specific theoretical and empirical frameworks, though Stelter, Nielsen, & Wikman's (2011) and Nacif's (2021) studies illustrate clear coaching processes and contributing frameworks.

Despite the limited research, group coaching is considered a valuable intervention in advancing numerous organisational and individual outcomes, such as understanding of others (Brown & Grant, 2010); self-efficacy and role clarity (Brandmo et al., 2019); constructing leadership identity (Aas & Vavik, 2015); and enhancing health and wellbeing (Whitley, 2013). Furthermore, group coaching has demonstrated strength in supporting coachees to recognise different perspectives and increase self-awareness (Gyllensten, Henschel, & Jones, 2020).

### Positive Relationships in Coaching

#### Positive relationships and their connection to wellbeing

More broadly, positive relationships are considered a central determinant within many wellbeing models (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011) and enable individuals to feel valued, seen, and engaged (Kahn, 2007). Interpersonal relationships have been found to be integral in self-perception, identity formation, and fulfillment of personal aspirations (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). In the workplace, positive relationships facilitate wellbeing in the forms of increased meaning, positive emotions, personal growth, and job satisfaction (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016).

Recognising the variances among interactions in the workplace, the theory of high-quality connections promotes a way of understanding whether the "connective tissue between individuals is life-giving or life-depleting" (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003, p.263). High-quality connections are marked by three subjective experiences: positive regard, which denotes a feeling of being known and cared for (Rogers, 1951); vitality, observed as an increase of positive energy (Quinn & Dutton, 2005); and mutuality, indicating shared engagement in the connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997). When

experiencing a high-quality connection, individuals demonstrate openness to new ideas and influences (Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2012) and the expression of greater positive and negative emotions (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).

### **Relationships in coaching**

Warmth and a sense of belonging in group coaching are considered to facilitate conditions which enhance learning and self-concept (Brandmo et al., 2019; Fusco, O’Riordan, & Palmer, 2016) and generate social capital (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2021; Stelter et al., 2011). Despite acknowledging the significance, the group contributes to learning (Ostrowski, 2019) and wellbeing (Nacif, 2021), much of the extant literature does not speak to the depth of the relational experiences within group coaching. A recent study utilising both dyadic and group coaching interventions illuminated the prevalence of connectedness, shared experiences, and prosocial behaviours (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2021), pointing to further research opportunities within different populations and organisational contexts.

Researchers have also drawn comparisons to group psychotherapy in understanding group coaching phenomena (Brandmo et al., 2019; Nacif, 2021), positing that wellbeing concepts and therapeutic factors “support the effectiveness of the group work in a virtuous cycle” (Nacif, 2021, p. 180). Relationships are considered essential for effective group therapy (Gullo, Di Fratello, Giannone, Mannino, & Burlingame, 2015) and positive outcomes closely link with high group cohesion, particularly when the therapist emphasises member interaction (Burlingame, McClendon, & Yang, 2018). Prior research demonstrates how group interactions facilitate normalising of experiences, inclusion, belonging, and more positive senses of self (May, Strauss, Coyle, & Hayward, 2014; Tamplin, Baker, Grocke, & Berlowitz, 2014).

### **Aims and Objectives**

To address the gap in the literature, this study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to understand the experiences of leaders in a four-week group coaching intervention, and is guided by three main questions:

1. How do participants experience interpersonal relationships within group coaching?
2. What meaning do participants derive from the relationships that are formed?
3. How do these relationships influence the participants’ sense of self, wellbeing, and learning?

Thus, the study explores a novel area in group coaching and contributes to frequent calls for more qualitative research (Rajasinghe, 2020), which aim to enhance understanding of “the human interaction of coaching” (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011, p. 80).

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

The research project took a phenomenological epistemological approach and used an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology (Smith et al., 2009). This methodology was selected to address the research questions following participants’ lived experiences in a group coaching intervention and gain insights to the sense they made from those experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Analysing data from every participant in the intervention provides both a homogenous sample (Smith et al., 2009) and the ability to illuminate convergence and divergence (Nizza, Farr, & Smith, 2021) among the experiences, both which bring idiographic quality aligning with IPA (Smith, 2004).

The group coaching intervention's theme, "Leading in a Virtual World", aimed to enhance leaders' abilities in navigating complexities due to remote work. Four 90-minute sessions occurred in April 2021 and were held weekly on Microsoft Teams. The intervention was carried out by a trained coach with leadership development, adult learning, and facilitation experience.

The first session included the development of a group agreement, which was referred to at the beginning of each subsequent session. The themes of the sessions were determined collaboratively between the participants (numbered P1 to P7) and the coach following discussion about desired individual outcomes, and included:

- authentic voice: advocating for self and others
- relationships: honesty, trust, and connection
- transitions: navigating ambiguity, power dynamics, and an evolving future

The sessions oscillated between exploring personal experiences and perceptions related to the themes and surfacing emergent challenges. Aside from P3 & P7 being absent for session four and a portion of session two, participants had full attendance.

## **Theoretical and empirical underpinnings**

The intervention aligned with Ostrowski's (2019, p. 54) definition of group coaching as "the application of coaching principles [...] to a small group, across multiple sessions, facilitated by a skilled professional, and in service of individual, collective, personal, and/or organisational learning and goals" and drew from theoretical and empirical frameworks including:

1. Person-centred coaching: a relationship-based approach where the coach stayed with the participants' agendas (Joseph, 2014) to help them live more authentically (Joseph & Bryant-Jeffries, 2019) and foster actualising tendencies (Rogers, 1959, 1963). In exploring values, beliefs, and assumptions, the coach provided a positively regarding stance and created a learning environment where group interaction facilitated sharing and discovery (Joseph, 2014).
2. Positive psychology coaching: with a focus on optimal functioning and wellbeing (Boniwell, Kauffman, & Silberman, 2014), the coach integrated continuous developments in positive psychology research (Biswas-Diener, 2020) and tailored interventions to the group (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Moving beyond a sole focus on positive phenomena, the coach encouraged embracing both positive and negative aspects of participants' experiences (Lomas & Ivztan, 2016) and exploration of broader systemic and cultural contexts (Lomas, Waters, Williams, Oades, & Kern, 2020).
3. Authentic leadership: where foundational elements of self-awareness; internalised moral perspective; relational transparency; and balanced processing (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008) are leveraged to foster self-concordance and wellbeing (Luthans, Norman, & Hughes, 2006). This theory influenced the coaching by inviting participants to reflect on their leadership identities, including values and significant life experiences, to promote concordance.
4. Positive organisational scholarship: generative phenomena in organisations which cultivate individual and collective flourishing (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012), encompassing literature in areas such as strengths, positive relationships, and positive emotions. In exemplar, the coach inquired about a participant's strengths, both from their own perception and those of the group, when appropriate.

The frameworks above were selected due to their applicability for the intervention's population, the training the coach received in their master's studies, and the coach's expertise in leadership development. Recognizing the implications of the pandemic, the coaching was derived from a deep understanding of personal and organisational wellbeing.

## Participants

Six to eight participants over age 18 were sought to join this study, with eligibility requirements of working remotely due to COVID-19, living in Canada, and self-identifying as a leader (with formal management responsibilities). Eleven participants self-selected through advertisements placed on the researcher's social media accounts. Initial conversations were held with each participant to confirm eligibility and further detail the study. Three participants did not meet eligibility criteria and one participant withdrew. The remaining seven participants accepted invitations to take part in the study. As illustrated in Table 1, the participants brought a diverse range of leadership experience, occupations, and ages.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Industry	Occupation	Leadership Experience
P1	52	Canadian – English/Swedish	Female	Healthcare or social assistance	Healthcare management	10 to 14 years
P2	24	Canadian-born Hong Kongese	Female	Professional, scientific, or technical services	Administrative	1 to 4 years
P3	32	Caucasian	Female	Professional, scientific, or technical services	Research & Development	1 to 4 years
P4	30	Caucasian	Female	Educational services	Administrative	< 1 year
P5	44	(Hong Kong) Chinese Canadian	Male	Healthcare or social assistance	Administrative	10 to 14 years
P6	40	Caucasian	Female	Finance or insurance	Accounting	10 to 14 years
P7	50	Caucasian	Male	Unanswered	Legal	> 15 years

## Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews, each up to 90-minutes in length, were conducted over Microsoft Teams and digitally recorded between one to three weeks following the final session. The interviews focused on understanding participants' experiences of the intervention, their interactions with others, and their perceptions of connectedness within the group.

## Data Analysis

The collected data was transcribed from the recordings using Microsoft Word. The analysis process followed IPA protocols developed by Smith et al. (2009) and continued with initial familiarisation of one case through writing initial exploratory comments, including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual annotations. The annotated data was imported to NVivo where emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009) were identified prior to being analysed and drawn together into subordinate themes in Excel through multiple iterations, and then again drawn together into superordinate themes. This process was repeated with each additional case, ensuring idiographic analysis

(Smith, 2004). Once all cases were analysed, the researcher then sought meaningful patterns across all cases (Smith et al., 2009) and clustered themes into a grouped table.

## Reflexivity

As the first author conducted both the intervention and the data collection, ongoing self-reflexive practice provided transparency and insights about how their assumptions and influences shaped the research. Conducted through journaling and supervisory conversations, the researcher paid particular attention to the echoes (Goldspink & Engward, 2019) summoning personal experiences with groups concurrently and prior to the research, noticing when the data evoked resonance from their own experience. This reflective practice was also used to bracket the identification of existing literature throughout the analysis.

## Results

The analysis of interview transcripts identified four superordinate themes and twelve subordinate themes, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Summary of themes and prevalence**

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes	Participant Prevalence
1. Being with others	Bolstered by new connections	7/7
	Discovering commonalities and differences	7/7
	“I’m not alone”	7/7
2. A safe haven	Foundation of trust	7/7
	Being seen	6/7
	Finding acceptance and strength	7/7
3. Exchanging support	Extending support to others	7/7
	Receiving support	7/7
	Witnessing support	6/7
4. Developing a group bond	Evaluating closeness to others	7/7
	Me becomes we	7/7
	A longing to belong	6/7

### 1. Being with others

The experience of being with others demonstrated similar and differing meanings for the participants.

#### 1.1 Bolstered by new connections

Group coaching allowed participants an opportunity “to know people that are completely new” (P1), feeling like “bonus time” (P7) and “refreshing to talk to people in a different context” (P3). An awareness of the “magnified” (P6) aspect of COVID-19 on one’s ability to connect with others was noted by four participants with P2 expressing how the “interactions make me feel less alone and in a time of isolation, that means the world”.

Participants reported several positive emotions, including interest, curiosity, comfort, and gratitude. Most participants spoke of feeling refueled and recharged, some illustrating this with rich metaphors:

*It made my day brighter, like I always felt good coming out of the meeting with almost like having a little like brain spa. (P3)*

*It's like very reinvigorating and it's almost it's like good for the soul. Like it seems like soul food almost, like it fills up my bar a bit. (P2)*

## 1.2 Discovering commonalities and differences

Participants expressed their growing awareness of other participants which allowed them to see each other more fully as people “with a personal life, with kids, with personal battles, with own aspirations” (P2):

*It's sort of like layers of an onion, you know you keep learning new things about people as you peel away the layers. (P7)*

Identifying commonalities such as shared industries and stakeholders evoked a sense of familiarity, and diversity in multiple aspects such as “areas and ages and races” (P4) and perspectives was valued among participants. The commonalities were “bolstered by those different life experiences” (P3) as participants expressed heightened awareness in areas such as intersectional identities (P5), significantly less leadership experience than others (P2, P4), and a more reserved nature (P2). The commonalities also surfaced in relation to shared outcomes:

*That's how I would describe the group is just, you know, people with a common need and just a need to be heard and need to have a safe space to express what they're concerned about - a space to be vulnerable because I think we really try very hard to never show any vulnerability. (P6)*

## 1.3 “I’m not alone”

The value in hearing about others’ experiences illuminated a normalisation of both challenges and continuous learning (P4):

*It was really nice to see myself and the struggles I have in everyone else. (P1)*

This realisation that “you’re not the only one who feels that way” (P7) provided validation for all participants which led to reassurance, relief, and a reduction of feeling like an imposter:

*For her to say that she's still faking it 'til she makes it made me feel really good because I feel like that's what I'm doing all the time. (P4)*

The experience also developed systemic awareness, often disrupting assumptions about their own workplace and realising how many issues stem from the “current workplace environment” (P2):

*It's not just you, it could also be the organisation and it's not just your organisation, other organisations struggle from these same things (P3)*

For some participants, this further lessened the burden and pressure they felt as “some things maybe aren’t meant for one person to solve” (P2) and generated hope in that “maybe we're on the cusp of that in trying to turn around” (P6).



## 2. A safe haven

Participants reflected on the value of being in a trusting environment.

### 2.1 Foundation of trust

The composition of the group mattered to some participants, where “being with strangers [...] is kind of built-in anonymity” (P3) and knowing others self-selected to be in the group created a “level of trust and openness and participation” (P4). P5 highlighted how early interactions with the coach predisposed positive perceptions of the group:

*We all trusted that you were going to bring a constellation of people together to have a valuable four weeks together. And then it gets reinforced, because then that connection I just extrapolate to everyone in the room.*

Participants indicated a sense of ease, becoming “more comfortable after every single one” (P2). In part facilitated by “coming for a common purpose” (P6) and the group agreements which helped “to have everybody sort of feel like they were on the same page” (P7), it was also “built on those other foundational pieces about safety, trust, and understanding context” (P3). The safety was described as not only honouring secrets, but also in “sharing your feelings and that someone is going to take them on board” (P3):

*When people share vulnerable experiences, that shows their humanity. Like it shows me that they trust us enough or me enough to be able to share that with a stranger and I feel very honoured (P2)*

### 2.2 Being seen

Being given “a voice” (P2) allowed for participants to express their humanity:

*You're kind of in this middle. You're stuck in this middle piece. And what's that like? What's the human experience in that small space and just a chance to talk about it? (P6)*

Which allowed for authenticity and transparency:

*I can just I can take off the mask and I can just be me and go this is what I'm worried about. This is what's concerning me. This is what I'm stressed about. And people go “I hear ya”. (P6)*

At times, ‘being seen’ was as simple as when “people take the time to say your name” (P3). Further, as one of two participants who presented as having a minority ethnicity, P5 remarked on the significance of observing the acknowledgement of another participant of minority ethnicity in the first session and of being honoured for who he was:

*I feel a little bit more even more comfortable in my own skin and having engaged with a group of people who received me as a an equal and not a fraud. (P5)*

### 2.3 Finding acceptance and strength

Being with others generated heightened self-awareness and self-acceptance:

*I learned lots to remind myself about what does it mean for myself and what do I hold true and important given where I am professionally. (P5)*

*You kind of realise, well, maybe you know we are a product of the things that we've been through and as much as we you know, idealise where we're at, sometimes we just have characteristics that are in what they are. (P7)*



The experience amplified the inner strength of participants. Newer leaders reported feeling “on the right track” (P2, P3) and more confidence, with P2 acknowledging how she’s had “these people become my cheerleaders”. For P1, a more experienced leader, it helped her see her own value:

*Well, I think I learned that I do have a lot to offer. (P1)*

For some participants, this created an ability to bring their “whole authentic human self forward” (P2), a sense of empowerment (P7), and personal growth:

*You grow, you grow internally so much in an environment like that, and I would say even like our four short weeks together, right? (P6)*

### 3. Exchanging support

The importance of exchanging support was a central element of participants’ relationships with one another.

#### 3.1 Extending support to others

Participants reflected on several ways they supported others, such as celebrating successes, offering different perspectives, listening, and validation. Those who were newer leaders recognised the unique support they offered:

*I feel like just by listening and being part of the group and maybe reminding them about how people were who are very new to leadership feel and experience. Maybe that gave them a more broad perspective. (P4)*

Offering support that was “appreciated and valid” (P2) and made others’ “life a bit better” (P6) created feelings of helpfulness. It also increased belonging:

*It actually reinforced the amount of inclusion and belonging that I had because I was, I wasn't just taking I was giving as well, or I was trying my best to give. (P2)*

Despite this, all participants expressed uncertainty about the usefulness of their support:

*Just with my lack of experience, I don't I don't know if my information was helpful or if me sharing certain experiences was worth anyone's time (P4)*

*And I kept wondering, am I sharing enough? [...] Am I giving enough as much as I'm um benefiting from receiving and hearing and listening? (P5)*

#### 3.2 Receiving support from others

Receiving support from others was recognised as instrumental in the experience, from “it's nice to be so thoughtfully listened to” (P1) to having “a sounding board” (P2, 5) and receiving validation:

*Having someone like validate that you're not, because I do feel quite isolated. Just to know that like I'm not overreacting. (P3)*

The support allowed for several outcomes, including feeling understood:

*Whether their guidance to adjust things can be really done based on where my situation is, it didn't really matter because at least they understood how I felt. (P4)*

Generating new awareness that one “probably wouldn’t have been able to get if I was just ruminating by myself” (P2) and further contemplation:

*I hope they knew that I valued things that they said too, because as I said, there were a number of things that really made me think. (P7)*

### 3.3 Witnessing support

Participants expressed the ways they observed reciprocal support among the group from intentionally creating space for “the quieter members” (P1) and responsiveness:

*Whenever someone shares something, there’s bound to be nods and that type of body language immediately sends the indication of validation of ‘right’ and like ‘I understand’. Like, communicates that even nonverbally. So, there’s this mix of nonverbal and verbal reassurance that is provided from the collective group. (P2)*

Witnessing support, particularly from others with significant leadership experience, informed how participants perceived the group:

*To see them also come into the fold in that same way reinforced it to me like okay, this is a nice safe place with really thoughtful, humble people. (P5)*

## 4. Developing a group bond

Participants shared similar and different meanings through the experience of being part of a group.

### 4.1 Evaluating closeness to others

All participants described an assessment of the connections they generated with others in the group. P4 spoke of paradox in her sense of familiarity:

*Honestly, it felt like we were this little like group of friends or family even that like knew each other for so long and I don’t know how that happened so quickly. [...] So, it’s like so interesting to think about that? Where you can’t actually picture them where they are or what they’re doing but you like felt so willing to share.*

While many noted sensing “a quick bond” (P2, 3, 5), those with more leadership experience (P1, P5, P6, P7) expressed hesitancy in their evaluations of closeness:

*I think we were just getting started. The engine was warming up in all the positive ways. All the little things in the car dashboard that should light up are lighting up. This is all good and we’re just starting to roll, and we haven’t quite hit the onramp to the highway, right? (P5)*

Many participants noted being able to relate with certain people more than others (P1, 3, 4, 6, 7). Conversely, P2 stated similarity across the connections “because everyone was so equally respectful”.

### 4.2 Me becomes we

All participants spoke highly of the group, including positive descriptors such as open, kind, and curious. Referred to as “a stellar group of people” (P5) where having “quite a high level of compassion and empathy skills [...] drove that heart work forward” (P2). The language used by participants indicated a shared way of being:

*I think that I mirrored what the group was, sort of the culture that we had created, right? You know, we were all thoughtful. We're all respectful. So, I think I was all those things (P1)*

Being “in the same boat” (P6) helped to “share that sort of cognitive burden” (P3) and generate a sense of commitment to the group:

*I know that all of these other people are showing up for me because we said we were going to, and we all are in this together. (P4)*

Some noticed the group’s presence “permeate outside of those four weeks” (P5):

*The group talk was kind of like sitting as a little voice in my ear. Like whether I had invited it or not, it was just kind of there. (P3)*

Regardless of the evaluated proximity between oneself and others, most participants reflected on the uniqueness of the group, questioning how the self-selection process attracted such a good group. Hypothetical contemplation of different variables, such as what would happen if somebody in the group “didn’t have the same sort of value set” (P1) and wondering “had this been a completely different group, would they also have done this?” (P4) illustrated the group itself was seen as rare and distinctive.

### 4.3 Longing to belong

Participants indicated a preference to be with the whole group together. A sense of incompleteness arose when some members weren’t in attendance, such as feeling like “we really can’t get started until everyone’s around” (P5) and disappointment:

*It felt like it kind of took the wind out of your sails a little bit when people just didn't weren't able to show up or had to leave early. (P4)*

A longing to continue the connection was expressed by most participants whether driven by curiosity (P1), a yearning to “let the group grow” (P6), or a realised need to maintain connections as P2 illustrates:

*That really reaffirmed that like I should seek that out more and that's why I'm like actually willing to stay connected with this group or even after this group coaching because I think it's very important for my wellbeing and my mental health to have that sense of connection.*

## Discussion

This study echoes assertions that coaching groups can be instrumental in increasing wellbeing (Nacif, 2021). The results provide new insights on how connections in group coaching can serve fundamental social and emotional needs, particularly when grappling with effects of a pandemic and for leaders who may feel more isolated in their roles. Reports of feeling cared for, increased energy, and high engagement indicate the presence of high-quality connections (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Further, the findings provide novel evidence of positivity resonance (Fredrickson, 2016), where behavioural synchronicity in nonverbal cues such as nodding as well as shared positive affect and mutual care were expressed. Positivity resonance theory proposes an increased quality of interpersonal connections and wellbeing when these shared experiences occur (Fredrickson, 2016).

While this study selected participants from various organisations using convenience sampling, bringing together participants with workplace experiences proved valuable. Participants expressed the significance of safety and trust in the group, highlighting the impact of being able to speak

freely with strangers (Simmel, 1971). Relating to previous research (Nacif, 2020), the presence of holding (Winnicott, 1986) appeared as participants recognized how others were able to 'take on' their feelings and secrets. In shared vulnerability and engagement in a common purpose, a sense of mutuality (Miller and Stiver, 1997) was fostered. Further, these results promote the core conditions of safety and boundaries which "help create and sustain positive relationships in groups" (Kahn, 2007, p. 278). The boundaries were not only generated through the closed group structure, but also in the creation and ongoing reflection of group agreements.

Being in the group elevated appreciation and acceptance of self and others. Many participants referred to how observing others' self-disclosure (Dindia, 2000), particularly in the first session, was instrumental in shaping their relationships. Participants further elaborated on how their beliefs and understandings of themselves as leaders had shifted after hearing how others were also struggling, drawing connections with previous research on the relationships between group coaching, self-concept, leadership identity formation, and authenticity (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Fusco et al., 2016).

In being understood and accepted by others following removal of professional facades, participants were able to appreciate their uniqueness and valued aspects of identity (Roberts, 2007), supporting assertions that interactional groups are effective in altering imposter beliefs (Clance & Imes, 1978). Through discovering similarities across their experiences and realising they were not isolated in their situations, a sense of universality (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020) developed. Further, participants highlighted new systemic awareness cultivated by interacting with others across domains and industries, with many indicating an influence on perceptions of their own organisations.

Consistent with existing research (Stelter et al., 2011; Bonneywell & Gannon, 2021), the findings indicate participants generated social capital throughout the intervention, where receiving support buffered against struggles experienced and offering support helped participants feel like valued contributors. These findings echo how learning occurs both through seeking and providing support (Holmes & Kivlighan, 2000), and acts of altruism boost self-esteem (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). Observing reciprocal support among others facilitated social learning (Bandura, 1986), which has been correlated with depth and effectiveness in group psychotherapy (Kivlighan, 2011), and influenced perceptions of individuals and the group overall.

Evaluations of the relationships formed varied among participants. Interestingly, the difference was divided among leadership experience, with newer leaders indicating a higher level of closeness, reduced loneliness, and an elevated sense of belonging, whilst experienced leaders referenced a more limited perception of closeness. Further exploration of these variations may be warranted to determine if factors such as age or leadership experience influence one's belonging motivation (Allen, Kern, Rozek, McInerney & Slavich, 2021) in coaching groups. Despite the variations in evaluating closeness, the comfort, warmth, and connectivity expressed by all participants indicated cohesiveness among the group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020), where inclusion and commitment created unity. Addressing individual challenges through a shared experience bolstered the sense of unity even more, creating experiences so positive that participants wished to maintain their bonds following the study.

Extending the literature, the findings also suggest the emergence of several group processes not typically explored in group coaching research. The consistent use of collective language, such as "we" and "our group", reinforced by the multiple positive attributes accredited to the group and questioning its uniqueness, indicate the forming of group identity and in-group favouritism (Tajfel, 1981, 1982). In adopting the group's characteristics as one's own, such as how one group member said they "mirrored what the group was", the results suggest internalisation of group norms (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Further, the group served as an ongoing support mechanism, described as "sitting as a little voice in my ear" or prompting ongoing reflection between and beyond the sessions, consistent with Fusco et al.'s (2016) considerations of how group coaching allows for the forming of significant and generalised others (Mead, 1934).

This study illustrates the significance of bridging differences as participants reflected on diversity within the group and building bonds across multiple domains. These findings suggest the group formed a social network, where most members' sense of belonging was influenced by the quality of interpersonal bonds rather than social categories (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013). Illuminating the implications of group composition in cultivating belonging (Glasford, 2021), some participants acknowledged how treatment of fellow ethnic minority group members, particularly in the beginning, facilitated greater connection with others and more positive perceptions of the group overall. These results lead us to advocate that coaching groups foster experiences with diverse participants, where the power of coming together in an inclusive environment can facilitate belonging regardless of differences in areas such as identity, generation, and leadership experience.

## Limitations

A number of limitations exist within this study. First, the researcher was also the coach which may have influenced more positive responses from participants despite reminders that all perspectives were encouraged; further, the coach's style and facilitation experience may have influenced the findings. Secondly, the intervention took place during the COVID-19 pandemic when social interactions were significantly impacted. While these unique circumstances may not repeat, thus preventing replication of contextual factors, the study provides insights which may inform future studies. Thirdly, while the study's participants represented a diversity of work and life experiences, only two participants represented minority ethnicities, which happened to be the same ethnicity.

## Conclusion

The findings illustrate several avenues for future research, such as larger scale studies that include increased ethnic diversity and multiple coaches, as well as comparative studies between virtual and in-person modalities and of within- and multiple-organisation groups. The results indicate careful consideration of organisational climate in implementing similar interventions within organisations as relational outcomes, trust, and willingness to engage could be severely impacted. These findings also convey the value of ensuring self-selection and that organisations do not mandate attendance, particularly given the impact resistant group members could have on others.

As illustrated above, the results indicate promising associations with existing research on high-quality connections (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) and positivity resonance (Fredrickson, 2016), both of which could further elucidate the instrumental facets of group coaching. The findings suggest the need for further research investigating relationships with social psychology and positive psychology to extend scientific understanding of group coaching. In addition, other emerging themes arose in the data relating to the participants' experiences outside of the group sessions as a result of their interactions during the intervention. This indicates an opportunity for research into how the relationships in group coaching provide workplace benefits and positive leadership outcomes.

Further, the results endorse an autonomous approach (Heron, 1999), where the coach plays an essential role of promoting member interaction and a positive group climate (Burlingame et al., 2018) while allowing for the group to lead one another. The findings also illuminate a key policy implication where coaching accreditation bodies could expand existing frameworks to delineate competencies necessary for group coaching, such as facilitating the formation of new groups and navigating several individual learning outcomes (International Coaching Federation, n.d.; European Mentoring & Coaching Council, n.d.)

In summary, this research contributes to a growing body of evidence that relationships and the group itself are powerful in advancing learning and wellbeing in group coaching, particularly for

those whose sense of connection and belonging have been impacted due to pandemic circumstances.

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