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Academic Paper

Leaders' adaptive identity development in uncertain contexts: Implications for executive coaching

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Abstract

Executive coaches need to add value to leaders in uncertain organisational contexts. One way would be to support leaders with their personal uncertainty by encouraging adaptive responses. This qualitative study, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, explored leaders' lived experience of personal uncertainty through interviews, to identify leverage points for executive coaching. Since personal uncertainty energises sensemaking and identity work, the inter-related theoretical lenses of sensemaking and leader identity work, currently scarce as lenses informing executive coaching practice, were used to interpret the findings. Implications for executive coaching are outlined and include facilitating leaders' identity work, particularly their sensemaking, towards adaptive identity development.

Keywords

personal uncertainty, identity uncertainty, leader identity work, sensemaking, executive coaching

Article history

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Introduction

Executive coaches are expected to add value to leaders and their clients in a turbulent world (Einzig, 2017): a world which requires these leaders to constantly adapt and set the tone for others whilst experiencing personal uncertainty themselves in navigating continuous organisational changes and dynamics (Bushe & Marshak, 2016). Personal uncertainty is a form of self-doubt rooted in issues of identity and is mostly experienced as an aversive state (Van den Bos, 2009). Individuals have multiple identities or sub-components of their self-concept (Brown, 2015), with leader identity being one. Leaders' personal uncertainty may therefore affect their sense of leader identity, potentially eroding their confidence and agency (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2017). Thus, executive coaches, by virtue of holding a safe psychological space for their clients,could support leaders in making sense of their personal uncertainty and move towards adapting positively.

When individuals encounter uncertain events or dynamics in their work contexts, they experience uncertainty which energises both sensemaking and identity work. Since sensemaking is grounded in identity issues (Weick, 1995), individuals 'make sense' by interpreting their experience through the lens of identity into a plausible account that serves as a springboard for action (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Individuals' identity work refers to the ways in which they engage "in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising" their identities to achieve a "sense of coherence and distinctiveness" in their uncertain contexts (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). In the literature, sensemaking and identity work are considered to be interwoven processes; with some authors viewing sensemaking as a part of identity work, while others see identity work as a component of sensemaking (Vough, Caza & Maitlis, 2020).

Given today's dynamic organisational contexts, leaders need to adapt through developing their leader identities, termed adaptive identity development (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). As leader identity influences leader competence, leader development is increasingly being informed by leader identity development (Ibarra, Wittman, Petriglieri, & Day, 2014; Kragt & Day, 2020), which encompasses identity work. Leader identity is based on how one thinks of oneself and how one is perceived by others as a leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Therefore, leader identity is viewed as socially constructed (Ibarra et al., 2014) through identity work that is a complex intra-personal and social process in the organisational context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Gjerde & Ladegård, 2018). However, most research has focused on assessing leader identity changes after attending leader development programmes; thus, more research on the processes of leaders' identity work is required (Skinner, 2020b).

In the leader development literature, executive coaching has been recommended for facilitating leaders' sensemaking (Hammond, Clapp-Smith & Palanski, 2017) and identity work (Kragt & Day, 2020). With leader identity being socially constructed, coaching from a social constructionist perspective, facilitating meaning-making of clients' self-explorations in relation to their context (Armstrong, 2012), would be valuable. Yet, turning to executive coaching practice, Butcher (2012) found that an identity lens was not explicitly used by coaches. Subsequently, Skinner (2020a, 2020b) has argued for leader identity development to be adopted as a theoretical lens for coaching leaders. However, given that the processes of identity work and sensemaking are inter-related (Vough et al., 2020), including a sensemaking perspective could play a meaningful role in facilitating leader's identity development. Thus far there is a paucity of sensemaking in the coaching literature, with mainly du Toit (2007) advocating its use.

The aim of this study was to explore leaders' personal uncertainty in dynamic organisational contexts. By interpreting their experience of and approach to personal uncertainty, through the theoretical lenses of sensemaking and identity work, insight would be gained into the inter-relationship of the leaders' sensemaking and identity work. This insight would highlight implications for executive coaching practice towards facilitating leaders' adaptive identity development in uncertain contexts.

Literature

The constructs of personal uncertainty, sensemaking, and leader identity and identity work provide the theoretical background to the study. Coaching literature is also reviewed to assess the use of sensemaking and leader identity work as theoretical lenses.

Personal uncertainty

Personal uncertainty is related to doubts about oneself and who one is becoming in an uncertain context (Weick et al., 2005), and is described as identity uncertainty by Epitropaki et al. (2017). For leaders, identity uncertainty is feeling conflicted or unsure about their leader identity (Lanka ,

Topakas, & Patterson, 2019). Different forms of identity uncertainty occur. For example, identity threat occurs when individuals perceive events or relationships as being harmful to their identity (Petriglieri, 2011), resulting in loss (Conroy & O'Leary, 2014) or devaluation (Dutton et al., 2010) of their identity, leading to intense emotions (Conroy & O'Leary, 2014). Liminality, another form of identity uncertainty, is experienced when individuals are betwixt and between different identities during transitions (Beech, 2011).

Personal uncertainty tends to be an uncomfortable state that motivates individuals to resolve their uncertainty (Van den Bos, 2009). Nonetheless, uncertainty also catalyses people towards self-improvement and a search for meaning (Szeto & Sorrentino, 2010). Epitropaki et al. (2017) therefore argue that identity uncertainty can be a driver of personal growth for leaders, and have suggested research on how leaders' personal uncertainty fosters identity work - an objective of this study.

Sensemaking

When people encounter novelty, disruption, or uncertainty, their sensemaking becomes more conscious (Weick et al., 2005). Being grounded in identity issues (Weick, 1995), individuals make sense by answering a number of questions: What is going on in this context and why? What are the implications for who I am and who am I becoming? What do I need to do? (Vough & Caza, 2017). This effortful sensemaking is fostered by individuals' emotional states, wanting to resolve their uncertainty (Maitlis, Vogus, & Sonenshein, 2013). Yet, when people experience very intense negative emotions, their cognitive process of sensemaking may be hindered (Maitlis et al., 2013; Conroy & O'Leary, 2014).

The process of sensemaking is social, occurring through dialogue (Weick, 1995). Even solitary sensemaking involves real or imagined thoughts of others in their context (Weick et al., 2005). When triggered, sensemaking commences through noticing cues in the context (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). These cues are interpreted through mental frames (for example, past experience or personal assumptions) towards developing a plausible (not accurate) account of what is happening, using this as the basis of next actions (Weick et al., 2005). This sensemaking is iterative, with continuous adjustment as sense is made and remade, until the uncertainty is resolved (Conroy & O'Leary, 2014). Effective sensemaking, however, could be thwarted by an individual's limiting mental frames (Weick et al., 2005). Hammond et al. (2017) suggest that coaching could enhance sensemaking through uncovering and reframing one's limiting perspectives.

Leader identity and identity work

The construct of leader identity is complex, involving three levels of inclusiveness: personal, relational and collective (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The personal level relates to individual leadership schema and traits, the relational level is based on relationships built with key stakeholders through dyadic and team interactions, and the collective level pertains to group or organisational membership (Miscenko & Day, 2016).

Leader identity is also ambiguous (DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009) since it is influenced by different expectations of leadership and social and power dynamics (Lanka et al., 2018; Meister, Sinclair & Jehn, 2017) requiring leaders to adapt through identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Hence leader identity is a work-in-progress, evolving over time and through experience (Ibarra et al., 2014). A motive driving identity work is to develop a positive leader identity (Dutton et al., 2010)associated with a strengthening of identity, giving increased access to social resources (Dutton et al., 2010), increased leader self-efficacy (Day, Harrison & Halpin, 2009) and personal meaning in the leader role (Hammond et al., 2017).

Identity work, triggered by a perceived identity discrepancy (Conroy & O'Leary, 2014), involves developing identity narratives to bridge the discrepancy, together with testing and experimenting with provisional identities in context (Ibarra & & Barbulescu, 2010). Such experimentation may involve identity claims and grants in interactions with stakeholders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and role crafting strategies (Gjerde & Ladegård, 2018). This is followed by monitoring the results for self, together with others' validation of our identity work efforts (Ashforth, & Schinoff, 2016). However, in reality, leader identity work may involve struggles of conforming to, or resisting, "societal and organisational scripts" of who one should be as a leader (Sinclair, 2011, p. 509), versus ideal or possible selves (Ibarra et al., 2014). Many leaders also grapple with issues associated with intersecting multiple identities, or stereotypes ascribed to them, based on membership of social categories such as gender and race (Meister et al., 2017; Petriglieri, 2011). Leaders may also encounter barriers to their identity work, such as not being validated by stakeholders (Lanka et al., 2018), resulting in a "partial or incomplete" identity (Beech, 2011, p. 287). Consequently, Kragt and Day (2020) advocate coaching to assist leaders with identity struggles or barriers to their identity work.

Sensemaking and identity work as theoretical lenses for executive coaching

Some literature is emerging on the use of leader identity work as a lens for executive coaching, but appears not to include sensemaking as a lens. Yet, DuToit (2007) advocated adopting a sensemaking perspective – arguing that coaching itself is a sensemaking process, and that it could also enhance the sensemaking of clients, particularly during uncertainty.

Turning to the use of a leader identity lens in coaching, Butcher (2012) revealed that although executive coaches acknowledged identity issues as featuring prominently during coaching, they viewed identity as a 'sub-text' to their coaching work. Thus, Butcher (2012) suggested further research to heighten awareness about the value of identity as a lens to inform executive coaching. More recently, Yip, Trainor, Black, Soto-Torres and Reichard (2020) proposed a theoretically-informed coaching framework for supporting the transition of an individual from a minority group, with multiple identities, to becoming a new leader. The guidelines, based primarily on narrative coaching (including the centrality of identity), emphasise a relational holding environment to explore the coachee's identity tensions. The importance of containing the coachee's emotions and developing the coachee's identity narratives related to the identity tensions, are stressed. While the guidelines address new leaders' identity tensions, they do not focus on experienced leaders' uncertainties in dynamic organisational contexts, the subject of the present study.

Furthermore, Skinner (2020a) developed a Leader Identity Formation Theory (LIFT), informed by research highlighting the importance of identity formation in coaching work with senior women leaders, and the need for a leader identity formation lens to inform executive coaching. LIFT views leader identity formation as "a continuum of identity stages from an under-developed stage through to a forming stage and a well-developed stage of internalisation" (2020a, p. 75). Research has established preliminary support for LIFT (Skinner, 2020b); in particular that leader identity 'formed and reformed' over the life span, subject to any enablers and derailers encountered. Enablers foster identity formation, such as access to supportive social resources, whereas environmental derailers and self-derailers are obstacles to identity formation. Skinner (2020b) provided guidelines for coaches to facilitate leader identity formation, but argued for more research into the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes in leader identity 'forming and reforming', an objective of this study.

In summary, although coaching has been recommended for facilitating more effective sensemaking and leader identity work, these theoretical lenses are scarce in the coaching literature. The literature also revealed that the processes of sensemaking and identity work are entangled (Vough et al., 2020). This study, by interpreting leaders' experience of personal uncertainty through the

inter-related lenses of sensemaking and identity work, would identify implications for executive coaches for working with leaders' uncertainty.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was exploratory, seeking to understand leaders' lived experience of, and approach to, personal uncertainty. Thus an interpretivist paradigm was adopted, meaning that such understanding would be based on an interpretation of the participants' experiences (Willig, 2008). A qualitative approach, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with theoretical foundations in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), was selected as it aligns with the research purpose. Phenomenology is concerned with obtaining a rich understanding of lived experience of a phenomenon. Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, is concerned with making sense of how participants make sense of their experience, and idiography pays attention to the nuances of individual participants. IPA also advocates theory-driven research, involving the engagement of theory when interpreting the findings, an objective of this study (Smith et al., 2009), in using sensemaking and identity work theories to interpret the findings.

Participants

Small samples are used in IPA studies to enable a more idiographic account of the phenomenon being explored, highlighting convergence and divergence across participants (Smith, 2011). Purposive sampling was used to source executive leaders, sharing the phenomenon of experienced uncertainty in an organisational context of change (Willig, 2008). Executives were sought as the intent was to explore experienced leaders' personal uncertainty. Further, these executives should not have received executive coaching to explore their own approach to their personal uncertainty.

Executives were sourced from South African (SA) companies that had experienced large-scale organisational change for at least eighteen months, preceding this study. Approval for the research was gained from two companies in different sectors, of similar size (approximately 2500 employees), on the basis that anonymity of the companies and the participants were ensured. The HR executives briefed the executives in each company, requesting voluntary participation. The sample comprised six executives, with three from each company, who signed informed consent forms in line with ethical research stipluations. The participants' age ranged from 40 to 55 years, and their executive experience from two to twelve years. This sample included some gender and racial diversity, with two females and four males; and two black people and four white people as classified in SA (Statistics South Africa, 2016).

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used; favoured for IPA (Willig, 2008). These were conducted in person using an interview guide aligned with the research purpose. Participants were first asked to briefly describe the key organisational changes occurring over the previous two years, followed by their own experiences of personal uncertainty over this period. Thereafter, their experiences of personal uncertainty were explored in more depth, including how they approached their uncertainty, and the outcomes thereof. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed verbatim, with participants verifying the accuracy of their transcripts.

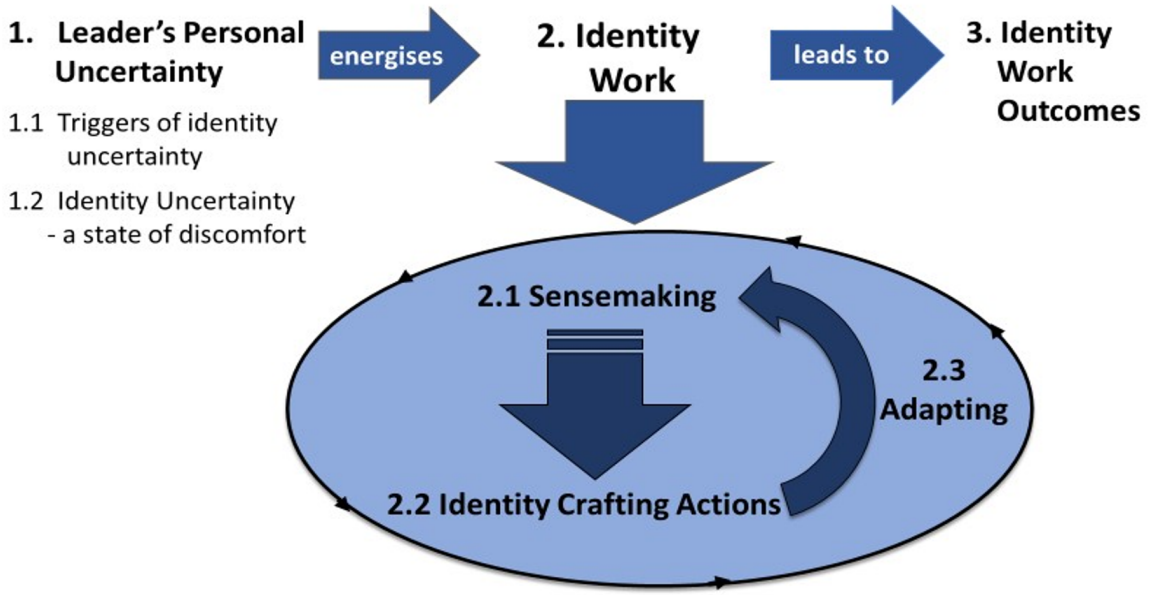
Data analysis only commenced after all six interviews were completed, following IPA guidelines (Smith, 2011) and began with a textual analysis of three participants' transcripts. Working through each transcript to identify themes inductively for each participant, the themes were clustered into emerging key themes. These key themes were then used to guide the analysis of the remaining

three transcripts, while being attentive to any different themes The themes were then clustered into superordinate themes, key themes and sub-themes, drawing from sensemaking and identity work literature (Smith et al., 2009).

Findings and discussion

The findings are depicted schematically in Figure 1, following a recommendation in IPA (Smith et al., 2009), to represent how the leaders' uncertainty energised their identity work and emphasising the inter-relationship between their identity work and sensemaking. Three superordinate themes were identified: (1) leaders' personal uncertainty, (2) identity work, and (3) identity work outcomes; suggesting that identity work was the over-arching process. The leaders' personal uncertainty, an uncomfortable state of identity uncertainty, energised them to do identity work to resolve their uncertainty, leading to identity work outcomes. At the core of the leaders' identity work, was their sensemaking - the springboard for their identity crafting actions. The results of their actions were then adapted through further sensemaking, and/or further sensemaking was required due to unfolding events in their contexts, resulting in identity work outcomes over time.

Figure 1: How leaders' personal uncertainty energises identity work



The findings are now discussed, referencing participants' verbatim extracts (using codes E1 to E6), and interpreted through the theories of leader identity work and sensemaking.

Superordinate theme 1: Leader's personal uncertainty

The leaders clearly experienced personal uncertainty triggered within their changing contexts. Although they never used the term 'identity', their uncertainty related to identity issues, suggesting it was identity uncertainty, as described by Epitropaki et al. (2017). This identity uncertainty related to aspects of their leader and/or role identities, being inter-related in executive positions (Kragt & Day, 2020). As depicted in Figure 1, the leaders' identity uncertainty was triggered in their contexts, manifesting in a state of discomfort.

Theme 1.1: Triggers of identity uncertainty

Four triggers of identity uncertainty were identified.

Transitions into new roles: transitions triggered three leaders' identity uncertainty, in terms of who they needed to be in their new roles. E6, who moved into an interim role at a senior executive level involving interactions with the company's new board, said it was "a terrible situation because you have no power at that time". His role mandate from the board was to "keep the seat warm", until the next incumbent was appointed, which "frustrated" him. E3, who was promoted from a general management role to an executive role, expressed "self-doubt" about "contributing at the required leadership level". E2, a newcomer, felt "very excluded… and unsettled" after joining the company, wondering whether he "made the right decision to join". The transitions therefore triggered a sense of liminality in these leaders, of being 'betwixt and between' their previous and emerging identities (Beech, 2011).

Being criticised or targeted by stakeholders: two leaders experienced intense identity uncertainty when criticised or targeted by key stakeholders. E2, the newcomer who felt excluded, also experienced criticism, as "things were being said by fellow executives" about his competence, resulting in his "confidence declining". For E5, his new CEO said that he was "going to be disciplined, because of some innocuous thing", which he was unaware of, making him feel "confused and inadequate". He experienced "anxiety" perceiving his own position "was under threat"; that he was "being targeted". Thus, both leaders' intense uncertainty related to perceived harm being done to their identities, termed identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011).

Conflicting role mandate: E4, also a newcomer, was shocked when the CEO she reported to left after having been there for a few months. The new CEO had a "completely different mandate" for her role, which she found "very frustrating … and disempowering". Consequently, E4 experienced a devalued identity with dimished personal agency (Dutton et al., 2010).

Personal dissonance in the leadership role: E1, was "frustrated and disillusioned" with the authoritarian leadership style of the CEO he reported to at the time. He felt this constrained him: "as a leader I want to contribute more … to make a real difference". His uncertainty was an identity struggle between conforming to the CEO's script versus enacting his ideal leader identity (Sinclair, 2011).

Theme 1.2: Identity uncertainty - a state of discomfort

Key words used by the leaders to describe their experienced uncertainty were: anxiety, decreased confidence, under threat, frustration, excluded, unsettled, disempowered, confused, inadequate, disillusioned and self-doubt. These emotive words clearly conveyed their identity uncertainty as a state of discomfort, concurring with Van den Bos (2009).

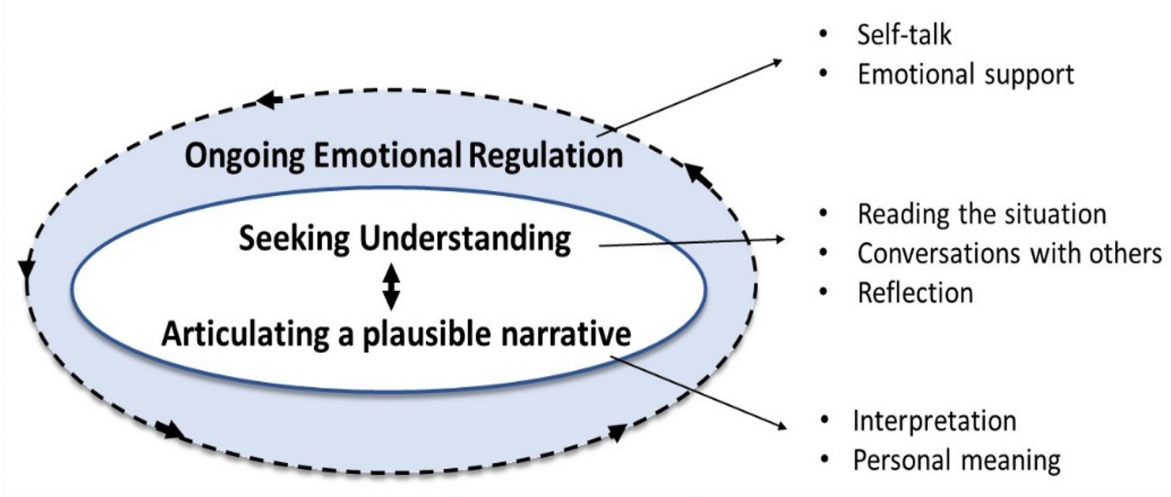
Superordinate theme 2: Identity work

The leaders' identity work comprised three interactive and iterative components (Figure 1); that is, sensemaking, identity crafting actions, and adapting. The leaders' emotional state of discomfort energised them to do identity work to resolve their identity uncertainty (Conroy & O'Leary, 2014). This finding supports Maitlis et al.(2013) on the role of negative emotions in fuelling sensemaking, the first component of their identity work.

Theme 2.1: Sensemaking

The leaders' sensemaking formed the foundation of their identity work, involving three approaches: ongoing emotional regulation, seeking understanding, and articulating a plausible narrative, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Sensemaking: Key themes and sub-themes



Ongoing emotional regulation: The leaders shared how they needed to regulate their emotions to be in a calmer state to make sense of what was going on, supporting Maitlis et al. (2013), who emphasised that very intense emotions hinder effective sensemaking. Their emotional regulation appeared to be ongoing throughout their sensemaking; therefore depicted in Figure 2 as a cycle encircling their sensemaking. The leaders used two forms of emotional regulation:

- Aligned with Brinthaupt (2019), they used self-talk to help regulate their emotional state in their work contexts. For example: "I said to myself - take a few deep breaths…" (E3); and "I gave myself a pep talk… to calm down" (E2).
- Concurring with Conroy and O'Leary (2014), they dissipated their emotions through emotional support from trusted others, who gave them the psychological safety they needed (Maitlis et al., 2013). Thus, E4 said "…if you trust someone, you can share without being threatened"; and E5 found it "good to speak to someone who has got your back…"

Seeking understanding: All leaders' emotional states of identity uncertainty motivated them to seek understanding of what was going on, and why, in three ways (Figure 2) – reading the situation, having conversations with others, and reflection – to help them make sense.

Firstly, in reading the situation, leaders extracted cues in their context for closer attention, as sensemaking involves connection of cues to one's mental frames (Weick et al., 2005). They extracted cues through observing:

- E5 started "observing closely…what's going on – and why"
- E1 "read the different board members … to figure out how to work with them"

These cues that they noticed were influenced by their mental frames and emotions (Du Toit, 2007). E5's threatened identity regarding being disciplined drove his "observing closely"; while E1 focused on cues to enable him to work with the new board he was reporting to, in his interim role.

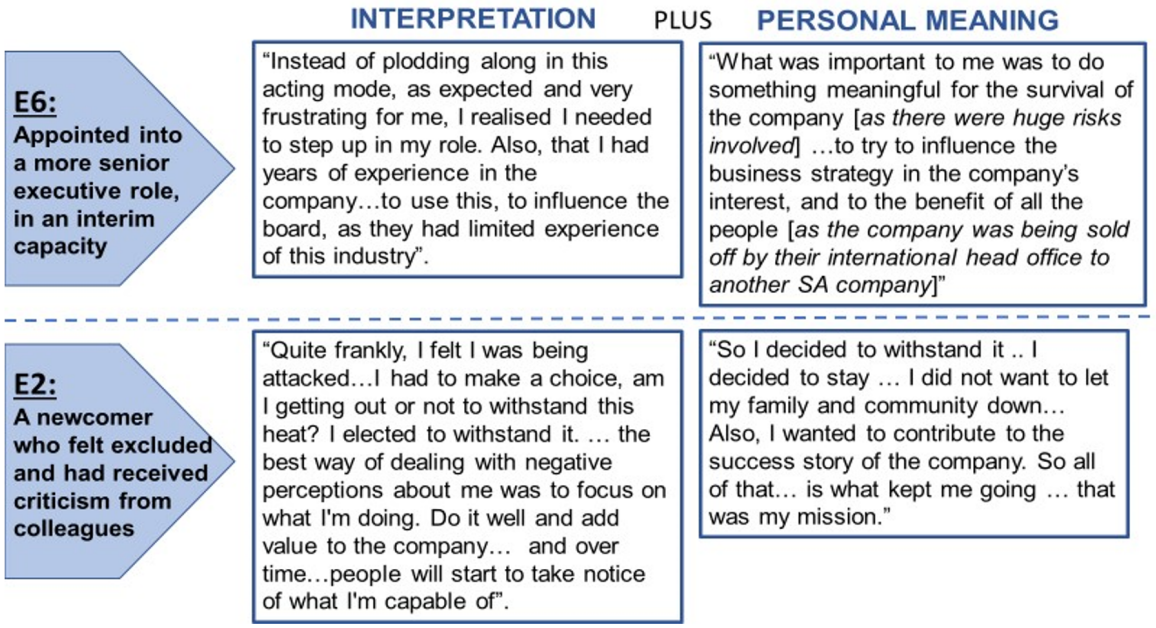
Secondly, having conversations with other trusted individuals was adopted by all leaders to seek more understanding, except for E2. This finding stresses the social nature of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and the value of dialogue with others to gain more perspective (Hammond et al., 2017). Thus, E4 discussed the frustrations of her conflicting role mandate with her personal professional network to gain more insight. E3, after being promoted, spoke to a trusted senior colleague about her transition challenges. In contrast to having conversations, E2 adopted a solitary approach for sensemaking, which may occur when experiencing very intense negative emotions, and therefore may not be effective, as argued by Maitlis et al. (2013). For E2, his uncertainty was very intense as

a newcomer, experiencing exclusion and criticism from his peers. He also chose not to share with his wife to avoid raising her anxiety, therefore using internal dialogue: "I told myself, they are …" and "I said to myself, I must…".

Thirdly, reflection was used by the leaders to gain more insight into their uncertainty. This echoes Parry (2003), who found that executives used reflection in their sensemaking, but the level of reflection varied, as for the current study. For some leaders (E3 & E6), their reflection was not in-depth; it was "thinking about things". In contrast, E1 reflected about who he "really wanted to be as a leader, and why ", and E5 reflected on his contribution to being targeted by the new CEO: "What was it from my side? …maybe I was a bit forceful in the beginning?". This in-depth reflection by E1 and E5 increased their self-awareness, required for changing their perspectives for more effective sensemaking (Vough & Caza, 2017).

Articulating a plausible narrative: Through seeking understanding (via reading the situation conversations with others, and reflection), all leaders reached points when they 'made sense' of their identity uncertainty through articulating plausible narratives. Their plausible narratives illustrated, firstly, an interpretation of what was going on in relation to themselves and what they should do; and secondly, a sense of personal meaning that increased their motivation to act. The articulation of the narratives of E6 and E2 is given in Figure 3, and discussed thereafter.

Figure 3. Examples of plausible narratives: Interpretation and Personal Meaning



The leaders' interpretations in Figure 3 related to key sensemaking questions (Vough & Caza, 2017); that is, what was going on and why, and the implicatons for them in relation to their leader/role identity, and what they should do. For E6, Sinclair's (2011) reference to identity script struggles is reflected in his frustration with the lack of agency in the script proffered by the board, for his acting role. He therefore chose to resist this script, and "step up" to his ideal leader/role identity, concurring with Ibarra et al. (2014). He rationalised that he had the experience to influence the board, thereby making his narrative plausible. For E2, who felt excluded and criticised by his peers, he explained that his peers "were not used to dealing with a black person in his position", being the first black person appointed to this executive role. His interpretation of "being attacked" by his peers suggests he experienced a stigmatised identity (Slay & Smith, 2011). He rationalised the need to prove his capability to his peers, hoping to gain their respect and inclusion; described as an identity-protection response (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 647). Taken together, the interpretations by

E6 and E2 gave them plausible (not accurate) accounts as the basis for moving forward (Weick et al., 2005).

Furthermore, most leaders bolstered their interpretations with personal meaning in their plausible narratives, to strengthen their motivation for acting or persevering. Both E6 and E2 (in Figure 3) derived personal meaning related to personal values and a sense of purpose aligned with their companies. This finding supports Van den Heuvel et al. (2009) on the role of meaning-making for self-motivation when experiencing change.

Theme 2.2: Identity crafting actions

The leaders' plausible narratives included what they should do, thereby serving as a springboard for their identity crafting actions to resolve their identity uncertainty (Figure 1). Their identity crafting focused mainly on role-related relational identity work with key stakeholders, highlighted by Gjerde and Ladegård (2018) as a main emphasis of experienced senior leaders. Two role-related relational identity crafting strategies were identified: role identity claims to more senior people, and role crafting actions in relation to peers. A third, and different strategy by one leader, was to exit the company.

Firstly, three leaders made role identity claims by confronting or persuading people more senior to them, to achieve and/or protect their identities, as found by Meister et al.(2017). In all three cases, their claims were granted, thus validating their identity crafting efforts (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). E4 initiated role negotiations with her CEO, achieving a satisfactory solution. E5, who was being targeted by his CEO, told the CEO that he was going to appeal to the board. E6 asserted himself in his acting role by "presenting a financial strategy to the board members", which they responded to positively.

Secondly, E2 (a newcomer) and E3 (internally promoted) focused on role crafting actions in relation to their peers. E2, who experienced prejudice and exclusion, wanted respect from his peers through proving his capability to them - by delivering in his role; and E3 met with her peers to "clarify their expectations" and "get their input on her objectives". They focused on crafting their role-related identities with their peers, crucial for achieving their desired identities in their new roles, as argued by Ibarra et al. (2014). Moreover, validation by key stakeholders is an identity motive (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016) for evolving one's leader identity when transitioning into a new role.

Thirdly, E1 was at a different point in his identity work concerning the resolution of his identity uncertainty, thus choosing to resign. His previous identity crafting actions involved discussing his leadership differences with the CEO, persevering for a while thereafter. The situation did not improve, becoming untenable for him; therefore deciding to exit and "take a sabbatical to decide on his next career step". Meister et al. (2017) found that an exit strategy may occur after individuals' identity discrepancies are not resolved through identity work efforts.

Theme 2.3: Adapting

The results of the leaders' identity crafting actions were then monitored and adapted through further sensemaking, and/or further sensemaking was required due to unfolding events in their contexts (Figure 1). This adaptation is typical of identity work which is iterative and dynamic (Ibarra et al., 2014). Examples of how leaders adapted are discussed.

E1, who resigned due to persistent dissonance in his leadership approach with the CEO, demonstrated much adaptation in his identity work. Although he resigned, intending to take a sabbatical to reflect on his future career path, he reviewed this when events unfolded. The CEO left, and the new CEO asked him to stay on, which he agreed to for six months. His plausible narrative was his "concern for the company", feeling "it was the right thing to do at the time"; reflecting his personal meaning. Yet concurrently, E1 continued to reflect on his career direction

through "reading books about business and the meaning of leadership," being prospective sensemaking towards future possible selves (Vough & Caza, 2017). Then further changes occurred after four months, with the creation of a new business development role at executive level, which was offered to him. After further sensemaking, E1's plausible narrative was that this new position "would be a challenge, and that is what I want, …as my perspective has changed after all my reading". He also appreciated having an "…alignment of my values with those of the Company", capturing his personal meaning in choosing to stay. E1's story shows his recurring sensemaking as events unfolded, related to his identity motive to make a meaningful contribution as a leader (Hammond et al., 2017).

Similarly, other leaders needed to adapt through developing their relational identities with stakeholders. E4 received feedback from her CEO during her role negotiations, to improve her relationships with some of her peers. Receiving feedback is a means of gauging validation by one's key stakeholders, and can trigger further identity work (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Thus, E4 took the feedback "on board", making sense of it to make relevant changes. In the case of E5, the CEO left shortly after E5's appeal to the board. Based on his negative experience of being targeted by the previous CEO, E5 chose to approach the next CEO differently; he "offered him his support" to lay the foundation for working with him. E5's positive adaptation shows he learned from his past experience (Vough & Caza, 2017), having reflected on his contribution to the poor relationship with the previous CEO.

Superordinate theme 3: Identity work outcomes

The identity work of all leaders, except for E2, yielded positive outcomes (Dutton et al., 2010) suggesting resolution of their initial identity uncertainty (Conroy & O'Leary, 2014). Their identity work resulted in a sense of positive identity, reflected in increased confidence and agency, concurring with Dutton et al. (2010) and Day et al.(2009). Some examples are:

- E1: "…really enjoying what I do now… and I am leading the way I want to"
- E4: "felt more congruent with my role – and more empowered"
- E5: "a good working relationship with the current CEO, and regained my confidence"

In contrast, E2 was "very disillusioned" and intended resigning. His identity crafting efforts with his peers had mostly been thwarted, being an organisational barrier (Lanka et al., 2018) to his identity work. E2's intense identity uncertainty was exacerbated by experienced prejudice from his peers (Slay & Smith, 2011), therefore never gaining the validation and inclusion to achieve a positive identity (Beech, 2011). Under these circumstances, an exit strategy may result (Meister et al., 2017). Due to his intense uncertainty, his sensemaking had been solitary, possibly hindering its effectiveness (Maitlis et al., 2013). Moreover, Slay and Smith (2011) found that identity work for marginalised professionals, often stigmatised by negative stereotypes, is complex and challenging, given the barriers that are encountered, as for E2. Yip et al. (2020) therefore suggest this complex identity work should focus on integrating one's leader identity with other valued identities.

Summary of findings

Whilst experienced leaders tend to have a more internalised leader identity (Kragt & Day, 2020), the findings indicate that they do experience personal uncertainty in their changing contexts, requiring adaptive identity development (Dutton et al., 2010). The findings also highlighted the nature of the inter-relationship between the leaders' sensemaking and identity work processes (Vough et al., 2020), a main objective of this study. The leader's identity work was the over-arching process adopted by them to resolve their identity uncertainty, triggered in their uncertain work contexts. Sensemaking was found to be the key component of their identity work, as it formed the basis of their identity crafting actions.

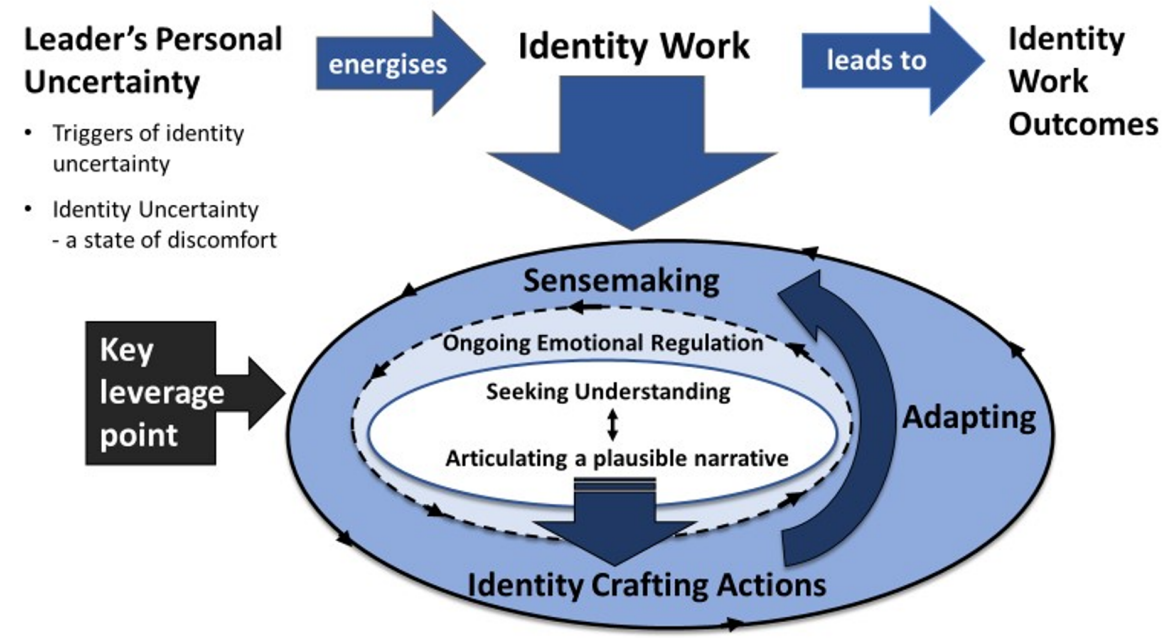
The findings also foreground the intra-personal and inter-personal processes involved in the leaders' identity work, on which further research was suggested (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Skinner, 2020b). In particular, the approaches involved in sensemaking were elucidated; that is, emotional regulation, seeking understanding and articulating plausibe narratives – as a springboard for developing identity crafting actions to resolve their uncertainty. The leaders focused mainly on role-related relational identity crafting strategies with their peers and/or more senior executives, bolstered by personal meaning related to their values and alignment with their organisation. Finally, their identity work, after further adaptation required in their contexts, resulted in positive outcomes for five of the leaders manifesting in increased confidence and agency. These outcomes suggest that although the leaders' initial identity uncertainty motivated them to resolve their uncertainty through identity work, it was also a driver of adaptation and personal growth, as emphasised by Epitropaki et al. (2017). However, one executive was an exception in not achieving resolution of his identity uncertainty; stressing the complexity of identity work by marginalised professionals which involves intersectional identities and organisational barriers to their identity work.

Implications for executive coaching

The intention of this research was to identify implications for executive coaching to facilitate leaders' adaptive identity development in uncertain contexts. The findings illustrate the potential value and applicability of adopting both theoretical lenses of sensemaking and identity work, as these are inter-related (Vough et al., 2020). This study therefore supports other authors' views (Butcher, 2012; Skinner, 2020a) that an identity lens be more explicitly used in executive coaching, and concurs with du Toit's (2007) call for adopting a sensemaking perspective.

The main implication for executive coaches is to consider using a guiding framework for including sensemaking and identity work lenses in their coaching repertoires. Figure 4, based on the research findings, highlights the components of leaders' identity work as potential areas for coaches to focus on. The assumption underpinning this coaching approach is that a trusting coaching partnership exists for the psychological safety required for working with a client's personal uncertainty, should it emerge.

Figure 4: A guiding framework for facilitating leaders' adaptive identity development



As depicted, sensemaking is the key leverage point for coaching, as the quality of leaders' sensemaking determines their identity crafting actions, and potential effectiveness of their identity work - subject to the complexity of the identity work required and barriers to it. Therefore, facilitation of effective sensemaking is the cornerstone of the coaching approach. Pointers are set out in Table 1, aimed at encouraging coaches to include relevant techniques from their own repertoires (for example, using sense-making techniques such as stakeholder analysis, metaphor or life narrative). These pointers should not be applied linearly, as sensemaking is iterative, requiring coaches to meet their clients where they are in their sensemaking and in relation to the dynamics in their contexts.

Table 1: Pointers for executive coaches to facilitate effective sensemaking

Component of sensemaking	**Pointers - including principles and guidelines**
Emotional regulation	1. If clients have intense emotions of identity uncertainty, coaches need to normalise their clients' emotions and hold the space for them to express, explore and process their experienced uncertainty. This will help dissipate the intensity of clients' emotions, enabling them to engage with more effective sensemaking. 2. Clients' emotions will fluctuate in their day-to-day contexts on an ongoing basis, potentially hindering their sensemaking. Therefore, coaches could explore emotional regulation techniques with their clients for their use.
Seeking understanding	1. Coaches need to be mindful of *the key sensemaking questions* that clients want to answer through seeking understanding: (i) what is going on (in my context) - and why? (ii) what are the implications for me (concerning my identity) – who am I in this, who am I becoming, who do I want to be, and who should I be – and what do I need to let go of? (iii) what should I do going forward? 2. In their sensemaking, clients will be connecting their mental frames with cues that they extract from their contexts. Coaches may consider how to expand their clients' range of cues they focus on, and how they might gain more information from other sources. In addition, to explore who else clients could have conversations with to gain more diverse perspectives. 3. Coaches can facilitate dialogue and in-depth reflection to surface clients' limiting mental frames used in interpreting their experiences and hindering their sensemaking. Assisting clients to reframe their limiting frames to more resourceful perspectives, will enable them to answer their sensemaking questions more meaningfully.
Articulating a plausible narrative	1. Coaches need to realise that their clients will reach points when they articulate plausible (not accurate) narratives. These narratives indicate that 'sense has been made', which include clients' answers to their sensemaking questions. Coaches must pay attention to clients' specific language and words used in their narratives, as these represent their sense. 2. Coaches can explore clients' interpretations (based on their realisations and rationalisations of their experiences), helping them to articulate their narratives more constructively for serving them in their contexts. This is important, as clients' narratives form the springboard for their identity crafting actions. 3. Therefore, coaches need to explore their clients' narratives in relation to the the following aspects, depending on the nature of their identity uncertainty: • Systemic dynamics within their contexts, with emphasis on stakeholder relationships • Intersections and/or conflicts with their other personal and/or social identities • Whether they are over-conforming to, or resisting, organisational, role and/or societal scripts • Whether they are compromising what's important to them and their desired identities • Possible barriers to their identity crafting actions which exist, or are anticipated, in their context – and to consider how their planned actions need to be adjusted in light of these barriers • Other viable options for identity crafting in their work contexts • Whether their identity crafting actions are ecological for them (and relevant others) – professionally and personally 4. Furthermore, coaches can assist clients to derive a stronger sense of personal meaning to motivate them with their identity crafting actions and/or for persevering in their contexts of ongoing uncertainty. Personal meaning may relate to having a sense of purpose and/or alignment of one's personal values with the organisation's values. Therefore, exploring clients' purpose and values may be insightful for them.

With a meaningful plausible narrative in place for the way forward, coaching would then focus on prioritisation, planning and execution of clients' identity crafting actions. Here the coach could explore ways of assessing the effectiveness of clients' planned actions or experimentation,

particularly in relation to key stakeholders - crucial for developing leaders' relational identities and for validation thereof. The next coaching sessions would then reflect on progress and the need for adapting any of the actions through further sensemaking.

The above coaching approach places emphasis on clients' sensemaking, within their broader identity work. Since an identity work lens is a recently emerging perspective in coaching, coaching practitioners could also consider the guidelines by Skinner (2020a) and Yip et al. (2020) for facilitating leader identity work. Finally, coaching practitioners could extend the coaching approach suggested here to non-executive leaders and other professionals experiencing personal uncertainty in their work contexts.

Limitations and opportunities for future research

A limitation of this study was that it relied on executives' retrospective accounts of their experienced uncertainty. Future research, using longitudinal designs, could potentially capture more of the dynamics of leaders' adaptive identity work over time. Future research could also build on this study, to further develop the use of the inter-related lenses of sensemaking and identity work in coaching practice; for example, developing this coaching approach further through action research involving coaching practitioners.

Based on the experience of one leader in this study, future research could explore how coaches work with marginalised leaders' identity uncertainty, to generate more insight into facilitation of this complex identity work, as social injustice is a global issue in organisations. In addition, with this study being conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there would be value in exploring leaders' personal uncertainty as virtual leaders. The findings could highlight coaching implications for working with virtual leaders' uncertainty, as many organisations are intent on sustaining virtual work practices in some form.

Conclusion

This study explored how experienced leaders' personal uncertainty fostered their identity work. The findings gave meaningful insights into the inter-relationship between their sensemaking and identity work. These insights helped to identify implications for executive coaches for facilitating adaptive leader identity development, through adopting the inter-related theoretical lenses of sensemaking and leader identity work, as sensemaking was found to play a key role in the leader's identity work. Executive coaches could, through inclusion of these lenses in their coaching repertoires, therefore add further value to their leader clients in increasingly uncertain contexts.

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