# How can executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients?

by

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## Abstract

This thesis and its underlying research projects seek to narrow a notable gap in the extant peer reviewed academic literature on executive coaching by addressing one question and two observations made by other researchers. In 2009 Kauffman and Bachkirova (p.3) posed the question "Does the coaches' background make a difference…?" In 2015 Athanasopoulou and Dopson (p.31) suggested that "…it would be valuable to obtain better understanding of the role that a coach's background plays in the outcome and quality of the coaching intervention". Most recently, Pandolfi (2020, p.13) suggested that "…more research is needed to understand the influence of coaches' background on outcomes". How one aspect of coaches' backgrounds can influence their coaching is examined here by exploring the question: '*How can executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients?*

This single question is addressed in depth and from different angles in a portfolio of four distinct research projects, as prescribed by Canterbury Christ Church University's guidelines. First, a critical review of the extant literature (Section 2) traces how the role of coaches' prior knowledge and expertise has changed over the past one hundred and fifty years. Second, a small scale research project (Section 3) explores the researcher's own experience of the phenomenon as a practicing executive coach. Third, an applied research project (Section 4) examines the experiences of the phenomenon of cohorts of other coaches and of their clients. Fourth, a report of professional practice (Section 5) explores how a leading training organisation covers the topic in its training programmes.

A qualitative research approach with a critical realist philosophical perspective was applied throughout the thesis. A series of electronic searches of literature databases and 'snowballing' were used to review the extant literature; a self-reflection exercise and a methodology informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) were applied to the small scale project; a methodology informed by IPA was also employed

for the applied research project; and thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse data for a case study in the report of professional practice.

The overarching finding of the research undertaken is that coaches' backgrounds can make tangible differences to coaching relationships and affect them in a number of different ways.

For the coaches themselves, it can underpin their abilities to develop peer to peer relationships with clients; to question, probe and challenge their clients; to empathise and engage deeply with their clients; to make interventions they might otherwise avoid; to share practical learning gained from their own organisational 'mistakes'; and to normalise their clients' concerns and vulnerabilities.

For clients, their coaches' prior experience can increase the credibility and substance of their coaching; strengthen their trust in coaching; help them feel understood; and provide validity to their sense checking of thoughts and ideas.

The report of professional practice (Section 5) asserts that the coaching accrediting body studied makes no reference in its competence framework to how coaches might use their prior experience in their coaching; that the training delivered by the organisation studied focusses on increasing participants' self-awareness and on non-directive skills; and that it covers listening skills thoroughly but devotes little attention to questioning techniques or how to incorporate prior knowledge and experience in their questioning.

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## List of abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ARP | Applied Research Project |
| CCCU | Canterbury Christ Church University |
| CR | Critical realism |
| CRL | Critical Review of Literature |
| EMCC | European Mentoring and Coaching Council |
| ICF | International Coach Federation |
| IPA | Interpretative phenomenological analysis |
| PDF | Professional Development Foundation |
| RRP | Report of Professional Practice |
| SSRP | Small Scale Research Project |
| TA | Thematic analysis |

# Section 1

# Introduction

## Section 1: Introduction

This thesis is submitted to Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) in fulfilment of its requirements of a PhD in Professional Practice: Psychological Perspectives. The research question explored is:

*How can executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients?*

This single question is addressed from a series of different angles in a portfolio of four distinct but closely related research projects. The thesis follows the structure prescribed by the CCCU programme with its concomitant word count guidelines:

- A critical review of the extant peer reviewed academic, empirical and practitioner literature on the topic (Critical Review of Literature – CRL – Section 2);
- A small scale study of my own experience of the phenomenon as a practicing executive coach (Small Scale Research Project – SSRP – Section 3);
- An applied study of the experiences of cohorts of other coaches and their clients (Applied Research Project – ARP – Section 4);
- A report of professional practice exploring how a leading training programme covers the topic (Report of Professional Practice – RRP – Section 5) .

This Section of my thesis introduces the topic; states the purpose and relevance of the research undertaken; provides an overview of the research methodologies applied; summarises the contributions to the theory and practice of executive coaching; and outlines the structure of the thesis.

### Chapter 1:1 Background

The executive coaching industry has burgeoned in size over the past two decades. In 1999, the International Coach Federation (ICF), one of the largest global coaching accrediting bodies, had just over 2,000 members; by 2019 its membership had grown to just under 34,000 across 145 countries (ICF, 2019). A study of the entire global coaching industry by PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated that there were approximately 71,000 coach practitioners in 2019, an increase of 33% on the 2015 estimate, with total revenues of around $2.8 billion (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020). Offstein et al (2020, p.1052) also confirm that “investment continues to pour into executive coaching as a field and discipline”.

Coaching is a social process and mainly a professional activity, making it subject to the concept of discourse and social change (Garvey & Stokes, 2022). The currently dominant discourse on the practice of executive coaching suggests that it is “a form of facilitation or people-management style, and strictly non-directive” (Ives, 2008, p.103). The predominance of this view has influenced the backgrounds and expertise coaches are expected to demonstrate in their work with one of the most influential contributors to the discourse asserting that “Coaching requires expertise in coaching but not in the subject at hand” (Whitmore, 2012,p.14).

That non-directive coaching can be efficacious has been well researched (Passmore, 2007; Koortzen & Oosthuizen, 2010) and this thesis does not seek to dispute its relevance. Nevertheless, the view summarised above of the role currently played by coaches’ backgrounds in executive coaching contrasts with those held in earlier manifestations of coaching. Until the 1980s or 1990s, the then dominant discourse in the literature suggested that the coach was generally expected to have greater expertise than the coachee (Evered & Selman, 1989; Brock, 2008).

The professional, practice based research described in this thesis first examines the factors that contributed to the metamorphosis of coaching from a process of sharing experience to facilitation and then explores how executive coaches prior experience can affect their relationships with their clients. A key observation of the critical review of literature (Section 2 below) is that there is a notable paucity of coverage in the extant practitioner and peer reviewed, academic literature of how coaches’ backgrounds can influence their coaching and their relationships with clients. The research conducted for this thesis aims to narrow that gap in the literature.

## Chapter 1:2 Purpose and relevance of the research

The coverage of executive coaching in academic, empirical and practitioner literature has blossomed in line with the growth of the industry referred to above. A Google Scholar search of articles with 'executive coaching' in their title suggests that there were around 560 published before 2000; since 2000, over 16,000 have been published.

Despite the burgeoning of both the industry and coverage of executive coaching, little attention has been paid to the coaches themselves. Instead, much of the literature has focussed on the processes and outcomes of coaching in order to promote its commercial success (Fillery-Travis & Cox, 2014). Bachkirova and Borrington (2019, p.338) suggest that while "the literature on coaching practice keeps growing" much of it is "developed by practitioners to promote their specific approaches to coaching, which are rarely supported by empirical research or justified by conceptual analysis".

The purpose of this thesis, and of all of the constituent research projects, is to explore one aspect of coaches themselves. By examining how coaches' prior experience can influence their relationships with their clients, the research seeks to elucidate the question posed by Kauffman & Bachkirova (2009, p.3): "Does the coaches' background make a difference…?" I propound that this will build on the extant literature on executive coaching by also addressing the observation made by Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2015, p.31): "it would be valuable to obtain better understanding of the role that a coach's background plays on the outcome and quality of the coaching intervention".

Bachkirova and Borrington's comments above regarding the lack of empirical research into the views propounded by practitioners are relevant to the significance of the research undertaken. I am a practicing executive coach and utilise my prior career experience in my coaching and therefore have an interest in the outcomes of the research.

In view of the possibility of researcher bias and in order to maximise the potential contributions of the findings of the research undertaken, particular attention was paid to the selection of research methodologies. My "fore-structure" (Smith et al., 2009) or prior beliefs and biases were explored thoroughly via the Small Scale Research Project (SSRP); a "multiperspectival" (Larkin et al., 2019) approach was used in the Applied Research Project (ARP) in order to triangulate its findings (Thurmond, 2001); and intentional discipline was applied to the analysis of the data in all of the primary research exercises. I suggest the significance of the research is enhanced by the rigour applied at all stages.

I posit that the findings of the research described in this thesis make important contributions to knowledge and scholarship in various areas of the executive coaching industry:

- Research of coaching. A number of questions posed by the authors quoted above are addressed and aspects of the extant literature are corroborated, illuminated and built upon;

- Executive coaches. Certain aspects of what an under-understood and poorly defined group within the ranks of executive coaches (those with prior career experience) can bring to their practices are elucidated;

- Buyers of coaching. Guidance that maybe relevant to the successful matching of senior executives with potential coaches is offered to human resource and learning and development professionals;

- Trainers of coaches. Specific recommendations are made to the organisations and institutions involved in training executive coaches.

Further details of these contributions to the theory and practice of executive coaching are summarised in Chapter 1:6 below; are included in the Sections below outlining each of the primary research projects; and are detailed further in Section 6 below.

## Chapter 1:3 Context of the research

The coaching industry is highly heterogeneous and, as Brunner (1998, p.516) pointed out it "takes many forms, from technical counselling to the psychological domination that flirts with suggestion, for this is a domain devoid of any fixed deontology".

The term 'coaching' now encompasses a wide variety of different fields including life, executive, career, performance, behavioural, personal development, 'third generation' (personal values), music, sports, wellbeing and health, amongst others (Gavin & Bernardi, 2023). It can be described generical as "an enabling process aiming at enhancing learning and development with the intention of improving the performance in a specific aspect of practice" (Kamarudin et al., 2020, citing Lord et al. 2008).

As is discussed in detail below, coaching is now generally regarded as being "strictly non-directive" (Ives, 2008, p.108) and not necessarily relying "on the specific experience and knowledge of the coach being greater than that of the client" (Cox & Ledgerwood, 2003, p.1).

The absence of clearly understood terminology surrounding coaching has contributed to different activities sometimes being confused (Stokes et al., 2020). The terms 'coaching' and 'mentoring', for instance, are sometimes used interchangeably and other times differently despite having distinct definitions (with mentoring being defined as a relationship in which "a more senior person who takes an interest in the sponsorship of a more junior person" (Ivey & Dupré, 2022) and often involves some transfer of knowledge or experience rather than being entirely facilitative (Koortzen & Oosthuizen, 2010).

The definition of 'executive coaching' has broadened in recent decades and Bachkirova and Borrington (2019, p.339-340) observed that the "plethora of terms (such as leadership coaching, executive coaching, business coaching)" that proliferates does not help organisations or buyers of coaching understand what it can offer and might also affect the validity of this thesis' research unless clarified.

### 1:3.1 Definition of the coaching studied

Due to the heterogeneity outlined above, it is important to clearly state the context of the research undertaken in the constituent research projects included in this thesis. Details of each of the research projects undertaken are provided in the relevant Sections below but the common context can be summarised as follows.

The designation ‘executive coaching’ is used throughout this thesis. It represents a distinct portion of the coaching industry and is still described well by Kilburg’s definition (1996, p.142):

> “… a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and, consequently, to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement”.

In addition, other important characteristics of the coaching studied are:

- All of the coaches involved were formally trained and accredited;
- All of the clients interviewed were current or recent coaching clients (‘coachees’) of the coaches and held roles at board / executive committee or one level below at their respective organisations;
- All of the coaching discussed was undertaken on a commercial basis with fees paid by the clients’ employers (with the exception of one of my own clients who participated in the SSRP and was part of my firm’s pro bono initiative for major charities – see Section 3 below);

- All of the coaching discussed and studied was dyadic (one-to-one rather than group coaching);
- All of the coaching was subject to strict confidentiality between coachees and coaches;
- The training course studied in the Report on Professional Practice (RPP) was delivered by a provider that specialises in training experienced businesspeople to be senior executive coaches – see Section 5 below.

Alternatively, the coaching studied can be described as being a combination of 'leadership coaching' in which the "client increases leader competencies for present or future roles" (Gavin & Bernardi, 2023, p.55); 'developmental coaching' in which the "the client attains personally desired outcomes or objectives" (p.55); and 'performance coaching' (p.55) in which the "client addresses present or potential performance concerns" (p.55).

See Sections 3, 4 and 5 for more details of the contexts of each of the three primary research projects (SSRP, ARP and RPP).

### 1:3.2 Personal motivation for the research

Undertaking the research required for this thesis has been transformational in my personal and professional development. I feel I have learned a great deal about the executive coaching industry; about myself as a researcher; about myself as a coach; and about myself - as covered in Section 7 below. My original motivation for pursuing the specific topic of my research is outlined here in order to assist the reader in understanding the context of the research.

I became a coach following a twenty seven year executive career in financial services. During my executive career I gained experience of leadership and management within organisations and held a number of senior leadership roles at chief executive, managing director and partner levels. For the past fourteen years I have presented myself within the executive coaching market as a 'business coach and executive mentor' and have sought to gain competitive advantage and distinctiveness by combining senior level business experience with strong coaching credentials (initial training, continuing professional development and supervision).

I use a coaching framework that seeks to integrate all aspects of me as a person into my coaching – all of my personal, business and coaching experience and my coaching training. My aim is to have the confidence to support clients across the entire spectrum of coaching issues – from the intensely practical to the deeply personal.

Reflecting upon, and determining, how to use my prior business experience in my coaching to the best effect for my clients has been a consistent and recurring theme of my professional development since I became a coach in 2009. The research question of my dissertation for my master's degree in executive coaching in 2011 was *'How does my business experience inform my coaching?'* and exploring that topic further has been an important part of my reading, reflection and professional supervision ever since.

I believe my prior experience is fundamental to who I am as a person, to who I am as a coach and to what I have to bring to my coaching and to my clients. Exploring and understanding how prior experience can affect relationships between coaches and clients is therefore fundamental to my professional development and to my coaching practice.

My background as a practicing coach influenced my selection of research methodologies for the projects requiring primary research (see Chapter 1:5 below). Since I am an active interpreter (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) throughout the research outlined below, "I" and "my" are used throughout this thesis in the spirit of maintaining an active voice throughout.

## Chapter 1:4 Research questions

As stated above, the overall question this thesis seeks to address is *How can executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients?* This is explored from a series of different angles in a portfolio of four distinct but closely related research projects. The subsidiary questions addressed are outlined in each Section below, but overall research questions posed for each of the projects are as follows:

**Critical Review of Literature** (Section 2) reviews the extant academic, empirical and practitioner literature and explores the question *How does executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients?*

**Small Scale Research Project** (Section 3) examines my own experience as a practicing coach and that of a selection of my clients and explores the question *How does my prior career experience affect my relationships with clients?*

**Applied Research Project** (Section 4) examines the experiences of other coaches and clients and again explores *How does executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients?*

**Report of Professional Practice** (Section 5) explores a question stemming from the Applied Research Project: *How does a leading provider of coaching training prepare coaches to use their prior career experience in their work with clients?*

## Chapter 1:5 Overview of research methods applied

Whilst suggesting that it would be valuable to develop improved understanding of the role played in coaching by coaches' backgrounds, Athanasopoulou & Dopson also note (2015, p.31) that "this cannot easily be assessed". The generally private and dyadic nature of coaching make observation difficult. Methodological approaches that captured the lived experiences of the members of coaching dyads were therefore designed and implemented to reflect the nature of the relationships studied.

The philosophical perspectives applied to all of the research projects can be described as 'critical realist' as they acknowledge that "there is a reality but that it is usually difficult to apprehend" (Easton, 2009, p.119-120) and that "different valid perspectives on reality" (Maxwell, 2012), p.9) can exist; as 'pragmatic-critical realist' because they reflect a view that "a means of evaluating the veracity of cognitive systems and theories…is through the practical success or failure" (Johnson & Duberley, 2000, p.162); and as 'phenomenological', 'interpretative', and 'idiographic' (Smith et al., 2009).

A qualitative research approach which explores "subjectivity and experience" and seeks to "understand better what their (my) research participants' experiences are like, what they mean to them, how they talk about them, and how they make sense of them" (Willig, 2012,p.5) was used. More specifically, a phenomenological approach that viewed "an experience as the main object of investigation and not the story of an experience" (Gill, 2014, p.120) was applied.

The research methods used can be summarised as follows:

- **Critical Review of Literature** (Section 2): a series of electronic searches of PsychINFO, Google Scholar and CCCU's Eresources were carried out followed by a 'snowballing' process to widen the search;
- **Small Scale Research Project** (Section 3): two methods were applied – a model based on two recognised frameworks was used for a self-reflection exercise and an approach informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) to analyse a series of client interviews (see below);
- **Applied Research Project** (Section 4): a methodology informed by IPA and refined by learning from the process used in the Small Scale Research Project mentioned above was used to analyse interviews with four coaches and four coachees (see below);
- **Report of Professional Practice** (Section 5): a case study protocol (Zucker, 2009) using thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied.

See the relevant Sections below for details of the research methods used in each of the constituent projects.

Smith et al's (2022; Burt et al., 2024) invitation to innovate how IPA is applied while continuing to use its "set of explicit core principles" (p.119) was accepted. The "core elements of IPA – concern with lived experience, hermeneutic inquiry, idiographic focus" (p.196) are used to examine a narrow but professionally significant phenomenon. The objective of the research was to elicit significant understanding of the participants' subjective perceptions of their lived experience of the topic researched.

## 1:6 Summary of contributions to:

### 1:6.1 Knowledge and scholarship in executive coaching

I assert that the findings of the research projects undertaken for this thesis contribute to the knowledge and scholarship in executive coaching in two different ways. First, by corroborating, elucidating, exemplifying, illuminating, illustrating, or substantiating multiple questions and observations referred to in the extant literature. Second, by providing new insights into particular aspects of coaching that coaches with significant prior career experience can bring to their relationships with clients. These are set out below in Chapter 6:3.1.

### 1:6.2 Knowledge and scholarship in research methodology

I assert there are three aspects of my experience of using methodologies informed and influenced by IPA in the research projects undertaken for this thesis that contribute to knowledge and scholarship in research methodology. These are set out below in Chapter 6:3.2.

### 1:6.3 Professional practice of executive coaching and coaching training

I assert that the findings of this research give voice to a heterogeneous grouping within the coaching industry that is poorly observed, relatively inarticulate and under-understood and set out three particular characteristics in Chapter 6:3.3 below.

### 1:6.4 Professional practice of coaching training

I make three recommendations to the coaching training sector that might increase the attention paid in training to how coaches might use their prior career experience in their work. These are set out in Chapter 6:3.4 below.

## Chapter 1:7 Structure of this thesis

This thesis follows the structure prescribed by CCCU for its PhD in Professional Practice and its concomitant word count guidelines:

- **Section 1: Introduction** - provides an introduction to the topic studied; states the purpose and relevance of the research undertaken; provides an overview of the research methodologies applied; and summarises the contributions to the theory and practice of executive coaching;
- **Section 2: Critical Review of Literature** – reviews the extant academic, empirical and practitioner literature relevant to the topic in the form of answers to specific questions;
- **Section 3: Small Scale Research Project** – explores my own experience of the topic through a self-reflection exercise and analysis informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of interviews with three of my own coaching clients;
- **Section 4: Applied Research Project** – explores the experiences of the topic of four other executive coaches' and a client of each of the coaches using an approach to analysis also informed by IPA of four other executive coaches' and a client of each of the coaches;

- **Section 5: Report of Professional Practice** – explores how a leading coaching training company prepares senior businesspeople to use their prior experience in executive coaching in a case study using thematic analysis (TA);
- **Section 6**: **Summary and findings** – summarises the critical review of literature; presents consolidated findings of the three primary research projects; and sets out the contributions to the theory and practice of executive coaching;
- **Section 7**: **Reflective account** – explores how undertaking the doctoral research set out in this thesis has influenced my understanding of the coaching industry; of myself as a researcher; of myself as a coach; and of myself.

# Section 2

# Critical Review of Literature

# Section 2 Critical review of literature

This section of my thesis summarises the findings of a critical review of the extant academic, empirical and practitioner literature on executive coaching undertaken between June 2017 and August 2019. My decision to undertake the review before conducting the three primary research projects was taken after consideration of the advantages and the risks associated with this chronology. I concluded that the advantages of being able to use the review's findings to inform my conduct of the subsequent projects and the questions explored within them to outweigh the risks of contamination from having a priori knowledge of the topic. Purposeful effort was made to "bracket" (Smith et al., 2009, p.25) the knowledge gained from the review in the analysis phases of the research projects.

Further reviews of more recently published literature and of literature related to the specific topics and methodologies of each of the subsequent projects were undertaken later. The findings and references to these are included in the respective sections below.

## Chapter 2:1 Introduction

The intent of my doctoral studies is to inquire into how the prior career experiences of business coaches can affect their relationships with clients. In support of that, the objective of this critical review of literature is to evaluate what can be learned from the existing body of work about how coaches' backgrounds have affected their coaching in the period since coaching's origins to the present day.

Conducting this review of the extant literature has confirmed that, while the corpus of literature on coaching is of a considerable size, the majority of it is practitioner based (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019). The practitioner literature is relevant to this PhD in professional practice and to the research question since it is part of the corpus of literature around coaching as a socially constructed phenomenon and has considerable influence on the practice of coaching.

Despite the growth of academic research into coaching in recent years, and the resultant increase of peer reviewed journal articles, there is a notable lack of coverage in research journals of how coaches' backgrounds can affect their coaching and their relationships with clients (Pandolfi, 2020). This thesis, and the research undertaken for it, seek to narrow this gap in the extant literature. The recent publication of an article in a peer reviewed academic journal (Hindle Fisher et al., 2023) outlining the research conducted for this thesis is one step towards the narrowing of the gap in the literature.

Consideration was given to reviewing proxy literature, ie academic coverage of similar or adjacent practices such as management consulting, public relations or therapy. Many of the practice areas were rejected due to differences in the contexts and purposes of similar practices (Stokes et al., 2020) and specifically due to the lack of any debate in other practices of the validity of practitioners having prior experience in the field under discussion. However, a similar debate about the role of prior experience does exist in the practice of sports coaching and this is discussed below.

Despite the paucity of coverage referred to above, this review suggests that prior business and managerial experience can contribute to the effectiveness of executive coaching, particularly in supporting coaches' credibility with executive clients and in their questioning of them. It highlights a number of implications that are relevant to further inquiry into how the prior career experiences of business coaches affect their relationships with clients.

As discussed in Chapter 1:3.1 above, the executive coaching industry is highly heterogeneous and "devoid of any fixed deontology" (Brunner, 1998, p.516). Defining key terms used throughout this review is therefore important:

– **"Business coach"** – an executive coach who has direct experience of managerial and leadership roles that are similar, but not necessarily identical, to those of his or her clients – (s)he has their own experience of working in similar corporate contexts (my own definition).

- **“Executive coaching”** - “…a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and, consequently, to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organization within a formally defined coaching agreement” (Kilburg, 1996,p. 142).

- **“Coaches’ backgrounds”** – executive coaches’ ‘non-coaching’ prior experience, knowledge and skill bases (my own definition).

This summary highlights a series of questions that are relevant to the topic. It seeks to evaluate, generally chronologically, how the ways the role of coaches’ backgrounds was positioned in the discourse on coaching changed as the coaching industry evolved.

The review notes that coaches’ backgrounds originally played a crucial role in coaching, but that this changed in the 1960s and 70s for a combination of reasons, leaving an industry in which “definitions of the coaching process vary considerably in their degree of clarity and succinctness, and also to the extent to which they emphasise teaching or direct instruction as opposed to facilitation or self-directed learning” (Stober & Grant, 2006,p.6) and “a more useful measure of validity may be one that is associated with the coach rather than with the coaching process in general” (Meuse et al., 2009, p.130).

## Chapter 2:2 Research methods

This “critical review” (Grant & Booth, 2009,p.93-97) of the literature sets out to “evaluate what is of value from the previous body of work” and to present a conceptual framework for further research. It aims to be comprehensive, to “identify the most significant items in the field” and to be systematic but not to be “exhaustive”.

A critical realist philosophical perspective with an objectivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, as noted by Johnson and Duberley (2000) was applied throughout the review. Thus, the views that some social phenomena exist independently of social construction and that multiple interpretations of a single reality reflecting individuals’ own beliefs constitute our knowledge of subjects underpin the commentary. By being both anti-positivist and anti-post-positivist, it seeks to provide “thick” (Geertz, 1973) explanation without claiming widely generalisable predictive powers.

Two methods of searching for literature relevant to the question were used for the version of this review submitted to CCCU in November 2022 and for the further searches between June 2023 and March 2024:

- A series of electronic searches were carried out on PsychINFO, Google Scholar and CCCU’s Eresources;
- A ‘snowballing’ process was applied in which all reference lists of the papers reviewed were analysed and the researcher’s judgment was used to decide which works to pursue further.

In the electronic databases, I conducted an initial search for the term ‘Executive coaching’ (in English), producing an inevitably high and unmanageable number of results. I subsequently undertook a further search for studies with ‘Executive coaching’ in their titles and the journal and book titles highlighted were screened to assess relevance. Further search terms included: ‘Coaches’ background’; ‘Business knowledge’; ‘Credibility’; ‘Coach credibility’; and ‘Coaches’ credibility’. Each of these was then combined with the wider search for ‘Executive coaching’ (in English) and the titles and / or abstracts of the highlighted work from each combination were screened in order to achieve thorough coverage. See Appendices A  and B for details of the searches.

Since executive coaching has only featured in peer reviewed academic journals in relatively recent years, searches were not limited to this category in order to gain a comprehensive account of its development. Similarly, no date restrictions were placed on the searches or selection of works for consideration. Studies were excluded if they focussed on life, educational, team or group coaching or on management and skills coaching after 2000. Sports coaching was searched separately in January - March 2024 (see below).

There were four distinct phases of searches of the extant literature on coaching for this thesis (with sources on methodologies excluded):

**June 2017 – August 2019:** my original search for sources highlighted 21 practitioner books; 12 academic books; 161 peer reviewed academic journal articles; 22 practitioner articles; 4 doctoral theses; and 5 magazine articles that met the inclusion criteria (see Appendices A and B). One further source was accessed in this phase – a personal communication with a leading academic in the field and author of multiple peer reviewed academic journal articles (Prof. Jonathan Passmore, September 2018).

**September 2019 – September 2022:** further searches and snowballing produced 27 new sources – 3 academic books; 20  peer reviewed academic journal articles and 4 professional services surveys.

**August 2023 – December 2023:** further searches and snowballing were conducted to deepen and update the research. 29 further peer reviewed academic journal articles and 5 academic book chapters were studied.

**January 2024 - March 2024:** separate searches of the literature on sports coaching were undertaken to address viva corrections. 43 peer reviewed academic journal articles were studied (and 14 cited).

In total, 144 sources are cited in this review:

105 peer reviewed academic journal articles;

11 academic books;

16 practitioner journal or magazine articles;

13 practitioner books;

2 professional services surveys or information sheets;

1 doctoral thesis.

The figures above refer to literature sources studied and cited that were relevant to the research question. In addition, 79 sources used to construct and undertake the research methodologies used are also cited.

## Chapter 2:3 How significant were coaches' backgrounds in the early manifestations of coaching?

Although the term 'coaching' does not appear in lexicons until the nineteenth century, its origins are earlier. Stern (2004), citing Hendrickson (1987), suggests the term dates to the sixteenth century and comes from a village in Hungary called Kocs where a "covered wheeled wagon or carriage ('koczi') first developed there to carry its passengers through the harsh terrain" (p.154). Stern asserts, perhaps speculatively, that "executive coaching is just one more evolution of the term where a coach helps to carry an executive from one point to another" (p.154). A report by the American Management Association (Tompson et al., 2008) claims, though with scant justification, that the activity is far older with reference to coaching being undertaken at the first Olympic games in Ancient Greece.

Although the connection between mentoring, a longer established activity, and coaching maybe more associative than substantive, "the boundary between the two is more blurred than is sometimes suggested" (Passmore, 2007, p.10). The original Mentor, the goddess Athene in disguise, took it upon herself to offer assistance and to be akin to *in locus parentis* to Telemachus while his father, King Odysseus, was abroad fighting the Trojan Wars (Gray et al., 2016). By setting Telemachus a variety of challenges, Athene provided him with leadership development opportunities in order to prepare him to assume his father's position if he did not return. There are differing interpretations of Athena's approach to this task – some (Whitmore, 2012) contend that she adopted a directive style of transferring her knowledge and insight to Telemachus; others (Garvey et al., 2014) argue that her approach was "more based more on experiential learning combined with support and challenge" (p. 14). Either way, it is clear that in its early manifestation, prior experience of the world was an indispensable credential for mentors.

Garvey et al (2014) trace the history of mentoring through Fenelon, Rousseau and Caraccioli in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and note that the first use of the term 'mentor' in English was in 1750, quoting a letter of Lord Chesterfield to his son telling him to “make a greedy use of him (*his mentor);* exhaust him, if you can, of all his knowledge…” (p. 15). Garvey et al (2014) go on to “suggest that the modern current discourses in both coaching and mentoring draw on these early descriptions of mentoring” and provide detailed analysis of the similarities of the two (p.16-17). While there is debate about the sometimes differing styles of interaction used in mentoring and coaching, it is clear that mentors have experience that is relevant to their mentees and that they are prepared to share (using a wide range of differing styles of interaction).

There are differing estimates of the date of the first reference to the term ‘coaching’ in English (for example, Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2015) suggest it was in 1830; Garvey (Garvey, 2011) suggests 1849, by Thackeray in his novel *Pendennis*. But there is agreement over the nature and location of the activity – support in preparation for university examinations from an academic tutor in Oxford. Later in the nineteenth century there was further reference to coaching, but mainly in sporting contexts. Garvey et al (2014) quote the Manchester Guardian in 1885 referring to a “clever coach” of a rowing crew who was “able to advise them from first to last” (p. 21). Once again, it is clear that prior knowledge of the subject matter being addressed by coachees was required by coaches in its earlier stages of development.

The first, albeit passing, reference to coaching in a business context was by Gorby (1937). In an article espousing the virtues of profit sharing in staff motivation, Gorby concludes that “Whereas supervision found it advisable in the early years to coach employees in the importance of spoiled work and cost reduction, it is now found that the older men voluntarily assume this task in training younger employees” (p. 83). I conclude from this that ‘to coach’ referred in this period to a hierarchical and supervisory task, relied upon prior experience and knowledge of the tasks in question, was likely to be both instructive and directive and entailed some transfer of knowledge derived from prior experience.

Coaching first appeared in management literature as a distinct topic during the 1950s and, as Evered and Selman (1989, p.20) note, “it was then one of the techniques used to support the development of less experienced colleagues through a sort of master-apprentice relationship”. This was managerial, or internal, coaching, rather than executive coaching, and was, as Evered and Selman (p.20) also point out, “within the control-order-prescription paradigm”. Brock (2008, p.74) confirms that “Early management coaching literature identifies coaching as a form of supervision, a best method of training by immediate superior, an actionable and sequential thinking framework, and a directed discussion and guided activity to learn to solve a problem or perform a task better”.

Gray et al (2016, p. 15) cite Megginson and Boydell’s (1979, p.5) definition of coaching up until the date of their writing as “a process in which a manager, through direct discussion and guided activity, helps a colleague to solve a problem, or to do a task better than would otherwise have been the case”. This position is confirmed by Eggers and Clark’s (2000, p.67) observation that until the mid-1970s, “coaching was seen as an employee job-development tool that managers used to foster greater productivity”.

From my review of the literature referred to above I conclude that until sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s “the coach is the more skilled, more experienced or more knowledgeable person” (Garvey et al, 2014, p.27) in a dyadic relationship and that relevant backgrounds were prerequisites of the role. While there are few or no specific references to the backgrounds required by coaches in this period, it is implied throughout, and confirmed by the quote immediately above, that the credentials required to fulfil the role would have included direct experience and / or knowledge of the responsibilities, work and tasks being undertaken by colleagues being coached.

Although the objectives of coaching in this period may have included the empowering and fostering of independence of coachees, as well as performance and productivity improvement, and the styles of intervention may have varied considerably, it is clear that the transfer of specific experience, knowledge and skills from coaches to coachees was an integral aspect of the activity.

Jumping ahead chronologically to the early 2000s, the discourse had changed with coaching being positioned more as a developmental intervention than purely a performance enhancing activity. Ives (2008, p.103) observes that in the last decades of the twentieth century coaching came to be regarded not as "…directive, conceived as guidance, teaching and instruction" but instead "as a form of facilitation or people-management style, and strictly non-directive".

This metamorphosis in how coaching is regarded in the dominant discourse is explored in the rest of this literature review. It is argued that the dominance of the discourse by proponents of a 'non-directive' approach to coaching (Whitmore, 2012) has resulted in the work of coaches with relevant prior experience being under-understood and that this has led to the gap in the literature referred to above.

Research on the efficacy of coaching is abundant (de Haan, 2019, de Haan et al., 2020) and is not the purpose of this study. This study focussed exclusively on the role of coaches' prior experience in coaching.

## Chapter 2:4 What factors contributed to the change in how the role of coaches is defined?

### 2:4.1 What changes in society influenced how the coach's role is defined now?

Coaching can be regarded as a social process in which it is both a product of and a contributor to the reshaping of society "where it is viewed as both a product of, and a contributor to, the reshaping of its social context" (Shoukry & Cox, 2018. P.2) and it is thus important to understand the social context in which it has developed.

My review of the literature indicates that the motivational movement that developed in the US in the late 1930s as a reaction to the earlier economic depression was an influence on coaching. People were seeking "guidance, encouragement and insights into their individual potential" (Wildflower, 2013, p.4) and the notion that they should use 'self-help' rather than rely on society to help them came to be regarded as an exemplar of the 'American dream'.

Books such as Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* and Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People,* published in 1937 and 1936 respectively, were best sellers and espoused developing self-knowledge and setting of personal goals as roots to increased success and happiness. Derloshon and Potter (1982) report that Earl Nightingale's radio recordings in the US in the mid-1950s won large listenership with lessons on self-knowledge, self-management and personal goal setting.

Contemporaneously in the 1950s, the humanist movement within psychology, led by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, was beginning to influence popular thinking. In the 1960s, as Wildflower (2013) notes, in an era of great social change (eg. the black civil rights movement, the anti-war campaigns and the development of the New Left), the humanists' beliefs that "certain human needs, such as the search for meaning, authenticity and transcendence, are part of the human condition" (Skiffington & Zeus, 2003, p.35) echoed ideas of personal growth, development and achievement.

The Esalen Institute was founded in 1962 by Michael Murphy and Richard Price. It was created to be a centre for the Human Potential Movement and many of the foremost thinkers of the humanistic and positive psychology schools (including Abraham Maslow, Kurt Lewin, Carl Rogers, Will Schutz and Fritz Perls) worked and / or lived there for periods. Esalen developed the principles and methods of the human development movement and Brock (2008) notes that key concepts of "…the Human Potential Movement have been adapted to coaching".

The contributions of the motivational and human potential movements and of Esalen to the current discourse around coaching are significant. Coaching's focus on "Concepts of self-knowledge and self-awareness…learning by doing, self-assuredness and self-acceptance through understanding, and self-management also came directly from the motivation movement" (Brock, 2008, p.181), as did the objective of helping healthy people "enjoy richer, fuller, more self-realised lives" (Wildflower, 2013, p.20).

The ideas of both influenced John Whitmore, who attended Esalen, and went on to introduce coaching to the UK (Wildflower, 2013), and Thomas Leonard, a financial advisor in Seattle who switched from advising clients on their finances to offering life coaching and ultimately started Coach University in 1992 and later the International Coach Federation (ICF) (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2015).

The influences referred to above and society's greater focus in this period on self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-help had a significant effect on the coach-coachee relationship (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). By privileging the coachee's self-determination, the coach's role moved towards facilitation of self-directed learning and away from sharing of experience. In an environment in which 'the client knows best', the value of the coach's experience, knowledge and skill base is much less obvious – and it was argued by some that they could be detrimental to the coaching process (Berglas, 2002; Bono et al., 2009).

### 2:4.2 How has John Whitmore's work influenced how the coach's role is defined now?

John Whitmore attended the Esalen Institute in the early 1970s after careers in the British army and motor racing. His interest in the motivation and human development movements led him to work with Timothy Gallwey, a former tennis coach turned educationalist, who used his tennis experience to develop a methodology for performance coaching through a series of books entitled *The Inner Game.*

"The term 'inner' referred to the player's internal state and what Gallwey suggested was that 'if a coach can help a player to remove or reduce the internal obstacles to their performance, an unexpected natural ability will flow forth without the need for much technical input from the coach" (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2015, p.64 citing Whitmore, 2012, p.8).

In the original text, *The Inner Game of Tennis* (1974), Gallwey highlights some principles that have made important contributions to the popular discourse on coaching and to its practice as well. He highlights "letting go of judgement" (Gallwey, 1997), "trust thyself" (p.51) and a non-directive approach - "I was certain that if I had told him the same thing after his first swing, he would have replied, 'Yes, I know'" (p.38).

Whitmore introduced Gallwey's concepts to the UK and its corporate world. In 1992 he published *Coaching for Performance,* which Gray et al (2016, p.16) suggest "was the vanguard of much of what we understand coaching to be today".

In Coaching for Performance (2012), Whitmore is clear about his favoured role for the coach citing Gallwey' claim that if a coach can help to remove or reduce the internal obstacles to someone's performance, then "…an unexpected natural ability to learn and to perform will occur without the need for much technical input from the coach" (p.10).

He went on to be more explicit when he challenged David Clutterbuck's assertion that coaching (and mentoring) benefit from the coach having more experience than the coachee

(Clutterbuck, 2014). He asserted that “Coaching requires expertise in coaching but not in the subject at hand. That is one of its great strengths” (p.14).

Whitmore developed a business around *The Inner Game* concept and, believing that the UK was not ready for self-help styled life coaching, decided to apply it to the business world, initially through a management development programme with IBM (Wildflower, 2013).

I believe the influence of Gallwey’s and Whitmore’s views on current executive coaching practice cannot be over-estimated. The GROW model (Goal setting, Reality checking, Options, What, Whom, Will) (Whitmore, 2012, p.55) is one of the most widely taught concepts in professional coaching and is used as a platform for non-directive interventions. It reflects the self-determining influences referred to above and, I believe, has had a major influence on the discourse that moved the coach from ‘experience sharer’ to facilitator.

Whitmore’s advocacy of a style of coaching in organisations that did not rely on the coach having relevant prior business experience is not surprising – he had none himself and the commercial success of his venture relied on him demonstrating that coaches having prior knowledge or experience in the subject at hand was unnecessary, perhaps even detrimental, in effective coaching.

Nevertheless, Whitmore (2012, p.42) qualifies his advocacy of ‘subject-matter free’ backgrounds for coaches with an important observation: “The ideal would seem to be an expert coach with a wealth of technical knowledge too. It is, however, very hard for experts to withhold their expertise sufficiently to coach well”.

### 2:4.3 What changes in the workplace influenced how the coach's role is defined now?

This research is into *executive* coaching and understanding the organisational context in which it is undertaken is critical. The norms and mores of the corporate workplace always reflect broader social attitudes and these changed significantly in the 1970s. Sherman & Freas (2004, p.2) observe that organisation life was 'rehumanised' when "…successive waves of change – including globalization of competition, a growing demand for services, and the acceleration and restructuring of business processes through information technology" forced organisations to restructure and reorganise their structures. This led to the demise of job security and the concept of a 'job for life' which, in turn, reduced employee loyalty and encouraged executives to plan and manage their careers more carefully. Coaching came to used as a means of facilitating greater self-responsibility and self-determination of career development.

Gray et al. (2016, p.24) build on this and argue that increased corporate competition in the 1980s and 90s forced organisations to reassess how they operated and resulted in demands for individual employees to be more flexible, innovative and adaptive to change in their working environments and that this "generated a social sense of urgency and competitiveness, a desire to do things differently…The need increased for people able to adapt to change rapidly, be innovative and creative, be flexible and adaptive, to learn quickly and apply their knowledge to a range of situations".

Before the advent of one-to-one executive coaching in the late 1970s and early 1980s, corporate executives who were lacking 'people skills' were given behavioural counselling or sent on management courses at institutions including the National Training Laboratory. Later multinational companies like General Electric and General Motors developed programmes focusing on personal effectiveness and later still 360 degree feedback processes were introduced. But, as Hall, Otazo and Hollenback (1999, p.39) point out, "…there was one big hole in these approaches were lacking a crucial ingredient: "follow-up guidance".

The idea that leaders were ‘in charge, but not in control’ became part of the managerial discourse and reflected the view that attempts to control processes in organisations are often ineffective and that trusted delegation is more likely to allow managers to bring about change. This way of thinking about organisations as patterns of interaction between human beings reflects Stacey’s work on ‘complex responsive processes’ (Stacey, 2003). He rejects what he refers to as the ‘dominant discourse’s’ “abstract notion of what an organisation is, namely, a system in which the ordinary, lived realities of human beings who are actually ‘the organisation’ disappears from view” (Stacey, 2012) and argues that organisations are understood better by consideration of “the details of the micro interactions taking place in the present between living humans in organisations” (2012, p.3).

I concur with Stacey’s view of organisations and with the notion that traditional management tools and techniques that he describes as those of “instrumental rationality” (2012, p.42) can only be expected to yield “competent performance” rather than “expert performance” (2012, p.107) - average, rather than outstanding, results. Using rational tools and techniques results in unexceptional performance because their rules, models and procedures cannot “address uncertainty, unpredictability, ambiguity and complexity” (2012, p.108).

The need to address increased **v**olatility, **u**ncertainty, **c**omplexity and **a**mbiguity in business led to the acronym VUCA becoming a managerial term. Many of the responses to this highlighted the development of interpersonal skills to enable managers think strategically, collaborate and lead change (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Petrie, 2014.)

Western (2012) highlights how coaching was used in response to this: “Coaching arrived in late modernity as the new Psy expert for the workplace” (p.98). He goes on to suggests that changes in the workplace led to greater focus on ‘how’ activities were undertaken and less on ‘what’ was done. This allowed what he terms the “Psy Expert coach” (p.165) to “gain legitimacy from being the ‘technicians of the psyche’. They are trained in a wide variety of techniques, applying psychology and psychotherapy to different levels of competence and training.” (p.165).

The findings of the literature discussed above indicate that the changes in the workplace brought about by greater competition, increased uncertainty and the “rehumanization” (Sherman and Freas, 2004, p.2) of organisations contributed to the change in the nature of coaching noted by Ives (2008) above.

The change in the role of the coach from a source of counsel based on prior experience to a facilitator of self learning also provided a business opportunity for Western’s (2012) ‘Psy Expert coaches’. This type of coach typically has little or no prior business experience to bring to their relationships with clients and it was thus in their commercial as well as professional interests to proselytise the legitimacy of coaching founded on psychological techniques (Bono et al., 2009). I suggest that their presence in the market and articulate contribution to the prevailing industry discourse increased the influence of ‘expert coaches’ with no business or managerial experience.

### 2:4.4 How has the psychology profession influenced how the coach's role is defined now?

The influence of psychology and the providers of psychologically based services is noted above. That there was 'supply' of psychological based services looking for business is not in doubt. Just as the corporate sector was experiencing increased volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, psychologists were suffering reductions in demand for their services due to the introduction of the 'managed' healthcare system in the US. Filipczak (1998, p.31) confirms this when he noted that "Skeptics also suspect that the booming trade in personal coaches is driven at least in part by a glut on the supply side" caused by cost-cutting by the providers of health insurance cover in the US.

The moniker 'coach' was also observed to be more acceptable in corporate environments than 'psychologist', 'therapist', or 'counsellor' (Arnaud, 2003). In a psychology journal Tobias (1996, p.87) notes: "I suspect the popularity of the term stems from the fact that coaching is perceived to be less threatening, perhaps because it may appear to be akin to physical fitness coaching"; and in a business magazine Morris (2000, p.144) noted that the influential business commentator "Warren Bennis believes that 'a lot of executive coaching is really an acceptable form of psychotherapy. It's tough to say. 'I'm going to see my therapist'. It's okay to say, 'I'm getting counselling from my coach'".

With the existing market for their services contracting, psychologists turned to the burgeoning coaching market for business. One view was that coaching was an additional service that psychologists could offer. Maddi (1997, p.215) comments: "Banking on their psychotherapeutic skills, clinical psychologists can be especially good at executive coaching or development"; Arnaud (2003, p.1134) prompts psychologists to position themselves as coaches and look to the corporate sector for executives who would have the budgets to be clients but would be wary of 'counselling' "appeal to a professional population composed of company heads or top executives – solvent clients, in sum – who, while they are certainly reticent to come to the couch, are nevertheless 'potentially interested"; and Peltier (2010) supports this when he comments in his handbook that: "The skills that psychotherapists possess are of enormous potential to business execs and corporate leaders. They ought not go to waste" (p.xxxi).

Other commentators took more assertive positions. Brotman, Liberi and Wasylyshyn (1998, p.40), for instance, comment: "We believe that psychologists are uniquely qualified to define what is required to be an executive coach when significant behavioural change is called for sustained behavioural change is the desired outcome".

McKenna and Davis (2009, p.245) add "…non-psychologists…will be hard pressed to internalise and incorporate the concepts, the research base, and the perspectives that come from our education and experience as psychologists".

Berglas (2002, p.3) goes further: "I believe that in an alarming number of situations, executive coaches who lack rigorous psychological training do more harm than good"

Berglas's unsubstantiated damning of non-psychologists makes no reference to the topics upon which they could claim relevance or their abilities to refer clients to other professions when appropriate. Berglas's advocacy of psychologists as coaches is an example of how the discourse around the backgrounds of coaches has been influenced by the profession.

However, those promoting psychological training as a prerequisite in executive coaching did not get it all their own way in the literature. Passmore, for instance, observes (2009, p.273) that "…the difference (*between psychology trained and non-psychology trained coaches)* may be more to do with our ability to be able to provide a theoretical underpinning to our work and explain what we do and the research evidence that supports our actions."

Berman and Bradt (2006, p.244) highlight a crucial dimension that is explored further below. They acknowledge that some commentators "have argued that only psychologists should set standards for executive coaching" but qualify that by stating that "We believe that knowledge, understanding and experience in the business world are essential to the delivery of effective coaching and consulting in most coaching assignments" and go on to assert that the rules, mores and cultures of corporate life are difficult to master without prior personal experience of them.

Bluckert offers a stronger view (2004, p.56) when he shared a concern that what he termed the ‘psychologising’ of coaching may be allowing to psychologists to “exert undue influence in the formative stages of the profession”.

The roles that psychologists, psychology backgrounds and understanding of psychology have to play in executive coaching are beyond the scope of this research. That they have influenced the discourse around coaching and the role of the coach is clear. Western (2012) suggests there are currently three dominant discourse of coaching – the “Soul Guide” (p.131), the “Psy Expert” (p.157) and the “Managerial” (p.177), with the “Network Coach” (p.192) emerging as a fourth. He states Soul Guide coaching “focuses on the inner self, free from utilitarian goals and outcomes” (p.133) and that “humanistic psychotherapies and psychoanalytic and existential approaches can fit within” it (p.158). The Psy Expert coach uses “tool- and technique- driven psychological coaching practice which is underpinned by psychology drawing on science and rationalism” (p.159).

It is clear from the above that the influence of coaching delivered by professional psychologists or others using psychologically based approaches to coaching have contributed significantly to the shift in how the role of the coach is regarded. By privileging the role of psychological understanding they have accentuated the move in coaching from providing guidance to being a facilitator of the coachee’s own learning, as observed by Ives (2008) above.

## Chapter 2:5 What can be learned from psychologists and psychotherapists about the role of the 'care giver'?

Since there are overlaps between the roles played by coaches and by psychologists and psychotherapists in their relationships with clients, I explore below what can be learnt from the literature that is relevant to this research.

Much has been written on this topic and the scope of this review allows only a short summary. Wampold et al (1997) undertook one of the first meta-analyses of the effectiveness of different styles of psychotherapy and conclude (p.210): "The results of our analysis demonstrated that the distribution of effect sizes produced by comparing two bona fide psychotherapeutic treatments was consistent with the hypothesis that the true difference is zero".

Kilburg (2004, p.203) sets out to test a similar position in coaching and "compares the emergence of the empirical literature on coaching to the historical pathway created by psychotherapy" and cites Rosenzweig's (1936) hypothesis "that the major positive impacts of various psychotherapies were due to various nonspecific common factors are the critical aspects of psychotherapy " (p.203) as the starting point for his analysis. His review of the literature led him to conclude: "In the end, we seem to find ourselves where Rosenzweig (1936) suggested we were heading. It would appear to be reasonable to conclude that the nonspecific aspects of helping create most of the positive leverage for change in human lives" (p.207) – that it was not the specific approach, tools or techniques used by a therapist that created effects, but nonspecific aspects of the intervention.

It has emerged that common factors such as empathy, warmth, and the therapeutic relationship have more influence on client outcomes than specialised treatment intervention. Lambert and Barley (2001) assert that "…decades of research undertaken indicates the that the provision of therapy is an interpersonal process in which a main curative component of therapy is the nature of the therapeutic relationship" (p.359). More recently, Sonesh et al (2015) comment further: "Relationship forms the medium and context by which specific coaching inputs (eg. feedback, challenging questions) are delivered" (p.75).

Sonesh et al (2015) cite Bluckert (2005) making a more emphatic statement, albeit from a practitioner rather than researcher perspective: "For many coaches the quality of the coaching relationship is not just a critical success factor, but ***the*** critical success factor in successful coaching outcomes" (p.76).

De Haan has researched the contribution of various factors to coaching effectiveness extensively and explored signals from therapeutic environments. Haan et al (2013, p.16) conclude "…that the concrete skills, actions, or personalities of individuals may be less important to outcome than what the individuals create "in between" themselves, that is, the strength of their working alliances".

This conclusion that the 'working alliance' is paramount in dyadic relationships echoes an earlier observation by Bordin (1979, p.252) when he states that "…the working alliance between the person who seeks change and the one who offers to be a change agent is one of the keys, if the **not** the key to the change process".

This necessarily brief overview of the literature on this topic confirms that many researchers believe that the coach-coachee relationship is a critical factor in coaching and that specific approaches, tools and techniques used by coaches maybe of second order importance. Put another way, 'who' the coach is and 'how' they interact with clients maybe more important in coaching than 'what' (s)he does. Since their prior business experience is part of 'who' coaches are, I conclude that it is likely to be critical factor influencing coaching relationships.

## Chapter 2:6 What does the literature tell us specifically about the importance of coaches' backgrounds?

The volume of literature on coaching has increased significantly in recent years. As Passmore & Fillery-Travis (2011) point out, there were few (93) studies published between 1937 and 1999 but there has been a proliferation since then. "The majority of research, however, reviewed coaching as a management skill and employed case study methodology to describe the process and effect on individuals" (p.73). Specifically, "there has been little published systematic empirical research into business coaching" (Blackman et al., 2016). This section therefore considers outcome research studies and then practitioner and case study literature separately. Please note that, in line with this entire critical review, the majority of sources cited are from peer reviewed journals.

### 2.6.1: What do the outcome research studies suggest about the importance of coaches' backgrounds?

Blackman et al (2016) observe that there are "111 published empirical papers investigating business coaching theory, processes, and outcomes" (p.459). The abstracts of these were reviewed and seventeen met the selection criteria referred to above.

Wasylyshyn (2003) was the earliest of the studies to refer to coaches' experience as a factor in coach selection. In a survey of eighty-seven of her own clients, graduate level training in psychology (82%) and experience in business or general management (78%) were rated as the two most important selection criteria. Echoing Whitmore's (2012) comment above regarding the ideal combination of credentials, she comments: "Talented executive coaches must be grounded in both business and psychology" (p.97) and, as a psychologist herself, suggests that "…psychologists who have not held business roles must amplify their business knowledge over time" (p.98).

Only 15% of respondents in Wasylshyn's study cited their coaches' experience in their own industry as being important. Although the study does not explore the role that business backgrounds play in coach-coachee relationships, it does suggest that coaches' non-coaching experience can play a role in selection. That all the respondents had experience of working with only one coach (Wasylyshyn herself) limits the relatively limited importance of experience in their own industry ascribed by the study.

Grant and Zackon (2004) is the earliest large-scale survey of coaches (2,529 members of the International Coach Federation) and seeks to explore “coaches themselves” (p.2). It notes that “Individuals with a wide range of prior professional backgrounds are working as professional coaches” (p.1) and that 99.9% of survey respondents had prior careers (p.6) – 40.8% as consultants, 30.8% as managers, 30.2% as executives, and relatively few as psychologists (4.8%). Once again, it does not explore the influence of prior experience, but does welcome the diversity of coaches’ backgrounds as having “significant contribution to make to the emerging professional discipline of coaching” (p.1).

Blackman (2006) analyses the responses to a six sectioned questionnaire by 113 professionals from a variety of industries who either had been or were being coached. One section asked about “features of the coach” and responses included 8.3% indicating that the coach having “experience within my industry” (p.101) was important – rated fifth out of ten factors, above “experience with coaching”, and top of questions relating to background rather than innate skills (eg. “communicates well, organized, confidentiality, and honesty”). Blackman (2006) is the first outcome study to highlight an important factor seen elsewhere in the practitioner and case study literature – that “credibility” is the second most important overall feature (p.101). Blackman contends that this credibility is related to the features of having experience in coachees’ industry fields but fails to make that link explicitly.

Kombarakaran et al (2008) analyses an empirical study of 114 executives and 42 coaches in a single global company. In a study that is primarily concerned with the effects of coaching on coachees, it suggests the success of coaching is influenced by “the selection of good coaches” (p.89) and speculates that this manifests itself in coaches who can “understand leadership and management issues….and the political and economic realities within the organization and its competitive environment” (p.79). Although the term ‘credibility’ is not used, it states that successful coaches “tend to be comfortable around top management” (p.80), implying, rather than stating, that prior career experience might be important if it increases senior executives’ estimations of coaches’ credibility.

Boyce et al (2010) studies 74 coach-coachee dyads in a military service academy and focusses upon coach credibility as one of the potentially important factors when aligning coaches with clients. Although the wider relevance of this study is limited by the fact that the coachees in it were military cadets and the coaches were unpaid (though trained) volunteers, one of its conclusions supports my emerging contention that “coaches’ ability to understand clients’ business environment and issues was crucial in building a relationship and achieving outcomes” (p.925).

De Haan et al (2011) studied the results of a questionnaire survey of coachees (71 at the outset of six month coaching assignments and 31 of those at the end). One aspect of the study was to ask the coachees to rate the top contributions of their coach to the coaching process and “knowledge and experience” ranked second, after “insight into and awareness of the client’s issues” (p.38). The study fails to examine the nature of the “knowledge and experience”, so it is unclear what importance is played by career experience (versus coaching knowledge and experience).

Bozer et al (2014) analysed the findings of a study of 72 coachees, 68 coaches and 28 supervisors of the coaches at an Israeli coaching firm. It looks at the relationship between coaches’ credibility and their academic, rather than career, backgrounds but nevertheless makes some important points about credibility. It notes that “coach credibility was described as consisting of two dimensions, expertise and trustworthiness” and “When a coach has credibility, coachees have confidence in the coaching”, and concludes that “…a coach’s credibility facilitates improvement in coachee job performance by allowing the coachee to speak candidly, be receptive to counsel / feedback from the coach” (p.891).

The above leads me to believe that any link between coaches' prior career experience and their credibility in their clients' perceptions would be significant.

Dagley (2010) features the output of interviews of twenty experienced purchasers of executive coaching in Australia and explores what factors are associated with "exceptional practitioners" (p.64). It observes that the most effective coaches are able to facilitate deeper conversations more quickly than other coaches and can motivate clients to take self-responsibility for their development. It concludes that three factors facilitate these outcomes: "credibility, empathy and respect" (p.67).

Dagley goes on to note that "Purchasers indicated that credibility is based on both acquired experience and performance in-the-moment" and "[exceptional coaches] relate to the individual they are coaching in terms of knowledge and experience" (p.67). In a ranking of practices and attributes affecting exceptional coaching, "credibility" ranks second out of eight factors in this study behind only "skilful challenging" with a score of 8.7.

Blackman et al (2016), a systematic review of the empirical evidence available in the coaching literature, echoes Dagley (2010): "…effective coach characteristics and skills….can be summarised into four consistent themes – integrity, support for the coachee, communication skills and behaviours, and credibility" (p.471).

On coach credibility specifically, Blackman et al., 2016 comment that credibility is required for effective coaching but that there is a debate around how it can be established. They go on to conclude that "….The evidence available in the 111 studies reviewed here tends towards the conclusion, that skills or expertise in the sector or in executive management are preferable" (p.473).

One of my clearest observations from this review of outcome studies is how little attention has been paid to the characteristics of the whole person of coaches. Nevertheless, I conclude from it that skills or expertise in executive management gained in careers prior to coaching can contribute to coaches' credibility and thus to their effectiveness.

It is important however to acknowledge that credibility can be derived from other sources too. Styhre (2008) provides a good reminder of that with a study of a single coach with no career or practical experience in construction coaching six site managers. The coach echoed Whitmore (2012) when he commented that after the managers' initial scepticism: "I sort of "won the battle" when they realized that my domain of expertise was virtually unknown to them…" (p.282).

### 2:6.2 What do practitioner and case study-based studies suggest about the importance of coaches' backgrounds?

The practitioner and case study-based studies provide a clearer and more emphatic message regarding the importance of coaches' prior backgrounds. Survey data confirms that coaches' business experience and credibility are important factors in sponsors' selection of coaches.

A survey by the American Management Association (Tompson et al., 2008) (not peer reviewed) notes that "business experience" ranks as the top criteria for selection with 68% of respondents using it either "frequently or a great deal" (p.22); another survey, the Ridler Report (Mann, 2013) (also not peer reviewed) notes that 99% of respondents rate "credibility and gravitas" of coaches as important in their selection of coaches (p.4) and goes on to link these qualities to: "broad business understanding and appreciation of the specific business context of the sponsor's organisation (which is underpinned by their business and coaching / consultancy experience)" (p.4); Alvey & Barclay (2007) identify three themes that are "particularly important to the establishment of trusting relationships" – "coach credibility, coach objectivity, and confirming behaviors" (p.22-23) – and note a further theme: "The coach's background was deemed important in the initial trust building with the coach" (p.23) and Mosteo et al. (2021, p.1242) note that coaches having "…good understanding of leadership, different business disciplines, organizational politics or management principles" positively affects the perceived value of coaching relationships by coachees.

Even studies that otherwise promote the superiority of psychology training acknowledge the importance of business experience. Bono et al (2009) note that "psychologists rated knowledge of business practices, including strategy, culture, and leadership, as a more important competency than did non-psychologist coaches" but note that "psychologists' greater emphasis on business competencies may reflect their appreciation for the value of business knowledge, which they may feel they lack" (p.388). Augustijnen et al (2011) concur: "All respondents indicate that the experience of the coach in the business world and coaching is important" and note: "experience in the business world means the coaches are more able to put themselves in the coachees' shoes and facilitate dialogue" (p.159):

Overall, I contend that Augustijnen et al's (2011) conclusion: "The results of this study indicate that both experience in a company and knowledge of psychology can be useful" (p.161) is a suitable summary of the findings of survey data studies.

Rekalde et al (2015) is a sophisticated attempt to determine factors influencing the effectiveness of coaching involving literature review, focus group interviews with twelve "experts" (p.1683) on coaching and questionnaire data from thirty-four respondents (coaches, coachees and buyers of coaching). They conclude that "profound knowledge of human nature produced through experience and/or specific training" and "experiential background additional to that of coaching (managerial, work-related, or life experience)" (p.1685) are the fifth and sixth respectively most important factors influencing coaching with average scores out of 10 of 8.44 and 8.18 (behind innate rather than experiential factors).

Elsewhere, it is widely recognised that coaches' backgrounds are important. In a doctoral thesis Bush (2004, p.100) notes that "A coach's background, combined with personal qualities, engendered trust, credibility and rapport". Some commentators are emphatic in their observations and Axmith (2004, p.5) highlights a view that "…CEOs want to work with a 'peer', someone who brings real-world business credentials to their role and who knows what it is like to reside in the corner office where the buck stops".

Other studies echo this view: "if senior executives are going to view development coaching as being useful, it had better be evident to them that our efforts are intimately tied to the realities of the business" (Saporito, 1996, p.56); and: "the coach needs to understand the demands of the leadership roles - the first-line supervision to middle management to the top executive" (Foxhall, 2002, p.53).

In a popular practitioner text O'Neill (2007, p.245) takes understanding of business for granted in executive coaching when she speaks on behalf of coaches: "You know how business functions operate and interrelate".

Some studies specify the need to be versed in the 'language of business', something that echo by a leading academic commentator: "In my experience, language is also important and coaches with less experience of business and organisational life find it more difficult to understand what is going on in middle and senior managers' lives" (Passmore, J., personal communication, 14th September 2018)

Stern (2004, p.155) confirms this: "The executive coach must be versed in the business and the skills the leader needs in order to succeed". Others suggest 'business empathy' as a substitute: "the ability to comprehend the business issues without personal experience of the subjects" (Marsden et al., 2010, p.18).

Others suggest that personal experience of business is at least preferred, if not essential.Dean & Meyer (2002) comment: "An executive with 'real world' business experience will bring in an experiential awareness of and sensitivity to the demands of the work situation" (p.13) and Joo (2005) observes "It is believed that the most important qualifications for a coach are character and insight, distilled as much from the coach's personal experience as from formal training" (p.476).

Passmore is once again forthright and makes an observation that coaches benefit from detailed, practical experience of working in corporate cultures: "My experience suggests ...they need to have got down and dirty in order to be able to understand clients....wisdom comes from having tried things and failed" (Passmore, J., personal communication, 14th September 2018).

Sabatier (2015, p.34) is equally clear: "…a coach must have a real understanding of what it's like to work in a large corporate environment, although which sector this is in is not so important".

That having the confidence to challenge experienced senior executives is critically important in coaching is noted in the literature. Cox (2003) comments on this: "…it is not enough to remain at a superficial or meta level of challenge, with no accurate or specific knowledge or experience of what those alternatives are or how their challenge will be received" (p.13).

Passmore concurs: "...the ability to challenge requires the coach to have confidence and the client to give their permission, which itself relies on the coach's legitimacy to challenge" (Passmore, J., personal communication, 14th September 2018).

Questioning is recognised as a key aspect of coaching: "Since the 1990s, the role of the coach has been redefined… He or she is not the leader with all the answers, but instead a team member who knows what questions will prompt other team members to discover the answers themselves" (Eggers & Clark, 2000, p.67).

Critchley (2018) confirms this with the observation that clients like "being asked difficult questions" (p.1). This prompts the question 'where do coaches' questions come from?'

Cox (2003) notes that: "…it could be argued that effective coaching relies on wisdom and prior knowledge at least as much as mentoring" (p.9) and "…questioning and confrontation cannot be independent of context since their very application depends upon the amount of background or contextual knowledge the coach or mentor has…" (p.13).

Passmore (2010) supports this position when discussing the validity of therapy research to coaching: "Using counselling research also fails to acknowledge the need for the coach to understand the business environment, and use this understanding to frame and inform their questions" (p.49).

The coach's 'use of self' has become increasingly important in executive coaching over the last decade and "emerged in the context of relational perspectives in the world of psychotherapy" (Cavicchia & Gilbert, 2019). "In simple terms the coach brings to his or her work life experience, personality, professional development, particular training and orientations to coaching" (p.131). This is also recognised by Campone & Awal (2012) when they note that coaches do not come to practice as blank personalities and that there is little research into how their prior life experiences affect their coaching.

Passmore (2010, p.56) confirms the efficacy of interventions based on coaches' prior experience: "The coach using themselves as a tool to help illustrate a key point was referred to by coachees as useful, such as the coach sharing a story from their personal experience of working in an organisation".

Cavanagh (2006, p.342) adds detail: "Our experience, mental models, values and intentions help us as coaches to see the data in a way that raises the possibility of change. The coach's experience, theories, values, and intentions inform the dialogue, rather than predetermine its outcome".

The above suggest that coaches' backgrounds are an indispensable aspect of the 'use of self' in coaching.

A clear theme of this review is that prior experience is critically important at the outset of coaching relationships. McGurk (2008), a handbook for buyers of coaching, notes that having relevant prior experience can be useful in establishing what is referred to as the 'face validity' and credibility of coaches and can play a major role in creating positive working relationships.

Ely et al (2010) concur when they observe that business awareness and knowledge of or experience in the client's industry are important for coaches in order for them to have credibility and expertise.

Jowett et al (2012) expands on this when they posit that coaches' backgrounds, experience, and expertise help coachees decide at an early stage whether they feel it is worth investing and thus committing time to the coaching relationship with that particular coach.

Natale & Diamante (2005) make the impact coaches have at initial meetings into a discrete phase of the coaching relationship. In what they term 'stage two' of the building of coach-

coachee relationships, the coaches' credentials and experience are examined and, they observe, business experience is paramount in corporate settings.

McKenna & Davis (2009) substantiate this effect when they observe that when coaches increase credibility "we are actually activating our client's cognitive expectations that coaching will be effective" (p.253). Scoular (2011) provides a simpler perspective when she suggests that business experience allows coaches to "earn your stripes…It's to get you in the door and to win clients' respect so you are able to coach" (p.30).

By no means all commentators agree, however. Fontaine & Schmidt (2009), for instance, state the views of some psychologists who see the situation differently: "Effective coaches offer executives a sounding board and provide perspective and feedback as opposed to information or advice" (p.277). Nevertheless, this review of the extant literature makes it clear that many commentators believe that coaches' prior career experience can influence their relationships with clients, particularly at the selection and outset stages. Moreover, the contrast between the clarity of the view that prior business and managerial experience is valuable in the practitioner and case study literature versus the outcome study literature confirms that there is a gap in the literature that my research outlined in this thesis seeks to narrow.

## Chapter 2:7 What does the literature suggest about the potential importance of credibility and trust in coaching?

Sue-Chan and Latham (2004), a study of external, peer and self-coaching, raises the potential importance of a coach's credibility in relation to giving feedback: "There is a positive relationship between the credibility of the source of delivery and…feedback acceptance" (p.262).Tormala & Clarkson (2007) define 'source credibility' in feedback exercises as: "…the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the source of a persuasive message. In general, the more expert and trustworthy the source of a message is perceived to be, the greater persuasive impact his or her message will exert" (p.561).

Evidence from other industries supports this contention. Lefkowitz, Blake and Mouton (1955) outline a test undertaken in which the reactions of a crowd of people to different individuals appearing to have varying degrees of credibility were observed. It concludes: "…the higher status of the perceived violator the greater the reduction in conformance to prohibition by pedestrians in the same situation" (p.706).

More recently, Önkal et al (2017) studied the forecasting industry and concluded that when no clear track record of historic accuracy is available or when the recipients of advice are professionals (as is the case in the coaching researched here), the credibility of the advisor has a strong effect on how the feedback is received.

Since changing coachees' attitudes to aspects of their own performance is often important in coaching Pornpitakpan's (2004) conclusion that a high-credibility source is more persuasive than a low-credibility source in changing attitudes and gaining behavioural compliance to suggestions of change is highly relevant.

Ilgen et al (1979) was one of the earliest studies to relate this to situations akin to coaching and concludes that the source of feedback is often the most important influence on the extent to which feedback is accepted and associates this effect with the level of credibility attributed to the source.

Bannister (1986) builds on this by comparing feedback given by high and low credibility sources and concludes: “Subjects receiving feedback from the credible source: (a) judged the feedback as more accurate and the source as more perceptive; (b) expressed greater satisfaction with the feedback; and (c) found the suggestions to improve performance as more helpful with greater intent to use them” (p.205).

A further potentially important point is made by an earlier study (Halperin et al., 1976, p.85): “Thus it seems plausible that status of the source (ie, the diagnostician) may influence acceptance of discrepant or less favourable personality interpretations but have no effect on acceptance of minimally discrepant or favourable personality interpretations” (p.85)

In the context of coaching, this is potentially important as it indicates that the credibility of the coach giving unwelcome or difficult feedback maybe a key determinant of its effectiveness.

The interconnection between coaches’ prior experience, credibility and trust emerged as an important theme as the research projects progressed, so further analysis of the peer reviewed academic literature was undertaken between June 2020 and January 2024. All of the sources reviewed confirmed the not surprising view that trust between coach and client is fundamental to the success of coaching.

De Haan & Gannon (2017, p.198) confirm the observation above when noting that “There is widespread support and evidence for the argument that trust forms a critical element in the quality of the coaching relationship”; Gan & Chong (2015)**,** in a study of coaching in Malaysia, found that what they referred to as ‘rapport’ is a significant predictor of the effectiveness of coaching as perceived by coachees; and Offstein et al. (2020) note that “Executive coaching is assumed to be a relationship anchored on trust, which takes time to develop, an activity that is highly intimate and relational”.

Pandolfi (2020, p.14) suggests trust in the context of coaching can be conceptualised as "accepting vulnerability to others' actions based on psychological safety, assuming positive intentions and confidentiality". The connection with clients' vulnerability is underlined by Garssman et al. (2020, p.39) when they observe that "…clients disclose their uncertainty, helplessness, or their current inability to cope with work-related challenges. They may be more open to the idea of change" when they are in working alliances based on trust.

The observations highlighted from this portion of the literature resonate strongly with my experience of executive coaching. I believe credibility impacts my own practice in at least two distinct ways. First, knowing that I have experience in organisational leadership enhances my own feelings of credibility and thus boosts my confidence in interactions with both potential and on-going clients. Second, numerous clients have remarked in formal and informal feedback that my organisational experience adds credibility to our work and thus to their confidence in its effects.

The potential connection between coaches' prior career experience and the building of trust in coaching relationships is discussed later in this thesis.

## Chapter 2:8 What does the literature tell us about the influence of the coaching training sector's influence on practice?

One of the principal questions raised by the research undertaken for the Applied Research Project (Section 4) concerns the influence the training of coaches may have on the topic of the thesis. This became the topic of my Report of Professional Practice (see Section 5).

A further search of the peer reviewed academic literature was consequently undertaken between October 2021 and January 2024 on the specific topic of coaching training. An additional 21 sources (18 peer reviewed academic journal articles, 3 academic books) were studied.

A summary of findings from the academic literature on how the training of coaches might influence the topic being researched is provided here and referred to in Section 5 below.

Boysen-Rotelli (2020) traces the origins of coach training organisations back to the 1980s and suggests they were created to satisfy demand from an increasing number of disillusioned corporate executives seeking new careers. Mainly privately owned and for-profit, they focussed on helping trainees develop active listening and powerful questioning skills (Griffiths & Campbell, 2008).

In recent years the relationship between the training sector and the industry's accrediting bodies has come under scrutiny. Although coaching of all varieties is unregulated worldwide, executive coaching is strongly influenced by two of the international accrediting bodies. The International Coach Federation (ICF) has over 34,000 members worldwide (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) has over 10,000 member coaches in 28 countries (EMCC, 2024). Together they dominate accreditation and the standards and frameworks they enforce influence how coaching is taught.

Some commentators (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015; Nadeem et al., 2021) suggest the commercial relationships between training providers (who pay to be accredited) and the accreditors (who charge the trainers' clients for individual accreditation) is unhealthy and maybe limiting creativity in how coaching is taught.

A parallel criticism of the accreditation bodies' influence on training sector is that it encourages too much focus on predictable competencies in order to provide the buyers of coaching with simple frameworks (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015). This focus risks simplifying coaching and lead to training that does not reflect the complexity of the relationships involved (Garvey, 2016). Put another way, the drive to professionalise coaching through accredited standards and quality assurance may have become "so dominant that any alternative is squeezed out, marginalised or simply ignored" (p.690). Nadeem et al. (2021) echo this concern and argue that the generic nature of the accrediting bodies' frameworks "…do not reflect specific context needs" of senior executive coaching clients.

These criticisms have led for demands for the accrediting bodies to "…acknowledge the powerful role they play in legitimizing particular forms of coaching" and "…promote plurality of coaching approaches" (Hurlow, 2022, p.134).

In addition to calls for better recognition of the plurality of coaching, are calls for greater recognition of the stages of development coaches go though. Drake (2011) identifies four distinct stages – "novice", "intermediaries", "masters" and "artisans" (p.143) and argues that these different stages require different training and support. Rajasinghe et al. (2022) make a similar point and argue that while competency based training maybe appropriate at the start of a coach's development, competencies need to be "let go or held lightly" (p.15) as coaches become more experienced.

There are notable references in the literature in response to these criticisms. Campone & Awal 2012, p.26) refer to several studies in the extant literature calling for "coach preparation to broaden and encompass knowledge beyond technical, skills-focussed training". More specifically, Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015, p.132) suggest training should focus on capabilities as well as competencies and thus provide opportunities "…to expose the tacit knowledge that the coach holds that will be applied appropriately when relevant".

This section of the critical review of literature suggests that there is debate in the coaching industry, at least in the academic community, that coach training, and ultimately the practice of coaching, could benefit from broaden its focus on skills and that helping trainees to use their prior career experience in their practices might be included in this move.

## Chapter 2:9 What can be learnt about the importance of coaches' backgrounds from sports coaching?

As highlighted in Chapters 2:1 and 2:2 above, the practice of sports coaching met the search criteria. A thorough review of the peer reviewed academic literature on the sports coaching was undertaken between January and March 2024.

Searches were conducted using the same sources and terms as outlined in Chapter 2.2 above. “Sports coaching” combined with “coaches’ backgrounds” revealed 137 sources and 227 with “coaches’ credibility”. The abstracts of all of the peer reviewed sources of both terms were reviewed; 43 were studied in detail; and 14 are cited below.

Although the relevance of sports coaching to this thesis’s subject should not be exaggerated (because of the clear recognition of the greater importance of coaches’ technical knowledge in sports coaching (Grant et al., 2012), there are parallels between the two fields.

Possibly because of the assumption that the primary requirement of an effective coach is “an extensive knowledge of the sport (professional knowledge)” (Cote & Gilbert, 2009, p.311), prior experience as a sportsperson is regarded by some as a “primary requirement” (p.311) of becoming an effective coach; and as a “crucial stepping stone” (Supian et al., 2023, p.1; Blackett et al., 2021; Watts & Cushion, 2017) by others.

The views above are reflected in appointments – in 2014, ninety of the ninety-two head coaches in English professional football leagues had previous experience as professional players (Blackett et al., 2017, p.745); and Mielke (2007, p.108) observes that “60% of all coaches” were previously professional players in their sport. Overall, “past research on expert team coaches’ career development” (Cregan et al., 2007, p.347) suggests that they were previously “successful, but not superior” (p.347) athletes.

There are parallels in the reasons cited in peer reviewed research for the preponderance of coaches with relevant prior experience in both fields.

In qualitative research of athletes' estimations of coaches (Becker, 2009) found that prior playing experience gave coaches "more respect and credibility" (p.101); that athletes "listened a bit more attentively" (p.101) to coaches who had played the same game; and that they appreciated coaches who "know what works and what doesn't work" (p.101). Mielke (2007, p.105) echoes this when he asserts that "coach respect by the players" comes from them having "been a successful player". Blackett et al. (2021 p.663-4) refer to former athletes' abilities to "legitimise their positions of power by quickly garnering athlete 'respect'".

Saury & Durand (1998) link the implicit knowledge coaches gained from having "lived through comparable situations and experienced the same sensations as their athletes" (p.264) with greater flexibility in their coaching. Côté et al. (1995) refer to this type of knowledge as "mental models" (p.14) and link it with greater adaptability to complex tasks.

There is a further parallel between the roles played by sports managers (who hire head coaches) and HR directors (who hire executive coaches into organisations). Blackett et al. (2017) studied the role of managers in the definition of sports coaches' identities and found that they sometimes assume that a prior playing career will provide sufficient symbolic power for new coaches to "be immediately recognised, valued and subordinated to by playing staff" (p.750). Indeed, Blackett et al. also observe that some managers believe that potential new coaches lacking elite paying experience would "not be capable of achieving instant player respect as required (.p.751). This type of view highlights the influence of the 'buyers' of coaching on appointments and echoes my own experience of the executive coaching market (Hindle Fisher, 2023).

As in executive coaching, there is debate in the literature on sports coaching of the nature of training required (McCullick et al., 2009) with some proponents of formal training bemoaning that the favouring of past athletic experience is "pervasive across all levels of sport" (Cote & Gilbert, 2009, p.311). Some commentators note that coaches often prize their sporting experience over their formal training (Watts & Cushion, 2017; McCalman et al., 2023). Others (Blackett et al., 2021) highlight coaches' "ability to reflect on their own competitive athletic experiences" (p.669) as a useful resource – something similar to an issue covered in Section 5 below.

Whilst the overwhelming majority of comment in the peer reviewed academic literature stresses the importance of prior sporting experience in sports coaching, there is disagreement too. Kiosoglous & Vidic (2017, p.122) note that prior experience is "relatively unimportant" and Irwin et al. (2004, p.432) go further when they observe that it can be "detrimental" with a lack of compassion towards others' challenges  potentially occurring "if the coach previously experienced success as a performer".

In conclusion, whilst the emphasis and importance ascribed to relevant prior experience are much greater in sports coaching than in executive coaching, some commentators (Kiosoglous & Vidic, 2017) highlight the value of combing it with the capacity of coaches to "process and reflect on what they observed, experienced and learned" (p.122) – an idea observed in executive coaching by Whitmore (2012) and Sonesh et al. (2015) and explored in Section 5 of this thesis.

## Chapter 2:10 Further literature and discussion

Attitudes to coaches' use of their prior career experiences and the 'expert knowledge' gained from them have changed significantly over past decades as social and pedagogical attitudes changed. Whitmore's (2012) comments serve as a summary of the transition Ives (2008) outlined: "…Gallwey had put his finger on the essence of coaching. Coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them…" (p.10).

There seems little doubt that this change in approach has been beneficial. Excessive use of 'expert knowledge' of any kind can be detrimental to coaching. Berglas (2002) makes the point that there is potential for coaches to misuse their prior experience in their work with clients when he observes that many of them come from corporate backgrounds and can abuse, often inadvertently, the trust they are able to build with their clients.

It would be easy to overuse the experience gained in executive positions when practicing as a coach after a career in organisations. Rabstejnek (2008) substantiates this when he observes that some coaches rely on transmitting the knowledge they gained in their own careers, what he calls 'how I did it' knowledge, and that this can have limited efficacy.

But I suggest expert knowledge can also be used very effectively to facilitate clients' decision making and development, as Cavanagh (2006) outlines: **"**Expert knowledge is critically important to the coaching conversation. Without it, we are simply well-meaning amateurs. Expert knowledge helps us, and our clients, understand experience in new ways" (p.342).

While coaches' 'how I did it' knowledge comes with significant risks associated with varying levels of its relevance to clients' experiences, experiential based expert knowledge can be highly efficacious. Chapman (2010) refers to Kolb's concepts and stresses the importance of the distinction between knowledge gained from theory (what he refers to 'grasping via comprehension') and from experience (referred to as grasping via apprehension).

Lee (2003) makes a similar point differently when he argues that many of the critical aspects of corporate life (such as influencing skills, motivating others and meeting targets and budgets) are best grasped by individuals who have had to deal with them themselves.

I believe the literature makes it clear that experience can be highly beneficial in coaching, but also that it is *how* it used that determines effectiveness. Schein (2000, p.69) points out: "…even though the temptation to become an instant expert is tremendous in this situation, it must be resisted. The coach, to be effective, must engage in open-ended inquiry to establish an equal helping relationship before he or she can determine what kind of help is needed."

A large proportion of the literature reviewed above was written by psychologists. I believe the homogeneity of the psychology profession and its highly articulate messaging have had a marked effect on the discourse surrounding coaching. Nevertheless, understanding the contributors to coaching's effectiveness is a live theme in the industry and a binary discourse has become prevalent – with proponents of psychologists' pre-eminence arguing for their greater efficacy.

Other commentaries contend that the combination of prior experience and 'psychological mindedness' is an optimal background for coaches, a position Sonesh et al (2015) support when they conclude that coaches with a combination of psychological and non-psychological knowledge maybe more effective than coaches with psychology only or non-psychology backgrounds.

Similarly, coaching's heterogeneity allows for variety – perhaps the conclusion of Smither et al (2003, p.40) is still relevant: "Executive coaches with specific backgrounds (eg., counselling psychology) may be well suited for some situations… but not for others (eg., helping a senior manager integrate organisational cultures during a merger or acquisition)."

A further theme related to the heterogeneity of coaching is evident in recent academic commentary. It is now argued by some (Stokes et al., 2020; Garvey, 2004) that the distinction between mentoring and coaching has created a false and unhelpful dichotomy and that recognising “the fundamental interconnections of the two” (Stokes et al., 2020, p.2) would be beneficial – something I explore later in this thesis.

The critical review of literature summarised above had a significant influence on this thesis’s overarching research question. After the review the question was finessed to be:

How can executive coaches’ prior career experience
affect their relationships with their clients?

The primary research projects set out below (Sections 3, 4 and 5) seek to test, amongst other things, two positions observed in the review. First, Whitmore’s (2012) observation: “It is hard, but by no means impossible, for an expert to be a good coach” (p.43). Second, Berman’s view (2019, p.74) that coaches working with certain senior clients “…are most effective when they have business acumen and management experience as well as expert- or master-level capabilities as a practitioner”.

## Chapter 2:11 Implications for research and practice

The tentative proposition explored in the following research projects (Sections 3, 4 and 5) stems from this critical review of the literature. Specifically, that coaches' prior business experience contributes to clients' perceptions of them as credible coaches and that that credibility: "…facilitates improvement in coachee job performance by allowing the coachee to speak candidly, be receptive to counsel / feedback from the coach, take risks in trying new behaviours, and adopt new approaches to the executive's job" (Bozer et al., 2014, p.891).

I plan to explore this through an inquiry with cohorts of coaches and coachees employing the following questions:

> **Question 1:** How would you define your (coach's) credentials to be a / your coach?
>
> **Question 1a:** How would you define the factors that influenced your initial choice of your coach?
>
> **Question 2:** How would you define the relevance of your (coach's) prior coaching experience to your relationship?
>
> **Question 3**: How would you define the relevance of your (coach's) prior business experience to your relationship?
>
> **Question 4**: How did your (coach's) prior business experience affect your coaching?
>
> **Question 5:** How did your (coach's) prior business experience affect your relationship?

While the observations from a small scale, qualitative research project of this nature may only be relevant to limited other situations, I believe it will add to our understanding and partially fill the gap in the literature highlighted by Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2015, p.31) and quoted above: "…it would be valuable to obtain better understanding of the role that a coach's background plays on the outcome and quality of the coaching intervention…".

The next section of my thesis provides a report on a Small Scale Research Project (SSRP) that explores how I and a cohort of my clients experience the phenomenon being researched.

# Section 3

# Small Scale Research Project

## Section 3: Small Scale Research Project

This section of my thesis provides a report on a Small Scale Research Project (SSRP) conducted between September 2019 and August 2020. A proposal and ethics release form were submitted and approved by CCCU in January and March 2020 respectively and are available on request.

### Chapter 3:1 Introduction

The research undertaken in this SSRP explores my own experience of how my non-coaching career experience affects my relationships with coaching clients. It was a pilot study for the more extensive exercise in my Applied Research Project (ARP – see Section 4) that explores similar issues with a cohort of third-party coaches and their clients.

Themes explored reflect the questions that emerged from my critical review of literature (see Chapter 2:10 above) eg. consideration of the importance of non-coaching experience to initial appointments by clients and to establishing credibility and trust; understanding the mores and cultures of organisations; understanding leadership and management issues; and framing and informing questions. Other themes emerged from the research process itself (see Chapter 3:4 below) eg. the learning I feel gained from having 'tried and failed' on occasions in my own executive career.

Research methodologies (see Chapter 3:3 below) were applied that reflected the researcher's background as a practicing executive coach with prior and on-going career experience of senior leadership and management roles in organisations, and included:

- Multiple cycles of reflection on recordings and transcripts of individual coaching sessions with three then current clients; and

- An analysis of semi-structured interviews with the three clients about their coaching relationships with me with questions informed by the earlier reflection. This analysis applied the core principles of IPA (see Chapter 1.5 and Smith et al., 2022, p.119) to illuminate and amplify the meaning-making of the participants. A degree of methodological plurality was exercised and the approach used is best described as 'IPA informed'.

– As noted earlier, the invitation from the creators of IPA to develop 'innovative' approaches was accepted (Smith et al., 2022, p.120). IPA was used to examine individuals' lived experiences of a very specific relational phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022; Nizza et al., 2021; Rajasinghe et al., 2021) rather than focussing on participants' emotional or affective responses.

In line with all of the research conducted for this thesis, this project's findings (see Chapter 3:5 below) have limited generalisability. Nevertheless, a number of themes were identified that informed the research undertaken for my ARP and maybe transferable to other situations and practitioners working in similar circumstances.

## Chapter 3:2 Literature review and terms of reference

### 3:2.1 Literature review

As discussed in the critical review of literature above (Section 2), the extent to which the importance ascribed to coaches having experience of and expertise in the topics being covered in coaching changed substantially over the past fifty years (Ives, 2008). The forces discussed above led to a dominant view that "coaching does not rely *necessarily* (researcher's emphasis) on the specific experience and knowledge of the coach being greater than that of the client" (Cox & Ledgerwood, 2003, p.1).

While 'specific experience' may not be *necessary* in coaching, my critical review revealed that there is clear indication in the outcome, practitioner and case study research that coaches' non-coaching experience can be extremely useful (Wasylyshyn, 2003; Grant & Zackon, 2004; Blackman, 2006; de Haan et al., 2011). Themes highlighted in this portion of the literature and explored in Section 2 above shaped this project's design and choice of questions.

### 3:2.2 Research questions

Whilst not wanting to limit the content or outcomes of the research exercises to aspects highlighted by the literature, both the self-reflection exercise and the semi-structured interviews with clients included consideration of the questions stemming from the literature review as set out in Chapter 2:9:

- Being appointed by clients (Tompson et al., 2008).
- Establishing credibility (Blackman et al., 2016; Jowett et al., 2012).
- Establishing trust (Alvey & Barclay, 2007).
- Understanding the "rules, mores, cultures, values and systems in corporate settings" (Berman & Bradt, 2006, p.244).
- Understanding leadership and management issues (Kombarakaran et al., 2008).
- Framing and informing questions (Passmore, 2010a).
- Challenging clients (Cox, 2003).

### 3:2.3 Terms of reference

The overarching aim of this project was to develop the researcher's understanding of how his own non-coaching career experiences affect his relationships with clients. This reflected the purpose of the project - to be a pilot study for the wider research inquiry (ARP – see Section 4) into the same topic with cohorts of third-party coaches and their clients using a research methodology informed by IPA.

As noted above, this project does not seek to produce generalisable findings but to generate robust, rich, in depth information that others may deem to be transferable to their own contexts (Gray, 2014). See Chapter 3:4.1 for details of my coaching practice and the contexts analysed.

## Chapter 3:3 Research methods

The research conducted for this project consisted of two distinct but interrelated exercises. In total, eight separate steps were undertaken and are described here and in Chapter 3:4:

- Selection of philosophical perspective, research approaches and methodologies (see Chapters 3:3.1, 3:3.2 and 3:3.3);
- Selection of sampling and sizing criteria (Chapter 3:3.4);
- Selection and recruitment of clients to participate (Chapters 3:3.5 and 3:4.2);
- Recording and transcription of client sessions (Chapter 3:4.3.1);
- Multiple cycles of reflection (Chapter 3:4.3.2 and Appendices C and D);
- Preparation of client interview schedule (Chapter 3:4.3.3 and Appendix E);
- Undertaking, recording and transcription of client interviews (Chapter 3:4.3.4);
- Analysis of recordings and transcripts (Chapter 3:4.3.5 )

### 3:3.1 Philosophical perspective

As throughout this thesis, a critical realist (CR) philosophical perspective with an objectivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, as noted by Johnson and Duberley (Johnson & Duberley, 2000), was applied throughout this SSRP. Consequently, the research does "not deny that there is a real social world we can attempt to understand or access through philosophy and social science, but *(recognised that)* some knowledge can be closer to reality than other knowledge" (Fletcher, 2017, p.182). All three levels of reality in CR ontology ("empirical", "actual" and "real" (p.183) were explored.

The word count stipulated by CCCU for this section of the thesis does not allow a full account of the philosophical perspectives applied to the research. For a more exhaustive exploration, please refer to Chapter 4.3 below.

### 3:3.2 Research approaches

Highly qualitative research approaches were used in both exercises undertaken. This is noteworthy as it "may appear contradictory to the dominant positivist views and for the professional bodies as they continue to seek universal understanding" of coaching (Rajasinghe, 2019, p.3).

The selection of qualitative methods reflected three factors. First, I support the view that coaching should be "analysed as a social process, where it is viewed as both a product of and contributor to the reshaping of its social context" (Shoukry & Cox, 2018, p.414). Second, to be consistent with CR which suggests "the social world consists of open systems, in which any number of occurrences and events can overlap and interact….As such, CR looks for tendencies, not laws" (Fletcher, 2017, p.185 citing Danermark et al., 2002). Third, approaches underpinned by phenomenology were preferred as it "assumes that only those who have experienced a particular phenomenon can communicate it to the outside world" (Rajasinghe, 2019, p.5-6).

### 3:3.3 Methodologies

#### 3:3.3.1 Self-reflection exercise

This, the first of the two interrelated exercises of this project, had two principal aims:

- To gain a clearer understanding of my own personal experience of the issues being explored; and
- To prepare myself for the IPA informed methods used in the second exercise and in my Applied Research Project as suggested by (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.91): "an acknowledgement to be made generally of the researcher's involvement (including the role of preconceptions, beliefs and aims) prior to the analysis stage".

The self-exploratory nature of the exercise suggested that an experiential learning methodology “whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1993, p.155) was applicable and would meet both aims.

Self-reflection was chosen as the method as it “leads to making sense of that experience in a new way, leading to deeper understanding” (Chapman et al., 2003, p.108). It was especially appropriate as “It is applied in situations where material is ill-structured or uncertain in that it has no obvious solutions, a mental process that seems to be related to thinking and to learning” (Moon, 1999, p.5).

In the absence of established protocols for methodologies in reflective exercises, a model focussing on two recognised frameworks - Moon’s (1999a, p.32-36) “process of writing reflectively” and John’s (1994) series of guiding questions - and informed by other influences, was developed to provide structure to multiple cycles of reflection.

Moon’s (1999a) process specified separate consideration of the “purpose”, “description”, “reflective thinking” and “product” (p.32-35) of individual events with the aim of providing a “process of metacognition – the process of overviewing one’s own mental functioning” (p.19). The model developed for this exercise included a number of exploratory cycles (see Appendix C) prior to the detailed phase outlined below. Influences on these included:

– Fletcher’s (2017) references to the three levels of reality in CR ontology prompted a cycle considering the “empirical”, “actual” and “real” (p.183) aspects of the coaching observed.

– Kolb (1993). A cycle focussing specifically on “abstract conceptualisation abilities” (p.148) was included aiming to “create concepts and integrate their observations into logically sound theories”. (p.148)

– Shoukry and Cox's (2018) reference to “integration and criticality” (p.422) prompted a cycle considering my awareness of my own social context and how it influences me, my coaching and my relationships with clients.

Within the “reflective thinking” phase Moon (1999a) referred to the “process of relating, experimenting, exploring, reinterpreting from different points of view” (p.35) and John’s (1994) more detailed guidance on this was included in the model developed for this exercise (see Appendix D). Other influences on the questions posed in this phase included:

– Smyth (1989) prompted questions about the underlying views, assumptions and beliefs underpinning practice; and

– Downey (2014) introduced the concept of “intent” (p.87) in coaching and linked coaches’ aims and purposes when posing questions with their effectiveness.

#### 3:3.3.2 Client interviews

This, the second of the two inter-related exercises of the project, had two principal aims:

– To explore how clients experience the knowledge, expertise and understanding of their worlds that my non-coaching career affords me; and

– To prepare myself for the IPA informed methods planned for my Applied Research Project (as above).

Consideration was given to both of the principal aims of this project and an approach based on the core principles of IPA (see Chapter 1.5 and Smith et al, 2022, p.119) was used for this exercise since it “offers an established, systematic, and phenomenologically focussed approach, which is committed to understanding the first person perspective **from** the third-person position” (Larkin et al., 2011). Moreover, “IPA’s focus on human experience to develop understanding, detailed attention to individual experiential accounts and contextual sensitivity” (Rajasinghe et al., 2021, p.871) makes it an appropriate methodology to explore the nature of dyadic coaching relationships.

Smith et al., 2009 define IPA as “an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography”. By combining the study of experience with the theory of interpretation and concern for the particular, “IPA aims to understand how people make sense of events, relationships, and processes in the context of their particular lifeworlds” (Larkin et al., 2011, p.330).

IPA’s focus on people’s lived experiences and their understanding of phenomena was preferred over grounded theory (with its more theoretical approach); discursive (with its privileging of language over content); narrative analysis (with its emphasis on ‘stories’ over experiences); and Thematic Analysis (with its less idiographic principles – see Chapter 4.3.3).

IPA was particularly relevant to a project on coaching conducted by a coach. First, since “coaching takes many forms” and “is a domain devoid of any fixed deontology” (Brunner, 1998, p.516), it is important to focus research on how individual clients in individual contexts experience it. Thus, “IPA studies, first and foremost, as offering detailed, nuanced analysis of *particular* instances of lived experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p.37) were well suited. (Rajasinghe, 2019, p.5) reiterated this: “IPA facilitates deeper understanding of coaching’s unseen subjective elements by exploring how it is experienced and understood”.

The “double hermeneutic” (Smith et al., 2009, p.3) in IPA recognises “the researcher’s centrality to analysis and research” (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.88) and thus reflects the dyadic nature of the coaching relationship and allows both participants and researcher to have voices.

IPA was chosen despite one reservation. Due to its widespread use in psychological research, topics explored by IPA are often “of major significance to the person” (Smith et al., 2009) being interviewed. This was not the case in this project – while their coach’s background was significant to the coach / researcher, clients were unlikely to have considered it explicitly prior to being interviewed. However, IPA’s focus on exploring how people make sense of their experiences to deepen understanding of a particular phenomenon (Larkin et al, 2011) made it appropriate for this exercise.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009) framework was used as a guide. Key elements included:

- Positioning the researcher’s role as being “implicated in facilitating and making sense” (p.28);
- Positioning participants as “the experiential experts on the topic” (p.64);
- Bracketing my “fore-structure” (p.25) in preparing for and undertaking interviews;
- Conducting semi-structured interviews where an interview schedule (see Appendix E) flexibly with the participant having an important stake in what is covered;
- Blending “organization, flexibility and sensitivity” with “imagination, playfulness, and a combination of reflective, critical and conceptual thinking” (p.40); and
- Asking open and non-directive questions (p.60) influenced by Heron’s (1976) facilitative, cathartic and catalytic styles of intervention.

### 3:3.4 Sample selection and sizing

Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2007, p.111) observed that when the purpose of a project "is not to generalise to a population but to obtain insights into a phenomenon...the most common method of sampling in qualitative research is purposeful sampling". Emphasis was placed on 'perspective representation' over 'population representation' (Gray, 2014; Smith et al, 2022) and "mixed purposeful sampling" (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, p.111) involving the combination of a number of different strategies was used.

Strategies included "critical case sampling" (p.112) in which clients' individual experiences were of particular interest were included; "typical case sampling" where I used my own judgement to identify a selection of my clients with whom our work is typical of my practice; and "convenience sampling" (p.114) in which I chose to invite clients who I thought would be happy to participate (and to refuse, with ethical considerations in mind – see 3:3.5.1 & 3:3.5.3 below).

Since clearer protocols on sample content and sizing were available for IPA than the reflection exercises, (Smith et al., 2009) guidance on homogeneity (p.50) and "rough guide" to sample sizing (p.51) were followed whilst aiming to balance saturation with practical considerations and remembering that generalisability was not being sought (see Chapter 3:4.2).

### 3:3.5 Ethical issues

Since the overarching objective of this project was to develop my own understanding of how my non-coaching career experience affects my relationships with clients, obtaining some clients' perspectives was essential. A researcher interviewing their own clients for an academic exercise provided heightened ethical concerns. These were given thorough consideration by the researcher and were subjected to scrutiny by the Ethics Committee before approval was granted in March 2020. The following issues are highlighted:

#### 3:3.5.1 Relationship issues

All of the participants in the exercise were clients of my business coaching and executive mentoring company with the fees for their assignments paid by their employers (with the exception of one organisational pro bono agreement). Special consideration was therefore given to the power dynamic between us when requesting their involvement in this project.

Full information about the project and the nature of their potential involvement was provided to all those invited to participate - in writing (see Appendix M) and in subsequent oral discussions. The opportunity for each client to decline to be involved with no effects on their assignment was stressed and their ability to do so was confirmed when one client did refuse.

#### 3:3.5.2 Confidentiality

As coaching clients, all participants were familiar with their discussions with me being completely confidential and this was confirmed in the consent letter. Participants' names and identities were kept confidential and the recordings and anonymised transcripts will be held and ultimately destroyed in line with CCCU's regulations.

#### 3:3.5.3 Consent

A consent letter (see Appendix N) was signed by all participants, and it was made clear that their participation was entirely optional and that declining would have no impact on the service they received or our relationship.

Overall, I was confident that my clients knew that they held the power in their relationships with me and that, as senior executives, they were all capable of declining the invitation.

### 3:3.6 Limitations

As noted above and by (Brocki & Wearden, 2006), this project makes "no claims as to the generalisability of their results but suggest rather that the data obtained might be useful in providing some insights" to other practitioners with similar backgrounds working with similar clients in similar contexts. See Chapter 3:4.1 for details of the researcher's practice and the contexts analysed.

Nevertheless, Robson's (2011) model of "trustworthiness" as cited in Petty et al (2012) and based on (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) work was used to augment the work undertaken:

- "Confirmability" was underpinned by the researcher's "own experience and subjectivity" being explored thoroughly and made explicit in the first exercise;
- "Dependability" of the data was unavoidably low due to the "variations between people and contexts as well as the passage of time" but was improved by a clear audit trail;
- "Credibility" was enhanced by the researcher's "prolonged engagement and persistent observation" with the data, by the 'triangulation' effect provided by the second exercise that some commentators question (see Chapter 4:4.3 for further justification), and by discussion with my supervisor and colleagues; and finally,
- "Transferability" was augmented by purposive sampling and selection.

The above notwithstanding, Robson's (2011) reminder, as cited in Petty et al (2012, p.383), while these strategies do suggest rigour and close attention to detail, they "do not in themselves guarantee trustworthiness" and the "responsibility for determining transferability is with those who might apply the findings to their own setting" is reiterated.

The application of the methodologies outlined above including the selection of participants, data collection and analysis is discussed in Chapter 3:4 below.

# Chapter 3:4 Project activity

This chapter outlines how the selected methodologies were applied and is set out in chronological order. Since the project was about a particular phenomenon – my career background and my coaching – this chapter starts with a description of my coaching practice.

## 3:4.1 The researcher's coaching practice

Executive coaching is a highly heterogeneous industry and my practice focusses on a small niche in the market. Some understanding of my practice, and therefore the coaching studied, is important in determining any transferability of this project's findings.

Labelling myself a 'business coach and executive mentor', I seek to create competitive advantage from combining senior level business experience with strong coaching credentials (training, continuing development and professional supervision). See Appendix F for further biographical and professional details.

### 3:4.1.1 Nature of the coaching undertaken

I use a framework for coaching that seeks to integrate all aspects of me as a person into my coaching – all of my personal, business and coaching experience including my training. The last of these includes access to techniques in various schools of psychotherapy including humanistic, gestalt, psychodynamic, transactional analysis and positive psychology. My aim is to have the confidence to support clients across the entire spectrum of coaching issues – from the intensely practical to the deeply personal.

Notwithstanding the facility to support clients across a broad spectrum, the bulk of the work undertaken falls into three categories:

- Strategic plans, hopes and fears – *what* the client wants and needs to achieve;
- Leadership style development and refinement – *how* they might seek to achieve their objectives;

- Relationship awareness, mapping and planning – *who* they need to have effective relationships with.

#### 3:4.1.2 Clients of my practice

My coaching practice is narrowly focussed and is:

- Exclusively one-to-one;
- With clients in commercial organisations (with limited exceptions – see below) who are:
  - Already in board / executive committee positions;
  - Heads of functions or departments; and (less often)
  - Younger, high potential executives being support for succession.
- Always financed by executives' employers (unless pro bono), never by individual clients.

### 3:4.2 Recruitment of participants

Clients to be invited to participate were selected using the sampling strategies outlined in Chapter 3:3.4 above. Consideration was given at all times to selecting "participants in order to illuminate a particular research question, and to develop a full and interesting interpretation of the data" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.95) and "who are able and willing to offer us a view of the phenomenon under investigation" (Smith et al., 2009, p.40).

I was keen to include clients with whom different aspects of my non-coaching career experience may have been relevant. Aspects included were:

- Specific industry experience – a client whose role was similar to roles I have undertaken;
- Board experience – a client whose role includes operating at main board level;
- Charity experience – a client working in the third sector where I have been a trustee.

Since these differing aspects of my career experience introduced potential for an element of comparison, the group selected was “homogeneous in other ways” (Smith et al., 2009, p.50) – they were all in ‘c-suite’ roles with similar coaching objectives.

Three clients were approached via introductory emails suggesting discussions at imminent face-to-face coaching sessions. The opportunity to decline was stressed at all stages (see Chapter 3:3.5.3) and when one client did decline a fourth client was approached. The power dynamic with each client was considered (see Chapter 3:3.5.1), and especially with Client C as their assignment was part of a pro bono arrangement between my firm and their employer. See Appendix G for anonymised details of the clients who participated.

### 3:4.3 Data collection and analysis

#### 3:4.3.1 Recording of coaching sessions and transcription

A digital recording was made of a single coaching session of between one and two hours with each participant in March and April 2020. All sessions were part of otherwise standard coaching assignments and the recording had no effect on the proceedings that was discernible to me or commented upon by the participants.

One feature of two of the three sessions was notable. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK at the time, the sessions with Clients A and B were undertaken via HD video conferencing. Since this was different to my usual practice of face-to-face meetings, it could be considered to be a limiting factor, but after consideration of the sessions I deem to have no discernible effects.

Each recording was transcribed into a MS Word document by a professional assistant with strict anonymity being maintained.

#### 3:4.3.2 Self-reflection cycles

Multiple cycles of self reflection were undertaken over five weeks in April – June 2020. Initially (twice), the transcripts were read in conjunction with listening to the recordings, followed by reading only combined with note taking. Each cycle outlined in Appendix C was undertaken at least once. In total, eleven separate sessions of between one and two hours were completed. Notes were taken throughout and a reflective essay was written with the aim of providing "a meeting place in which ideas can intermingle and, in developing, give rise to new ideas for new learning" (Moon, 1999a, p.18).

This was a difficult exercise to undertake. Initially, the frameworks used (Appendices C and D) seemed to be overly structured and unsupportive of affective reflection. While early attention provided a "a form of mental processing with a purpose" (Moon, 1999a), further effort was required to enable emotional dimensions to be examined. The usefulness of the cycles in facilitating meaningful reflection varied with Cycle 6 (Appendix D) proving to be the most productive of both cognitive and affective reflection. Findings from the exercise are summarised in Chapter 3:5.1 below.

#### 3:4.3.3 Influence of the self-reflection exercise on the client interview exercise

It was tempting to reflect my observations from the reflection exercise (see Chapter 3:5.1) explicitly in the client interview questions. However, Smith et al's (2009) framework was used and "open and non-directive questions" (p.60) were asked with the reflection observations being consciously bracketed as part of my "fore-structure" (p.25). This also supported efforts to make my actions and interactions facilitative of an "exploring" (p.46) "conversation with a purpose" (p.57) rather an interrogation.

#### 3:4.3.4 Recording of client interviews and transcription

An "interview schedule" (Smith et al., 2009) was prepared (see Appendix E) that reflected the issues outlined above. Questions asked were a mix of "structural" (Smith et al., 2009) (*What characteristics, qualities, behaviours or expertise would you say are important in a coach?*), "descriptive" (p.60) (*How would you describe my credentials to be your coach?*) and "evaluative" (p.60) (*How would you say that non-coaching experience has influenced you and our work together?*). The questions asked started very wide ranging and became more specific as they progressed.

The participants were not provided with the questions in advance but were told that the focus of the interviews would be on certain aspects of our relationship. Digital recordings were made of interviews lasting between 25 and 30 minutes with each of the three clients in July and early August 2020. For reasons outlined in Chapter 3;4.3.1, all of the interviews were conducted by HD video conferencing but, once again, no detrimental effects were discerned or commented upon by the clients or by me.

Conducting the interviews proved to be an interesting experience. Asking open, enquiring questions was similar to coaching and not difficult. However, being the researcher and being central personally to the questions and answers felt awkward. This feeling declined with familiarity and with the perceived honesty of the participants, meaning that it was not considered to be a limiting factor.

#### 3:4.3.5 Analysis of client interview transcripts

Smith et al's (2009, p.79-107) framework of analysis was used with the aim of following an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith, 2007) and included:

- Reading (twice) and correcting of the transcripts in conjunction with listening to the recordings;
- "Close, line-by-line analysis" (Smith et al., 2009, p.90) of the transcripts looking for the "understandings of each participant";
- Identification of "text which seems important" (p.91) with initial noting of why each felt significant (see 4.3.5.1);
- Further analysis of the comments identified aiming to develop "a dialogue" (p.79) with the data;
- "Developing emergent themes" (p.91) in each case individually;
- "Searching for connections across emergent themes" (p.92-100) looking for fit among them;

– Developing “super-ordinate themes” (p.101)

– Developing a table of themes that illustrates the relationships between them.

Throughout the process conscious attention was paid to the double hermeneutic of IPA – “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening” (p.3) and being “avowedly interpretative” (p.90). This was not easy at times. A tendency to privilege the participants’ experiences over my own was identified and effort made to balance the two appropriately. Findings from the analysis outlined above follow in Chapter 3:5.2.

#### 3:4.3.5.1 Initial noting

After multiple cycles of listening to the recordings and reading and correcting the transcripts, I went through them again underlining “text which seems important” (Smith et al, 2009, p.91). Then for each piece of underlined text, “attempt(ed) to write in the margin an account of why you (I) think it was underlined and therefore important” (Smith et al., 2009). An example of initial noting is in **Table 3:1** below:

| **Transcript** | **Initial comments** |
|---|---|
| Me: How would you say any aspect of my non-coaching career or my experience outside coaching has been evident in our work together? | |
| Client C: …you are the only person who on a couple of decisions has asked me about governance boundaries…I think you have naturally identified or asked questions about boundaries between the Trustees and the Exec…and, actually, because you understand how it works and some of the dynamic, you just instantly ask the right question, or a question that adds huge value to me and I don’t think someone who | Experience supports understanding that supports trust<br><br>Experience supports questioning that supports credibility |

| | |
|---|---|
| hadn't had exposure to some of that would have got there.<br><br>I think with someone who has got relevant experience trust in the discussion is high because you know you are going to get to the value quite quickly and I then have quite a lot of confidence in the output… | Adds something over pure coaching<br><br>Experience supports trust<br><br>Value of coaching enhanced<br><br>Experience supports confidence that supports trust |

#### 3:4.3.5.2 Development of emergent themes

After further analysis of the transcripts and my initial notes, I identified emergent themes, initially for each client and then for the cohort. An example of this process using the same text as in Table 1 is shown in **Table 3:2** below:

| **Transcript** | **Emergent themes** |
|---|---|
| Me: How would you say any aspect of my non-coaching career or my experience outside coaching has been evident in our work together? | |
| Client C: …you are the only person who on a couple of decisions has asked me about governance boundaries…I think you have naturally identified or asked questions about boundaries between the Trustees and the Exec…and, actually, because you understand how it works and some of the dynamic, you just instantly ask the right question, or a question that adds huge value to me and I don't think someone who hadn't had exposure to some of that would have got there.<br><br>I think with someone who has got relevant experience trust in the | Experience linked with understanding<br><br>Experience linked with challenge<br><br>Experience in business combined with coaching |

| | |
|---|---|
| discussion is high because you know you are going to get to the value quite quickly and I then have quite a lot of confidence in the output… | Experience linked with trust<br><br>Experience linked with value of coaching |

Eight emergent themes were identified across the three clients (see Appendix H). Effort was made to pay attention to "the I and the P in IPA" (Smith et al., 2009) and thus "achieve an hermeneutic circle without losing the lived experience of the clients".

### 3:4.3.5.3 Development of super-ordinate themes

There was a high level of commonality across the three clients' views. This made the process of clustering the emergent or subordinate themes into super-ordinate themes relatively straightforward. The first two listed here were created by abstraction (p.96) and the latter two were created by subsumption (p.97):

- Critical but not sufficient
- Credibility
- Trust
- Value

All four are discussed in Chapter 3:5.2 below and detailed in Appendix H.

## Chapter 3:5 Discussion

This chapter outlines and discusses the findings of both the exercises undertaken and covers them separately and in chronological order.

### 3:5.1 Findings from the self-reflection exercise

The exercise of self-reflecting on three client coaching sessions had two principal aims:

- To gain a clearer understanding of my own personal experience of the issues being explored; and

- To prepare myself for the IPA informed methods used in the second exercise and in my ARP (Section 4) by exploring the “preconceptions, beliefs and aims” (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) influencing my “fore-structure” (Smith et al., 2009, p.25)

I utilised the cycles of reflection outlined in Chapters 3:3.3.1 and 3:4.3.2 above and in C and D below before undertaking the interviews in the second exercise in order to ensure that any observations were genuinely personal to me. Five specific observations emerged:

- Initial reflection suggested I perceived that my prior experience had a notable influence on my coaching;

- Certain aspects of my experience seemed to me to be particularly notable;

- My experience seemed to affect how I exercised care for my clients;

- I perceived that my experience influenced my clients’ trust in me and their estimations of my credibility; and

- My experience seemed to have a notable effect on my own confidence in myself.

These observations are outlined in Chapters 3:5.1.1 – 3:5.1.6 below:

#### 3:5.1.1 Numerical observation

In Cycle 1, I explored what critical realists term the "empirical level" (Fletcher, 2017, p.183) and my initial feelings about my contribution to sessions were reflected upon. Although contradictory to the anti-positivist perspective taken elsewhere, a numerative approach was applied to this initial cycle. The frequency of 'meaningful' comments and those where I felt there was some influence of my prior career experience evident helped me formulate my first impressions but I attributed little importance to precise numbers.

I undertook two rounds of reflection for this cycle. First, I identified all of my comments in the sessions that I considered to be 'meaningful', ie actually adding to clients' thinking rather than linking the dialogue, and reflected upon them. Second, further reflection helped me identify those where I felt some influence of my prior experience was evident.

The indications from this exercise are shown in **Table 3:3**:

| **Comments** | **Client A** | **Client B** | **Client C** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Those considered 'meaningful' | 50 | 63 | 52 |
| Those in which an influence was identified | 22 | 44 | 32 |

This very simple exercise confirmed to me that my prior, non coaching experience seemed to have had a notable influence on a material proportion of my contributions to coaching interactions. Although not especially meaningful, this initial exercise provided useful data for the next cycle.

#### 3:5.1.2 Certain aspects of my experience seemed to be especially influential

In Cycle 2, I explored the "actual level" (Fletcher, 2017) and each of the latter group of comments above was reflected upon. I identified certain specific aspects of my non coaching experience as possible influences upon each comment. Cycle 2 suggested that the following aspects of my prior experience were important to my coaching:

- “Experiential awareness of and sensitivity to the demands of the work situation” (Dean & Meyer, 2002, p.82)
- Understanding of leadership and management issues (Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Dagley, 2010);
- Understanding the “rules, mores, culture and value systems in corporate settings” (Berman & Bradt, 2006, p.244);
- Language of business (Passmore, J., personal communication, 14th September 2018).

It was noteworthy that the first three of the specific aspects of experience were evident across all the clients and the fourth, familiarity with “language”, was only evident with Client A, the participant in a career setting closest to my previous executive career.

#### 3:5.1.3 My experience influenced the nature of the care I showed to clients:

In Cycle 3, I explored the “real level” (Fletcher, 2017) and my reflection focused on what causal factors might have been underlying my interventions. This included affective aspects and revealed an additional influence. In a number of instances reflection suggested that my contributions were influenced by a desire to highlight the potential pitfalls of situations similar to some that further thought suggested I felt I had mishandled in my own executive career.

An example of this was identified in the session with Client B when I asked:

> *“Is there a functioning head of that who can exercise some leadership in the short term?”*

Reflection reminded me of instances when I had missed opportunities as a leader and this suggested that I was keen to ensure that the client did not make similar mistakes – and thus benefit from my prior experience. How I believe my prior experience influenced these instances reminded me of a comment from my review of literature:

> "My experience suggests that coaches' age and experience are also important...they need to have got down and dirty in order to be able to understand clients....wisdom comes from having tried things and failed". (Passmore, J., personal communication, 14th September 2018)

#### 3:5.1.4 My experience may have enhanced clients' estimations of my credibility and trust in me:

Cycles 4 and 5 (Kolb's active conceptualisation and consideration of the social context respectively) proved to be effective preparation for Cycle 6. This cycle was based on Moon (1999a) and Johns (1994) and was the most thorough cycle and the one that prompted the greatest reflection. Examination of my intent (Downey, 2014) and influencing factors (Smyth, 1989) for each contribution led to the following observations:

i. My "knowledge, understanding and experience in the business world" (Berman & Bradt, 2006, p.244) were figural in my reflection of many individual contributions;

ii. Reflection led me to surmise that the above influenced how I interacted with the clients and affected my credibility in clients' minds (Boyce et al., 2010; Blackman et al., 2016)

iii. In a similar way, I felt that the influence of my experience on my coaching interventions affected the level of trust clients seemed to have in me (Alvey & Barclay, 2007; Bush, 2004).

#### 3:5.1.5 My experience may have boosted my own confidence and encouraged me to make interventions I may have otherwise avoided:

Reflection on observations 3:5.1.4 (ii) and (iii) above revealed a further dimension. I pondered if my knowledge and understanding of clients' contexts may have increased their confidence in me as their coach, but also had two other potentially significant reflections:

i. I felt that my understanding of clients' contexts substantiated their feelings of me as a 'peer' – someone who understood their worlds and who had the credibility to be their 'thinking partner'.

ii. The potential effect on clients' confidence was important but I identified that my own confidence was also affected significantly – knowing that I 'knew what I was talking about' allowed me to make interventions I believe I would have otherwise avoided.

An example of (ii) above was an exchange with Client C:

> *"How does being in the spotlight, everyone watching and listening to you feel? What emotions does it trigger in you?"*

After an explanation of how they were feeling, they asked if they should just "get over it" and I responded:

> *"I wouldn't say just get over it, but it is probably going to be a factor on an ongoing basis, that's the job"*

My reflection upon this substantiated 3:5.4.1 (ii) and (iii) above:

- I would not have made a 'normalising' comment if I had not had experience in a CEO role (like the client's) myself;
- My comment may have helped the client adjust to the attention they were receiving; and
- My prior experience may have lent credibility to the comment and enhanced trust.

#### 3:5.1.6 Discussion of findings from the self-reflection exercise

The multiple cycles of reflection on individual coaching sessions undertaken in this exercise certainly provided me with a clearer understanding of my own experience of the issues being explored.

The initial numerical analysis confirmed that my prior experience did indeed seem to influence a material proportion of my coaching interventions. Further reflection suggested that the nature of the influence was greater on issues pertaining to clients' overall contexts (awareness and sensitivity to their work situations; to leadership and management issues; and to corporate rules, mores, cultures and value systems) than to specific technical or task related issues.

The exercise provided me with a good understanding of my "fore-structure" (Smith et al., 2009, p.25) and provided rich data for the next exercise. The most revelatory aspects were:

- The perceived connection between my prior experience and the nature of the care I showed to clients; and
- The possible interconnections between my clients' estimations of my credibility and trust in me with my own confidence.

The exercise also had wider impact on me. First, I feel I learned much about the power, but also the difficulty, of self-reflection. It was more complex than anticipated and heightened my awareness of my marked tendency to privilege cognitive over affective mental processes.

Second, the exercise had a validating effect. I have always sought to allow my business experience to 'inform but not direct' my coaching and the nature of the effect my reflection suggested my experience has on my coaching confirmed his aspiration.

Third, the revelation of a potential connection between my experience and how I display care for clients deepened my understanding of my motivation to be the type of coach I have set out to be. Sharing any learning I have from an executive career I am not particularly proud of helps me make more meaning from a significant phase of my life.

### 3:5.2 Findings from analysis of client interviews

One of the principal aims of this exercise was to explore how clients experience the knowledge, expertise and understanding of their worlds that my non-coaching career affords me and thus complement the findings of the self-reflection exercise that explored my own experience. Four super-ordinate themes emerged from the analysis outlined in Chapter 3:4.3.5 (see Appendix H):

- Critical but not sufficient
- Credibility
- Trust
- Value

These are discussed in Chapters 3.5.2.1-4 below:

#### 3:5.2.1 Critical but not sufficient

My business experience was mentioned by all clients but attitudes towards its importance varied from it being considered desirable (Client A: *"I think some experience in my industry is desirable"*) to it being advantageous (Client C: *"I have personally valued…relevant experience in the job at hand"*). It was however clear that it was not sufficient alone – coaching skills such as listening and probing were highlighted by all clients as being important too.

That clients knew, or sensed, that I "*know enough*" (Client B) to be able to understand them emerged as an important factor – confirmed by there being no references to me being able to provide 'answers'. I tentatively surmise that my experience supports clients' confidence in the coaching process as much as in me personally. Client B's comment illustrates this:

> "*Because, to put it bluntly, I don't want to spend the time trying to educate the coach in what goes on in business - I want to take that level of assumed knowledge as read…"*

It was clear that clients valued the combination of business experience with coaching expertise – it was not sufficient alone. Multiple references to coaching skills confirm this together with qualifications being a means of avoiding "*charlatans"* (Client B) and Clients C's observation that "*you are an expert and a skilled coach".*

#### 3:5.2.2 Credibility

Although not mentioned explicitly by every client, my interpretation suggested that my business experience enhanced all participants' estimation of my credibility as their coach. Four subordinate themes emerged from the analysis (experience linked with my understanding, empathy, challenge or directly with credibility).

'Being understood' is recognized as an important component of coaching (Neves, 2014) and my experience's contribution to my ability to understand them was highlighted by all clients. Comments varied from it being *"assumed knowledge I guess that one needs to have"* (Client B) to "*helpful"* (Clients A and C). My interpretation led me to cluster this under 'credibility' as I believe my understanding enhanced both the coaching process and clients' perceptions of me.

Empathy is also recognised as an important component of coaching (Bluckert, 2005; Lambert & Barley, 2001; Sonesh et al., 2015) and was highlighted by two clients in connection with my experience. Client A referred to empathy explicitly, in conjunction with and similarly to 'understanding', with reference to his particular context:

> "…*it's because you can show that empathy and understanding whereas I think if you went to a generic coach it's quite a different thing"*

This conflation of empathy with understanding seems apposite as I believe 'feeling understood' is an important component of experiencing someone else's empathy.

My interpretation associated Client B's (a very long-standing client) comment with empathy:

> "…*I don't think you and I would have struck up the relationship we have done had you not had it* (experience)"

I surmised from this that he feels that the empathy he has experienced from me in our long relationship, partly derived from my experience, has enhanced my credibility in his mind.

Client C made an important observation about the connection between my experience and the nature of my questioning and challenging:

> "…*because you understand how it works and some of the dynamic, you just instantly ask the right question"*

Since asking relevant and appropriate questions is self-evidently an important aspect of coaching, I am, as above, interpreting this positively and clustering it as something that enhanced credibility. Although the connection between my experience and questioning was only made by one client, I believe the observation has wider relevance.

Finally, all the clients made either a direct or indirect connection between my experience and my credibility. Client A's reference was indirect but the simplest:

> "…*but the key for me was that you had experience within the fund management industry"*

Client B, meanwhile, made a more generic but equally clear observation:

> "*To be credible you need to…'get' the context, the politics, I guess, the scenario"*

Client C made a more nuanced reference:

> "…*one of the things that was compelling for me to work with you was the fact that you had sufficiently different experience to this point as well as your experience in my sector"*

The ‘different experience’ referred to my financial background and the client later highlighted the value derived from challenge from me on financial issues. Once again, my interpretation categorised this as a reference to credibility.

#### 3:5.2.3 Trust

The third super-ordinate theme was originally subordinate but became super through subsumption. Trust was mentioned explicitly by one client and I have interpreted another client’s comment. Client B linked trust explicitly with credentials:

> “*…in establishing your credentials, which in my mind was critical to establishing trust, I think it* (my experience) *does all sort of hang together”*

Interpretation led me to categorise Client B’s comment under the theme of trust:

> “*Thinking about it, I think of you as a peer and we have a peer to peer relationship”*

Setting aside the highly complimentary nature of this comment, I am linking ‘peer’ status with a high level of trust in me as an individual – something which I believe enhances trust.

Client C made a wider point:

> “*…with someone who has got relevant experience, trust in the discussion is high”*

This less personal, more generic observation suggested that trust in the output of discussions with someone with experience is high – an additional dimension to trust in coaching.

#### 3:5.2.4 Value

The super-ordinate theme of 'value' was also originally subordinate. Each client made an explicit or implicit reference to my experience being linked with their estimation of the value of the coaching.

Client A linked my understanding of and empathy for his situation to the fulfilment of the primary objective of the assignment and thus the value to him and his employer:

> *"…I think it was providing a reduction in the level of stress and anxiety…"*

Client B speculated how our relationship would have differed if there had not been a *"shared understanding"* of his context:

> "…*I wonder whether I would have lost interest or it just wouldn't have turned into the productive relationship that it has done…"*

Client C built on their prior comment about trust in discussions with experienced individuals being greater with:

> *"…I know you are going to get to the value quite quickly and I then have quite a lot of confidence in the output."*

Although referring to different aspects of 'value', my interpretation suggested that my prior experience contributed to the value derived by the clients from our coaching relationships.

#### 3:5.2.5 Discussion of findings from analysis of client interviews

Maintaining an appropriate balance in IPA's "double hermeneutic" (Smith et al., 2009, p.3) was challenging but I am confident that I remained "closely involved with the lived experiences" (p.92) of the clients and that my interpretations "contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual" (p.92).

I believe this exercise confirmed that that the participants experienced the knowledge, expertise and understanding of their worlds that my non-coaching career affords me in our relationships. In particular, it acted as an initial credential; and enhanced my credibility, their trust and their estimation of value in the coaching.

## Chapter 3:6: Findings of this Small Scale Research Project

The overarching aim of this project was to develop the researcher's understanding of how his own non-coaching career experiences affect his relationships with clients. It consisted of two distinct but interrelated exercises. First, an exercise of self-reflection on three client coaching sessions to enable me to gain a clearer understanding of my own experience of the issues and, second, an analysis of semi-structured interviews with the same clients inquiring into their experiences of their relationships with me, their coach.

My observations from the self-reflection exercise are:

**3:6.1.1** Simple, initial observation suggested that my non-coaching career experiences had a marked influence of on my coaching and relationships with clients;

**3:6.1.2** More thoughtful reflection suggested that my experience of the "work situation" (Dean & Meyer, 2002, p.82); of leadership and management issues (Kombarakaran et al., 2008; (Dagley, 2010)and the mores and culture of corporate settings (W. H. Berman & Bradt, 2006) were the principal influences;

**3:6.1.3** My experience influenced my care for clients' interests – I was keen to make them aware of risks of situations in my own career that I felt I had mishandled;

**3:6.1.4** I sensed that my experience had enhanced my credibility in clients' minds (Blackman et al., 2016) and their trust in me (Alvey & Barclay, 2007);

**3:6.1.5** I sensed that my experience had a tangible effect on my own confidence – allowing me to make interventions I feel I would have otherwise avoided.

My observations from my analysis of three client interviews are:

**3:6.2.1** That my prior experience was important to my clients' assessments of our relationships but it was not sufficient - it had to be complemented by coaching skills and expertise;

**3:6.2.2** That my experience had contributed to my understanding of their contexts; to the empathy I was able to show; and to the challenge that I was to make and these in turn had enhanced clients' estimations of my credibility;

**3:6.2.3** That my experience had enhanced clients' trust in me and in the coaching process;

**3:6.2.4** That my experience had enhanced the value of the coaching, either by achieving its key objective, maintaining the client's interest or achieving relatively quick outcomes.

Within the confines of the limitations of this project, it seems clear that my non-coaching career experience has a notable effect on my relationships with clients. This was evident in both my own feelings and in clients' views. It gives me confidence; contributes to me feeling I am a peer of successful and senior clients; and allows me to make potentially useful contributions that I would otherwise not make. For clients, it enhances their estimations of my credibility; it engenders trust in me and in the coaching process and it increases the value of coaching.

It is reiterated that this project makes "no claims as to the generalisability of their results but suggest rather that the data obtained might be useful in providing some insights" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.95) to other practitioners with similar backgrounds working with similar clients in similar contexts.

Nevertheless, I assert that the findings of this project, plus the further exploration of the same issues conducted for my ARP (Section 4) add to our understanding of "the role that a coach's background plays on the outcome and quality of the coaching intervention" (Athanasopoulou et al., 2015, p.30).

Further objectives of this project were related to preparation for my ARP that uses an IPA informed methodology. These were:

i. To explore my “fore-structure” (Smith et al., 2009, p.25) or, as suggested by Brocki & Wearden (2006, p.91), make an acknowledgement “of the researcher’s involvement (including the role of preconceptions, beliefs and aims) prior to the analysis stage”;

ii. To familiarise myself with other aspects of IPA to support my application of it in the larger project.

Both of these objectives were fulfilled. The first was an integral part of the project and the learning from it transferred easily to the larger exercise. The success of (ii) above was limited by the modest scale of the project, but it provided invaluable learning about the use and application of IPA.

The next section of my thesis provides a report on an applied research project that explores how a cohort of four third party coaches and a cohort of clients of the coaches experience the phenomenon being researched.

# Section 4

# Applied Research Project

# Section 4 Applied Research Project

This section of my thesis provides a report on an Applied Research Project (ARP) conducted between September 2020 and August 2021. A proposal and ethics release form were submitted and approved by CCCU in November 2020 and January 2021 respectively and are available on request.

## Chapter 4:1 Introduction

This applied research project explores the issue of the role played by certain aspects of coaches' backgrounds in their coaching and seeks to address Kauffman & Bachkirova's question (2009, p.3) referred to above: "Does the coaches' background make a difference…?"

### 4:1.1 Terms of reference

My critical review of the academic and practitioner literature summarised in Section 2 above revealed that very little research had been conducted on the role coaches' backgrounds play in coaching interventions but that the dominant discourse on coaching maintains that prior experience of clients' contexts is unnecessary, even possibly disadvantageous. However, the findings of my own self-reflection and of interviews with a selection of my clients conducted for my SSRP (see Section 3) indicated that my background does have a tangible influence on my relationships with clients. Consequently, the aim of my ARP is to provide a detailed examination of how a cohort of third party coaches and their clients experienced the coaches' prior career backgrounds in their relationships and how they made sense of that experience (Smith, 2011b).

### 4:1.2 Context of the research

Over twenty years ago (Brunner, 1998, p.516) pointed out that "coaching takes many forms, from technical counselling to the psychological domination that flirts with suggestion, for this is a domain devoid of any fixed deontology". The definition of 'coaching' has broadened further since then (Stokes et al., 2020) and it is therefore important to clearly state the context of the research undertaken in this project.

The nature of the work studied is variously termed 'executive', 'business', 'leadership' or 'workplace' coaching and it represents a distinct portion of the highly heterogeneous coaching industry. Kilburg (1996, p.142) defined it as "… a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant…to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and, consequently, to improve the effectiveness of the client's organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement".

In addition, other important characteristics of the coaching studied are:

- All of the coaches involved were formally trained and accredited;
- All of the work was undertaken on a commercial basis with fees paid by the clients' employers;
- All of the work undertaken was subject to strict confidentiality between individual clients ('coachees') and coaches.

#### 4:1.3 Themes of the research

The methodology applied to the research project (see Chapter 4:3) was informed by the core principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) and involved semi-structured interviews with cohorts of coaches and clients (see Chapter 4:4). Whilst seeking to avoid limiting or influencing the content and outcomes of these interviews, consideration was given to themes observed in the Critical Review of Literature (Section 2) and that emerged from an inquiry into my own practice undertaken in my SSRP (Section 3). These included:

- How does coaches' prior career experience ('it') affect clients' initial assessment of coaches? (Tompson et al., 2008)
- How does it affect clients' overall assessment of coaches?
- How does it affect coaches' and clients' estimations of credibility? (Blackman et al., 2016) (Jowett et al., 2012)
- How does it affect trust between clients and coaches? (Alvey & Barclay, 2007)

- How does it affect questioning (Passmore, 2010a) and challenging (Cox, 2013) in coaching?
- How does it affect estimations of the value of coaching?
- What aspects of it are particularly relevant in coaching?

These themes were pursued tentatively in interviews with ample scope provided for participants to steer the course of the conversations and to express their own views.

#### 4:1.4 Structure of this report

The structure of this report reflects the CCCU guidelines and is divided into six chapters:

- **Chapter 4:1** introduces the purpose of the research project, outlines the context of the work studied and outlines the themes explored;
- **Chapter 4:2** summarises the relevant findings of a thorough critical review undertaken in 2017-2019 of the extant academic and practitioner literatures and explains how they informed the research;
- **Chapter 4:3** describes and justifies the philosophical perspective, research approach and methodological approach applied in the project. It also covers the approaches taken to sample selection and ethical issues (including power dynamics, confidentiality and informed consent). Finally, it notes important limiting factors of the project;
- **Chapter 4:4** sets out the research activities undertaken including the collection, analysis and review of data and themes. The influences of findings from the literature and of the philosophical perspective taken are explored;
- **Chapter 4:5** presents a discussion of the findings of the project and offers an interpretation of them in the context of the extant research;
- **Chapter 4:6** outlines some conclusions from the findings and makes certain recommendations for the practice of coaching and for future research.

## Chapter 4:2 Literature review

A comprehensive "critical review" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p.93-97) of the academic and practitioner literature on executive coaching was conducted between June 2017 and September 2019 (see Section 2). Between September 2019 and September 2022 further reviews of the literature on coaching and on research methodologies were undertaken. An additional 47 peer reviewed academic journal articles (20 on coaching; 27 on methodologies); 7 academic books (3 on coaching; 4 on methodology) and 4 professional service surveys were studied.

Two high level observations emerged from the initial review (Section 2) that informed and influenced the research undertaken for this project. These are summarised in Chapters 4:2.1 and 4:2.2 below.

### 4:2.1 Changes in the importance ascribed to coaches' backgrounds

The importance ascribed to coaches' prior experience changed in the second half of the twentieth and the early decades of the twenty first centuries (Ives, 2008). Up until the late 1970s coaching was regarded as "a process in which a manager, through direct discussion and guided activity, helps a colleague to solve a problem, or to do a task better than would otherwise have been the case" (Gray et al., 2016, p.15).

This changed materially in the 1980s and 1990s and my critical review of the literature identified five factors that led to coaching being "regarded as a form of facilitation or people-management style, and strictly non-directive" (Ives, 2008, p.103). The influences of the motivational movement in the US in the 1930s; of the humanist movement within psychology from the 1960s onwards; of the changes in the workplace in western economies caused by technological advances and globalisation; of the increased supply of coaches with little or no contextual experience or expertise in business; and finally of a number of vested interests led to this metamorphosis.

### 4:2.2 An alternative discourse

Although the dominant discourse in coaching suggests that prior experience or expertise in clients' contexts is not important, the critical review of literature revealed evidence in the outcome and case study research that suggests it can have noticeable effects on coaching relationships (Bush, 2004; Rekalde et al., 2015; Dean & Meyer, 2002).

The literature review identified coaches' credibility as an important influence on the effectiveness of coaching (Blackman et al., 2016) and also that credibility is linked to coaches' prior experience: "The evidence available in the 111 studies reviewed here tends towards the latter conclusion, that skills or expertise in the sector or in executive management are preferable" (p.473). Since credibility is the only feature that could be associated with coaches' backgrounds, it emerged as an important theme for this research project.

Similarly, the review also prompted exploration of the effects coaches' backgrounds may have on trust in coaching relationships. Alvey & Barclay (2007) identified three themes that were "particularly important to the establishment of trusting relationships" – "coach credibility, coach objectivity, and confirming behaviors" (p.22-23) – and noted that "The coach's background was deemed important in the initial trust building with the coach" (p.23).

Finally, the literature highlighted that coaches' backgrounds may have effects on two fundamental components of coaching – questioning and challenging of clients, both of which were explored in this project.

### 4:2.3 Conclusion

The conclusions from my critical review of the literature were that:

- The role ascribed to the backgrounds of coaches changed markedly in the past fifty years;

- Some notable vested interests contributed to coaching becoming regarded principally as the facilitation of clients' self-learning;
- Coaches' experience and expertise in clients' contexts was considered unimportant in this manifestation of coaching;
- The discourse on coaching is dominated by vested interests keen to minimise the contribution to coaching of coaches' prior experience;
- Nevertheless, there is evidence in the outcome and case study literature that suggests that coaches' prior experience could have material effects on coaching relationships; and
- The effects highlighted on coaches' credibility, trust, questioning and challenging in coaching relationships were worthy of exploration in the research project.

My own experience of executive coaching suggested that a binary discourse on the varying contributions made to coaching by psychological understanding and by coaches' prior experience of clients' worlds risks creating a false dichotomy. Whilst both bring important and different components to bear, an optimal outcome maybe to combine the two.

As quoted above, Whitmore's (2012) observation supports this conclusion: "The ideal would seem to be an expert coach with a wealth of technical knowledge too. It is, however, very hard for experts to withhold their expertise sufficiently to coach well" (p.42). This research project sought to explore how coaches' prior experience can support the pursuit of Whitmore's 'ideal'.

The following chapter outlines the philosophical perspectives and research methodology applied to this project and to the Small Scale Research Project (Section 3).

## Chapter 4:3 Research methods

Although the research methods used for this project were similar to those applied to the SSRP described above (Section 3), the philosophical perspectives; the research approach, methods and framework; the sampling and sizing criteria; the preparation of interview schedules; the ethical considerations; and the limitations to the research are described in fuller detail here for a number of reasons. First, I made considerable further effort to deepen my understanding of the methodology applied before starting this project. Second, this additional effort resulted in notable refinements to my approach to applying the core principles of IPA to the research (see Chapter 4.3.3 below). Third, the importance of this project to my overall thesis is sufficient to justify a more detailed explanation of the approaches taken].

There were seven distinct phases of project. These are listed here and described in Chapter 4:4 below:

- Definition of the philosophical perspectives underpinning the research (see Chapter 4:3.1);
- Selection of the research approach, methods and procedures (Chapters 4:3.2, 4:3.3 and 4:3.4);
- Selection of the sizing and sampling criteria (Chapter 4:3.5);
- Preparation of interview schedule (Chapter 4:3.6 and Appendix I);
- Recruitment of participants (Chapter 4:4.2);
- Data collection - conducting, recording and transcription of interviews (Chapter 4:4.3);
- Data analysis (Chapter 4:4.4).

### 4:3.1 Philosophical perspectives

In order to ensure rigour, Willig's (2012, p.10) framework was used to establish the philosophical perspectives and epistemological positioning of the research. Willig's three questions were reflected upon, researched and addressed:

- What kind of knowledge did I aim to create?
- What assumptions did I make about the worlds being studied?
- How do I conceptualise my own role as the researcher in the research process?

In answer to the first question, the research can be described as 'critical realist' (CR) as it acknowledges that "there is a reality but that it is usually difficult to apprehend" (Easton, 2009, p.119-120) and that "different valid perspectives on reality" (Maxwell, 2012, p.9) can exist; as 'pragmatic-critical realist' because it reflects a view that "a means of evaluating the veracity of cognitive systems and theories…is through the practical success or failure" (Johnson & Duberley, 2000, p.162); and as 'phenomenological, interpretative, and idiographic' (Smith et al., 2009) (see below).

A CR perspective was particularly appropriate for research into coaching relationships. CR's "integration of realist ontology (there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories, and constructions) with a constructivist epistemology (our understanding of the world is inevitably a construction built from our own perspectives and standpoint" (Creswell and Piano Clark, 2017, as cited by Leonard & Willig, 2021, p.55) reflects the highly individual nature of dyadic coaching. Similarly, CR's "appreciation and valuing of context-specific conditions" (Deforge & Shaw, 2012, p.86) reflects the particular aspect of coaching being studied.

Two important dimensions of CR are recognised in the research. First, that "There exists both an external world independently of human consciousness, and at the same time a dimension which includes our socially determined knowledge about reality" (Danermark, Ekstrom, et al., 2002, p.5-6). Second, it does "not deny that there is a real social world we can attempt to understand or access through philosophy and social science, but (*recognised that*) some knowledge can be closer to reality than other knowledge" (Fletcher, 2017, p.182).

My answer to Willig's second question regarding assumptions made is that the world "is made up of both objective and subjective layers of reality, which are ultimately subjectively interpreted" (Leonard & Willig, 2021, p.54). This is underlined by the centrality of language to the research which itself contributes to the reality it described and interpreted.

My own role in the research was as an "insider interpreter of participant's subjective and contextual reality" (p.54). As an experienced executive coach myself, I seek to explore how the phenomenon studied was experienced by the participants in and through my own experience.

The philosophical perspectives outlined above reflect both my personal sense making of the world and the subject matter studied. By focussing on "the practical application of findings, rather than enquiry for the sake of science" (Ryan, 2019, p.25), it addresses my personal objectives. By seeking "to produce evidence to inform policy or practice, based on what works, for whom and in what circumstances" (p.25) and by recognising "the conditional nature of all of its results" (Bhaskar, 1979, p.6), it reflects the highly personal and heterogeneous nature of coaching.

#### 4:3.2 Research approach

The nature of the subject matter (coaching relationships) made a research approach that "is interested, in particular, in the way the world is understood, experienced and produced" (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2009, p.2) appropriate. A qualitative stance in which I explored "subjectivity and experience" and sought to "understand better what their (*my*) research participants' experiences are like, what they mean to them, how they talk about them, and how they make sense of them" (Willig, 2012, p.5) was taken at all stages. 'Rich data' was sought with the objective of achieving a coherent understanding of the underlying richness (de Haan, 2019).

More specifically, a phenomenological approach that views "an experience as the main object of investigation and not the story of an experience" (Gill, 2014, p.120) was applied. This approach also provided opportunities to bring my own experience as a coach to bear as in phenomenology "the researcher is fully involved, interested and open to what may appear. Researcher subjectivity is prized and intersubjectivity is embraced" (Finlay, 2008, p.3).

That "phenomenologists strive to understand the meaning of a person's experience rather than providing causal explanation of such experiences" and their "ultimate aim is to understand an experience, as far as possible, as opposed to using this understanding to predict of explain behaviour" suited the aims of the project and my epistemological position. A phenomenological approach was also consistent with the project's critical realism perspective – by studying the participants' subjective experience of the phenomenon, it sought to increase understanding of reality but did "not view this as a direct mirroring" (Harper, 2011, p.89). The approach taken is thus "roughly in the middle of the realism-relativism axis" (p.89) as it seeks participants' perspectives on their lived experiences, rather than factual accuracy, but does assume that their perspectives informed understanding of the phenomenon.

Establishing my particular approach to phenomenology, and particularly my stance on the influence of my own experience, are important issues. Considering them led me to appraising the contributions to the development of phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

"Husserl is the putative founder of phenomenological philosophy, and his work directly informs 'descriptive' phenomenological methodologies, which seek to describe the essence of experiences" (Gill, 2014, p.119). In this style of inquiry the researcher "needed to bracket out the outer world as well as individual biases in order to successfully achieve contact with the essences" (Laverty, 2003, p.22). It attempts "to see the phenomenon in its essence" (Finlay, 2008, p.2) and requires the researcher to "free ourselves from our prejudices and previous understandings, securing a level of detachment such that we encounter the things themselves" (p.4).

Heidegger was a student of Husserl and developed a different approach to phenomenology. His work created 'interpretative' phenomenology and "introduced the hermeneutic method into modern philosophy by explicating the necessity of interpretation in the study of human being" (Gill, 2014, p.120). This reflected the view that "nothing can be encountered without reference to a person's background understanding" (Laverty, 2003, p.24) and that "every encounter involves an interpretation influenced by an individual's background or historicity" (p.24). Put more simply, "we cannot escape our historicity and our own personal 'take' on the world" (Finlay, 2008, p.5).

Gadamer developed Heidegger's approach further and discussed what Finlay (2008) describes as a 'dialectical dance' that involves moving "between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight; between naïve openness and sophisticated criticality" (p.3). In Gadamer's own words (Gadamer, 1975, p.268-269):

> "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings".

I reflect Heidegger's and Gadamer's positions on the efficacy of utilising prior experience or pre-understanding in the project and thus "interpretation is (*was*) not a choice but an integral aspect of (*the*) research" (Gill, 2014, p.120). In order to fulfil the requirement of an interpretative phenomenological inquiry to have an awareness of my own biases, I made a self-reflective exercise an integral part of my SSRP and used it as an opportunity "to give considerable thought to their own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experience relates to the issues being researched" (Laverty, 2003, p.28). This exercise highlighted potential biases that shaped my interpretation of the data, but also allowed me "to bracket in how experiences might enrich the interpretations" (Callary et al., 2015, p.64). This proved to be essential to my execution of the project (see below).

An additional advantage of using an interpretative approach was that it mirrors an important aspect of the research's subject matter. Examining how coaches' prior career experience can affect their relationships with clients involved exploring how one form of 'pre-understand' manifested itself in relationships and I felt it would be interesting to reflect on similarities between this and the research process.

The choice of a specific research method was straightforward once I was clear about my philosophical perspective and overall attitude to the approach to be taken.

### 4:3.3 Research method

The research method used was based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This is justified by a number of factors. First, it is now an established part of "the qualitative methods repertoire" (Nizza et al., 2021, p.369). Second, it is increasingly popular as a multi-disciplinary qualitative methodology (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014). Third, because it "is committed to understanding the first person perspective from the third-person position, so far as possible, through intersubjective inquiry and analysis" (Larkin et al., 2011). Fourth, it considers human experience as a source of knowledge development (Rajasinghe, 2019).

IPA was consistent with the philosophical perspectives outlined in Chapter 4:3.1 above because it goes "beyond description...generating an insider's perspective – but it states no single, closed, a priori, theoretical assumption about how that insider's perspective may be interpreted" (Larkin et al., 2006, p.113-114). It also reflected the research approach outlined above by being based on personal experiences and focussed on interpretation rather than description.

IPA was developed by Professor John Smith, originally as a health psychology research methodology (Burt et al., 2024). With others, Smith wrote the definitive work on IPA (Smith et al., 2009) and asserted that is "informed by concepts and debates from the three key areas of philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography" (p.11).

IPA is phenomenological in that it "values the participants' own perspectives" and "is concerned with how the person binds and integrates discrete elements of perceptions, memories, judgements, assumptions, and beliefs" (Jeong & Othman, 2016, p.559). It is hermeneutic since it is in the interpretative rather than descriptive tradition and uses a 'double hermeneutic' whereby the "participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world" (Smith, 2004, p.40). It is very specifically idiographic in that it "refers to an in-depth analysis of single cases and examines individual perspectives of study participants in their unique contexts" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p.8).

In addition to the factors highlighted above, the choice of IPA is justified because it is particularly applicable to research on coaching conducted by a coach.

First, since "coaching takes many forms" and "is a domain devoid of any fixed deontology" (Brunner, 1998, p.516), it is important to focus research on how individual clients in individual contexts experience it. Thus, "IPA studies, first and foremost, as offering detailed, nuanced analysis of particular instances of lived experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p.37) made it well suited.

Rajasinghe et al. (2021, p.871 ) reiterated this: "IPA's focus on human experience to develop understanding, detailed attention to individual experiential accounts and contextual sensitivity positions it as an appropriate methodology to explore some timely questions that can facilitate progress without reducing coaching to a mechanistic process". IPA's particular suitability for research on coaching has become well recognised. In addition to Rajasinghe's (2019 and 2021) commendations, it has been used successfully by other practitioners (Lech et al., 2018; Passmore & Mortimer, 2011).

Second, I noted Smith & Osborn's (2015, p.54) observation that the researcher may find themselves "adapting the method to your own particular way of working and the particular topic you are investigating". I felt there were some similarities in the techniques used in IPA to how I coach. Like my coaching, it attempts "to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the participant" but is also an "endeavour for both participant and researcher" (Shinebourne, 2011, p.22) – which mirrors my use of tentative observation and interpretation in coaching.

My third reason for using IPA was that it regards the research participant as "the experiential expert on the subject" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.60) being investigated – which also mirrors my coaching style that privileges the client's views and feelings on all subjects.

The fourth reason was the flexibility IPA allows the researcher. In contrast to Giorgi's (2010) reservations (see below), once I had immersed myself in it, I came to the view that IPA is "more of a craft than a technique or scientific method" (Gill, 2014, p.126) and embraced the opportunity to apply its principles with flexibility and sensitivity to the research participants' contexts.

The final reason for my choice of research method was Larkin and Thompson's (2012, p.101) comment that the "outcome of a successful IPA study is likely to include an element of 'giving voice' (capturing and reflecting upon the principal aims and concerns of the research participants)". This resonated with my view discussed above that the particular dimensions that coaches with relevant prior experience can bring to coaching relationships are generally under-understood. Giving such coaches clearer 'voice' in the discourse on coaching by "articulating taken-for-granted meanings, practices, habits, skills and concerns" (Benner, 1994a) became a key objective of this project.

The choice of IPA was justified by analysis of and comparison with other possible methods:

- Grounded theory - with its more theoretical approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1994);
- Discourse analysis - with its privileging of language over content ;(Gill, 2000)
- Ethnography - with a similar profile as above (Brewer, 2000)
- Narrative analysis - with its emphasis on 'stories' over experiences (Bamberg, 2012);
- Case study - with its more positivist epistemology (Hartley, 2004)
- Thematic analysis - with its less idiographic focus (Braun & Clarke, 2006) – see below.

The choice of IPA as the research method for this project rather than the approaches above was given thorough consideration at the outset of my research in September 2019 and again when this project was designed in September and October 2020. IPA's applicability, particularly in preference to thematic analysis (TA), was considered again in October and November 2023.

That TA, and particularly, reflexive TA, could have been used for this project is in no doubt. Nevertheless, the choice of IPA is justified by two further factors. First, it is acknowledged that there is a "lack of substantial literature on thematic analysis" (Nowell et al., 2017, p.1) and that for an inexperienced researcher this introduces unwelcomed complexity. Second, and more importantly, IPA is avowedly idiographic and "involves a detailed focus on the analysis of each case, before developing themes across cases" (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, p.42). Honouring the individuality of each research participant was important due to the highly personal nature of coaching.

IPA was chosen despite three reservations. First, and most importantly, its applicability for the subject matter being researched was questioned. Eatough and Smith (2008) observe that "Typically, IPA studies explore existential matters of considerable importance for the participants" (p.204) and this was not obviously the case for at least one cohort of participants in this project. Whilst a study of the relevance of their own prior career backgrounds to coaching was likely to be of interest to the coaches interviewed, they were unlikely to be especially important, let alone existential, to the coachees taking part. Nevertheless, the backgrounds of coaches and client-coach relationships are considered to be of sufficient relevance to all parties to justify the approach.

The second reservation of note was IPA's reliance on typed transcripts. Rajasinghe (2019, p.10) points out that "Transcripts are unable to convey the subtleties of participants' non-verbal communication" and went on to suggest that this could be considered a limitation of any study utilising IPA. My own experience of coaching substantiates the importance of being able to see, as well as hear, clients to gain understanding of their sentiments. Two actions were taken in the interview and analysis stages of the project to mitigate this reservation. First, I took detailed notes of each interviewee's body and facial cues during the interviews. Second, I listened to each recording several times while reading each transcript in order to capture as many cues from verbal intonation as possible.

The most generally aired reservation concerning IPA surrounds its flexibility. Giorgi (2010) posits that its lack of a prescriptive method invalidates its efficacy and reduces it to "individualistic experiential analysis" (p.10). I disagree and believe IPA's flexibility was an advantage as it provides opportunities to ensure sensitivity to each interviewee's context while remaining phenomenological. That said, I was aware throughout that the lack of a prescribed IPA template made the research process "easy to do badly and difficult to do well" (Wagstaff et al., 2014). I reflected this concern by giving special attention to "commitment and rigour" (Yardley, 2000, p.219) and "trustworthiness" (Petty et al., 2012 citing Robson, 2011) and by highlighting the findings' lack of generalisability.

Recent discussion of the applicability of IPA in qualitative research has made the reservations highlighted above less relevant. The use of IPA in this project is entirely consistent with Smith et al.'s (2022) advocacy of potential 'innovative' approaches (including "multiple perspectives" (p.120)) in an entire chapter in their most up to date text devoted to future development of its use. Moreover, their assertion that it is the "core elements of IPA – concern with lived experience, hermeneutic inquiry, idiographic focus" (p.196-197) - that should remain central to how it is used underlines my confidence that a methodology informed by those core principles was appropriate for this project. As Smith et al. (2022, p.119) note, "it is also possible to apply these principles within other research designs, and still maintain an IPA approach". This recent acknowledgement by the creators of the methodology endorses the use of IPA here in an innovative way than in more established forms (Burt et al., 2024).

### 4:3.4 Research framework

I strove to apply the core principles of IPA thoughtfully and remained cognisant throughout of warnings of caution. First, I reminded myself that "simply operationalising the six steps because of the seemingly straightforward, linear presentation in Smith et al., 2009" (Engward & Goldspink, 2020. p.47) would be a mistake and returned repeatedly to the original data. Second, Benner's comment (1994, p.xvii) that interpretative phenomenological research "cannot be reduced to a set of procedures and techniques" but must nevertheless "be auditable and plausible" prompted me to put structure around my analysis.

Consequently, I prepared a framework for the project based on Smith et al.'s (2009) guidelines but set out to use it with flexibility and sensitivity. Key elements included:

- Positioning the researcher's role as being "implicated in facilitating and making sense" (p.28);
- Conducting the interviews in a "collaborative" manner and tone (Brocki & Wearden, 2006)
- Positioning participants as "the experiential experts on the topic" (Smith et al., 2009), p.64);
- Bracketing my "fore-structure" (p.25) out and in when preparing for and undertaking interviews;
- Conducting "semi-structured interviews where an interview schedule was used flexibly and the participant had an important stake in what is covered" (p.4);
- Blending "organization, flexibility and sensitivity" with "imagination, playfulness, and a combination of reflective, critical and conceptual thinking" (p.40); and
- Asking open and non-directive questions (p.60) influenced by (Heron, 1976) facilitative, cathartic and catalytic styles of intervention.

One particular feature of the framework used should be highlighted. The most common designs of IPA studies "involve collecting qualitative data from a reasonably homogenous group who share a certain contextual perspective on a given experience" (Larkin et al., 2019, p.184). Nevertheless, I wanted to reflect Eatough and Smith's (2008, p.193) sentiment concerning IPA by "adopting a creative and imaginative stance to the approach which is in keeping with its original spirit".

I thus decided to interview two separate cohorts – one of coaches with relevant backgrounds and another made up of a client of each of the coaches. This reflected the dyadic nature of the coaching studied and my strongly held view that the client and her views are at least as important as the coach's in any discussion of coaching relationships. Employing multiple perspectives "of data collection or analysis in order to establish a rounded, multi-layered understanding of the research topic" (Yardley, 2000, p.222) has a well-established role in qualitative research generally but has only more recently been adopted in IPA studies.

Larkin, Shaw and Flowers (2019) promoted the inclusion of multiple perspectives in IPA studies and asserted that "multiperspectival designs retain IPA's strong connection to phenomenological and hermeneutic concepts". Their highlighting of the value of including multiple perspectives to "address relational, systemic, or other socially nuanced research questions" (2019, p.185) prompted my decision to garner data from both parties in the coaching dyad. Since the project was conducted, Smith et al. (2022, p.122) have confirmed multispectival designs' place in IPA research that "use a series of different perspectives to explore a single, often interactive, phenomenon from different points of view".

Ummel and Achille (2016) reiterated this approach and its particular applicability to researching coaching dyads when they state that analysing data from different perspectives allows researchers "to derive a more complete picture of a given phenomenon" (p.813).

Whilst I believe the approach of interviewing cohorts of the two different parties in dyadic coaching relationships is appropriate methodologically, it is important to stress that it was not undertaken with any aim of identifying causality in the research. It was used for two related purposes. First, to provide internal reliability checks (Jeong & Othman, 2016). Second, to enhance "persuasiveness" and to "increase the potential contextual range of the analysis" where "both author and audience begin to feel more confident the analysis is telling them something substantive" (Larkin et al., 2019, p.195).

Methodical soundness aside, the decision to interview two cohorts created four additional sources of complexity in the project.

First, I was alert to the possibility of the clients feeling under "subtle pressure" (Ummel & Achille, 2016, p.808) to particate in the project when asked by their coach to do so. How this issue was managed is covered in Chapter 4:4.2. Second, "managing the possible influence of the first interview on the second" (Ummel & Achille, 2016, p.810) of each dyad demanded careful reflection (see Chapter 4:4.4). Third, having two perspectives on each relationship increased the risks of "loss of idiography, the artificial construction of consensus, or the denial of difference" (Larkin et al., 2019, p.192) (see Chapters 4:4.4.2 and 4:4.5). Fourth, the familiarity between the members of the dyads made managing confidentiality more complex and affected how verbatim quotes were presented (see Chapters 4:3.7, 4:4.5 and 4:5.3).

### 4:3.5 Sizing and sampling criteria

Sample sizes are typically small in IPA exercises since they seek to gain insiders' perspectives on specific phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2016) and require in depth analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith). Smith et al. (2009, p.51) and Turpin et al. (1997, p.4) suggest that sample sizes of three to six and six to eight respectively are appropriate for IPA research studies. In total, eight participants took part in this project – four coaches and four clients (one per coach). The slightly higher than average sample size was offset by the narrow focus of the topic being researched and I considered it to be manageable.

Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2007, p.111) observe that when the purpose of a project "is not to generalise to a population but to obtain insights into a phenomenon...the most common method of sampling in qualitative research is purposeful sampling". Consequently, "mixed purposeful sampling" (p.111) reflecting six considerations important to executing high standard IPA studies was used:

- First, I set out to construct a cohort of coaches and to influence the selection of clients that I believed would "illuminate a particular research question, and develop a full and interesting interpretation of the data" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.95);
- Second, I identified potential participants who I believed would "represent a perspective, rather than a population" (Smith et al., 2009, p.49);
- Third, I sought coaches "for whom the research question will be significant" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.57), ie coaches who presented their prior career experience as a component of their distinctiveness in the coaching market;
- Fourth, I sought coaches for whom coaching was regarded as "an integral part of the life experience" (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014, p.9), ie their coaching practices were significant in their work portfolios;
- Fifth, and more practically, each coach was selected because I felt they would be "able and **willing"** (researcher's emphasis) to offer us a view of the phenomenology under review" (Smith et al., 2009, p.40);
- Lastly, "pragmatic considerations (ease or difficulty of contacting potential participants, relative rarity of the phenomenon)" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p.9) were addressed and reserve candidates were identified to be approached if recruitment proved to be difficult.

As stated above, the sampling strategy emphasised 'perspective representation' over 'population representation' (Gray, 2014). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select individuals who represented the phenomenon of interest. Exclusive purposive sampling strategies such as theoretical, quota or stratified (Robinson, 2014) were rejected and participants were chosen to guarantee perspective representation.

One feature of the sampling methods used for this project should be highlighted. All four of the coaches interviewed were known to me in advance (see Chapter 4:3.7.1) and some might consider this a limiting factor. The decision to recruit participants in this way was taken after thorough consideration of alternatives and was subject to debate with, and ultimate approval by, a CCCU Board of Studies (in January 2021).

The decision to recruit participants who were known to me was based on my desire to ensure maximum reliability of the representation of the phenomenon being researched. To be meaningful, the coaches participating needed to have had prior career experiences that were similar to the roles their clients were fulfilling.

Consideration was given to identifying candidates through one of the professional bodies I am associated with, such as EMCC or APECS (Association of Professional Executive Coaches and Supervisors). The selection of the approach taken over these routes is justified by the need to achieve homogeneity of the sample where homogeneity "refers to a probable shared perspective upon the phenomenon of interest"(Larkin et al., 2019, p.182). The approach taken was practical and allowed me to recruit participants whose career backgrounds I knew to be appropriate.

Following this approach addressed all of the considerations observed in the peer reviewed academic literature on research methodology listed above – to create a sample that illuminates a particular question; that represents a perspective rather than a population; where the question being researched is both significant and integral to all; that is able to participate; and that is practically feasible.

### 4:3.6 Preparation of interview schedules

An interview schedule of questions to be asked in the semi-structured interviews of the coaches and clients was prepared, as suggested by Smith el al. (2009). The principal influences on the selection of questions were:

#### 4:3.6.1 The critical review of literature

As noted in Chapter 4:2.3 above, my critical review of the literature highlighted that the possible effects of coaches' prior career experiences on coaches' credibility (Blackman et al., 2016), trust (Alvey & Barclay, 2007), questioning and challenging (Cox, 2003) in coaching relationships were worthy of exploration in the research project.

#### 4:3.6.2 The self-reflection exercise within my SSRP

Both components of my SSRP were designed to contribute to this project. The first component was an exercise of self-reflection on how I understand and make sense of the influence of my prior career experience on my coaching and client relationships. This exercise addressed Benner's (Benner, 1994b, p.108) suggestion that "interpretative researchers critically reflect on what their biases and blind spots might be and why they think the questions that they are asking are relevant".

The exercise provided me with understand of my "fore-structure" (Smith et al., 2009, p.25) by exploring my "preconceptions, beliefs and aims" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.91) as well as my affective reactions to reflection on the issue. The aim of this was to make me "aware of one's own bias, so that text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth" (Gadamer, 1975, p.268). In turn, I sought to use the heightened self-awareness gained to both "bracket out" and "bracket in" (Callary et al., 2015, p.67) my own experience. This served to reinforce the phenomenological nature of IPA by seeking "an insider perspective on the lived experiences of individuals" (Fade, 2004, p.648).

Four observations about how my prior career experience influences my coaching emerged from the self-refection exercise in my SSRP that were reflected in the interview schedule and conduct of the interviews in this project:

- I felt my clients' estimations of my credibility as a coach were affected by my "understanding and experience in the business world" (Berman & Bradt, 2006, p.244);
- I felt the levels of trust clients had in me was affected by my prior experiences (Bush, 2004);
- I felt my prior experience influenced how I exercised care for my clients – it prompted me to highlight pitfalls that I had encountered in my own career;
- I felt my prior experience boosted my own confidence and allowed me to make interventions I might have otherwise avoided.

#### 4:3.6.3 Interviews of three of my own clients within my SSRP

The second component of my SSRP was a series of interviews with three of my own clients. Analysis informed by IPA of the interviews revealed four key themes:

- Clients valued the combination of business experience with coaching expertise – but it was not sufficient alone;
- Clients' estimations of my credibility were enhanced by my business experience (evidenced by mentions of "understanding', "empathy", "challenge" or "credibility" itself;
- Clients' trust in our coaching or in me as a coach were enhanced by my prior experience;
- Clients' views on the value they or their organisations had derived from the coaching were influenced by my prior experience.

The influence of all three of the sources discussed above can be seen in the schedule of questions prepared for the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix I). Attention was paid to both ‘bracket in’ and ‘bracket out’ the influence of the above in the selection and formation of the questions and, later, in the interviewing.

### 4:3.7 Ethical issues

Full consideration was given to the ethical issues surrounding this research project. An Ethics Panel form of scrutiny form was originally submitted to a CCCU in November 2020 with ‘approval in principle’ being granted in December 2020. Amendments were made to the proposal to reflect issues raised concerning the handling of sensitive topics with participants, the location of interviews, de-briefing of participants, confidentiality and wording of the Consent form. Full approval was attained in January 2021.

Particular consideration was given to the following issues:

#### 4:3.7.1 Relationship issues

As discussed in Chapter 4:3.5 above, all four of the coaches interviewed were known to me prior to the project. Special consideration was therefore given to the balance of power in my relationships with them. All of them were professional coaches with extensive prior business experience and thus had shared interests in the outcomes of the research. My relationships with them are best described as ‘professional friends’ with the shared professional interest in the reliability of the research far outweighing any inclination to contribute in ways to please or placate me. As far as I am aware, none of the coaches were known to each other and identities were not disclosed amongst the cohort or to the clients.

None of the clients interviewed were known to me beforehand. The likelihood of any ethical issues arising in connection with my relationships with them was low but there were issues relating to their relationships with their coaches which affected the treatment of confidentiality (see below). As far as I am aware, none of the clients were known to each other and identities were not disclosed amongst the cohort or to the coaches.

Overall, I believed that the likelihood of emotional issues arising from the participants' involvement in the project was low. Nevertheless, I made arrangements for confidential, one-to-one support from an experienced therapist to be available to anyone who felt they might benefit from it – and made all participants fully aware of the facility.

#### 4:3.7.2 Confidentiality

As experienced coaches and clients of experienced coaches, all participants were familiar with their discussions with me being completely confidential and this was confirmed in the consent letter. Participants' names and identities were kept confidential and the recordings and anonymised transcripts were stored in secure facilities (see below).

The decision to include dyads in the multiperspectival design gave "rise to additional ethical issues, especially around threats to internal anonymity" (Larkin et al., 2019, p.189). Extensive consideration was given to these risks and Ummel and Achille's (2016, p.808) comment that "internal confidentiality is of utmost importance when there is a risk of emotional harm should participants learn information about one another that was not intended to be shared".

Consideration was given to the view that "anonymity is a continuum (from fully anonymous to very nearly identifiable)…along which researchers balance two competing priorities: maximising participants' identities and maintaining the value and integrity of the data" (Saunders et al., 2015, p.617) and I used my own judgement in balancing the risks. Actions taken in mitigation were:

- Special care was taken in the recruitment discussions to highlight possible loss of anonymity in general and within the dyads;

- Each participant was given sight of any quote of theirs intended for inclusion in this report prior to inclusion and the right to exclude was stressed;
- Some quotes are presented without attribution within the presentation of data in order to reduce the likelihood of dyad partners being able to identify each other (Larkin et al., 2019).

#### 4:3.7.3 Consent

As noted above, full information about the project, participants' involvement and the desired outputs was provided to all participants in oral discussions and in writing. Oral and written consent was received from all participants. See Appendices P and Q.

#### 4:3.7.4 Other issues

Location. The interviews were undertaken either face-to-face in the participants' offices or mine or via video conferencing. In all instances, the participants chose the means and location of their interviews.

Feedback. I guaranteed to provide participants with as much feedback as they chose and outlined the options available to them. All participants agreed to review any quotes (but not full transcripts) to be included in the final report but none requested any further feedback.

Data protection. All data was stored in compliance with CCCU's and the GDPR's requirements and will be destroyed after the requisite period after the completion of my PhD studies.

Thorough consideration was given to the ethical issues surrounding this project prior to it being undertaken. Nevertheless, I remained vigilant to further issues arising in the course of the research. In the event, no further ethical issues or problems were encountered.

### 4:3.8 Limitations

The research conducted for the project is qualitative and seeks to develop subjective understanding of the lived experiences studied. It therefore makes no claims to satisfy positivist expectations (Marshall et al., 2013). Furthermore, in keeping with the critical realist perspective adopted, the research looked for "tendencies, not laws" (Danermark et al., 2002, p.185) and makes "no claims as to the generalisability of their results but suggest rather that the data obtained might be useful in providing some insights" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.95) to other practitioners with similar backgrounds working with similar clients in similar contexts. See Chapter 4:4.1 for details of the coaching and the contexts analysed.

In keeping with IPA, the research made no effort "to achieve a representative sample in terms of either population or probability" (Smith et al., 2009, p.95) but set out "to illuminate a particular research question, and to develop a full and interesting interpretation of the data" (p.95). This was undertaken by interviewing participants who represent a perspective and attempting to "understand how people make sense of events, relationships, and processes in the context of their particular lifeworlds" (Larkin et al., 2011, p.321).

The use of IPA in research is questioned by some commentators. Giorgi(2010) states that IPA's lack of prescription, focus on the researcher's own experience and absence of insistence on accounting for all interview data means that its use cannot be regarded as being in keeping with the human sciences. In addition, and as discussed in Chapter 4:3.5 above, the decision to select the sample of participants through the researcher's network may affect some readers' estimations of the findings.

In order to maximise the trustworthiness of the research, Robson's (2011) model as cited in (Petty et al., 2012, p.381-383) and based on (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) work was applied:

- "Confirmability" was underpinned by the researcher's "own experience and subjectivity" being explored thoroughly and made explicit by the prior SSRP exercise;

- “Dependability” of the data was unavoidably low due to the “variations between people and contexts as well as the passage of time” but was improved by a clear audit trail;
- “Credibility” was enhanced by the researcher’s “prolonged engagement and persistent observation” with the data, by the triangulation effect provided by the second exercise, and by discussion with my supervisor and colleagues; and finally,
- “Transferability” was augmented by purposive sampling and selection.

Nevertheless, despite the efforts above, it is important to note Robson’s (2011) reminder, as cited in Petty et al. (2012, p.383) - while these strategies do suggest that rigour and close attention to detail were applied, they “do not in themselves guarantee trustworthiness” and the “responsibility for determining transferability is with those who might apply the findings to their own setting” is reiterated.

The application of the methodologies outlined above including the selection of participants, data collection and analysis is discussed in Chapter 4:4 below.

## Chapter 4:4 Project activity

This chapter discusses how the research and methodological approaches detailed in Chapter 4:3 were applied and is presented in chronological order. Effort was made throughout the project to maintain consistency with the philosophical perspectives and methodological approach chosen. In order to be consistent with IPA's phenomenological underpinning and remembering that it is "an approach to inquiry concerned with the detailed examination of participants' experience and how participants make sense of that experience" (Smith, 2011, p.6), the phenomenon being studied is first defined. This was especially relevant due to the heterogeneous nature of the coaching industry (Brunner, 1998).

### 4:4.1 Nature of the coaching studied

The coaching studied is consistent with Kilburg's (1996) definition quoted in Chapter 4:1.2 above. Consequently, the clients interviewed all had "managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation" (p.142); were employed in commercial organisations; and were being coached by one of the coaches interviewed.

The coaches interviewed were all formally trained executive coaches who use "a variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction" (p.142). A defining feature of the coaches was that they all had prior business careers of at least twenty years including significant managerial authority and responsibility.

All of the coaching studied was one-to-one; focussed primarily, but not exclusively, on organisational issues; and paid for by the clients' employing organisations. See Appendices J and K for anonymised profiles of the participants.

The phenomenon studied was thus defined as: ***the lived experiences of trained executive coaches with significant prior business careers and of clients of coaches with that background.***

### 4:4.2 Recruitment of participants

The participants in the study were selected using the sampling strategies outlined in Chapter 4:3.5 above. A homogeneous group was selected "in order to illuminate a particular research question" (their prior career backgrounds and coaching undertaken) and to explore a specific perspective. The pragmatic approached discussed above was applied and no attempt was made "to achieve a representative sample in terms of either population or probability" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.95).

As far as I am aware, none of the coaches were known to each other, did not work together and their identities were not shared within the cohort. As discussed above, they all had an interest in the research because of their coaching profiles and were senior executives in their own rights. The power dynamic between each of them and me was thus considered appropriate and the risks of them agreeing to participate or responding in particular ways in order to please me were considered to be low. The recruitment process was considered by a CCCU board of studies and approval was granted in January 2021.

Initial approaches to the coaches were made by email (2) or in person (2). When interest was indicated, I followed up by sending an information sheet and organising a video call to explain the exact nature of the project and the requirements and implications of taking part. Participant consent forms were sent after the calls. Four coaches were approached and all agreed to take part.

A requirement of the coaches' participation was that they would identify a current client who was prepared to be interviewed about their experience of being coached by them. Each of the coaches approached a client and all agreed to have an introductory video call with me to explore their involvement. I supplied the Information Sheet (see Appendix P) to each before having the calls and Participant Consent Forms (see Appendix Q) were sent after thorough explanation the nature, requirements and implications of the project. The possibility of each of the clients feeling under any pressure or obligation to participate was explored and each was assured that neither their coach nor I would be unhappy if they declined. All four agreed enthusiastically to participate.

Reflecting issues highlighted by the CCCU ethics panel, procedures concerning confidentiality (particularly within the dyads), the nature of the anonymity being applied, the use of verbatim quotes and rights to withdraw were highlighted in all discussions and every participant was given ample opportunity to ask questions and / or to decline.

### 4:4.3 Data collection

The interviews with the coaches took place in May 2021 and the clients in May and June 2021. Participants were asked to choose the method and location of their interviews. Three each of the coaches and the clients opted for face-to-face meetings (two of each in their offices, one at mine) and one of each for video calls. I sensed no discernible differences in the quality of the discussions between the different methods or locations. Interviews lasted between twenty-five and forty-five minutes and all were recorded digitally.

The interview schedule discussed in Chapter 4:3.6 (Appendix I) was used throughout. The participants were not provided with the questions in advance but were aware of the focus of the research from the recruitment process.

Effort was made to build on the IPA interview technique I used for my SSRP and to ensure that it benefited from, but was not overly reliant upon, parallels with my style of coaching. Open questions were posed "in naturalistic ways so that the participants do not feel unduly awkward and constrained by the research interview or foreign, abstract language" (Benner, 1994b, P.108) and I ensured that there were "sufficient opportunities to probe and elaborate the data" (Jeong & Othman, 2016, P.561).

My aim to make the interviews "a conversation with a purpose" (Smith et al., 2009, p.57) was generally achieved within a spirit of the participants and me "exploring" (p.46) together with me acting as "an 'enabler' who helps the participant evoke and bring to life the phenomenon being talked about" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p.206).

The reservation highlighted in Chapter 4:3.3 concerning the applicability of IPA due to the level of importance of the issue being researched to the participants proved to be relevant. Both the coaches and the clients often seemed to take the coaches' business experience for granted and consequently I did find myself sometimes being inclined towards "collecting facts" rather than "exploring meaning" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, P.104). Nevertheless, I reminded myself that the phenomenon was there "ready to shine forth, but directive work (is) required by the researcher to facilitate it coming forth, and then to make sense of it once is has happened" (Smith et al., 2009, p.34). Overall I believe the interviews provided sufficiently "rich, detailed, first-person accounts of their experiences" (p.56) of the phenomenon.

### 4:4.4 Data analysis

Reflecting the view that IPA is a methodology that is "easy to do badly and difficult to do well" (Larkin et al., 2006, P.53) and "more of a craft than a technique or scientific method" (Gill, 2014, P.126), I sought to develop and 'craft' my approach to data analysis and build on how I undertook a similar exercise when researching my SSRP.

#### 4:4.4.1 Framework of analysis

Nevertheless, as for my SSRP, I used Smith et al's (2009, p.79-107) basic framework with the aim of following an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith, 2007):

- Reading (twice) and correcting of the transcripts in conjunction with listening to the recordings;
- Dealing with individual transcripts (of the coaches' interviews first, followed by the clients') before moving on the next;
- "Close, line-by-line analysis" (Smith et al., 2009, p.79) looking for the "understandings of each participant";
- Identifying "text which seems important" (p.91) with initial noting of why each felt important (see 4.4.3);
- Further analysis of the comments identified aiming to develop "a dialogue" (p.79) with the data;
- "Developing emergent themes" (p.91) in each case individually (4.4.4);

    - "Searching for connections across emergent themes" (p.92-100) looking for fit among them;
    - Developing "super-ordinate themes" (p.101) (see 4:4.5);
- Developing a table of themes that illustrates the relationships between them (see Appendix L).

#### 4:4.4.2 Crafting my approach to using a methodology informed by IPA

The experience of conducting my SSRP and further research allowed me to make the following refinements to my approach to using a methodology informed by IPA in data analysis:

1. Reference to critical realism (CR) reminded me that extant theory can be a starting point for research but that I should "avoid any commitment to the content of specific theories" (Bhaskar, 1979, p.48). Thus, in the initial noting and emergent themes stages of the process, I consciously bracketed out the findings of my critical review of literature that pointed towards certain effects of coaches' business experience on their clients' perceptions of them;

2. In line with the above, I attempted to avoid any predetermined ideas while conducting the analysis and "to explore, flexibly and in detail" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.57) what the participants experienced;

3. I worked on overriding the generally objectivistic nature of my early education and sought to be "fully involved, interested and open to what may appear" (Finlay, 2008, p.3) when reading and analysing the transcripts;

4. I remained cognisant throughout of my CR perspective's assumption that "our data can tell us about reality" (Harper, 2011, p.91) but the relationship is not linear – and that other inputs including interpretation were required;

5. I attempted to focus on "how 'things are understood', rather than 'what happened'" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p.112) and to do this by "trying to understand what it is like from the point of view of the participants" (Shinebourne, 2011, p.21);

6. Having found it difficult to remain "avowedly interpretative" (Smith et al., 2009, p.90) while undertaking my SSRP, I made particular effort to use the double hermeneutic and produce a report that is demonstrably "an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking" (p.80);

7. In the later stages of the analysis I sought to reverse the first and second points above and to bracket in my experience in order to "enrich the interpretations" (Callary et al., 2015, p.67);

8. I focussed more clearly on the idiographic nature of IPA and applied additional discipline to beginning "each transcript afresh, allowing the material to speak in its own terms rather than being overly influenced by what other participants have said" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.74). This was especially relevant when working on both halves of the dyads;

9. Throughout the exercise I repeatedly asked (Benner, 1994b, p.101) question of myself: *'What do I know or see that I did not know or expect before I began reading the text?'* and remembered her view that my views should be "challenged, extended or turned around" (p.101) by the process.

I feel the refinements outlined above allowed me to take a more flexible, less mechanical approach to the exercise and, in particular, improved my idiographic focus on each participant's transcript.

From hereon I undertook two separate exercises – one analysing the coaches' data and another the clients'. The approach is summarised here using the processes applied to the coaches' data as an example.

### 4:4.4.3 Initial noting

I followed Smith et al's (2009) suggestion and went through multiple cycles of listening to the recordings (twice), reading the transcripts (thrice) and underlining "text which seems important" (p.91). As noted in 4:4.4.2, para 3 above, I made particular effort at this stage to bracket out extant theories and to be as "fully involved, interested and open to what may appear" (Finlay, 2008, p.3) as possible.

**Table 4:1** shows an example of initial noting:

| Transcript | Initial comments |
|---|---|
| *Me: How do you feel your experience, the fact that you have 'been there, done that', effects your coaching?*<br><br>*Coach D: I think you can see the pitfalls. quicker. I think you can join the dots quicker. I think you can go through a mental checklist of things that leaders ought to be considering, and you can see the practical impacts, rather than just the theory. And I think you can empathise with people, when they get into trouble, they're suffering from high stress. And I think, having been in a lot of leadership positions, and seen a lot of leaders in action, rather than just in a coaching relationship, you've actually seen the good stuff and the bad stuff, and you can spot them in people. And you think 'how are the people around you experiencing you?', because I'm experiencing some things that are flashing red lights for me. So I'm sounding a little biased I can hear myself being a little biased. I think there are some risks, but I also think there are some advantages. And of course, most coaches don't have that experience and of course, the majority of amazing coaches don't have* | Experience of problems / mistakes / failures?<br><br>Quicker to understand / 'get it' / credibility? Experiential learning an advantage?<br><br>Practical understanding / credibility / feeling understood / heightened ability to empathise?<br><br>Learned from mistakes?<br><br>His confidence heightened?<br><br>Not without risks? |

| | |
|---|---|
| *that experience, so it's not a prerequisite by any means.* | Not sufficient alone? Not a requirement? |

My heightened attention to idiography (4:4.4.2, para 8) was powerful at this stage. While listening to, reading and noting each participant's account, I personalised my attention to the particular individual concerned rather than thinking of it as anonymised data. This enabled me to focus more effectively on how participants were experiencing the phenomenon rather than their descriptions of what happened (4:4.4.2, para 5).

#### 4:4.4.4 Development of emergent themes

After further analysis of the transcripts and my notes, I identified emergent themes, first for each coach, then the cohort of coaches, then each client and then the cohort of clients. **Table 4:2** shows an example of this process using the same data as above:

| **Transcript** | **Emergent themes** |
|---|---|
| Me: *How do you feel your experience, the fact that you have 'been there, done that', affects your coaching?*<br><br>Coach D: *I think you can see the pitfalls. quicker. I think you can join the dots quicker. I think you can go through a mental checklist of things that leaders ought to be considering, and you can see the practical impacts, rather than just the theory. And I think you can empathise with people, when they get into trouble, they're suffering from high stress. And I think, having been in a lot of leadership positions, and seen a lot of leaders in action, rather than just in a coaching relationship, you've actually seen the good stuff and the bad stuff, and you can spot them in people. And you think 'how are the people around you experiencing you?', because I'm experiencing some things that are flashing red lights for me. So I'm sounding a little biased I can hear myself being a little biased. I think there are some risks, but I also think there are some* | Cautionary tales<br><br>Practical experience<br><br>Confidence<br><br>Shared problems |

| | |
|---|---|
| *advantages. And of course, most coaches don't have that experience and of course, the majority of amazing coaches don't have that experience, so it's not a prerequisite by any means.* | Risks |

Twelve emergent themes were identified across the cohort of coaches and seven across the clients (see Appendix L). I posed Benner's question (4:4.4.2, para 9 above) to myself throughout this phase and in the development of super-ordinate themes (see 4.4.5 below) and paid particular attention to "the I and the P in IPA" (Smith et al., 2009, p.91).

#### 4:4.4.5 Development of super-ordinate themes

The process of clustering the emergent themes into super-ordinate themes was, at the same time, both straightforward and stressful. At this stage I consciously bracketed in elements of my "fore-structure" (Smith et al, 2009, p.42) gained from my own professional experience, my research of the extant literature and my SSRP.

There was strong convergence of themes - within the two cohorts, across them and with my fore-structure – and little divergence. This caused two concerns. First, (Smith, 2011a, p.23) suggests that pointing to "divergence" is a criterion of "good" IPA. Second, the commonality of comments led me to feel that my views were possibly not being challenged sufficiently and that therefore "the quality of the account is questioned and the danger of just reading in preconceptions must be considered" (Benner, 1994b, p.101).

Noting Shinebourne's (2011, p.27) view that one of Yardley's (2000) criteria for judging the validity and quality of an IPA study, "commitment and rigour", can be met by demonstrating "prolonged engagement with the topic and immersion in the data", I went through the initial noting and development of emergent themes phases on two further occasions, making new notes and reconsidering the identification of themes during both. The second exercise (in August 2021) led to minor changes and the third (in March 2024) to no changes to the five super-ordinate themes. Nevertheless, the thoroughness of this exercise is sufficient "to demonstrate that the findings are not based on personal opinion, but on a rigorous analytical transparent process" (Roberts, 2013, p.217).

Although experienced in different ways, three of the themes of the coaches' data were shared by the clients. All were created by either "abstraction" (Smith et al, 2009, p.96) or "subsumption" (p.97). The super-ordinate themes are listed in **Table 4:3** below, detailed in Appendix L and discussed in Chapter 4:5.

| **Super-ordinate themes - Coaches** | **Super-ordinate themes – Clients** |
|---|---|
| Important but not sufficient | Important but not sufficient |
| Credibility | Credibility |
| Confidence | Confidence |
| Learning from mistakes | |
| Risks | |

#### 4:4.5 Reflections on data analysis

The analysis phase of the project was challenging and I recognised Nolan's reference to a "sense of being overwhelmed by participant data" (Wagstaff et al, 2014, p.6). Similarly to my feelings when undertaking my SSRP, I found it difficult to remember that "interpretation is not a choice but an integral aspect" (Gill, 2014, p.120) of IPA, not least because it differs markedly from my style of coaching which privileges clients' views over my own.

There was one notable exception to the general natural predominance of the participants' views in my thinking. The reservation about the use of IPA discussed in Chapter 4:3.3 due to the relative lack of consciousness of the topic in the clients' minds was justified as their coaches' prior experience was something that they had given limited (if varying) thought to in the past (see Chapter 4:5.3). Thus, I occasionally wondered if I was "forcing them, perhaps reluctantly or unsuccessfully, to enter" my world (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.55).

While clients' perspectives are the natural focus of my current professional thinking, the views of 'experts' were the equivalent throughout my generally positivist early education. Consequently, remembering that "IPA researchers do not attempt to verify of negate specific hypotheses established on the basis of the extant literature" (Smith, 2004, p.43) and to bracket out my prior knowledge at certain stages were also difficult, particularly when identifying emerging theme.

Conscious effort was made to use the concept of the double hermeneutic appropriately and this was reviewed this again in March 2024. I referred again to Smith et al. (2009), Smith and Osborn (2008) and Pietkiewicz & Smith, (2014) and was reminded that my role was to try to decode the participants' meaning making, to make sense of it and to formulate critical questions relating to the material – and not to bring by own frames of reference into play. I used hermeneutics of 'empathy' and of 'questioning' to form interpretations with the participants' experiences and avoided brining my own, outsider perspectives to bear through 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Ricoeur, 2008).

I also applied considerable thought to how my own prior experience might be influencing how I analysed and interpreted the participants' data and was alert to the possibility of reading what I wanted to see in the data. Overall, I believe the experience of using the concepts of IPA in my SSRP, the understanding that exercise gave me of my fore-structure, the further research highlighted in 4:4.4.2 and my most recent review allowed me to undertake the analysis appropriately.

In my attempt to honour the idiographic nature of IPA, I began "each transcript afresh" and tried to allow "the material speak on its own terms rather than being overly influenced by what other participants have said" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.74). Nevertheless, what Wagstaff et al (2014, p.11) refer to as their "most frequently cited dilemma" – "the tension between the espoused idiographic focus and the development of general themes" – proved to be testing. I applied Callary et al.'s (2015, p.70) recommendation and asked myself repeatedly if my categorisation was "emerging inductively from the specific data set", or whether I had "deductively coded it from an established theme in a previous transcript".

Although not easy, I believe I was able to maintain the voice of individual participants appropriately in the process.

I became aware of the validity of Benner's observation (1994a, p.xvii) that in interpretative phenomenology the "extremes of idealizing and villainizing are to be avoided". While there was absolutely no inclination to 'villainise' any of the participants' comments, I did find myself inclined to 'idealise' the contributions of one of the coaches and one of the clients. When, on reflection, I became aware that their experiences mirrored my own in certain ways, I redoubled my efforts to "limit the interpreter's projection of his or her own world onto the text" (Benner, 1994a, p.xvii). Overall, I believe the integrity of the exercise was maintained.

I remained alert throughout the project to risks associated with interviewing dyads of coaches and clients. Although the questioning of the clients focussed on their experiences with their current coaches, it was about an established aspect of the coaches' credentials that the clients appreciated and was not seeking to identify any deficit in their skills.

What Ummel & Achille (2016, p.810) asserted to be the "most challenging aspect of doing separate interviews" – "managing the possible influence of the first interview" (of the coach of each dyad) on the second (the client) – was limited by not reflecting the coaches' responses in the interview schedule used for the clients. Although the dyads are not identified in this paper, I identified nothing in what was said by any member of a dyad that I believe would be sensitive to the other in any way.

## Chapter 4:5 Discussion

This chapter discusses and interprets the findings of the analysis described in Chapter 4:4. It examines the super-ordinate themes of the interviews of the cohort of coaches first and then the themes of the clients' interviews. Please refer to Appendix L for details of the connection between the super-ordinate and emergent themes.

### 4:5.1 Super-ordinate themes – coaches

Five super-ordinate themes emerged from the analysis of interviews with the coaches. Three themes – 'Credibility', 'Confidence' and 'Learning from mistakes' - suggested that the coaches' prior business experience had a tangible effect on their coaching and their relationships with their clients (see 4:5.1.2, 4:5.1.3 and 4:5.1.4). These findings were qualified by 'Important but not sufficient' (4:5.1.1) and 'Risks' (4:5.1.5).

#### 4:5.1.1 Important but not sufficient

This theme was created by putting together multiple comments from all of the interviews and developing a title, ie. by "abstraction" (Smith et al, 2009, p.96). It reflected my interpretation of the participants' sentiments regarding the positioning of their business experience within their coaching – that it was important to their practices but not sufficient alone for them to work with clients in the ways they felt appropriate.

Only one of the coaches included any reference to non-coaching experience in answer to the first question of every interview: *In your experience of executive coaching, what characteristics, qualities, behaviours or expertise would you say are important in a coach?*

The ability to develop appropriate coaching relationships through personal characteristics and coaching, or coaching related, skills dominated the responses to this question, and the ability to listen predominated. Coach B's opening comment illustrated this and all coaches highlighted it:

*"I think the ability to listen is really important and I think to really listen to what someone is actually saying, rather than making assumption. So really, when there are words which have got a wide meaning to be able to question what that person means by that. And I think it's more than listening with the ears, I think it's observing the body language and the comfort or discomfort with which someone's saying something, for example… "*

This confirmed the work of de Haan et al (2011, p.35) that found listening skills and non-verbal communication skills to be amongst the most highly appreciated qualities of a coach in a study of 71 coaching clients.

What I interpreted as 'personal characteristics' included "*curiosity"* (Coach A), "*humble*" (Coach C), "*presence*" (Coach D), being "*genial, outgoing, friendly and approachable*" (Coach C), and building "*trust and rapport*" (Coach A).

The findings of this theme confirmed the nature of the coaching studied (see Chapter 4:4.1) and suggested that, while coaches' prior business experience can affect their relationships with clients (see below), the cohort felt its effect was subordinate to personal characteristics and coaching skills.

I suggest this finding is important and worthy of emphasis. It illustrates a widely expressed view, summarised by de Haan and Gannon (2017, p.200) citing Ianiro et al (2013, p.28) that:

> "…coach behaviours, such as displaying listening, understanding and encouragement in conjunction with non-verbal affectionate cues like eye contact, smiling, the display of facial expressiveness and head nodding" are associated with better quality coaching relationships".

#### 4:5.1.2 Credibility

This theme was created by "subsumption" (Smith et al, 2009, p.97) of three emergent themes under one. Three of the cohort made unprompted references to increased "credibility" stemming from their prior experience in response to the question: *How would you describe your credentials to be a coach?* and the fourth (Coach C) replied when asked if he felt his clients' estimations of his credibility were influenced in any way by his prior experience:

> "*Undoubtedly….I do think when looking at coaches many* (clients) *want a feeling that they are working with someone that has got relevant experience."*

Coach D linked the credibility his experience brings him with risks (see 4.5.1.5 below) when he commented:

> *"My own view is they're probably more influenced by wanting someone who's done what they've done than should be the case. That's my own view. Because if I was a CEO again, and looking for a coach, knowing what I know now, I would be far less swayed by wanting someone who's done my job. But I think that's because I now know coaching pretty well now, but I think some people are influenced by that and they think, actually, I want someone who can say 'Well, when I did your job, this is what happened' and there were times it is valuable to say 'Hang on a minute, let's just think through the risks of doing what you're proposing to do, because I've seen stuff happen'. I think there are some advantages, but I also think there are risks of it too, because the very best coaching is helping people find the answers for themselves, and there's a risk if you think you know the answer that you tell them too early".*

As well as highlighting potential risks, these comments echoed the findings of Jowett, Kanakoglou and Passmore ((2012, p.192-193) that:

> "…coaches' background, experience, and expertise would seem to help coachees respect and appreciate their coaches upfront and thus help them decide from the outset whether it is worth investing and thus committing in the coaching relationship and in that particular coach".

The observations above also made me wonder if the view (unattributable) of one of the leading trainers of coaches that prior career experience "get's you in the door, but then makes no difference" might be accurate. Analysis of further comments suggested not.

My interpretation of the coaches' references to the credibility they feel they gained from their practical rather than theoretical experience of operating in organisations suggests there were four notable effects on their relationships with clients:

#### 4:5.1.2.1 Peer to peer

The similarities between the coaches' career backgrounds and the clients' contexts encouraged feelings of peer to peer relationships. Coach A commented on this whilst also highlighting a risk:

> *"So it's certainly not a one down relationship with the client being here and me being up here. So I would say that it* (prior experience) *contributes to being adult to adult. But I have to be careful in some situations where I'm coaching with less experienced individuals, people who are maybe a couple of levels below, that they're not just trying to please me, and they're not really just wanting me to give them advice…"*

I interpreted this data as suggesting that prior experience can support coaches in developing peer to peer relationships, although, once again, noting that this is not without risks. The relevance of this is noted in the literature by Allen et al.'s (2016, p.8) reference to coaches working with senior executive clients needing "to have a solid standing with the coachee and be able to interact on an equal level of influence".

#### 4.5.1.2.2 Questioning, probing and challenging

All of the coaches felt their prior experience influenced how they undertook three critical aspects of coaching - questioning, probing and challenging clients. Coach D observed:

> *"I think it's probably easier to probe, you might assume someone's feeling what you felt, and you can probe for that. So classic coaching questions, what are you feeling? Where are you feeling in your body? What's that doing for you? How is that helping or how is that destabilising you and you deal with that stuff? Now, you may ask those questions, assuming they're feeling the way you felt when you were in a similar situation, and they're not feeling that, which is fine, but you can unearth that. So I think you can look for things, and sometimes you're right and sometimes you're not, but you're more likely to see things. I think if you've been there yourself, I think it enhances the credibility of you coaching them through a scenario that you've been in".*

The specific advantages experience can bring to knowing how to probe and what questions to pose were also highlighted. Coach A commented:

> *"…I think there are times where I will have a hypothesis as to what is going on, which has to have been informed by my prior experience. Then I will pose a question with that hypothesis in mind, but not actually saying, necessarily, what I'm thinking. That's not true always, sometimes I do actually just say, 'Look, when I hear that, that reminds me of this, I wonder if there's something similar going on here?'*

I interpreted this data as suggesting that experiential knowledge of the sort of organisational contexts clients work in gives coaches the opportunity to pose questions and challenges that increase their credibility in clients' thinking.

The importance of being able to challenge senior executive clients effectively is also highlighted in the literature. Berman (2019, p.78) comments that clients "…want coaches who tell them what they think, are willing to confront their behaviour and their intrinsic beliefs, and are willing to challenge them, rather that just ask questions and encourage self-reflection" (citing the ICF's guidelines).

#### 4:5.1.2.3 Listening

Although only mentioned explicitly by one participant, the contribution of coaches' credibility to the quality of clients' listening was also implied by two others. Coach B replied to a question about the possible effects of a particular intervention with: "*I think they listened more carefully. Definitely".* The contention that clients may listen and give more attention to coaching with coaches who have credibility stemming from their experience of business was supported by the theme below.

#### 4:5.1.2.4 Impact

All of the coaches commented either explicitly or implicitly that they felt their credibility enhanced the impact of their coaching. This was expressed by some at generic levels but more explicitly by Coach B:

> *"I think that it gives me more credibility with senior people, rightly or wrongly, I think that they feel that I do understand their world and therefore they're more open with me, and they can talk more about it…"*

Coach D highlighted a different effect:

> "*I think it's a problem shared; I think it's a deeper engagement. Again, there are risks this is overplayed, you get too involved, and I think a coach does have to be detached at a professional level, but also, I think it helps if the client knows you deeply care. You're not just there to play a role and take the fee, but you actually deeply care about them, and I think it also enables you to ask some relevant questions and give some relevant advice.*

I interpreted the data above as suggesting that the ability to 'share' clients' issues generated by experiential understanding can increase the impact that coaches can have with their clients.

Overall, the occurrence of unprompted references to the additional credibility the cohort felt they gained from their prior experience, Coach B's reply quoted above, together with my further interpretations covered in 4:5.1.2.1 - 4 meant that credibility emerged as one of the clearest themes of the research.

#### 4:5.1.3 Confidence

Although very closely related to, and overlapping with, the theme of credibility discussed above, my analysis led me to make the connection between the coaches' prior experience and their 'confidence' a super-ordinate theme in its own right. It was created by subsuming two emergent themes across the cohort that summarise how it manifested itself – 'confidence' itself and 'bolder'.

#### 4:5.1.3.1 Confidence

Three of the four coaches made unprompted references to their business experience enhancing their confidence in themselves as coaches. When asked how her lived experience as a senior executive affected her coaching, Coach A commented:

> *"I think it means that I am more confident. So, in all coaching, I want to be able to add value and I want to know that I'm adding value. And sometimes that's a long, there's a long line and you don't necessarily know, but I think the fact that I have an operator's experience, have got that lived experience, gives me more confidence that there is value add, not so much as I say through telling people what to do, but through just offering a perspective…."*

The view that prior experience can build coaches' confidence was an unprompted finding and an important one. Coaching senior executives can be challenging and I am interpreting the data above as suggesting that prior experience can support coaches' confidence to challenge and support their clients.

The value coaches being self-confident is also highlighted in the literature with Berman referring to their need to "…have a level of self-confidence that allows him or her to tell strong-willed, powerful people that they are doing the wrong thing" (2019, p.80) and Allen et al. (2016) mentioning the need for coaches to have the 'courage' to challenge effectively.

#### 4:5.1.3.2 Bolder

All four participants mentioned that the additional confidence they gained from their prior business experience encouraged them to be bolder with their coaching interventions. Coach A expressed it explicitly:

> *"I think it gives me a confidence and that confidence manifests itself in, maybe I will try some things out that I wouldn't necessarily otherwise try out. Or maybe I will be a bit more pokey around something that maybe I wouldn't otherwise do…and I'm always very clear in the beginning and say 'If you want me as a coach, you're not going to get the fluffy 'Oh, it's all right', sort of, you know, help you feel better sort of thing. You might get that because a lot of people are very hard on themselves, but actually, you're going to get somebody who's going to say, 'Well, you know, you keep on saying this, but you're doing nothing about it. You're not fooling me. I don't know, are you fooling yourself? What's going?"*

My interpretation of this data suggested that the coaches' experience of their business backgrounds led them to feel more confident in their roles as coaches of senior executives and encouraged them to embolden their probing and challenging of clients.

#### 4:5.1.4 Learning from mistakes

This super-ordinate theme was created by abstraction of multiple unprompted references to the concept by all four coaches. It arose from two interrelated emergent themes:

##### 4:5.1.4.1 Cautionary tales

The ability to share anecdotes or "*cautionary tales*" (Coach C) about "*mistakes*" (Coach A) in their own careers was something all four coaches highlighted. This was an unprompted finding and my interpretation of the data suggests it is an important one.

Coach B commented that "*…wisdom comes from having made a lot of mistakes…"* and felt this experiential learning proved to be very effective in her coaching.

Coach A highlighted a specific example of ‘learning from mistakes’:

> *“So, when I look back on my career and I look back on some of the feedback that I had, there was one thing that stood out for me as a constant refrain that I either consciously or unconsciously chose to ignore and with the benefit of hindsight, I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't ignored that, you know, still managed to do pretty well. But that is something I bring up in the context of ‘Here's an example of a blind spot of mine. Let's explore around where you might be having blind spots”…….It is something as an executive I wasn’t so great at but with the benefit of hindsight, I am brilliant at coaching other people at it”.*

My interpretation of this data led me to conclude that the emotion of realising in hindsight that she may have missed opportunities in her career by ignoring some feedback made her more caring of clients facing similar situations. Examples of ‘mistakes’ in coaches’ own careers can provide useful ‘cautionary tales’ and also serve to normalise clients’ fears (see below).

#### 4:5.1.4.2 Normalising

Closely related to the above, was the use of mistakes or *“failures”* (Coach D) as a way of normalising weakness and thus encouraging clients to share their vulnerabilities.

Using the same example as referred to above, Coach A went on to explain how she used her own experience as:

> “*…a segue into ‘no one’s perfect, let’s have a look at what might enable you, what patterns of your behaviour might be getting in the way of you being your best self’”.*

Coach D referred to a similar sentiment:

> *"…I think being able to say to someone 'This is normal, how you're feeling, is not unusual. This is typical for someone in your situation, you can't be a CEO at this level without having this sometimes, the classic imposter syndrome, feeling you're out of control, thinking you don't know which way to turn, because you're overwhelmed by stuff, waking up in the middle of the night thinking about the work and being unable to get back to sleep'. And I think you can say that a lot of this stuff, if we do it in the right way, is helpful to you…Iif you are the sort of person who can be successful in your role, occasionally, you're going to wake up in the middle of the night…"*

The participants' experience is echoed in the literature. It is observed that the effectiveness of coaching is linked to clients' willingness to share and work with their vulnerabilities (McKenna & Davis, 2009; Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018).My interpretation of the data suggested that coaches being able to use their own experience to facilitate discussion of clients' vulnerabilities is a powerful tool to be able to utilise.

#### 4:5.1.5 Risks

This super-ordinate theme was created by abstraction from three underlying emergent themes. Unprompted references to the potential risks of coaches' prior business experience having detrimental effects on their coaching were made by all of the cohort. Like the theme of 'Important but not sufficient' explored in 4:5.1.1, it serves as a qualifier to the potentially additive effects explored in 4:5.1.2, 4:5.1.3 and 4:5.1.4.

The risk of providing answers too readily rather than helping clients to find their own was referred to in different ways by all of the participants. Coach A highlighted the issue:

> *"…it's really easy to jump too conclusions and it's very important for me, as a business experienced coach, not to jump to conclusions about, 'Oh, I know what this is', and jump to the solution. Particularly as you're wanting to add value, you've got to be really careful to hold that curiosity and that space for exploration. And when that's going wrong, or when I've noticed myself over stepping in a coaching relationship, I use the analogy of muscles. I don't need to exercise my muscle, it's the client, I'm trying to help him or her exercise their muscles.*

She went on to note that her reflection on her practice revealed examples of this happening:

> *"I was looking at my notes from my coaching sessions…and noted to myself afterwards being too pushy, too suggesting, too advisory or whatever it was, as opposed to holding it lightly, and it will probably be around something that's a real trigger for me, probably I made a mistake and just don't want* the client *to make that mistake…"*

The data above gives a clear warning of one of the risks facing coaches with prior business experience and also demonstrates the self-awareness required to combine experience with coaching (Berglas, 2002; de Haan et al., 2013; Whitmore, 2012).

Although neither supported by convergence nor contradicted by divergence, two other notable points emerged from individual participants.

Coach B highlighted the possibility of her prior experience leading to the heightened chance of her colluding with her clients:

> *"…I think you do have to guard against that to a degree that you recognise yourself in somebody it makes you too sympathetic. But on the other hand, it does build a bridge, because I don't feel that I can't say 'I had that issue'. I don't feel that it's wrong to bring my personal experience into it, where I think it's helpful, so I would say that builds a bridge.*

and went on to describe a situation with a client when she felt she had failed to support them effectively because she 'felt for them' too much and sympathised with them rather than empathising.

Coach A highlighted another risk for coaches with prior business experience. In contrast to the attractions of being able to create peer-to-peer relationships with senior executives, she noted some of the risks of working with less experienced clients:

> *"…I have to be careful in some situations when I'm coaching less experienced individuals, people who are maybe a couple of levels below, that they're not trying to please me and they're not really just wanting me to give them advice…"*

Although closely related to the observation above regarding the risks of clients choosing particular coaches for the wrong reasons, and something that is well understood by the coaching training industry, the potential perils caused by disparities between coaches' levels of experience and those of their clients should be noted by coaches.

In summary, I contend that my analysis and interpretation of the interviews with the coaches indicated that their lived experience of the phenomenon of being executive coaches following senior level careers in business included examples of their prior experience having tangible effects on their coaching, their clients and their relationships with their clients.

#### 4:5.2 Super-ordinate themes – clients

Three super-ordinate themes emerged from the analysis of my interviews with clients. All three themes reflected, to varying degrees, factors highlighted in the interviews with the coaches. Two themes – 'Credibility' and 'Confidence' - suggested that the coaches' prior business experience had a tangible effect on the clients' lived experience of being coached and their relationships with their coaches (see 4:5.2.2 and 4:5.2.3). The other theme, explored first – 'Important but not sufficient' – was, as it was in the analysis of the coaches' contributions, a qualifier of the generally additive features of the other themes.

##### 4:5.2.1 Important but not sufficient

This theme was created by putting together multiple different themes from all of the client interviews, ie. by abstraction.

Although there was some convergence of the clients' responses with the coaches' to the first question of each interview: *In your experience of executive coaching, what characteristics, qualities, behaviours or expertise would you say are important in a coach?,* there was also a notable divergence. In contrast to the coaches, three out of the four clients included references to "*understanding the context that people are operating in"* (Client 4) or "*someone who's had some shared experience"* (Client 2). This could be interpreted as suggesting that the clients ascribed more importance to their coaches' backgrounds than the coaches themselves did. However, it should be noted that the clients interviewed were aware of the focus of my research in advance through the recruitment process and their responses were therefore not entirely unprompted.

Similarly to the coaches' responses (see 4:5.1.1), personal characteristics and coaching, or coaching related, skills dominated the clients' responses and the ability to listen predominated. Client 1 commented "…*you want a very good listener";* Client 2 that "…*you want a good listener, listening is absolutely important"*; Client 3 that their coach "…*waits for me to kind of get everything out"*; and Client 4 mentioned *"The ability to listen, really actively, and interpret without reframing".*

What I interpreted as 'personal characteristics' included "*empathy*" (Client 1), "*someone you can trust*" (Client 2) and "*emotional intelligence*" and "*sensitivity*" (Client

The findings of this theme confirmed that although the clients interviewed considered their coaches' business experience to be important in their assessment of their coaches and believed it was additive to their coaching (see below), they also regarded their coaches' personal characteristics and coaching skills as being integral to their relationships.

#### 4:5.2.2 Credibility

This theme was created by subsuming two emergent themes under one. Clients 1 and 2 made unprompted references to the credibility of their coach being enhanced by their prior experience. Client 3 replied "*Yes, I 100% agree, credible and also kind of more genuine"* when asked if he felt his coach's credibility was influenced by their prior experience. Client 4 went into more detail about his lived experience:

> "*I think about trust, that sort of capability, credibility, reliability, and intimacy. The fact that somebody has been in similar environments and has performed in that environment for a period of time and had success with it means that they have navigated discussions like this, and their knowledge builds their credibility, so that when you make the decisions yourself as the coachee,…I can go and talk to my Mum about things, right, she's great. But she doesn't know about working capital, she doesn't know about board room etiquette, she doesn't know about all those sorts of complex issues. And she was an HR director."*

Client 4's sense making of his experience here was very powerful. I interpreted his comparison with his mother's experience as a way of underlining and highlighting the value of his coaches' to him (Bozer & Jones, 2018; Dagley, 2010).

Client 4 was more explicit when comparing his prevous experiences with several other coaches:

> *"…I think there's something important about context, understanding the context that people are operating in. And I think ideally, having some experience of it is vital. My more positive experiences have been with people who've been in the world, the same boardrooms, the same type of intense moments. And some of my less positive experiences have been with much more academic, completely different experiences…"*

My sense making of the Client's sense making here linked 'understanding of context' with his coach's credibility – he was more credible because he had operated successfully in similar situations and experienced similar stresses (Axmith, 2004).

My interpretation of the participants' accounts is that their experiences of credibility were not limited to their views of their coaches – it extended to the credibility they attributed to their coaching and to the views and decisions that they framed in the course of it. This view is supported by the theme of confidence explored below.

### 4:5.2.3 Confidence

Confidence emerged as a distinct super-ordinate theme of the clients' lived experiences as it did with the coaches'. It was created by subsuming two emergent themes from across the cohort – 'Confidence' itself and 'Knows what it is like' and led to three interpretative findings:

#### 4:5.2.3.1 Confidence

All four participants used the word 'confidence' in connection with the effects of their coaches' prior business experience on them. Client 3 put it very clearly:

> *"…it gives me a lot of confidence, a lot of trust…"*

Client 4 explained his feelings more fully:

> "*What does it do for the coach? What it really helps with is, they can inject very powerful interventions around things you should or shouldn't do, things you miss the opportunity to do, and I think that that comes from that trust and intimacy and confidence in each other that where we're thinking partners…"*

My interpretation of this data suggests that the 'powerful interventions' that the client feels stem from his coach's experience are linked to the trust and confidence he has in his coach and in their relationship.

'Knowing what it is like' and the felt experience that resulted from it was highlighted in:

#### 4:5.2.3.2 Understanding

Explicit links were made between their coach's business experience and their ability to understand clients' situations.

Client 2 made a clear link:

> "*…I just think the fact the s/he'd been there and seen that, and done it, was helpful…most of the time it wasn't her / him sharing an opinion or talking through her / his experiences, s/he rarely, if at all, talked through any specific experiences, but it just felt like s/he understood the challenge, and therefore, understood how to unpick it…"*

I interpreted the above to mean that the Client's confidence in his coach and in the work they were doing together was increased by his feeling that his coach understood the sort of challenges he was experiencing.

Client 4 expressed similar sentiments with references to the importance of his coach's understanding of his 'context' which he attributed to their business experience:

> *"I think there's something important about context, understanding the context people are operating in. And I think ideally, having some experience of it is vital…I think understanding people's behaviour is great, but understanding their behaviour and their context, I think that's really relevant...I think having the benefit of somebody who really understands what it means…to be a participant in C suite conversations, with main board discussions, I think that's where the real edge comes from, because it is not just about saying, 'I'm going to make you the best version of yourself, I'm going to understand your psychology', it's 'I'm going to help you understand that's different in different places with different people.' So, I think context is really important…"*

Client 4 linked his point made earlier about understanding context with where 'the real edge' of his coaching came from. I interpreted this once again as meaning that his confidence in his coach and their coaching were boosted by this understanding.

Others made references to other feelings they associated with their coaches' understanding. Client 2 observed:

> "*…some other coaches I've had before, who were very good coaches, I think struggled to properly empathise or understand my situation based on a lack of background…"*

Client 4 felt his coach's understanding of his situation affected his attitude to his coaching and the pace of the work. In reply to a question about how his coach's business experience might have affected how he received his coaching, he noted:

> "*Much more openly, and 'wholly', if I can use that word…I think it* (his coach's experience) *builds trust and accelerates the process as well because the more you somebody, the quicker you can get to the nitty gritty of the key issues…I want a real thinking partner who's on the pitch, part of that lived experience…"*

#### 4:5.2.3.3 Sense checking

This finding from interpretation of the clients' interviews was one of the most powerful of the project and was entirely unprompted . Three out of four clients referred directly to similar sentiments that were important aspects of their lived experience of being coached by someone with extensive business experience. Client 2's comment triggered the theme:

> "*…I do think I've got a lot of confidence from knowing that someone's been there, lived it and breathed it and therefore can be a sense check of the answers that you're coming up with…"*

The comment above was the most explicit reference and needed little interpretation. Client 4 expanded on the phenomenon with a comparison with coaches with less business experience with whom he had worked previously:

> "*…my trust in their ability to be able to help me navigate that situation, it's just not there…*their approach *solely vests in the fact that I do know the answers…and I buy into the concept that through coaching…we can find 80% of the answers, but we don't know 20% of the answers…I think the*

*danger is…a coach could lead you to believe that you can find the answers…whereas, actually, the acknowledgement that you don't…I think gives you confidence to make bolder decisions."*

I interpreted the comment above to be a demonstration that coaches with business backgrounds can, in certain situations, add something to coaching that those without it would not be able to. The client's link with being able to make 'bolder decisions' underlines the confidence he took.

I interpreted Client 3's comments that echoed similar sentiments to be linked to confidence as well :

"*…the majority of the time, the coach doesn't give you the answer, but just kind of bounces back what you're saying, but when the situation is a bit more critical, I think that's when I really value the fact that s/he's been on boards, has been CEO…"*

Client 2 was more explicit about the value of knowing that his coach had relevant experience and I interpreted that he got confidence from knowing that he coach would challenge him if appropriate:

*"I think it certainly brings confidence…it's useful to have the confidence that if I'm coming up with something really daft or an approach that is not going to work, s/he would step in a say 'let's think about that'…"*

Whilst Client 4 identified the wider significance to him of the same effect with reference to work he had recently done with his coach on issues which the coach had current experience on another board:

"*It allows me to have much higher trust and confidence in* my coach. *It allows me to engage in more important*

> *discussions…the more you trust them to talk about more important topics…And for the business, that's great…"*

Increased confidence in their coaches resulting from their non-coaching experience, supported by reassurance taken from the fact they would be provided with a sense check of their thinking, was the most striking feature of the clients' contributions. As noted under Credibility in 4:5.2.2, I interpreted that the heightened confidence was not limited to clients' assessment of their coaches – I suggest it also affected the importance, trust and value they attributed to the coaching and its outcomes.

In summary, my analysis and interpretation of the interviews with the clients suggested that their lived experience of the phenomenon of being coached by coaches with prior senior level careers in business included examples of that experience having tangible effects on their coaching and their relationships with their coaches.

### 4:5.3 Discussion of project findings

Athanasopoulou & Dopson's comment 2015, p.31) suggesting that it would be valuable to develop improved understanding of the role played by coaches' backgrounds in coaching but that "this cannot easily be assessed" resonated during the course of the project.

The highly personal nature of coaching, the common practice of clients often only ever working with a single coach and the homogeneous nature of the project's sample resulted in coaches' business experience being regarded generally as a 'given' of executive coaching (because all the coaches involved had it). Coach A exemplified this when she reflected a sentiment that I sensed in all of the coaches:

> "*….actually, I don't think about it much because I guess it's just part of who I am…"*

This feeling underlined my reservation regarding the applicability of IPA to the project due the importance ascribed to the phenomenon by the participants (see Chapters 4:3.3 and 4:4.3), but I am satisfied that the process unearthed sufficiently "rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences" (Smith et al, 2009, p.56) to be valid.

Indeed, the lack of attention paid to the phenomenon by the participants historically supports the contention that the nature and heterogeneity of coaches' with business backgrounds result in this being an under-understood segment of the coaching industry. The objective to include an element of "giving voice" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p.101) to this segment of the industry by "articulating taken-for-granted meanings, practices, habits, skills and concerns" (Benner, 1994a, p.xviii) was thus achieved.

Despite the challenges referred to above, I contend that the findings of this project contribute to the academic and practitioner understanding of executive coaching by substantiating, elucidating or exemplifying factors already observed in the extant literature and by providing fresh insights into coaching relationships. I suggest the following findings are noteworthy:

**4:5.3.1** It is important to emphasise that while this study highlighted a number of ways in which the prior business experience of some coaches can have tangible and additive effects on their relationships with their clients, the effects identified were 'important but not sufficient' to deliver the coaching the coaches set out to conduct and their clients experienced. Other personal characteristics, qualities, behaviours and skills of coaches were identified as prerequisites of efficacy. This substantiated Blackman et al.'s comment (2016, p.459) that "effective coach characteristics and skills…can be summarised into four consistent themes – integrity, support for the coach, communication skills and behaviours, and credibility".

**4:5.3.2** One of other the clearest themes of the project was the coaches' feeling that their non-coaching business experience increased clients' estimations of their credibility (5.1.2). This substantiates Bush's observation (2004, p.100) that "… coach's background … engendered trust, credibility and rapport".

**4:5.3.3** The coaches' observation that their experience contributes towards their relationships "*being adult to adult*" (Coach B) illuminates Axmith's(2004, p.5) contention that "the coach must have the right background…CEOs want to work with a 'peer'…someone who brings real-world business credentials". It also suggests that they may be "more able to put themselves in the coachee's shoes and facilitate dialogue" (Augustijnen et al., 2011, p.159).

**4:5.3.4** Being able to "*drill down*" (Coach C) and "*understand the practicalities*" (Client B) of business echoes Cox's (2003, p.13) view that it is not sufficient for coaches "to remain at superficial or meta level of challenge, with no accurate or specific knowledge or experience".

**4:5.3.5** Several observations summarised under 'impact' above (4:5.1.2.4) were connected to issues raised in extant research. Empathy is recognised as an important component of coaching (Bluckert, 2005; Lambert & Barley, 2001; Sonesh et al., 2015), so Coach D's observations that "*you can empathise with people*" when you understand their situation and have "*much deeper engagement"* suggests that this can lead to tangible relational effects.

**4:5.3.6** Coach C's view that his clients were *"more open with me, and can talk more"* substantiates a number of references in the literature. Bozer et al. (2014, p.891) suggest that "a coach's credibility facilitates improved coachee job performance by allowing the coachee to speak candidly…". More recently, Garssman et al. (2020) contend that what they term 'high-quality working alliances' enable clients to '…disclose their uncertainty, helplessness, or their current inability to cope with work-related challenges (p.39). I suggest this greater openness has a tangible positive effect on coaching relationships.

**4:5.3.7** I suggest the findings summarised in 4:5.2.2 above regarding credibility are particularly important. The clearly stated limitations of this project notwithstanding (see Chapters 4:3.8 and 4:6.3), the observations that clients' lived experience of the effects of their coaches' prior business careers included that they *"added credibility and substance"* (Client 1) and meant that they *"understood the challenge, and therefore, understood how to unpick it"* (Client 2) elucidated existing observations in the extant literature as well as confirming effect on coaching relationships.

**4:5.3.8** The super-ordinate theme of the clients' contributions named Confidence revealed a number of noteworthy findings. I am interpreting all four clients' references to 'confidence' itself to be analogous to their trust in their coaching. Client 3's reference to his coach's prior experience giving him *"a lot of confidence, a lot of trust"* inspired this interpretation. It substantiates (Alvey & Barclay, 2007, p.22-23) linking of "coach credibility" with the importance of the "establishment of trusting relationships" in coaching.

The contribution of coaches' prior experience to the levels of trust in coaching relationships is an important finding. The importance of the relationship between coach and coachee to its effectiveness and perceived value is well established (de Haan, 2019).

Using indications from psychotherapy, "… the working alliance between the person who seeks change and the one who offers to be a change agent is one of the keys, if not the key, to the change process" (Bordin, 1979, p.252). More recent research has confirmed the same effect in coaching. De Haan et al. (2020, p.162) refer to the working alliance between coach and coachee as the "best predictor of outcome". Trust has been identified as a critical contributor to "…a high-quality working alliance" (Garssman et al., 2020, p.39) and "…an essential element of the coaching relationship (Mosteo et al., 2021, p.1248).

**4:5.3.9** I believe that the clients' observations that their coaches' understanding of their situations were important since 'being understood' is also recognised as an important component of coaching (Neves, 2014). Understanding was improved by the ability to link "*understanding people's behaviour"* with "*understand that's different in different places with different people"* (Client 4) which increased confidence in the coaching and encouraged the client to approach it "*Much more openly, and 'wholly'"* (Client 4).

**4:5.3.10** The effect of coaches with business credibility being able to 'sense check' clients' thinking was a powerful finding and a factor not identified in the extant literature. Whether it be the ability to challenge "*something really daft"* (Client 2) or help identify the "*20% of the answers"* that Client 4 might not have, it emerged as an important component of the clients' lived experience of their coaching and an influence on their coaching relationships.

**4:5.3.11** A further finding of the project not identified in the extant literature was the feelings of confidence the coaches gained from their prior or non-coaching careers. As discussed in 4:5.1.3.1 above, this reflected other researchers' findings (Berman, 2019; Allen et al., 2016) and  manifested itself in a number of different ways that I believe had a tangible effect on their coaching relationships, but most notably, all four participants felt the confidence they derived from their prior careers encouraged them to *"try things"* that they otherwise would not (Coach A) or use it to calibrate their challenge of their clients.

**4:5.3.12** A further finding of the project was that coaches believed that being able to use and refer to *"mistakes"* (Coach A) they have made in their own careers was additive to their coaching. That they have "*experienced good stuff and bad stuff"* (Coach D) contributed to their credibility and the observation that "…*wisdom comes from having made a lot of mistakes…"* substantiates Passmore's observation: "My experience suggests that coaches…need to have got down and dirty in order to be able to understand clients....wisdom comes from having tried things and failed" (Passmore, J., personal communication, 14th September 2018). I interpret the clients' preferences for practical versus academic coaches, evidenced by comments such as "*I like the learning from experience"* (Client 3) and *"my less positive experiences have been with the more academic coaches"* (Client 4), to be confirmation of this sentiment.

**4:5.3.13** The specific use of *"cautionary tales"* (Coach C) as segues into being able to say "*no one's perfect"* (Coach B) in an empathetic style emerged as a powerful normalising tool that supports clients' revelations of their vulnerabilities.

I contend that the findings summarised above demonstrate that coaches' prior and non-coaching experience can have tangible and additive effects on their relationships with their clients. It was noteworthy that the clients mentioned no aspects or examples of their coaches' prior business experience being anything other than additive to their impressions of their coaches and their coaching. Their appreciation of ways in which it benefited their coaching, and therefore them, were not qualified by any reservations or misgivings.

The additive effects of the coaches' prior business experience were qualified by one theme by both the coaches and the clients and by another by the coaches. First, the theme covered in 4:5.1.1, 4:5.2.1 and 4:5.3.1 that made it clear that other personal characteristics and skills were of primary importance in coaching. Second, the coaches themselves were clear that there were risks associated with their use of their experience (see 4:5.1.5).

There were multiple references to the *"real edge"* in the participants' coaching coming from *"the ability to listen, the ability to question, the ability try and get under blocking assumptions…working, as I say, with a client's own self-awareness, but actually also the awareness of their stakeholders* (Coach C); "*the credibility of having done similar roles…**plus*** (researcher's emphasis) *clearly, he's done quite a bit of coaching before* (Client 2); and "*understanding their behaviour **and*** (researcher's emphasis) *their context"* (Client 4).

My conclusion from the sentiments expressed above, and from the whole of this project, is that coaches combining and integrating their learning from their practical experience in business ***with*** learned or innate coaching skills and techniques can result in an attractive and differentiated style of executive coaching.

This view is shared by others (Allen et al., 2016; Mosteo et al., 2021) with the value of coaches being able to integrate behaviours traditionally associated with mentoring into their coaching being recognised (Passmore, 2007). Even arguably the most influential advocate of the 'prior experience free' style in the discourse on executive coaching, Sir John Whitmore, surmised that "The ideal would seem to be an expert coach with a wealth of technical knowledge too." (Whitmore, 2012, p.42). Giving further voice to this view is an important contribution of this research.

### 4:5.4 Contribution to the state of knowledge and scholarship in executive coaching

I contend that this research substantiates and elucidates a number of observations on the executive coaching industry covered in the extant literature by providing in-depth examples of how they form part of the lived experience of coaches and their clients. I believe three specific topics are noteworthy.

**4.5.4.1 Credibility**. The research suggested that both coaches and their clients regarded coaches' prior business experience as a source of additional credibility. The coaches felt their prior experience allowed them to have peer-to-peer relationships; to question, probe and challenge with additional conviction; and to have greater impact through deeper engagement. The clients felt that knowing that their coaches had experienced similar challenges added substance to their coaching and appreciated the practical experience evident in their dialogues.

Bozer et al.'s (2014, p891) observation that "when a coach has credibility, coachees have confidence in the coaching" mirrors both my interpretation of the sentiments of the participants in this study and my own experience with coaching clients. Similarly, Dagley's observation (2010, p.67) that credibility enables coaches to "get to deeper conversations more quickly and motivate people to take personal responsibility for the own development" resonates with the research's findings and suggests that coaches with prior business experience are well placed to support their clients.

**4.5.4.2 Empathy.** The understanding of their clients' situations and contexts that the coaches' prior experience facilitated was highlighted by three of the four clients interviewed and one made an explicit connection with the ability to empathise (Client 2: *"some other coaches…struggled to properly empathise or understand my situation based on a lack of background"*).

My interpretation indicates that the ability to promote clients' feelings of being understood has a direct effect on building empathy and rapport. Gan and Chong's (2015, p.479) observation that "mutual understanding, liking and agreement between coach and coachee tends to reduce the differences between them and allow them to recognise, appreciate and respect each other" resonated and suggested that this effect is noteworthy.

The research illustrates a further way in which I am interpreting coaches' prior experience having contributed to an additional aspect of empathy. I assert that the opportunity for coaches with business experience to use examples of their own 'failures' and 'mistakes' to normalise their clients' vulnerabilities (see 4:5.1.4.2) is a valuable dimension of the service they can provide. This observation is closely related to the third topic.

**4.5.4.3 Trust.** Three out of the four clients made explicit and unprompted connections between their coaches' prior experience and their 'trust' in their coach and in their coaching. Client 3 expressed it clearly (*"…it gives me a lot of confidence, a lot of trust*); and Client 4 expanded the point (*"…I think it builds trust and accelerates the process…"*).

De Haan & Gannon (2017, P.198) noted that "There is widespread support and evidence for the argument that trust forms a critical element of the coaching relationship" but (Pandolfi, 2020, P.14) comment in a recent systematic review of the extant literature identified a gap in research on the topic:

> "…consistent with common sense, evidence shows trust is important in the coaching relationship, although quality of studies is moderate, as it tends to rely on coaches' ratings. Trust is conceptualised as accepting vulnerability to others' actions based on psychological safety, assuming positive intentions and confidentiality".

I contend that this finding of my research makes an important contribution to our knowledge of this important element of executive coaching.

### 4:5.5 Contribution to the practice of executive coaching

I assert that this research substantiates and documents a number of important aspects of coaching that coaches with extensive prior business experience use in their work with clients that are worthy of clearer recognition by the buyers and users of executive coaching. Three areas are highlighted.

**4:5.5.1 Prior experience is valued.** For reasons outlined above, the discourse on the executive coaching industry is dominated by vested interests who promote styles of coaching that require little or no experience of clients' managerial and organisational contexts. Within this discourse, coaches' use of their prior experience in their coaching is often conflated with directives style of interaction – suggesting that it inevitably results in 'how I did it' interventions.

As discussed in 4:6.4 and in Section 5 below, one of the recommendations stemming from this research is that it would be valuable to explore how the coaching training sector provides guidance and support to new coaches around 'how' they might use their prior experience in their coaching. The following findings of this research prompting this recommendation are as follows:

**4:5.5.1.1** Coaches and clients both observe that coaches' prior experience influences clients' estimations of their coaches and their coaching;

**4:5.5.1.2** Knowledge of coaches' prior experience underpins the development of peer to peer relationships with coaching clients;

**4:5.5.1.3** Coaches' prior experience can underpin their abilities to empathise and engage deeply with clients;

**4:5.5.1.4** Clients may experience greater trust in their coaches and their coaching as a function of the confidence they take from the practical experience they have gained in their non coaching careers.

**4:5.5.2 Confidence.** Experiential knowledge emerged as source of additional confidence in their coaching abilities for the coaches and was appreciated by the clients. The virtues of using prior experience to influence questioning, probing and challenging of clients was highlighted by the coaches and the clients suggested that interventions based on experience were believed to have particular credibility.

The use of experiential knowledge gained in prior careers as an influence on how to gauge the intensity of coaching interventions emerged as a clear finding. In particular, the coaches felt their experience helped them to "*try things out that I wouldn't otherwise try out"* (Coach A) and I suggest it may have emboldened their probing and challenging of clients.

**4:5.5.3 Learning from mistakes.** The coaches identified the use of *"cautionary tales"* (Client C) and reference to their own *"mistakes"* (Coach A) as bases of powerful interventions. One of the most powerful findings of the project was the value the clients ascribed to being able to 'sense check' their ideas with their coaches. I suggest these two findings are interrelated and that the boosts to confidence and credibility of coaching interventions available from sensitive references to past mistakes are under-estimated in coaching.

I contend that increased recognition of the benefits available from coaches using experiential learning gained in prior business careers is justified both in the design of coaching training programmes and in the selection of coaches.

## Chapter 4:6 Findings and recommendations of this applied research project

### 4:6.1 Terms of reference

The overarching purpose of this project is to contribute to the academic and practitioner understanding of executive coaching by exploring how the prior career experiences of a cohort of coaches affected their relationships with their clients. It seeks to address the question posed by Kauffman & Bachkirova (2009, p.3): “Does the coaches’ background make a difference…?” and the suggestion made by Meuse, Dai, & Lee (Meuse et al., 2009, P.130) that “a more useful measure of validity may be one that is associated with the coach rather than with the coaching process in general”.

The research undertaken was a qualitative inquiry with a critical realist philosophical perspective, an objectivist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as the research method as it was “committed to understanding the first person perspective from the third-person position” (Larkin et al.,2011, p.321) and a “multiperspectival” (Larkin et al., 2019) approach was applied to include data from interviews with a cohort of clients in order to establish a more rounded, multi-layered understanding (Yardley, 2000) of how the phenomenon studied was experienced by both parties of coaching dyads.

### 4:6.2 Findings

Within the constraints of the limitations of this project (see 4:3.8 above and 4:6.3 below), the data from the interviews of both the coaches and clients indicated that coaches’ backgrounds do “make a difference” and the effects of them may be experienced in a number of different ways.

Coaches may experience their prior business experience as a factor that:

**4:6.2.1** **I**ncreases their clients’ estimations of their coaches’ credibility (Blackman, 2006; Boyce et al., 2010; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Dagley, 2010).

**4:6.2.2** Underpins the development of peer to peer relationships with their clients (Axmith, 2004);

**4:6.2.3** Supports their abilities to question, probe and challenge their clients effectively (Cox, 2003; Eggers & Clark, 2000; Passmore, 2010a);

**4:6.2.4** Helps them empathise and engage deeply with their clients (Schein, 2000);

**4:6.2.5** Encourages their clients to reveal their inner feelings to them (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; McKenna & Davis, 2009);

**4:6.2.6** Gives them the confidence to try interventions that they might otherwise avoid (not previously observed);

**4:6.2.7** Allows them to share practical learning gained from their own mistakes or failures (not previously observed);

**4:6.2.8** Provides opportunities for them to normalise clients' concerns, fears and perceived weaknesses (not previously observed).

Coaching clients may experience their coaches' prior experience as a factor that:

**4:6.2.9** Increases the credibility and substance of their coaching (Blackman, 2006; Boyce et al., 2010; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Dagley, 2010);

**4:6.2.10** Strengthens their trust in their coach and their coaching (Alvey & Barclay, 2007; Bush, 2004; de Haan & Gannon, 2017);

**4:6.2.11** Helps them feel understood, which itself influences how they approach their coaching (Neves, 2014);

**4:6.2.12** Provides validity to their sense checking of their thoughts and ideas (not previously observed).

Subject to the same limitations as noted above, it is posited that coaches' prior and non-coaching experience:

- Can have tangible and notable effects on coaches themselves, on their clients and on coach-client relationships; and,
- Subject to qualification of being combined with appropriate personal characteristics and coaching skills and techniques, can be notably additive and beneficial to coaching relationships and to the lived experience of being coached.

### 4:6.3 Limitations

It is important to reiterate that the research undertaken for this project is qualitative; seeks to identify "tendencies, not laws" (Danermark, Ekstrom, et al., 2002, p.185) and makes "no claims as to the generalisability of their results" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.95).

In keeping with use of IPA as its research methodology, the project makes no effort "to achieve a representative sample in terms of either population or probability" (Smith et al., 2009, p.95) but instead "to illuminate a particular research question, and to develop a full and interesting interpretation of the data" (p.95).

In addition, and as discussed in Chapter 4:3.5 above, the decision to select the sample of participants through the researcher's network may limit the validity of the findings in some readers' estimations.

Nevertheless, it is suggested that the data obtained might provide some insights to other practitioners with similar backgrounds working with similar clients in similar contexts (see Chapter 4:4.1).

### 4:6.4 Recommendations

I contend that the in-depth analysis of the lived experience of a cohort of coaches with extensive prior business experience and of a cohort of their clients undertaken for this research project provides a number of new and useful insights to the academic and practitioner understanding of the nature of the coaching studied. Nevertheless, I suggest further research into the under-understood topic is justified.

Stober & Grant's (2006), p.6) observation that "definitions of the coaching process vary considerably …to the extent to which they emphasise teaching or direct instruction as opposed to facilitation or self-directed learning" remains valid today and still provides ample justification for further research. Nevertheless, I suggest there is a dimension between the extremes of the spectrum Stober and Grant refer to – between the direct transfer of knowledge implied in "teaching and direct instruction" and the non-directive style implied by “self-directed learning”- that it would be valuable to explore. This might be summarised as ‘how can non-directive styles of coaching that incorporate some transfer of knowledge and experience be used to facilitate clients’ self-directed learning?’

In particular, it would be worthwhile to gain better understanding of how the coaching training sector currently provides guidance and support to new coaches around ‘how’ they might use their prior experience appropriately and to most effect for their clients. This topic is explored in a report on professional practice that forms the next section of my thesis.

# Section 5

# Report of Professional Practice

# Section 5 Report of professional practice

## Chapter 5:1 Introduction

This section of my thesis is a Report of Professional Practice in the form of a case study that sets out to derive in-depth understanding of an issue that emerged directly from the Applied Research Project (ARP) covered in Section 4 above. A proposal and an ethics release form were submitted to CCCU in November 2021 and approved in January 2022.

### 5:1.1 Purpose of the project

The overarching purpose of this PhD thesis is to explore how coaches' prior career experience can influence their relationships with clients. One of the key observations from my ARP is that coaches' prior experience can have tangible and notable effects on coaches themselves, on their clients and on coach-client relationships. A resultant recommendation is that further research might be undertaken on how the coaching training sector prepares aspirant coaches to use their prior experience in their work.

This project seeks to address the question: ***How does a leading provider of coaching training prepare coaches to use their prior career experience in their work with clients?*** By using one of the UK's foremost providers of coaching training ('the organisation') as the "unit of analysis" (Yin, 2012, p.7) of a case study, this report sets out "to collect, present and analyse data fairly" (Yin, 2009, p.3) in order to provide a "systematic inquiry into an event or set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest" (Bromley, 1990, p302). The purpose of the project is to contribute further to the academic and practitioner understanding of the executive coaching industry.

### 5:1.2 Terms of reference

As noted in Sections 3 (Small Scale Research Project, SSRP) and 4 (Applied Research Project, ARP) above, a prior thorough critical review of the academic and practitioner literature (Critical Review of Literature, CRL, Section 2) revealed that little research has been conducted on the role coaches' backgrounds play in coaching interventions. My ARP

(Section 4) examines how a cohort of coaches and their clients experienced the coaches' prior career backgrounds in their relationships and concluded that it can have tangible effects on them and their coaching.

A qualitative research approach was applied to all aspects of this project and the research question was addressed by "construing, synthesising and clarifying data, and producing a history, meanings and understandings" (Zucker, 2009, p.3). A single case design was used and the organisation studied was chosen for its "critical" and "extreme" (Yin, 2009, p.48) characteristics. Moreover, a style of thematic analysis (TA) is used in which "the centrality of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.590) is prized.

Consequently, the project does not seek to produce generalisable findings but to contribute to the theory and practice of executive coaching by generating robust, rich, in depth information (Gray, 2014). Nevertheless, I sought throughout to "consider alternative perspectives…that most seriously challenge the assumptions of the case study" (Yin, 2009, p.187) in order to underpin the project's validity.

### 5:1.3 Context of the research

As noted in Section 4 of this thesis, "coaching takes many forms" (Brunner, 1998, p.516) and it is therefore important to state the context of the research undertaken in this project.

The organisation studied as the unit of analysis provides training for clients seeking either to build their own commercial coaching practices or to use the skills gained in their corporate careers. The specific training programme analysed and discussed in interviews is specifically for one-to-one coaching and the organisation has built its reputation around specialising in training experienced businesspeople to be senior executive or business coaches.

The nature of training explored and analysed is therefore consistent with the coaching researched in Section 4 and is variously termed executive, business, leadership or workplace coaching. It represents a distinct portion of the highly heterogeneous coaching industry in which an external coach is employed by organisations to help its executive to "improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction" (Kilburg, 1996, p.142) and ultimately improve their organisation's effectiveness.

#### 5:1.4 Research question

Yin's (2009) recommendation regarding questioning was followed, so the interviews referred to below were "guided conversations rather than structured queries" (p.106) and were "fluid rather than rigid" (p.106). Nevertheless, the issue identified in my ARP and reflected in the overall title of this case study was at the core of the research questions used for the analysis of documents and in the interviews of the protagonists in the training course studied. These included:

- What characteristics do you and your organisation look for when selecting trainee coaches?
- What characteristics, qualities, behaviours, expertise and / or skills does your organisation set out to develop in trainee coaches?
- How do you reflect the EMCC's competence framework in your programmes' content?
- In particular, the EMCC's competence categories:
    - Understanding Self – demonstrate awareness of own values, beliefs and behaviours; recognise how these affect practice…
    - Building the relationship – skilfully builds and maintains an effective relationship with the client, and where appropriate, the sponsor…
    - Enabling Insight and Learning – works with the client and sponsor to bring about insight and Use of Models and Techniques – applies models and tools, techniques and ideas beyond core communication skills in order to bring about insight and learning…

- Your organisation trains a lot of coaches who have had extensive prior executive experience in their careers – how do you help them to integrate their prior experience into their coaching?

### 5:1.5 Structure of this Section

The structure of this Section of my thesis was derived with reference to Zucker's (2009) 'common case study protocol' and Braun and Clarke's "qualitative analysis guidelines" (2006, p.86-93). It is divided into five chapters:

- **Chapter 5:1** introduces the purpose of the case study, outlines the context of the training studied and details the questions explored;
- **Chapter 5:2** explores the background to the work undertaken with reference to the extant literature and the findings and recommendations of the research undertaken in my ARP;
- **Chapter 5:3** describes and justifies the philosophical perspective, research approach and research methods applied in the project. It also covers the approaches taken to participant selection, data collection and analysis as well as ethical issues (including power dynamics, confidentiality and informed consent). Finally, it notes important limiting factors of the research;
- **Chapter 5:4** presents a discussion of findings of the themes identified and makes connections with other debates within the coaching industry;
- **Chapter 5:5** outlines some conclusions from the findings and makes recommendations for the practice of coaching and for future research.

## Chapter 5:2 Background

As noted in Sections 2 (CRL), 3 (SSRP) and 4 (ARP) of this thesis above, a comprehensive "critical review" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p.93-97) of the academic and practitioner literature on the development of the executive coaching industry and the relevant academic research methodologies was conducted between June 2017 and September 2021 (Section 2). This review provided a conceptual framework for this doctoral research and informed my choice of research methods.

Between October 2021 and December 2023 further reviews of the literature on coaching training and accreditation, case study research, and thematic analysis as a research methodology were undertaken. An additional 21 sources on coaching training and accreditation were studied (18 peer reviewed academic journal articles, 3 academic books) and 11 sources on research methodology. Learning from this exercise informed the research methods outlined in Chapter 5:3 of this Section below.

Two principal observations emerged from the earlier review of the literature on the development of the coaching industry, First, that the importance ascribed to coaches' prior experience has changed markedly over the past fifty years (Ives, 2008) as coaching burgeoned as an industry and certain vested interests influenced its development (Gray et al., 2016; Scoular, 2011). Second, that although the dominant discourse in coaching suggests that prior experience or expertise in clients' contexts is not important, there is evidence in the outcome and case study research that suggests it can have noticeable effects on coaching relationships (Bush, 2004; Rekalde et al., 2015; Dean & Meyer, 2002).

Although the 'coach as process expert' definition of coaching dominates the discourse around coaching, the industry is "populated by coaches from a range of backgrounds" and there is "no commonly accepted body of knowledge from which coaches draw their practice" (Cavanagh & Grant, 2006, p.148). Moreover, (Blackman et al., 2016, p.459) contend that "there has been little published systematic empirical research into business coaching" but suggest that: "effective coach characteristics and skills….can be summarised into four consistent themes – integrity, support for the coachee, communication skills and behaviours, and credibility" (p.471). The same authors also suggest that credibility is indeed linked to coaches' prior experience and cite evidence from 111 studies reviewed suggesting that "skills or expertise in the sector or in executive management are preferable" (p.473).

The research outlined in Section 2 and summarised in Sections 3 and 4 and above suggests that prior career experience is a source of credibility for coaches and that it could also support trust, questioning and challenging in coaching relationships. All of these topics were explored in my SSRP and ARP (see Sections 3 and 4 respectively).

The findings of both projects corroborated and illustrated the observations of elements of the extant literature and posited that coaches' prior and non-coaching experience can have tangible and notable effects on coaches themselves, on their clients and on coach-client relationships. Furthermore, it was suggested that, subject to qualification of being combined with appropriate personal characteristics and coaching skills, coaches' prior career experience can be notably additive and beneficial to coaching relationships and to the lived experience of being coached.

I suggest in Section 4 above that it would be worthwhile to explore how non-directive styles of coaching that incorporate some transfer of knowledge and experience can be used to facilitate clients' self-directed learning. Since evidence of some formal training is now generally a prerequisite credential for coaches aiming to undertake the sort of work referenced in 5:1.3 above, I posit that examining how coaching training providers prepare nascent coaches to use their prior experience in their work would be worthwhile. This case study project seeks to address that topic.

The increased acceptance of executive coaching as a human development intervention in the corporate world over the past thirty years has led to a burgeoning of the coaching industry and the number of coaches available to organisations. This in turn has led to buyers of coaching needing to be more discerning about their selection of coaches (Bluckert, 2004) and to "an expectation for professional bodies to meet these needs by developing accreditation systems" (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015, p.123). Gaining some understanding of the influence of accrediting bodies on the coaching training sector therefore formed part of the literature review for this project.

Multiple accreditation bodies have been created around the world, but two dominate the industry (Scoular, 2011). The International Coaching Federation (ICF) was founded by Thomas Leonard (see Section 2) in 1995 in the US and now has over 44,000 coach members in over 150 countries worldwide. The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) was originally founded in 1992 in the UK but was formalised in its current form by seven individuals in 2002. It now has over 6000 member coaches in over 60 countries. The training organisation studied in this project is accredited by the EMCC, so its competency framework for coaches was examined (see Chapter 5:4.1).

Although the influence of the accrediting bodies is considerable, their contributions to the coaching industry are receiving increasing scrutiny. Garvey (2016, p.682), for instance, argues that their "professionalisation agenda" is at least in part a reaction to (Sherman & Freas, 2004) characterisation of the coaching industry as the 'wild west' and that the "result is that these frameworks are, in part, born of protectionism and a desire to exclude those who do not meet the protectionist agenda"(p.682).

Similarly, Bachkirova and Lawton Smith question whether the frameworks originally created by the accreditation bodies in pursuit of greater professionalisation are now appropriate and suggest they "may need to be questioned" (2015, p.123). Moreover, they contend that "The problem is that the approach taken by most professional bodies towards gradation of professional expertise is based on competency frameworks that are as yet unsubstantiated" (2015, p.127). More recently, (Hurlow, 2022, p.134) urged the professional bodies to "acknowledge the powerful role they play on legitimizing particular forms of coaching" and to "promote a plurality of coaching approaches".

A specific theme of the criticism levelled at the accreditation bodies in the extant literature that was relevant to this project was the efficacy of competency frameworks in assessing some aspects of coaching that can be influenced by coaches' prior experience. (Drake, 2011, p.143) contends that while accreditation maybe appropriate for novice coaches it may be less so for more experienced professions who “as masters they change the rules and as artisans they transcend the rules”. Nadeem et al. (2021, p.4) suggest that the ICF and EMCC competency frameworks “are generic and largely practitioner based and do not reflect specific context needs”.

Irrespective of any particular criticisms, the need to include reference to the influence of the accreditation bodies on training programmes in this project’s inquiry is clear – as Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015) point out: “Professional bodies influence the content of training and accept payment for accrediting courses. They then accredit individuals who complete that training” (p.125).

The following chapter outlines the philosophical perspectives, research methods and ethical considerations applied to this case study project.

## Chapter 5:3 Research methods

I was cognisant of Yin's observation (Yin, 2009, p.66) that "case study research is among the hardest types of research to do because of the absence of routine procedures". I therefore constructed my own framework based on Zucker's (2009) "common case study protocol" and Braun and Clarke's "qualitative analysis guidelines" (2006, p.86-93) for the data analysis phase. There were seven distinct phases of activity undertaken for this case study project.

- Definition of the philosophical perspectives underpinning the research (see Chapter 5;3.1);
- Selection of the research approach, methods and procedures (Chapters 5:3.2);
- Selection of the unit of analysis, participants and materials (Chapter 5:3.3);
- Data collection – collection of materials and conducting, recording and transcription of interviews (Chapter 5:3.4);
- Data analysis (Chapter 5:3.5):
    - Familiarisation with the data;
    - Generation of initial codes;
    - Search for themes;
    - Review of themes;
    - Naming of themes;
    - Writing the report.
- Consideration of ethical issues (Chapter 5:3.6);
- Limitations (Chapter 5:3.7).

### 5:3.1 Philosophical perspectives

The research undertaken for this case study project, along with all the research reported on in this thesis, can be described as 'critical realist' (CR) as it acknowledges that "there is a reality but that it is usually difficult to apprehend" (Easton, 2009, p.119-120) and that "different valid perspectives on reality" (Maxwell, 2012, p.9) can exist; and as 'pragmatic-critical realist' because it reflects a view that "a means of evaluating the veracity of cognitive systems and theories…is through the practical success or failure" (Johnson & Duberley, 2000, p.162).

The use of a method of analysis of the data informed by thematic analysis (TA) was consistent with a CR perspective as it "reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.81).

### 5:3.2 Selection of research approach, methods and procedures

A qualitative research approach in which I seek to explore "subjectivity and experience" (Willig, 2012, p.5) was used throughout this project. This is appropriate for the nature of the subject matter (one-to-one coaching) and the nature of the enquiry (how training is delivered and experienced).

A case study method was prescribed by the CCCU guidelines and a 'flexible' rather than 'closed' (Yin, 2009) approach was taken to the selection of a method of analysis. An approach informed by the principles of TA was used to analyse the data and is outlined below. This approach was consistent with case study methodology and the research remained entirely qualitative throughout.

Since the issue of coaches' use of their prior career experience is not routinely rehearsed in the coaching industry, a flexible approach was taken to the objectives of the research. It was largely "descriptive" but on certain questions it was also "exploratory" (Yin, 2009, p.7-8) and effort was made to distinguish between these two purposes. Since the research focusses on how the organisation delivers its training but also collected data from individuals involved in the phenomenon, the study is both "holistic" (because it explores a single entity) and "embedded" (because it reflects more than one source of data) (Yin, 2012, p.7). In Yin's protocol, it is therefore an 'embedded, single-case study'.

The method of data analysis was not prescribed by the CCCU regulations and TA was selected as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Two alternative methods were considered but rejected. Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) was rejected because its approach is overly theoretical and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis's (Smith et al., 2009) explicit focus on interpretation made it less appropriate for this exercise which sets out to be descriptive and exploratory (although some interpretation is applied – see below).

The use of TA "involves a number of choices" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.81) and researchers are encouraged to make "deliberate decisions about their approach" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.2).

First, a "theoretical" (Braun & Clarke, 2006) approach is applied which is "driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area" (p.84). The analysis outlined below is thus "less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspects of the data" (p.84).

Second, the analysis outlined below attempts to explore "the latent level" (p.84) of the data and go "beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations…that are shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (p.84). This resulted in some interpretation being included reflecting that "researcher subjectivity is the primary 'tool' of reflexive thematic analysis; subjectivity is not a problem to be managed or controlled, it is a resource for research" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.6).

### 5:3.3 Selection and recruitment of the unit of analysis, participants and materials

The purpose of this case study is to explore how a leading provider of coaching training prepares coaches to use their prior career experience in their work with clients. There are only a limited number of organisations in the UK that warrant the descriptor 'leading' and a shortlist of five organisations was drawn up using my knowledge and experience of the sector. The preferred candidate organisation is one of the longest standing providers (since 1999), has trained over 500 coaches since inception, and specialises specifically in training experienced businesspeople to be executive coaches.

The initial approach was made by email to the Chief Executive of the organisation. When interest was indicated, I followed up by sending an Information Sheet (see Appendix R) and organising a video call to explain the exact nature of the project and the requirements and implications of taking part. Once formal agreement had been communicated, I organised further video calls with individuals being invited to take part (see below) and sent the Information Sheet and Consent Forms (see Appendix S) immediately afterwards (including one to be signed by an authorised signatory of the organisation on its behalf as well as the individual's version).

In order produce an 'information rich' case that has "the potential to maximise understanding of the phenomenon under investigation" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.12) and since "a major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence" (Yin, 2009), I requested the following data sources from the organisation being studied:

| | |
|---|---|
| Documents: | EMCC Global Competence Framework (chosen as it is the organisation's main accrediting body and accessed separately); |
| | Coaching training programme course materials; |
| Interviews with: | Director of studies - someone with overall responsibility for course content ('the Director'); |
| | A course tutor who delivers training programmes ('the Tutor'); |
| | A student who has recently completed the course ('the Coach'). |

The backgrounds and expertise of the participants interviewed were all consistent with the type of coaching studied throughout this thesis. The Director became a coach, and subsequently a trainer of coaches, after a distinguished career in professional services; the Tutor became a coach, and subsequently a trainer of coaches, after a successful career in financial services; and similarly, the Coach after a successful career including leadership roles in financial services. All three undertake one-to-one coaching of senior executives.

The participation of the particular organisation selected determines that this case study should be regarded as an “extreme case or unique case” (Yin, 2009, p.48). The organisation’s strategic focus (on clients with significant prior career experience) and recruitment policies (see below) make it unusual in the training market and especially appropriate for this study.

### 5:3.4 Data collection

Data collection was undertaken in February and March 2022.

#### Documents

The EMCC Global Competence Framework was accessed via the EMCC's website and its current validity was confirmed by email with the EMCC. Hard copies of the training course materials were provided by the organisation. Documents collected for analysis are shown in **Table 5:1** below:

| | |
|---|---|
| **EMCC** | **Global Competence Framework, Version 2, Sept 2015, updated September 2020** |
| **Organisation's course materials** | **Introduction and Orientation** |
| | **Foundation tutorial** |
| | **Practice coaching pack** |
| | **Coaching essentials 1 and 2** |
| | **Approaches to coaching 1 and 2** |
| | **Review session** |
| | **Self awareness** |
| | **Coaching in context** |
| | **The business of coaching** |

#### Interviews

Interviews with the organisation's director of studies (the Director), a tutor (the Tutor) and a recent client / coach (the Coach) took place in March 2022. Participants were asked to choose the method and location of their interviews and all three opted for face-to-face meetings in my office. Interviews lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes and all were recorded digitally. A follow up conversation by video conferencing was had with the Coach in April 2022 to clarify a number of details.

Schedules of questions relevant for each participant based on the outline in Chapter 5:1.4 above were used to pursue “a consistent line of inquiry” (Yin, 2009, p.106) with a stream of questions that was “fluid rather than rigid” (p.106). The participants were not provided with the questions in advance but were aware of the focus of the research from the recruitment process. Anonymised transcripts of the interviews were produced by a professional executive assistant.

### 5:3.5 Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's six "basic precepts" (2006, p.87-93) were used to conduct thematic analysis of the data collected. This involved "a constant moving back and forward" (p.86) between the full data set, the coded extracts and my draft report and the process can be described in Braun and Clarke's phases:

#### 5:3.5.1 Familiarisation with the data

The EMCC guidelines, the course materials and the interview transcripts were all read three times "in an active way – searching for meaning, patterns and so on" (p.87) with preliminary notes being made in the final round of reading.

#### 5:3.5.2 Generation of initial codes

Initial codes from the data were produced manually on the fourth and fifth rounds of reading and noted on the transcripts. These referred to the "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data" (p.88) but the "theory-driven" nature of the exercise was reflected in specific questions about the overarching topic being posed at all times. In total, sixty-five different codes were identified across the entire data set.

Although the five separate data sources (EMCC guidelines, course materials and three interviews) were all considered individually when the original analysis was undertaken in April 2022, the codes from each were consolidated into one list at an early stage.

This process was revisited in March 2024 in order to underpin thoroughness. In this revised process, the initial codes from each data set were kept separate and considered in isolation in each of phases 5.3.5.3 and 5.3.5.4 below.

An example of coding from one of the data sets is shown in **Table 5:2**:

| **Data extract** | **Code** |
|---|---|
| **Director:** *The first checkpoint, and this happens quickly in your head, you have to be adept at doing it, you have to be sure that the motive you have for offering the advice is because you believe, genuinely, that it's in support of the client's learning and their self. If you're doing it because of you, you're thinking to yourself 'Well, I haven't said anything for 45 minutes, it's about time I sort of showed how flash and clever I am'. That's not a good reason.* | Awareness of client's interests<br><br>Awareness of self and own needs |

### 5:3.5.3 Search for themes

The codes above were analysed and consideration was given to emerging themes ("captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p.82). In total, five potential over-arching and twelve sub-themes were identified by categorising some as main themes and others as sub-themes and by discarding some altogether.

In the March 2024 exercise, searches for themes were conducted for the separate data sources. Although there was a high degree of commonality, a number of additional potential over-arching themes and sub-themes emerged (two and seven respectively).

### 5:3.5.4 Review of themes

The list of candidate themes produced in the phase above was refined by reviewing them at two levels – first, when all extracts for each theme were re-examined and second, when "the validity of individual themes" (p.92) was considered "in relation to the entire data set" (p.92).

In the March 2024 exercise, the separate data sets were reviewed first and only then were they considered as a group. Despite this thorough re-examination of the data, no changes were required.

#### 5:3.5.5 Naming of themes

Three themes emerged from the phase above and these were refined further and consideration was given to how they fit "into the broader story" (p.92) that I want to tell about the data in relation to the research question.

#### 5:3.5.6 Writing the report

The final phase was to write up the report in Chapter 5.4 below. Analysis and further refinement of the themes continued during this phase and one theme with three sub-themes emerged – see Chapter 5.4.1 below.

### 5:3.6 Consideration of ethical issues

Full consideration was given to the ethical issues surrounding this research project. An Ethics Panel form of scrutiny form was originally submitted to a CCCU panel in November 2021 and approval was attained in January 2022. Copies of the forms are available on request.

#### 5:3.6.1 Relationship issues

Both the Director and the Tutor of the organisation are leading figures in the coaching industry and were thus known to me prior to the project. Special consideration was therefore given to the balance of power in my relationships with them and particular effort was made to ensure that their free consent to participating in the project was gained.

I believed that the likelihood of emotional issues arising from the participants' involvement in this project was low. Nevertheless, I made arrangements for confidential, one-to-one support from an experienced therapist to be available to anyone who felt they might benefit from it – and made all participants fully aware of the facility.

#### 5:3.6.2 Confidentiality

All of the participants were trained coaches and were therefore familiar with their discussions with me being completely confidential and this was confirmed in the consent letter. The organisation's and participants' names and identities were kept confidential and the recordings and anonymised transcripts were stored in secure facilities.

#### 5:3.6.3 Consent

As noted above, full information about the project, participants' involvement and the desired outputs was provided to all participants in oral discussions and in writing. Oral and written consent was received from all participants. The potential use of verbatim quotes was discussed explicitly with each participant and I agreed to get their personal 'sign off' of any quote I intended to use prior to submission of the report.

#### 5:3.6.4 Other issues

Location. The interviews were all undertaken face-to-face in my office. All participants were offered video calls and alternative locations but chose to meet in central London.

Feedback. I guaranteed to provide participants with as much feedback as they chose and, as a minimum, to gain prior approval for the use of individual quotes and to supply them with a copy of the final report.

Data protection. All data was stored in compliance with CCCU's and the GDPR's requirements and will be destroyed after the requisite period after the completion of my PhD studies.

Thorough consideration was given to the ethical issues surrounding this project prior to it being undertaken. Nevertheless, I remained vigilant to further issues arising in the course of the research. In the event, no further ethical issues or problems were encountered.

#### 5:3.7 Limitations

In keeping with the critical realist perspective adopted throughout this thesis, this case study looks for "tendencies, not laws" (Danermark et al., 2002, p.185) and makes "no claims as to the generalisability of their results but suggest rather that the data obtained might be useful in providing some insights" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006. P.95) to other practitioners with similar backgrounds working with similar clients in similar contexts.

The facts that this case study is based on a single unit of analysis and that it is an "extreme case or unique case" (Yin, 2009, p.48) should be borne in mind. Nevertheless, "the process of selecting, justifying and applying research strategies, procedures and methods" (Yilmaz, 2013, p.320) was purposive and sought to underpin the study's dependability and reliability.

All of the participants interviewed have personal and / or commercial interests in the training course studied – two as providers of its services (the Director and the Tutor) and two as coaches whose accreditation is based on it (the Tutor and the Coach). Two specific actions were taken to mitigate the increased potential for self-reported bias in the sample:

1. The experience of a recent recipient of the training – the Coach – was included. This thus introduced an element of 'triangulation' to the methodology and it is important to be clear about the nature of this aspect of the project.

   The triangulation used was 'data source triangulation' and not 'multiple methodologies' or 'data analysis triangulation' (Natow, 2020). The decision to include "multiple data sources by gathering data from different …perspectives" (p.161) was made for two reasons. First, to increase the reliability of the research by providing internal checks (Jeong & Othman, 2016) and second to increase "confidence in the findings" (Thurmond, 2001, p.254, citing Fielding & Fielding, 1986).

2. Specific questioning was applied to the Coach regarding the opportunities he experienced during the training to reflect on use of his prior experience in his coaching.

The following chapter sets out the themes that emerged from the data analysis outlined above and discusses their relevance to the overarching question.

## Chapter 5:4 Discussion

This chapter sets out and discusses the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data outlined in Chapter 5:3 above.

### 5:4.1 Introduction

Braun & Clarke (2021) "generally recommend discussing two to six themes (including any subthemes) in any single report". Extended further analysis at the report writing stage led me to selecting one theme with three sub-themes. These are shown in **Table 5:3**:

| **Overarching theme** | **Sub-themes** |
|---|---|
| Super comfortable being non-directive | Raising awareness<br>Shut up and listen<br>Floating soap bubbles |

The overarching theme and sub-themes of the analysis are discussed below. Two other significant background points emerged from the analysis.

First, the direct influence of the relevant accrediting body, the EMCC, on the content of the course studied, and therefore on this research inquiry, appears to be minimal. The Director summed up the process the organisation went through regarding accreditation:

> *"…when we realised it was increasingly valuable for us and for our clients for us to be accredited, that raised the question 'Is what we've got good enough?' We didn't have to do very much…"*

This comment confirms Boysen-Rotelli's (2020, p.27) observation that the "first few coaching schools were all private, for-profit organisations that were forced to invent curriculum as they went". Nevertheless, that little work was required for the organisation to reflect the EMCC's guidelines suggests there may be some validity to Bachkirova and Lawton Smith's (2015, p.125) view that there is "too close a relationship between training providers and professional bodies".

The direct influence of the EMCC's guidelines on the training course studied aside, references to coaches' backgrounds and their use of prior experience are notably absent from the EMCC's Competence Framework. Training providers are therefore under no obligation to cover this facet of coaching in their training of coaches in order to obtain accreditation.

Whilst the complexity of devising competency frameworks to cover the wide variety of different approaches to coaching and of coaches' backgrounds is acknowledged, I suggest the failure to include the need for coaches to harness the influence of their prior career experience in their coaching is an issue worthy of review by the accrediting bodies. Inclusion of a requirement for training organisations to cover this topic, where and when appropriate, would address (Campone & Awal, 2012, p.26) recommendation for the coach education sector "to broaden and encompass knowledge beyond technical, skills-focussed training".

The accrediting bodies' current failure to reflect the potential importance and usefulness of coaches' prior experience in their frameworks lends weight to Bachkirova & Lawton Smith's (2015, p.124) that the accrediting bodies oversimplify the task of providing frameworks "by disregarding the complexity of the processes involved in coaching and appear reductionist in the identification of coaching expertise" (citing Garvey, 2011; Ferrar, 2006). This in turn influences the training of coaches and I concur with Bachkirova & Borrington's (2019, p.339) comment that it "would be counterproductive for the educators of coaching to not pay attention to the many levels and variations in coaching".

The second background point that emerged from my analysis of the data collected is that the organisation's approach to selection of clients for its courses is consistent with its market positioning as a specialist in training experience businesspeople to be executive coaches. The Director commented that the organisation:

> *"…is known for attracting people who have an organisational hinterland and are already, let's say, successful…"*

Similarly, the Tutor commented that:

> *"…our coaches are experienced, smart, intelligent people with lots to offer. They will frequently have encountered situations that our coachees are experiencing, or things that are analogous anyway…"*

The quote above confirms the nature of the coaching studied as outlined in Chapter 5:1.3 above and that it is consistent with the research covered throughout this thesis. The fact that the majority of the organisation's clients are experienced businesspeople also confirms the unique or extreme case status of this study and underlines the limitations referred to in Chapter 5:3.7 above.

### 5:4.2 Overarching theme – Super comfortable being non-directive

The overarching theme of this study reflects the finding that the emphasis of the training is on minimising the risks of coaches using their prior experience in their work with clients rather than on explicitly supporting them in using it appropriately. The Tutor commented:

> *"…I would say the first 50, 60 or 70 per cent of the programme, in terms of time, is spent with people who come with lots of expertise, getting them to realise the power of putting it to one side…"*

The Director explained his view that coaches having experience to bring to coaching is important and is reflected in the organisation's recruitment processes, but that it is "*a necessary but not sufficient condition"*. Consequently, the Tutor explained that is not until…

> "*the second half of the programme, once you've got to a point where you're super comfortable being non directive, then you can start bringing your experience back in…".*

The Coach confirmed his experience of this:

> "*…at the end of the course, once we had gone through the very non-directive approach, there was a kind of tacit recognition that completely non-directive coaching was unlikely…"*

This suggests that the organisation's training of coaches:

1. Is consistent with the requirements of its accrediting body's (EMCC) Competence Framework.
2. Reflects John Whitmore's observation as quoted above: "ideal would seem to be an expert coach with a wealth of technical knowledge too. It is, however, very hard for experts to withhold their expertise sufficiently to coach well" (Whitmore, 2012, p.42).
3. Like a large portion of the coaching industry, is consistent with Rogerian thinking and the humanistic approach to coaching, counselling and coaching that is "*founded on the assumption that people are intrinsically motivated to grow and develop in the direction of becoming optimally functioning"* (Joseph, 2014) and that promotes an industry in which "*Most coaches generally adopt an 'ask not tell' approach"* (p.72)

How the organisation prepares coaches with prior experience to withhold it and use it appropriately is explored through examination of the three sub-themes. The ordering of the sub-themes reflects the sequencing of the training.

### 5:4.2 Sub-theme 1: Raising awareness

This sub-theme reflects a focus of the training that was evident across the course materials and all three interviews. It is also consistent with the first item on the EMCC's list of mentoring / coaching competencies titled *Understanding Self*:

> Demonstrates awareness of values, beliefs and behaviours; recognises how these affect their practice and uses self-awareness to manage their effectiveness in meeting their client's; and where relevant, the sponsor's objectives.

Raising coaches' awareness of themselves and how their prior experience might affect their competence as coaches emerged as a key aspect in the organisation's approach to preparing experienced businesspeople to be coaches. The magnitude of the changes in behaviour that the transition from business executive to executive coach requires was noted by all three participants. The Director commented:

> *'…it's easy to discuss here and describe it, but it is actually for many something that is really quite hard. Because it means going from a place of surety, of competence, of ego familiarity to a place where 'I don't know what I'm doing', it's hard, or can be hard. So that's tricky for people, but it's important…"*

The Tutor concurred:

> *"…it's really tough, if you've, been celebrated for your expertise in your career, it's very difficult to park that expertise and leave it to one side…"*

And the Coach confirmed:

> *"…I think the biggest challenge for me was stepping out of the classic command and control organisation, where*

*during my career, broadly speaking, I developed a leadership style that involved giving direction, whether rightly or wrongly, it was the way my style had evolved. And it was shifting that perspective completely, really, and becoming much more self-aware. And really, rather than looking to find solutions for everything, it was learning in my coaching, to create space for the client to find the solutions…*"

The Director introduced a concept of "*the unlearning of your previous life"* that echoes Campone and Awal's (2012) reference (quoting an interviewee in their study of 80 coaches) that "formal coach training encourages respondents to 'unlearn my consulting skills', allow the person being coached to lead" (p.31). This concept might be otherwise expressed as what Rajasinghe et al. (2022) refer to as "letting go…the ability to 'know', be able to 'do' or 'remember' something unconsciously" (p.10) as prior experience cannot, and should not, be forgotten if it is to be used in coaching.

Nevertheless, I suggest this process of *"unlearning"* or 'letting go' of the behaviours and cultural norms of prior career experience is a prerequisite step that should be undertaken before working on how to incorporate learning from prior experience in coaching. Put another way, before mastering how to introduce their own insights effectively into a coaching relationship, trainee coaches should be aware that delivering them in the style they may have used in corporate life may not be in the client's best interests.

I found this a powerful reminder of a critical step in the development of coaching competence. Once gained, the awareness that conducting oneself in the style of most corporate cultures will not necessarily benefit clients can be underestimated. The view that prior career experience may be useful in coaching, but not sufficient, and that it is best harnessed when combined with coaching training was expressed well by the Coach:

*"…I couldn't imagine being a coach without having had some significant experience. And I couldn't imagine being*

*a coach without having gone through the training. It's as simple as that. I mean, I would have been lost in the process. And that's partly because of all the things that we think we do well in business, that we don't necessarily do as well as we think…"*

Once coaches' awareness of their behaviours and styles of interaction has been raised, the training introduces key skills.

### 5:4.3 Sub-theme 2: Shut up and listen

This sub-theme reflects the training's introduction of an active response to the heightened self-awareness covered above. The naming of it reflects a particularly memorable comment by the Director:

*"….we teach senior leaders to shut up and listen. Full stop. End of story…"*

The importance of coaches listening well, and of coachees being, and feeling, listened to, is well documented in the extant literature and elsewhere in this thesis. The training's focus on listening is consistent with the EMCC's guidelines and the humanistic approach to coaching referred to above. Listening features in the EMCC's competence framework. It is implied in "*skilfully builds and maintains an effective relationship with the client"* (Competence 4) and highlighted explicitly in Competence 5, *Enabling Insight and Learning,* as a foundation capability "*Uses an active listening style"* .

The importance of gaining awareness of the power of listening featured in all the interviews and was summarised well by the Director:

*"….the single most valuable thing you can possibly do is to shut up and listen while they* (the coachees) *spend two hours pouring out their troubles…"*

The experiential nature of the training given is also notable. The Director also commented:

> *"…they get the experience of being listened to, some of these people…for many, it's a relatively new experience, so they get the learning from both sides. They get the experience of what it's like to be listened to as well as doing the listening. So that means they get the experience of being asked shorter questions, open questions, simple questions, clean questions…"*

I believe this is another important step in training experienced businesspeople to be coaches. In my experience, listening is often an underdeveloped and under appreciated skill in corporate life. The Coach concurred with this view when he cited "*listening being the best example"* of the skills the training had highlighted that he felt he needed to improve upon.

The Tutor summarised the outcome the training aims for in this dimension:

> *"…when they come out will we hope they will be good at withholding judgment and looking like they withhold judgment, feel like they withhold judgment…."*

I posit that a potential risk of the course's focus on listening is that it could encourage a view that it is preferable to "*listen, don't ask, as even asking can limit the self-determination of the client"* (Joseph, 2014, p.72). I suggest this would be detrimental as I concur with Griffiths and Campbell's (2008) finding of a study of a cohort of coaches and their clients that questioning is "*far more than a communication tool, but rather a key driver in the whole coaching process"* (p.24).

The first two themes discussed above are closely related – increased self-awareness is encouraged in order to heighten understanding of how the behaviours common in corporate life can be inappropriate in coaching and listening skills are propagated to fill a deficit often experienced in corporate life. Both involve withholding prior experience rather than utilising it. The last of the three sub-themes summarises the training's principal technique for bringing insights into coaching.

### 5:4.4 Sub-theme 3: Floating soap bubbles

The naming of this sub-theme reflects a comment by the Tutor who suggested that coaches should introduce hypotheses based on their own ideas or experience…

> "…*like a soap bubble - it exists, you can see it, but if you don't want it, you can just pop it very easily and move on, and it's as if it never happened…".*

This approach reflects the EMCC's guidelines that suggest a competent coach…

> "*Offers own perspectives and ideas in a style that allows the client to choose whether to work with them or not"* (Foundation Capability, Competence 5).

Once again, the training emphasises using self-awareness and listening skills to withhold any habitual temptation to share hypotheses unhelpfully early. The Tutor explained:

> *"So our coaches are experienced, smart, intelligent people with lots to offer. They will frequently have encountered situations that their coachees are experiencing, or things that feel analogous anyway. So it's very likely they will form a hypothesis about what might be going on for the coachee, or what could be a good idea, and what we say is, 'just park that hypothesis for as long as you can'. But if it remains something that you feel would be valuable, then float it to your client, as an offer…"*

The Director's comments also highlighted the risks to effective coaching associated with coaches sharing their experience in their work with clients:

> *"…you still need to be sensitive to the fact that you're not the client. They are. Whilst you can offer advice, you can never have exactly their experience…."*

Furthermore:

> *"…you have to be sure that the motive you have for offering the advice is because you believe genuinely, that it's in support of the client's learning and self…"*

The Coach's perspective confirmed the efficacy of this approach and once again highlighted the potency of prior experience being combined with training:

> *"…it was amongst the most valuable things on the course…. Being able to float a hypothesis in a discussion in such a way that it didn't feel like you're railroading the client into what you've just decided is what the individual thinks, or the situation is, or a combination of both. But the ability to do that, and this absolutely draws on experience…I think without experience, without business experience, I'm not sure how you would be able to do that…"*

The training's approach to the sharing of hypotheses, insights and experience by coaches as outlined above is consistent with the organisation's market positioning and strategy. It enrols *"experienced, smart, intelligent people with lots to offer"* (Tutor) in the knowledge that they have "*an organisational hinterland"* (Director) that may be useful to coachees. The training then equips trainees with techniques to share their 'hinterland' or experience in ways that do not direct or overwhelm their clients.

As noted above, there is a risk that the training's focus on helping trainees to achieve the not insignificant outcome of being able to *"shut up and listen"* (Director) could produce coaches who are skilled at the *"not tell"* part of Joseph's (2014, p.72) *"ask not tell"* approach, and who are less proficient in the *"ask"* aspects.

The extant literature suggests that effective questioning is a key skill in executive coaching (see Section 2 of this thesis; Eggers & Clark, 2000; Jonathan Passmore, 2010; Critchley, 2018) and, as Cox (2003, p.13) notes:

> *"…questioning and confrontation cannot be independent of context since their very application depends upon the amount of background or contextual knowledge the coach or mentor has".*

Griffiths and Campbell's (2008, p.23) study also observes that:

> *"…the process of active listening appeared to be underpinned by coaches' implicit understanding of an underlying framework of focus which allowed them to attend to the client and the clients agenda"*

and quotes (p.24) a coaching client's observation that active listening in coaching is:

> *"…not just any old questions either…They're the key questions and obviously they just get to the nuts and bolts of what's going on and actually get deeply enough into you…to get a little insight".*

I contend, therefore that (a) the absence of reference in the EMCC's framework to how coaches might harness their prior career or life experience in their understanding of clients' contexts; and (b) the focus of the training studied on listening skills with little explicit coverage of questioning mean that an important aspect of executive coaching may not attended to as effectively as it might be.

### 5:4.5 Summary

The overarching theme and sub-themes outlined above are the outcomes of reflexive thematic analysis of the data highlighted in Chapter 5:3.4. Since a “theoretical” ((Braun & Clarke, 2006) p.84) approach was applied (reflecting the research’s analytic interest in the specific topic of coaches’ use of their prior experience), this report focuses on the data relevant to the topic and does not seek to provide a rich description of all of the data collected.

The next chapter outlines my findings from the case study and makes some recommendations for practice and further research.

## Chapter 5:5 Findings and implications for practice and research

### 5:5.1 Findings

The objective of this case study is to address the question: ***How does a leading provider of coaching training prepare coaches to use their prior career experience in their work with clients?*** My observations and findings from analysis of the data referred to above are as follows:

1. Under its competence category titled "Enabling Insight and Learning", the EMCC's Global Competence Framework refers to "uses an active listening style" and "uses a range of questioning techniques to raise awareness" but makes no reference to where the understanding required to underpin active listening or questioning might come from;
2. Specifically, there is no reference to how executive coaches might use their prior experience in their work with clients in the EMCC framework;
3. It is therefore not a requirement for the organisation studied to cover this aspect of coaches' backgrounds explicitly in its training of coaches in order to obtain accreditation;
4. The overall aim of the training studied is to equip coaches with the self-awareness and skills needed to be highly proficient in non-directive coaching;
5. The 'unlearning of previous life', or learning to 'let go' of previous experience and 'holding it lightly', required to achieve point 4 above is a significant and often difficult task for experienced businesspeople who may have previously been 'celebrated' for their business expertise and / or experience;
6. The training's key focus is on listening skills with little attention paid to questioning techniques or how to incorporate prior knowledge and experience in questioning;
7. The training provided includes a strong experiential element that provides opportunities for coaches to both listen and be listened to;
8. Once their prior expertise has been 'put aside', the training extends a tacit invitation to coaches to incorporate their own ideas and insights in their coaching;

9. The training's principal technique for coaches to introduce their own ideas and insights - 'floating hypotheses' – focusses predominately on minimising the risks of them reverting to more directive, or at least strongly suggestive, styles of interaction that they may have used in corporate environments;
10. There was no evidence to suggest that coaches are encouraged to reflect explicitly on their prior career experience as a source of insights – though their previous experience is an important feature of the training's recruitment process.

Overall, I believe that the organisation studied provides robust and thorough training that reflects its context in the coaching industry, the current discourse on coaching, and Campone and Awal's (2012) observation that "formal coach training…provides a grounding in theoretical frameworks needed to explain the coaching process, provides tools and structure" (p.31).

The organisation recognises that coaches prior career experience will be important to their ability to build successful practices and therefore to its own reputation. The Director commented:

> *"…if you don't have basic business credibility…it's very unlikely that you're going either to make a living as a coach or even be credible as a coach…."*

Consequently, the organisation enrols trainee coaches who have significant prior career experience and focusses its training on helping them 'unlearn their previous lives'. Proficiency in non-directive coaching and the ability to introduce ideas and insights into coaching tentatively are the key desired outcomes. Throughout the training it is assumed that the coaches will have insights to bring to coaching because they generally have 'organisational hinterlands'.

Nevertheless, there was no evidence in the data to suggest that the training raises the idea that coaches might reflect on their careers with the intention of identifying aspects of their experience that might be brought to bear to their clients' benefit in their coaching.

### 5:5.2 Implications for practice

Within the constraints of the limitations of this study (see Chapter 5:3.7 above), I make three recommendations regarding the practice of coaching and coach training. All are based on my view (see Chapter 4:6.4 above) that practice could benefit from exploring how non-directive styles of coaching that incorporate some transfer of knowledge and experience might be used to facilitate clients' self-directed learning.

First, I suggest the coaching industry's accrediting bodies should consider making explicit reference in their competence frameworks to how coaches might use their prior experience in their coaching. The ICF's Current Core Competencies (as revised 18th May 2021) make no reference to coaches' backgrounds and experience. The EMCC's Global Competence Framework refers to *Understanding self* and highlights *awareness of values, beliefs and behaviours* but not to experience. I suggest this is a significant omission since coaches' backgrounds are important contributors to the credibility, market differentiation and selection of executive coaches.

Second, I suggest the industry's accrediting bodies and coaching training sector should acknowledge Campone and Awal's (2012) observation that "different categories of event" (p.33) in coaches' lives, including their prior career experience, "have different impacts, suggesting the need for a multifaceted strategy for the preparation of coaches" (p.33).

Specifically, the coaching training sector should consider how to support trainees who have prior career experience that may be potentially relevant to clients to explore how they might use it effectively and appropriately in their coaching. This might include:

1. Reflection on aspects and events in their careers and their own professional development that might be relevant to clients working in similar environments;
2. Reflection on issues in their careers that with the benefit of experience they might now handle differently;
3. Reflection on how to incorporate learning from the above in the questioning, supporting and challenging of clients without compromising the self-directed nature of coaching.

Third, I suggest the industry's accrediting bodies and coaching training sector should also note Nadeem et al.'s (2021) observation that the industry's competency frameworks "do not reflect specific context needs" (p.4) and Campone and Awal's (2012) recommendation that:

> "…given the diversity of prior professional training and experiences of coaches…differentiating coach training and education may warrant closer consideration. This might address different practice contexts and introduce knowledge and skills as warranted by practitioners' prior experience and training" (p.34).

Creating a clearer distinction between initial coaching training that focusses on "skills, processes, coach behaviours; ethical standards and business practices" (Campone & Awal, 2012,p.34) and on-going education that broadens "the knowledge domains" (p.34) of coaches at an early stage of their development as practitioners could, I suggest, produce several positive outcomes:

– Increase the confidence of newly trained coaches who have relevant prior experience to harness it in their work with clients in ways that are appropriate;
– Make the differentiation and categorisation of coaches in the market clearer and, by introducing specific 'education' for coaches with different backgrounds and knowledge domains, more legitimate;
– Thus, improve the efficiency of the market in executive coaching services for both its buyers (HR, Learning & Development etc) and its ultimate clients (coachees); and
– Provide additional commercial opportunities for training organisations due to the increased formal need for coaches to be 'educated' as well as 'trained'.

### 5:5.3 Implications for research

As noted in Chapter 5:3.7 above, the generalisability of the observations of this case study is limited by the research methods applied and the unit of analysis chosen. Consequently, I suggest further research on the approaches and methods used by the coaching training sector to develop coaches' abilities to harness the benefits of prior career inexperience is justified. The reasons cited above concerning the importance of prior experience to coaches' credibility, market differentiation and selection apply to this recommendation.

# Section 6

# Summary and findings

# Section 6 Summary and findings

This Section of my thesis provides a brief summary of the four distinct but closely related research projects undertaken in fulfilment of Canterbury Christ Church University's PhD in Professional Practice: Psychological Perspectives; draws together the findings of the three primary research projects and consolidates them to address the single research question explored; and sets out the contributions claimed to knowledge and scholarship in executive coaching, to knowledge and scholarship in research methodologies and to the professional practice of executive coaching and coaching training.

The overarching single research question explored in depth and from a series of different angles throughout this thesis is:

***How can executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients?***

The four constituent parts of the thesis are:

- A critical review of the extant academic and practitioner literature on the topic. See **Section 2 – Critical review of literature (CRL)**
- A small scale study of my own experience of the topic as a practicing executive coach. See **Section 3 – Small scale research project (SSRP)**
- An applied study of the experiences of the topic of cohorts of other coaches and their clients. See **Section 4 – Applied research project (RPP)**
- A report of professional practice exploring how a leading training programme covers the topic in one of its programmes. See **Section 5 – Report of professional practice (RPP)**

## Chapter 6:1 Summary of the research projects undertaken

The four projects referred to above are summarised as follows in **Table 6:1**:

| | **Section 2**<br>**Critical review of literature** | **Section 3**<br>**Small scale research project** | **Section 4**<br>**Applied research project** | **Section 5**<br>**Report of professional practice** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Purpose** | To provide a critical review of the extant academic, empirical and practitioner literature relevant to the topic | To explore my own experience of how my non-coaching career experience affects my relationships with clients | To explore how coaches' prior career experience affects the relationships between the coaches and clients in four dyads | To explore how a leading coaching training provider prepares coaches to use their prior career experience in their coaching |
| **Research question** | How does executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationship with their clients? | How does my prior career experience affect my relationships with coaching clients? | How does executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients? | How does a leading provider of coaching training prepare coaches to use their prior career experience in their work with clients? |
| **Research methods** | Electronic searches;<br>Snowballing | Self-reflection;<br>IPA of interviews | IPA of interviews | Case study using thematic analysis |
| **Initially under-taken** | June 2017 – August 2019 | September 2019 – August 2020 | September 2020 – August 2021 | September 2021 – June 2022 |
| **Findings** | **CRL** | **SSRP** | **ARP** | **RPP** |
| | Attitudes to the importance of coaches' prior experience to their coaching have changed over the past forty years.<br>The currently dominant discourse suggests that coaching is a means of facilitation and non-directive.<br>The case study and practitioner literature however suggest that coaches' prior experience can enhance their | My own self-reflection suggested that my experience of organisational life; of leadership and management issuers; and the mores and cultures of corporate settings are influences on my relationships with clients.<br>I felt my experience influences how I care for clients and my own confidence. I also felt it enhances my | Coaches felt their prior business experience ('it'):<br>Enhances their clients' estimations of their credibility;<br>Underpins the development of peer to peer relationships;<br>Supports their abilities to question, probe and challenge;<br>Helps them empathise and engage deeply;<br>Encourages clients to reveal their inner feelings; | The accrediting body studied (EMCC) makes no reference to how coaches might use their prior experience.<br>The training company studied is therefore not required to cover it.<br>The training focuses on increasing self-awareness and on non-directive coaching skills.<br>Listening skills are covered thoroughly but little attention is given to questioning techniques or how to incorporate prior |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | credibility and support trust, questioning and challenging in coaching relationships. | clients trust in me and their estimations of my credibility.<br>My clients suggested that my prior experience is important but not sufficient in our relationships – it has to be complemented by coaching skills.<br>They suggested that my experience contributes to my understanding of their contexts; to the empathy I am able to show; and to the challenge I am able to make.<br>Overall, clients suggested that my experience enhances my credibility as their coach; their trust in their coaching; and their estimations of the value of the coaching. | Gives them confidence to make interventions;<br>Allows them to share practical learning gained from mistakes;<br>Provides opportunities to normalise clients concerns.<br>Clients felt it:<br>Increases the credibility and substance of their coaching;<br>Strengths their trust in coaching;<br>Helps them feel understood;<br>Provides validity to their sense checking of their thoughts and ideas. | knowledge and experience in questioning.<br>A tacit invitation is extended to incorporate ideas and insights once non-directive skills have been mastered.<br>The principal technique for introducing ideas and insights focusses on minimising the risks of coaches reverting to directive or suggestive interventions.<br>Coaches are not encouraged to reflect explicitly on the prior career experience as a potential source of ideas and insights. |

## Chapter 6:2 Findings of the research projects undertaken

This chapter summarises in chronological order the findings of the four distinct but closely related research projects undertaken. This starts with the critical review of literature (Chapter 6:2.1 below), is followed by a summary of the consolidated findings of the the primary research undertaken for the SSRP and ARP (Chapter 6:2.2 below) and finally for the RPP (Chapter 6:2.3 below).

### 6:2.1 Findings of the Critical Review of Literature (CRL)

The learning gained from the critical review of literature (CRL - Section 2) is reflected throughout this thesis and specifically in the themes and issues explored in the small scale research project (SSRP - Section 3), the applied research project (ARP - Section 4), and the report on professional practice (RPP – Section 5).

The initial thorough searches and critical review of the extant literature was undertaken between June 2017 and August 2019 (see Section 2). Further searches, snowballing exercises and critical assessment continued until September 2022 and are reflected in the various sections. In total, over 270 sources were studied.

Two principal observations emerged from the initial review on the development of the coaching industry, First, that the importance ascribed to coaches' prior experience has changed markedly over the past fifty years (Ives, 2008) as coaching burgeoned as an industry and certain vested interests influenced its development (Gray et al., 2016; Scoular, 2011). Second, that although the dominant discourse in coaching suggests that prior experience or expertise in clients' contexts is not important, there is evidence in the outcome and case study research that suggests it can have noticeable effects on coaching relationships (Bush, 2004; Rekalde et al., 2015; Dean & Meyer, 2002).

The subsequent projects all explore how coaches' backgrounds affect their coaching relationships in an attempt to close the gap in the literature identified.

### 6:2.2 Findings of the Small Scale Research Project (SSRP) and Applied Research Project (ARP)

The findings of separate analyses of the self-reflection exercise, interviews with other coaches and interviews with clients undertaken for the SSRP and ARP are set out in their respective sections above.

Further analysis informed by IPA was undertaken of the data from the two projects in January - March 2022 to provide a consolidated set of findings from the two projects. These are set out here and reflect the input on the topic from five experienced executive coaches with extensive prior career experience (myself through the SSRP and four others through the ARP) and seven coaching clients (three of my own through the SSRP and four others through the ARP).

The consolidated findings of the two projects are discussed below and are based on eight 'super-ordinate themes' (Smith et al., 2009) from the data from the five coaches and seven coaching clients. Each was created by either 'abstraction' or subsumption' (Smith et al., 2009) of the emergent themes. Three of the themes were common to both coaches and clients and are discussed together. Three of the themes derived from the data from coaches and two from the clients suggest that coaches' prior career experience can have tangible additive effects on coaching and coaching relationships. These findings were qualified by one theme highlighted by both the coaches and clients and a further theme by the coaches only. These are set out in **Table 6:2** and summarised below:

| **Super-ordinate themes - Coaches** | **Themes of the findings** |
|---|---|
| Credibility<br>Confidence<br>Learning from mistakes<br>Risks<br>Important but not sufficient | Credibility<br>Confidence<br>Learning from mistakes<br>Risks<br>Important but not sufficient |

| Super-ordinate themes - Clients | |
|---|---|
| Credibility<br>Confidence<br>Important but not sufficient | |

#### 6:2.2.1 Credibility

That coaches' prior career experience can enhance their credibility as coaches emerged from analysis of the reflections of both the coaches and the clients interviewed.

Coaches felt it makes them more credible to potential clients, encourages feelings of peer to peer relationships, and influences how they question, probe and challenge clients. I propound that the use of prior experience in questioning is especially significant because, as Mosteo et al. (2021, p.1242) point out, "…targeted questioning conjointly with powerful listening….are key elements of a coach's direction of the coaching process".

Clients concurred with the view that their coaches' prior experience enhances credibility and highlighted that interventions based on learning from experience have more impact in coaching than comments based on theoretical frameworks or academic observations alone.

#### 6:2.2.2 Confidence

That coaches' prior career experience can have notable influence on the levels of confidence of both parties in coaching dyads emerged from analysis of the reflections of both the coaches and the clients interviewed.

Coaches felt that having experience of situations similar to their clients' allows them to speak and question with greater confidence, to try interventions that they might otherwise avoid, and to calibrate how they challenged clients.

Clients felt their coaches' prior experience boosts their confidence in their coaches and their coaching. This manifested itself in a number of different ways.

First, it can promote trust in coaches and of coaching. I propound this is also especially significant as clients being able to trust their coaches is "…essential in facilitating individuals to reveal as much about their concerns as possible, so that coaches can orient actions as appropriate for each coachee's development" (Albizu et al., 2019). Furthermore, "…coachees with high levels of trust in the coach will be more open and receptive to feedback provided by the coach and this is likely to increase affective outcomes of coaching (eg. self-awareness, self-efficacy)" (Bozer & Jones, 2018, p.349).

Second, clients felt their coaches' experience gives them confidence that their coaches understand their challenges and how to unpick them. Coaches 'knowing what it is like' to be in their position and the experience of feeling understood by their coaches were important aspects of clients' confidence in their coaching.

Third, clients felt that coaches who have understanding of business contexts similar to theirs and of what it is like to operate at senior levels within organisations can provide 'real edge' in their coaching. This corroborates Mosteo et al.'s observation (2021, p.1242) that a "coach with good understanding of leadership, different business disciplines…as part of their core competencies, and knowledge about a given business context positively affect the perceived value of the coaching relationship by coachees".

Fourth, one client highlighted that the confidence they derived from their coach's prior experience allows them to address the 'nitty gritty' of key issues more swiftly than would otherwise be possible.

Overall, I assert that the enhancement to the confidence of both coaches and clients associated with coaches' prior experience is both significant and noteworthy.

#### 6:2.2.3 Learning from mistakes

That coaches' prior career experience can allow them to utilise 'cautionary tales' and normalise their clients' concerns particularly effectively emerged as a clear theme from analysis of the reflections of the coaches.

The coaches felt that their learning from 'mistakes' in their own careers encourages them to highlight risks their clients maybe facing in similar situations and that interventions using such learning can be especially effective.

Similarly, coaches felt their ability to refer to their own career 'failures' or 'mistakes' in coaching can provide opportunities to normalise apparent weakness and thus encourage clients to share their vulnerabilities more openly.

#### 6:2.2.4 Risks

That there are risks attached to experienced businesspeople becoming coaches was highlighted by the coaches.

All of the coaches interviewed were cognisant of risks of misusing their prior experience. The most consistently highlighted concern was of providing answers to clients' issues too early rather than helping clients find their own solutions.

Other risks highlighted included being chosen for the wrong reasons – for advice or mentoring rather than coaching – particularly when working with less experienced clients - and a potentially heightened risk of collusion.

#### 6:2.2.5 Important but not sufficient

That coaches' prior career experience can be additive to coaching but is not sufficient alone in coaching emerged from analysis of the reflections of both the coaches and the clients interviewed.

There was complete unanimity across and among both cohorts that the advantages to be gained highlighted above were qualified by the need for coaches to have the appropriate personal characteristics and coaching skills.

The ability to develop effective coaching relationships dominated the coaches' responses to questioning around the skills and expertise required in coaches, and the ability to listen predominated. The clients' responses echoed the coaches'. Personal characteristics and coaching skills dominated their responses to the equivalent question about skills and expertise and the ability to listen effectively predominated again.

This finding corroborates research of senior executives' coaching experiences by McGill et al. (2019, p.12-13):

> *"Leaders highlighted various important coach qualities, with individuals emphasising different qualities. Among the most important qualities were business and coaching experience, coaching skills including knowledge of psychology, insight, calmness, listening and ability to challenge and work at pace".*

I posit that the data from the interviews of both the coaches and clients undertaken for the SSRP and ARP components of this thesis suggest that coaches' backgrounds can have tangible and notable effects on coaches themselves, on their clients and on coach-client relationships. Subject to the qualification of needing to be combined with appropriate personal characteristics and coaching skills and techniques, coaches' prior career experience can be notably additive and beneficial to coaching relationships and to the lived experience of being coached.

### 6:2.3 Findings of the Report of professional practice (RPP)

The subject of the RPP stemmed directly from an implication for further research of the ARP. The purpose of it is to explore how a leading coaching training provider in the UK prepares coaches to use their prior career experience in their coaching. The findings of case study project are set out in Section 5 above and are summarised below:

**6:2.3.1** The Global Competence Framework of the EMCC, the accrediting body of the training company studied, refers to the use of active listening and a range of questioning techniques but makes no reference to where the understanding required to underpin these competencies might come from.

**6:2.3.2** Specifically, there is no reference in the EMCC framework to how executive coaches might use their prior experience in their work with clients.

**6:2.3.3** It is therefore not a requirement for the organisation studied to cover this aspect of coaches' backgrounds explicitly in its training of coaches in order to obtain accreditation

**6:2.3.4** The overall aim of the training studied is to equip coaches with the self-awareness and skills needed to be highly proficient in non-directive coaching. This reflects Campone & Awal's comment (2012, p.34) that coach training focuses on "the technical knowledge of the field: skills, processes, coach behaviours; ethical standards and business practices".

**6:2.3.5** The programme encourages trainee coaches to 'let go' of their previous experience, something that Rajasinghe et al. (2022, p.10) suggest "appears as a threshold to coach development".

**6:2.3.6** The training's key focus is on listening skills with little attention paid to questioning techniques or how to incorporate prior knowledge and experience in questioning.

**6:2.3.7** Once trainee coaches' prior expertise has been 'put aside', the programme extends a tacit invitation to them to incorporate their own ideas and insights into their coaching.

**6:2.3.8** The training's principal technique for coaches to introduce their own ideas and insights focusses predominately on minimising the risks of them reverting to more directive styles of interaction that they may have used in their prior corporate environments.

**6:2.3.9** There was no evidence to suggest that coaches are encouraged to reflect explicitly on their prior career experience as potential sources of insights.

Overall, I assert that the organisation studied provides robust and thorough training that reflects its context in the coaching industry, the current discourse on coaching, and Campone and Awal's (2012) observation that "formal coach training…provides a grounding in theoretical frameworks needed to explain the coaching process, provides tools and structure" (p.31).

## Chapter 6:3 Contributions to knowledge, scholarship and professional practice

The contributions to knowledge, scholarship and professional practice it is asserted this thesis offers are set out in each of the above reports on the constituent research projects and are summarised and expanded upon below.

### 6:3.1 Contribution to knowledge and scholarship in executive coaching

I assert that the findings of the research projects undertaken for this thesis contribute to the knowledge and scholarship in executive coaching in two different ways:

- By corroborating, elucidating, exemplifying, illuminating, illustrating, or substantiating multiple questions and observations referred to in the extant literature;
- By providing new insights into particular aspects of coaching that coaches with significant prior career experience can bring to their relationships with clients.

The individual contributions to knowledge and scholarship in executive coaching in both categories are set out below:

**6:3.1.1** The research seeks to elucidate the question posed by Kauffman & Bachkirova (2009, p.3): “Does the coaches’ background make a difference..?” Within the constraints of the limitations of the research, the findings suggest that coaches’ backgrounds can indeed make tangible and notable differences to coaching relationships and to coaching.

**6:3.1.2** The findings contribute to addressing Athanasopoulou and Dopson’s observation (2015, p.31) that “it would be valuable to obtain better understanding of the role that a coach’s background plays in the outcome and quality of the coaching intervention” by identifying specific effects of coaches’ prior experience.

**6:3.1.3** By exploring the lived experiences of coaches and clients, the research addresses the suggestion made Meuse et al. (2009, p.130) that: “a more useful measure of validity may be one that is associated with the coach rather than with the coaching process in general".

**6:3.1.4** The finding that coaches' prior experience is 'important but not sufficient' to deliver coaching and that other personal characteristics, qualities, behaviours and skills are required substantiates Blackman et al.'s (2016, p.459) comment that "effective coach characteristics and skills…can be summarised into four consistent themes – integrity, support for the coach, communication skills and behaviours, and credibility".

**6:3.1.5** The findings substantiate Bush's observation (2004, p.100) that "…coach's background…engendered trust, credibility and rapport". The significance of this is confirmed in more recent research (Mosteo et al., 2021, p.1245) that highlights "the importance of trust or the 'connection' generated between coach and the executive" as factors influencing the assessment of the effectiveness of coaching.

**6:3.1.6** The findings illuminate Axmith's (2004, p.5) contention that "the coach must have the right background…CEOs want to work with a 'peer'…someone who brings real-world business credentials".

**6:3.1.7** The findings corroborate Augustijnen et al.'s (2011, p.159) suggestion that coaches' with relevant prior experience may be "more able to put themselves in the coachee's shoes and facilitate dialogue".

**6:3.1.8** The findings illustrate Cox's (2003, p.13) view that it is not sufficient for coaches "to remain at superficial or meta level of challenge, with no accurate or specific knowledge or experience".

**6:3.1.9** The findings exemplify multiple references in the extant literature to the importance of empathy in coaching (Bluckert, 2005; Lambert & Barley, 2001; Sonesh et al., 2015).

**6:3.1.10** The findings substantiate Bozer et al.'s view (2014, p.891) that "a coach's credibility facilitates improved coachee job performance by allowing the coachee to speak candidly…".

**6:3.1.11** The findings related to clients' feelings of being understood illustrate Neves's (2014) view of the importance of this in coaching.

**6:3.1.12** The finding related to clients' confidence in their coaches and their coaching and the interpretation that this is analogous to trust substantiates Alvey & Barclay's (2007, p.22-23) linking of "coach credibility" with the importance of the "establishment of trusting relationships" in coaching.

**6:3.1.13** The finding that the impact of clients' sense checking of ideas is enhanced by their coaches' prior experience was not identified in the extant literature. Since this emerged as an important component of the clients' lived experience of their coaching and an influence on their coaching relationships, I contend that it adds to our knowledge of executive coaching.

**6:3.1.14** Although coaching clients' feelings of enhanced confidence are evident in the extant literature, the importance of coaches' prior experience to their own confidence is not and I contend that this finding of the research also adds to our knowledge.

**6:3.1.15** The finding related to the powerful normalising effects of coaches being able to refer to their own 'mistakes' in their coaching as an empathetic tool to encourage clients to reveal their vulnerabilities is not covered in the literature and I contend that it also adds to our knowledge.

As noted above, I suggest the findings summarised above corroborate, elucidate, exemplify, illuminate, illustrate or substantiate multiple questions and observations referred to in the extant literature and provide a number of new insights into coaching and coaching relationships.

I contend that the findings of this research demonstrate that coaches' prior career experience can have tangible and additive effects on their relationships with their clients and on how coaching is experienced by their clients. My interpretation of the research suggests that coaches combining and integrating their learning from their practical experience in business with learned or innate coaching skills and techniques can result in an attractive and differentiated style of executive coaching that is otherwise under-understood and poorly articulated.

### 6:3.2 Contribution to knowledge and scholarship in research methodology

I suggest there are three aspects of my experience of using IPA in the research projects undertaken for this thesis that contribute to knowledge and scholarship in research methodology:

**6:3.2.1** The suitability of IPA as a research method for the academic study of coaching is becoming increasingly well recognised (Passmore & Mortimer, 2011; Lech et al., 2018;Rajasinghe, 2019; Rajasinghe et al., 2022).

The heterogeneity of coaching in general and the dyadic and confidential nature of the particular type of coaching studied in this research mean that its "detailed, nuanced analysis of particular instances of lived experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p.40) is particularly well suited. In addition, since a large portion of coaching research is conducted by practicing coaches, I suggest IPA is especially applicable as its "double hermeneutic" (Smith et al., 2009, p.3) recognises "the researcher's centrality to analysis and research" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.88) and thus allows both the participants and the researchers to have voices.

I found both of the points above to be relevant and suggest that the research described in this thesis provides further evidence of IPA's applicability to the research of coaching.

**6:3.2.2** One of my reservations about using IPA for the research undertaken reflected Rajasinghe's (2019, p.10) observation that "Transcripts are unable to convey the subtleties of participants' non-verbal communication". I recognised this limitation of IPA and suggest that other researchers using the method in similar situations should consider limiting its impact by adopting the techniques used in this research (taking of detailed notes of each interviewee's body and facial cues during interviews followed by repeated listening to audio recordings of interviews while reading the relevant transcripts).

**6:3.2.3** Although I believe my decision to analyse data from interviews of separate cohorts of coaches and coaching clients, ie both halves of dyadic relationships, is methodologically sound and that it adds substance to the findings (Larkin et al., 2019), triangulation of data collection and analysis has only recently been adopted in IPA studies.

My experience of using a 'multiperspectival' design was positive. Although not aimed in any way at identifying causality, I believe the triangulation undertaken enhances the "persuasiveness" of the research and hope that the readers of the findings "feel more confident the analysis is telling them something substantive" (Larkin et al., 2019, p.195).

More widely, I concur with Larkin et al. (2019, p.195) that triangulation is well suited to research questions that are relational, systemic or otherwise socially nuanced and commend it to other researchers studying similar issues in similar contexts.

My personal reflections on what I feel I have learned and how I feel I have developed as a researcher are included in Section 7 below, but I also believe the research undertaken for this project adds to knowledge and scholarship in the use of IPA as a research method.

### 6:3.3 Contribution to the professional practice of executive coaching

I suggest that this research gives voice to a heterogeneous grouping within the coaching industry that is poorly observed, relatively inarticulate and under-understood. I assert that the findings of this research illustrate and substantiate a number of important aspects of the coaching that coaches with significant prior business experience can bring to their work with clients that are worthy of clearer recognition by the buyers and users of executive coaching. Three areas are highlighted.

**6:3.3.1 Prior experience is valued.** For reasons outlined above, the discourse on the executive coaching industry is heavily influenced by vested interests who promote styles of coaching that require coaches to have little or no experience of clients' managerial and organisational contexts. Within this discourse, coaches' use of their prior experience in their coaching is often conflated with directives style of interaction – suggesting that it inevitably results in 'how I did it' interventions.

Observation of the coaching training industry, now reinforced by the findings of the RPP, suggests that the training of experienced businesspeople in coaching skills focusses predominately on helping them free themselves from utilising their prior experience and provides little or no guidance on *how* they might use their experience in the service of their clients. The findings of this research suggest this is unfortunate and I contend that the practice of executive coaching could benefit from clearer acknowledgement of the advantages available from the thoughtful use of coaches' prior career experience in their work with clients. The following findings are highlighted:

**6:3.3.1.1** Coaches and clients both observe that coaches' prior experience influences clients' estimations of their coaches and their coaching;

**6:3.3.1.2** Knowledge of coaches' prior experience can underpin the development of peer to peer relationships with coaching clients;

**6:3.3.1.3** Coaches' prior experience can underpin their abilities to empathise and engage deeply with clients;

**6:3.3.1.4** Clients may experience greater trust in their coaches and their coaching as a function of the confidence they take from the practical experience their coaches have gained in their non coaching careers.

**6:3.3.2 Confidence.** Experiential knowledge emerged as source of additional confidence in their coaching abilities for the coaches interviewed and was appreciated by their clients. The virtues of using prior experience to inform questioning, probing and challenging of clients was highlighted by the coaches and the clients suggested that interventions based on experience are considered to have particular credibility.

The use of experiential knowledge gained in prior careers as an influence on how to gauge the intensity of coaching interventions emerged as a clear finding. In particular, the coaches felt their experience helped them to try things they would not have otherwise tried and my interpretation suggests it may have emboldened their probing and challenging of clients.

**6:3.3.3 Learning from mistakes.** The coaches identified the use of 'cautionary tales' and references to their own 'mistakes' as bases of powerful interventions. One of the most powerful findings of the project was the value the clients ascribed to being able to 'sense check' their ideas with their coaches. I suggest these two findings are interrelated and that the boosts to confidence and credibility of coaching interventions available from sensitive references to past mistakes are under-estimated in coaching.

I contend that increased recognition of the benefits available from coaches using experiential learning gained in prior business careers is justified both in the design of coaching training programmes and in the selection of coaches.

### 6:3.4 Contribution to the professional practice of coaching training

One of the principal recommendations of this research (see Chapter 4:6.4 above) is that it would be valuable to explore in more detail how non-directive styles of coaching that incorporate some transfer of knowledge and experience can be used to facilitate coaching clients' self-directed learning.

The following three recommendations are intended to increase the attention paid in coaching training to how coaches might use their prior career experience in the work.

**6:3.4.1 Accrediting bodies.** The leading international accrediting bodies currently make few or no references in their competency frameworks to how coaches might utilise their prior career experience in their work with clients. I believe this is a significant omission since the research set out in this thesis suggests that coaches' backgrounds can be important contributors to the credibility, market differentiation and selection of executive coaches.

I suggest that the accrediting bodies should consider making explicit reference in their frameworks to this facet of coaching. As well as addressing the recommendation made here, such a move by the accrediting bodies would also reflect Hurlow's view (Hurlow, 2022) that they should "…promote a plurality of coaching approaches".

**6:3.4.2 Multifaceted training.** Second, I suggest the industry's accrediting bodies and coaching training sector should acknowledge Campone and Awal's (2012, p.33) observation that "different categories of event" in coaches' lives "have different impacts, suggesting the need for a multifaceted strategy for the preparation of coaches".

A multifaceted coaching training strategy should reflect the fact that "coaches do not come to their practices as a 'tabula rasa' – a blank sheet" (Campone & Awal, 2012, p.22) and should help trainees to bring their life experience to their work. Specifically, the training sector should consider how to support those trainees who have significant prior career experience to use it effectively and appropriately in their coaching.

This additional dimension of training might include facilitating reflection on aspects and events in their prior careers that might provide insights and reflection on issues in their careers that with the benefit of experience they might now handle differently.

**6:3.4.3 Differentiating training from on-going education.** Third, I suggest the training sector should note Nadeem et al.'s (2021, p.4) observation that the industry's competency frameworks "do not reflect specific context needs" and Campone and Awal's (2012, p.34) recommendation that "…given the diversity of prior professional training and experiences of coaches…differentiating coach training and education may warrant closer consideration".

I propose creating clearer distinction between initial coaching training that focusses on "skills, processes, coach behaviours; ethical standards and business practices" (Campone & Awal, 2012, p.34) and on-going education that broadens "the knowledge domains".

I suggest this differentiation could provide newly trained coaches with opportunities to harness their prior experience once their initial training has been completed; make the categorisation of coaches in the market clearer and, by introducing specific 'education' for coaches with different backgrounds and knowledge domains, more legitimate; and consequently improve the efficiency of the market in executive coaching services for both its buyers of (HR, Learning & Development etc) and ultimate coaching clients.

The coaching training sector in the UK is growing and vibrant and I suggest greater focus by the accrediting bodies and buyers of coaching on 'on-going training' of coaches would provide interesting additional commercial opportunities for the organisations within it.

Overall, I posit that the research undertaken for this thesis makes a number of noteworthy contributions to the understanding of the particular skills and competencies that coaches with relevant prior career experience can bring to their work with clients (See Chapters 4:5.4, 4:5.2, 5:5.2 and 5:5.3).

## Chapter 6:4 Limitations

It is important to reiterate that all of the research undertaken for this thesis is avowedly qualitative and, reflecting its critical realist philosophical perspective, seeks to identify "tendencies, not laws" (Danermark et al., 2002, p.185). It makes "no claims as to the generalisability of their results but suggest rather that the data obtained might be useful in providing some insights" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.95) to other practitioners with similar backgrounds working with similar clients in similar contexts.

Nevertheless, Robson's model (2011) model of "trustworthiness" as cited in (Petty et al., 2012b) and based on Lincoln & Guba's (1985) work was used to augment the work undertaken:

- "Confirmability" was underpinned by the researcher's "own experience and subjectivity" being explored thoroughly and made explicit in the SSRP (Section 3);

- "Dependability" of the data was unavoidably low due to the "variations between people and contexts as well as the passage of time" but was improved by clear audit trails maintained for all research projects;

- "Credibility" was enhanced by the researcher's "prolonged engagement and persistent observation" with the data, by the triangulation undertaken within the SSRP and ARP (Sections 3 and 4 respectively), and by discussion with my supervisor and colleagues; and finally,

- "Transferability" was augmented by purposive sampling and selection of participants in all the primary research projects.

In keeping with the use of IPA as their main research methodologies, no effort was made in the SSRP and ARP (Sections 3 and 4 respectively) "to achieve a representative sample in terms of either population or probability" (Smith et al., 2009, p.95) but instead "to illuminate a particular research question, and to develop a full and interesting interpretation of the data" (p.95).

It should also be remembered that the three clients interviewed for the SSRP were clients of the researcher's (my) firm and that the coaches interviewed for the ARP were known to me beforehand. The findings and conclusions of the SSRP and ARP should therefore be read and, if appropriate, applied elsewhere with these limitations in mind.

It should also be borne in mind that the RPP is a case study based on a single unit of analysis and that it is an "extreme case or unique case" (Yin, 2009, p.48). Nevertheless, "the process of selecting, justifying and applying research strategies, procedures and methods" (Yilmaz, 2013, p.320) was purposive and sought to underpin the study's dependability and reliability.

In addition, it is reiterated that all of the participants interviewed for the RPP have personal and commercial interests in the training course studied – two as providers of its services (the Director and the Tutor) and two as coaches whose accreditation is based on it (the Tutor and the Coach). Once again, the findings and conclusions of the RPP should therefore be read and, if appropriate, applied elsewhere with these limitations in mind.

# Section 7

# Reflective report

# Section 7 Reflective report

This Section sets out how I feel my reflections on the doctoral research documented in this thesis have influenced my understanding of the coaching industry; of myself as a researcher; of myself as a coach; and of myself.

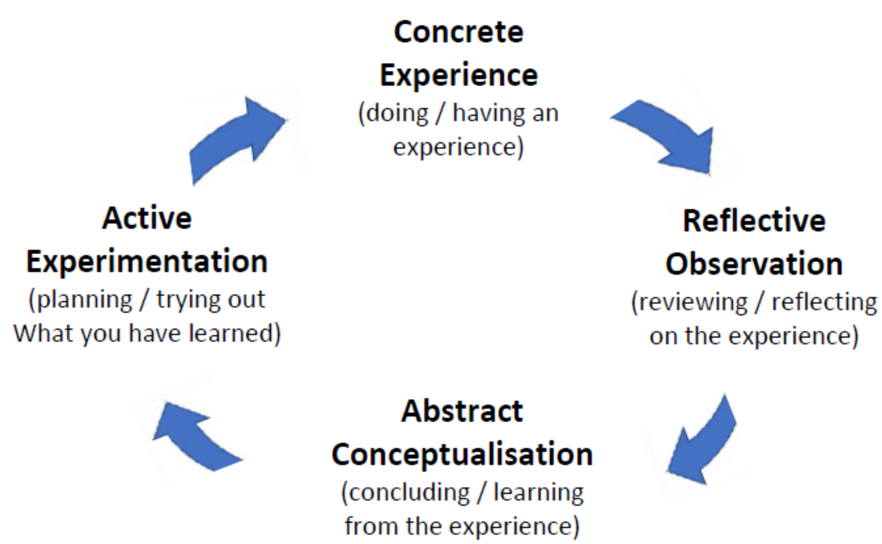
Over the past twelve months I have used Kolb's experiential learning cycle as a model for reflection on the learning journal I have kept while working on the various constituent projects of my PhD. This methodology is discussed briefly below followed by summaries of my learning in the four categories highlighted above.

## Chapter 7:1 Methodology for this section

I initially considered using the model of self-reflection based on frameworks by (Moon, 1999b) and (Johns, 1994) for this final project (see Section 3). I chose Kolb's experiential learning cycle instead for three reasons. First, Kolb's view that "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p.26) seemed to more closely aligned to the purpose of this exercise than the prior model's focus on 'understanding'. Second, that Kolb's cycle purposively "accommodates both deductive (moving from abstract concepts to testing their implications) and inductive (concrete experience leading to reflective practice) approaches" (Vince, 1998, p.306) was attractive. Third, and more prosaically, I felt I would benefit more from using and mastering a framework that was new to me.

I reflected on my lived experience of completing the constituent parts of this PhD thesis on multiple occasions between September 2021 and August 2022 using a variant of Kolb's framework (McLeod, 2017) as shown in **Table 7:1** overleaf:

Kolb's experiential learning cycle




The cycles of reflection undertaken contributed to the contributions to knowledge, scholarship and professional practice claimed in this thesis set out in Section 6 above and also to the more personal learning set out below.

## Chapter 7:2 My understanding of the coaching industry

I came to my PhD studies with significant concrete experience of the coaching industry – two masters' degrees and eight years of practice including considerable client work and marketing of my firm's services, plus regular supervision, continuing professional development and interaction with other coaches. I feel my studies forced me to reflect upon that experience far more thoroughly than I had done before, helped me assimilate it and ultimately to use it more effectively in my practice.

My work on the Critical Review of Literature (CRL, Section 2) was one of the highlights of the programme for me. I feel the requirements to develop my ability to critically review material and to give deliberate consideration to the meaning I should ascribe to it enhanced my cognitive abilities. I feel my generally positivistic prior education encouraged me to strive to understand others' ideas and concepts; this programme first forced me to explore my own sense making and later gave me the confidence to believe that I have valuable expertise in the field to bring to scholarship. Three topics are noteworthy.

First, reflection on the origins of coaching has liberated my thinking about the industry. I now understand how my previous thinking about coaching was constrained by the dominant discourse and its privileging of ‘content free’ approaches. Understanding that the early manifestations of coaching included the transfer of knowledge and experience and identifying the vested interests that influence the discourse in, and accreditation of, executive coaching has increased my confidence in using my prior experience in my work with clients and convinced me of the virtues of the heterogeneity of the industry.

Second, reflection on this thesis’s overarching question led to new knowledge structures that have enhanced my use of my prior career experience in my practice. The understanding of what other practitioners and researchers have written about the role of coaches’ prior experience gained from the CRL combined with the understanding of my own lived experience of the phenomenon gained in the Small Scale Research Project (SSRP, Section 3) provided rich concrete experience. IPA provided an excellent framework for reflective observation on that experience and led directly to the findings and contributions to knowledge, scholarship and practice set out in Section 6 (abstract conceptualisation). Since preparing Section 6 above I have been actively experimenting and trying out aspects of the findings in my practice. An example of this effect is my increased and more confident use of my own organisational ‘mistakes’ as means of normalising clients’ insecurities.

Third, the learning described above has helped my understanding of (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019, p.341) view that many definitions of coaching in the dominant discourse “create an illusion of simplicity and clear boundaries of practice”. In contrast to my previously held views, I now believe that “recognising the complexity of practice and acknowledging the multiplicity of coaching approaches is more productive than trying to arrive at definitional clarity or any definitive integration of diverse views” (p.354). I am not suggesting that the coaching provided by coaches with significant prior career experience to bring to their work is any ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than that offered by coaches with different backgrounds. Instead, I suggest that the industry is enriched by the reality that “coaching practitioners come from different backgrounds and work in many different ways” (p.352).

## Chapter 7:3 My understanding of myself as a researcher

The change in my attitude to myself as an academic researcher has been one of the most striking aspects of the development I feel I have made. I came to the PhD programme feeling that having to master research methodology was an unwelcome requirement of the process; I finish it with a deep interest in qualitative methodologies in general and a passion for IPA in particular.

I came to appreciate the rationale for the programme’s structure more in retrospect than in anticipation. As well as providing an opportunity to explore my “fore-structure” (Smith et al., 2009) which was invaluable to my subsequent use of IPA, the SSRP also provided rich concrete experience of ‘doing’ IPA. The reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation that I undertook before starting the Applied Research Project (ARP, Section 4) led directly to the refinements I made to my use of IPA in the bigger project (see Chapter 4:4.4.2 ‘Crafting my approach to IPA’).

The learning described above helped me become more comfortable focussing on ‘how things are understood’ and avoiding the unconscious inclination to describe ‘what happened’ in the interviews, transcripts and reports. I also spent time between the eight interviews conducted for my ARP reflecting on what I had learned from each about my use of IPA (Schon’s ‘reflection in action’) and refined subsequent processes. The abstract conceptualisation referred to above also led me to intensify the idiographic aspects of IPA and I applied additional discipline to beginning “each transcript afresh, allowing the material to speak in its own terms rather than being overly influenced by what other participants have said” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.74).

Applying IPA's "double hermeneutic" (Smith et al., 2009) also proved to be a significant development tool for me. Previous self-reflection undertaken over the last ten years in coaching, supervision and therapy has helped me understand that I have a strong tendency to privilege the thoughts and emotions of others over my own. Whilst I believe this trait generally serves me well as a coach, it was ill suited to a research method that recognises "the researcher's centrality to analysis and research" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.88). I therefore used intentional discipline to remember that I had expertise to bring to the research and to factor in my own thoughts and input into the analysis. Understanding IPA's requirement to consciously 'bracket' pre-existing views and biases proved to be important but also sharpened my treatment and use of my views and feelings in my coaching practice.

Overall, I believe the active assimilation of experience that reflection provided contributed significantly to my conduct of the research and to my personal and professional development.

## Chapter 7:4 My understanding of myself as a coach

Not surprisingly, I feel my learning from the programme about myself as a coach is considerable and multifaceted. Some aspects are highlighted under three headings – skills, clarification and confusion.

### 7:3.1 Skills

Although my initial coaching training was styled 'relational' and I regarded myself as someone who is defined by his relationships with others, I have been conscious during my career as a coach of a need to, at least, understand and make considerable use of tools, models and frameworks in my practice. The confidence that I feel I have gained as a coach from my studies has changed my relationship with 'techniques'.

Although the findings of this research suggest that prior career experience can be additive to coaching, they also indicate clearly that it is 'important but not sufficient'. Honing my coaching skills will therefore remain crucial to my professional development but further reflection on the self-reflection exercise of my SSRP and on the interviews with other coaches and with coachees has led me to believe that “being with the coachee and developing a relationship is far more important for the experienced coach and beneficial for the coachee” (Rajasinghe et al., 2022, p.14). My future CPPD will therefore be focussed more clearly than in the past on relationship building skills than on tools and techniques.

#### 7.3.2 Clarification

The programme has clarified the meaning I make of my prior career experience’s role in my coaching. Prior to undertaking the primary research projects, I had two, almost entirely unconnected, sources of meaning for this commercially important facet of my practice – an intuitive feeling that my prior business experience contributed to clients’ estimations of me as a coach and to their coaching and, separately, firm suggestion from the CRL that it was an important factor in coaching. There was little or no understanding ‘in between’ these two sources – I did not know what my credibility ‘looked like’ or what aspects of my prior experience contributed to it.

The connection between coaches’ credibility and their prior experience emerged from the CRL, was echoed in my own observations and those of clients in my SSRP and was confirmed in my ARP. Prior to the programme, the emphasis I put on my prior experience in differentiating myself in the coaching market was based on intuitive ‘hunch’ and abstract theory. I am now confident of its role in my work with clients and comfortable to proselytise the advantages that coaches with significant prior career experience can bring to their work.

#### 7:3.3 Confusion

Although I regard it as a positive outcome, reflection on the work I have undertaken for the PhD programme leaves me confused about my identity as a coach. It has prompted me to review how I present myself to the coaching industry, to clients and to myself. Some fresh and deliberate reflexive identification is possibly overdue after nearly thirteen years of practice and is aligned with my desire to work to the highest professional standards possible.

I am currently somewhere between the reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation stages of reflection on what I want my identity as a coach to be in the future. Whilst I am clear that I want to continue to utilise my prior career experience in my coaching, I do not want to become a “content knowledge-based expert” (Stokes et al., 2020, p.1).

In conventional definitions, I do not want to be a ‘coach’ “who seems to place the task or performance as the ultimate concern, ahead of an executive’s development” (Offstein et al., 2020, p.1044) but neither do I want to be a ‘mentor’ who relies on “direct experience and knowledge of the setting that the mentee is operating in” (Stokes et al., 2020, p.1). I am comfortable being a hybrid of the two but am conscious that failing to fit easily into the market’s categorisation makes what I can offer more difficult for others to understand and therefore has commercial disadvantages.

I am attracted by the humanistic principles of person-centred coaching and that it is “founded on the assumption that people are intrinsically motivated to grow and develop in the direction of becoming optimally functioning” (Joseph, 2014, p.66). That it is “most suitable with clients who have or who are capable of obtaining the relevant information” (p.70) fits with my focus on work with senior, experienced clients. But that “the person-centred coach is more likely to ‘listen, don’t ask’” (p.72) conflicts with my belief that questioning and challenging can be supportive of self-determination.

It is ironic that eleven years after completing my initial training and having rejected its moniker ‘relational coaching’ at the time, I should return to it as the best descriptor of who I feel I am as a coach. Critchley’s assertion (2010, p.855) that “meaning arises in the process of relating so the coach does not act on the client as an instrument in service of the client” but instead “the person of the coach must be fully involved” reflects my view that ‘who I am as a coach is who I am as a person’.

Bringing all dimensions of my lived experience, including my prior career experience, is therefore fundamental to who I am as a coach. This may sometimes lead me to be in conflict with the dominant discourse's definition of coaching "where the coach takes a neutral position in relation to the coachee's challenge or problem" (Stelter, 2014, p.54). Failing to fit easily into society's 'boxes' has been a feature of my life and my response has generally been to strive to 'fit in'. The learning and development I feel I have gained from my PhD studies is giving me the confidence to be an 'avowed hybrid' as part coach, part mentor.

I feel it would be remiss of me to fail to note that I am aware of further irony in my comments. Having referred multiple times throughout this thesis to certain vested interests influencing the discourse on coaching to suit their commercial objectives, my conclusion that coaches, including myself, with significant prior career experience to bring to their work can deliver distinctive features is another vested interest promoting its wares. Full disclosure complete.

## 7:5 My understanding of myself

I have made a concerted effort over the past twelve years to improve my own understanding of myself. The reflection I have undertaken for this final report and the self-reflection exercise I conducted for my SSRP have been powerful forces in this process. Four topics are noteworthy – my relationship with my emotions; my evaluation of my self-worth; myself as a 'mentor'; and my desires for my future self.

### 7:4.1 My relationship with my emotions

The understanding I feel I have gained into my relationship with my emotions is useful reiteration of prior insight. Historically, I regarded myself as being highly emotionally aware but came to understand that 'high emotionality' was a better descriptor of my younger self. Until relatively recently, I confused being nostalgic, sensitive and sentimental and having strong needs for inclusion and affection with emotional awareness. Recent reflection for this report has reminded me of this misunderstanding. My reflections were initially and instinctively highly cognitive and

I had to work hard to connect with my affective reactions. Although I believe I can connect with other people's emotions well, this bias to cognition in the analysis of my own emotions is an important observation for a coach who seeks 'use himself as an instrument' in coaching and to be able to support clients across a broad spectrum of issues.

I am conscious that a combination of factors, certainly including my 'conventional' education; a strong drive to 'fit in' and to be seen by others to be 'successful'; and almost certainly an unconscious desire to suppress some negative emotions surrounding my disability, has prompted me to take a highly analytical, logical and reasoned approach to life and that this can lead me to give insufficient consideration to my own emotions. This has been powerful learning and something that I feel is already influencing how I engage with the world.

### 7:4.2 My evaluation of my self-worth

My efforts to improve my understanding of myself prior to this programme revealed, at best, a strong need to be highly self-deprecating and, worse, a feeling of not liking or respecting myself very much. I was reminded of these feelings in the interviews with my clients for my SSRP and in my early attempts to master IPA's double hermeneutic.

Reflection while conducting my SSRP helped me understand that I often take a 'deficit' approach to my assessment of myself – tending to focus disproportionally on what I am not good at or have failed to achieve, rather than acknowledging a more balanced scorecard of strengths and weaknesses. I make particular effort to ensure that clients reflect on their strengths as well as their weaknesses and also that they consider 'good enough' as a possible assessment of individual skills, rather than merely applying the dichotomy of being either 'good' or 'bad'. I vowed at the time to apply these principles to myself and have noticed a perceptible change in the dialogue I have with myself about myself.

### 7:4.3 Myself as a 'mentor'

The programme has increased my knowledge of mentoring considerably and this has helped me understand better how the opportunity to share my prior experience with clients affects my views of myself. The professional aspects of this are covered in Section 3 (SSRP) and summarised in Section 6 (Summary and findings). Some more personal reflections are covered here.

I am generally finding being in 'later life' and the final phases of my professional career unsettling. The anxiety associated with this has been alleviated in recent years by a sense of purpose and satisfaction I have gained from being able to support clients in their careers. Deeper understanding of the nature of mentoring and reflection have brought this into considerably sharper relief.

Kram's comments (1983) that individuals "may feel challenged, stimulated, and creative in providing mentoring functions as they become 'senior adults' with wisdom to share" (p.609) and that mentoring relationships can enable senior managers "to meet the challenges of reappraisal at midlife" (p.621) resonate very clearly with me. The 'normalising' effect of knowing that others at my stage of life derive similar benefits from similar relationships has increased the potency of the feeling and serves me well.

#### 7:4.4 My desires for my future self

I feel reflection I have conducted on the academic and practitioner literature relevant to my studies, on myself as a researcher, on myself as a coach and on myself has reinvigorated me and given me more appetite for the future.

Knowing that I can critically review academic work to a high standard has given me confidence; the relational narrative identification I gained from the interviews with other coaches and with clients about their experiences of coaching was affirming; and being able to contribute to the knowledge, scholarship and practice of executive have made me feel I something of value to bring to my chosen craft.

> I finish this thesis aspiring to the "profound humility, or increasing humility, yet also significant confidence, while also being comfortable at times of not knowing or uncertainty" (Rajasinghe et al., 2023) observed in other experienced executive coaches whom I admire and respect.

Perhaps my most notable learning from my five years of doctoral studies is on reflection itself. Whilst I have considered my own personal and professional experience before, particularly in earlier academic exercises, the combination of the self-reflection undertaken for my SSRP, the nature of IPA and preparing this essay has required a significantly more deliberative approach than I have achieved before.

The programme has required me to subject aspects of myself and my practice to greater scrutiny than I had previously imagined possible. Although it is too early to ascertain how much benefit I will derive from this in the long term, I feel it has already changed my practice, my knowledge of coaching as a craft and my understanding of myself.

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## References and bibliography


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# Appendices

## Appendix A – Critical review of literature

| Search terms | Number of results | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Google Scholar | | CCCU Eresources[1] | | PsychINFO[2] | |
| | 2000-2024 | 2019-2024 | 2000-2024 | 2019-2024 | 2000-2024 | 2019-2024 |
| "Executive coaching" | 17,700 | 7,000 | 2,495 | 972 | 926 | 295 |
| Combined with:[3] | | | | | | |
| "Coaches' backgrounds" | 75 | 18 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 |
| "Coaches' business knowledge" | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

[1] Limited to peer-reviewed academic sources in English

[2] Limited to sources in English

[3] Multiple variations of terms searched eg. 'coach's background', coaches' backgrounds', 'coaches backgrounds' etc

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| “Coaches’ credibility” | 97 | 24 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| “Coaches’ confidence” | 37 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 2 |
| “Coaches’ previous experience” | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| “Coaches’ career experience” | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

## Appendix B - Analysis of sources studied and cited

| | |
|---|---|
| **Research question:** | How can executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients? |
| **Search criteria:** | Published in English; no date limits. |
| **Sources searched:** | Google Scholar; CCCU Library Search; PsychINFO. |
| **Search terms:** | 'Executive coaching'<br>Combined with:<br>"Coaches' backgrounds"<br>"Coaches' business knowledge"<br>"Coaches' credibility"<br>"Coaches' confidence"<br>"Coaches' previous experience"<br>"Coaches' career experience" |

**Sources identified:** See Appendix A

**Sources studied:**

| | PRJA | AB | PJ/MA | PB | PSS | DT | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **June 2017 - Aug 2019** | 161 | 12 | 27 | 21 | | 4 | **226** |
| **Sept 2019 - Sept 2022** | 20 | 3 | | | 4 | | **27** |
| **Aug 2023 – Dec 2023** | 29 | 5 | | | | | **34** |
| **Jan 2024 – March 2024** | 43 | | | | | | **43** |
| **Totals:** | 253 | 20 | 27 | 21 | 4 | 4 | **330** |
| **Cited:** | **105** | **11** | **16** | **13** | **2** | **1** | **144** |

| | |
|---|---|
| **PRJA** | Peer reviewed journal articles |
| **AB** | Academic books |
| **PJ/MA** | Practitioner journal / magazine articles |
| **PB** | Practitioner books |
| **PS** | Professional services surveys |
| **DT** | Doctoral theses |

## Appendix C – Small scale research project

**<u>Model of reflection developed for the first exercise of the project (see Chapter 3:3.3.1)</u>**

- **Cycle 1 – the CR empirical level**
    - What was I saying in a literal sense?
    - What were my initial feelings about the experiences?
    - Which parts of the dialogue stood out as being significant?
    - In what proportion of the meaningful interactions did I initially sense the presence of any influence of my non-coaching career experience?

- **Cycle 2 – the CR actual level**
    - What was really being said?
    - Did any non-coaching experience influence what I was probing or prompting?

- **Cycle 3 – the CR real level**
    - What might the causal factors of my contributions have been that led to the empirical level comments?

- **Cycle 4 – Kolb's actual conceptualisation**
    - How could what was going on be described conceptually?
    - How could what was going on be linked to the concepts identified in the literature?
    - *NB. This cycle to be repeated on multiple occasions throughout the exercise*

- **Cycle 5 – the social context**
    - How might my social context be influencing me, my coaching and my relationships with my clients?

- **Cycle 6 – detailed reflection**
  - Using framework and prompting questions from (Moon, 1999a) and (Johns, 1994) respectively
  - See detailed description in Appendix D

- **Cycle 7 – further reflection on all cycles**
  - What further thoughts and feelings emerged following completions of Cycles 1-6?
  - What could constitute CR's "retroduction" (A. Fletcher, 2017)?
  - What might the contextual conditions be for particular interventions by me in the dialogue?

## Appendix D – Small scale research project

**Questions / prompts (based on** Johns (1994) **used in Cycle 6 of the first exercise (see Chapter 3:3.3.1)**

- **Description**
  - What was being said and communicated?
  - What are the key issues that I need to pay attention to?
- **Reflection**
  - What was my intent in saying what I said?
  - What effect was I aiming to achieve?
  - How did I feel about this interaction when it happened?
  - How do I think the client felt about it?
- **Influencing factors**
  - What internal factors including my views, assumptions and biases may have influenced my thinking, decision making and choice of interaction?
  - What external factors influenced my thinking, decision making and choice of interaction?
  - What sources of knowledge, experience or expertise influenced my choice of interaction?
- **Specific points of enquiry**
  - Do I feel the interaction had any effect on my or the client's estimates of my credibility?
  - Do I feel the interaction had any effect on the level of trust between the client and me?
  - Do I feel the interaction tells us anything about the significance of my understanding of corporate settings?

   - Do I feel the interaction tells us anything about the significance of my understanding of leadership and management issues?

- **Learning**
   - How can I monitor and manage the potential distorting effects of confirmation bias in this exercise?
   - What sense can I make of this interaction in the context of this project's purpose and aims?
   - What does this interaction tells us about how I coach?
   - What effect might this increased understanding have on me and my coaching?
   - What effect might this increased understanding have on how I support, challenge, question and probe clients?

## Appendix E - Small scale research project

**Interview schedule of questions asked in interviews of clients (see Chapters 3:3.3.2 and 3:4.3.4)**

- **In your experience of executive coaching, what characteristics, qualities, behaviours or expertise would you say are important in a coach?**
  - What do you look for in a coach?
- **Going back to when you were deciding whether to work with me as your coach, what factors would you say influenced your decision?**
  - Was there anything that you thought would make coaching more or less effective or attractive for you
  - What did you think, feel or hope I would be able to bring to our work together?
- **How would you now describe my credentials to be your coach?**
  - What would you highlight if giving a reference about me to a potential client?
  - And why?
- **How would you say any aspect of my non-coaching career or my experience outside coaching has been evident in our work together?**
  - Follow up probes
- **How would you say that non-coaching experience has influenced you and our work together?**
  - Has it been evident at all in my questioning, probing or challenging of you?
- **How would you say my non-coaching experience has influenced what you have taken out of coaching?**
- **And how would you say my non-coaching experience has influenced our overall relationship?**

## Appendix F – Researcher's coaching profile

Hay
Hill
Partners

**Robin Hindle Fisher**

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M +44 (0)7813 800 441
D +44 (0)20 3008 7559

www.hayhillpartners.com

"Coaching is a great privilege and a great opportunity – both for clients and coaches. The unique relationships that develop can create enormous value, for individual clients and their organisations"

### Business Experience

Robin became a business coach following a 27 year executive career in the fund management industry. He held senior positions at CEO, partner and managing director level at a number of leading organisations and remains a non executive director in the sector.

Robin's coaching and mentoring work with clients is underpinned by his experience in senior leadership roles and on boards as well as by extensive coaching training (Ashridge Business School, the Metanoia Institute and others). At Phillips & Drew Fund Management he was initially an equity portfolio manager and ultimately CEO with responsibility for the UK operations of UBS Asset Management, over 400 staff and relationships with major institutional clients. He was involved in creating UBS's retail investment business in the UK as well as the merger of Phillips & Drew with its sister companies within UBS.

In addition to P&D, Robin was a partner at Governance for Owners LLP, a Managing Director at Deutsche Asset Management, a public company board director at Henderson Administration (now Global Investors) and a graduate trainee at Kleinwort Benson. Prior to Hay Hill, Robin worked as a business coach at Praesta Partners. He is Chair of the social impact investment company Big Society Capital.

Robin is married and has two daughters. He is a Governor of the disability charity Motability and has been a trustee in the third sector since 1999. A passionate supporter of Wales's rugby team, he also enjoys walking and now distant memories of the 2009 London Marathon.

### Education, Qualifications, Professional Positions, Awards

- MA, Coaching Psychology – Metanoia Institute
- MSc, Executive Coaching – Ashridge Business School
- Accredited Master Executive Coach – APECS
- Accredited Coach – Ashridge Business School (EMCC Master Practitioner)
- Sloan MSc, Management, Leadership & Strategy (with distinction) – London Business School
- BA Hons, Politics (with absolutely no distinction) – Durham University
- Chair, Big Society Capital
- FCA Senior Manager Function holder
- Executive Tutor, London Business School
- Governor (trustee), Motability
- Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE)

### Professional Expertise

Robin's clients value his ability to combine practical understanding of business with strong personal empathy and a deep interest in organisations. He particularly enjoys working with senior leaders in practitioner-led organisations, client focussed teams, career transition and people businesses undertaking mergers, acquisitions or restructurings.

### Clients

Robin has coached clients at organisations including:

**abrdn**
**Apollo Management**
**Aviva Investors**
**Barings**
**BC Partners**
**BP**
**CVC Capital Partners**
**Capital & Counties Properties**
**Capital One**
**Carne Group**
**Close Brothers**
**Coutts**
**The Crown Estate**
**FarFetch**
**HgCapital**
**John Lewis Partnership**
**Lazard Asset Management**
**Legal & General**
**Low & Bonar**
**M&G Investments**
**McKinsey & Co**
**Miller Insurance Services**
**Morgan Stanley**
**Nomura International**
**Northleaf Capital Partners**
**Oldfield Partners**
**Pantheon Ventures**
**Prudential**
**Royal Bank of Scotland**
**Schroders**
**Shawbrook Bank**
**Skillcapital**
**Talbot Underwriting**
**Tradeweb**
**UBS Investment Bank**
**Vitruvian Partners**

**Hay Hill Partners LLP**
29 Farm Street
London W1J 5RL

Association for Professional Executive Coaching & Supervision™

Robin Hindle Fisher is an APECS Accredited Master Executive Coach

## Appendix G – Small scale research project - Details of the clients who participated in the project

| | Client A | Client B | Client C |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Role title** | Chief Investment Officer | Chief Financial Officer | Chief Executive |
| **Type of organisation** | Investment management<br>Division of a FTSE 100 company | Real estate<br>FTSE 100 company | Charity<br>Top 10 in the UK |
| **Coaching objectives** | Provide a sounding board<br>Relationship mapping and planning<br>Allocation of time, energy and emotion<br>Medium to long term career planning | Refine leadership style<br>Refine contribution to the Exco<br>Relationship mapping and planning<br>Refine impact across the group | Prepare for transition to new role<br>Refine leadership style<br>Support articulation and communication of passion, vision and priorities<br>Relationship mapping and planning |
| **Areas of researcher's non-coaching experience of potential relevance** | Specific industry<br>Management and leadership<br>Organisational | Management and leadership<br>Organisational<br>Board | Charity sector – as trustee board member<br>Management and leadership<br>Organisational |

## Appendix H - Small scale research project – Super-ordinate and subordinate themes in analysis of client interview transcripts

| | Subordinate / emergent themes |
|---|---|
| **Critical but not sufficient** | **Experience in business**<br>*Client A: I think some expertise in my industry is desirable*<br>*Client B: You know enough that when we talk about the scenarios and situations I find myself in we can talk about it and it is not a foreign world to you*<br>*Client C: What I have personally valued has been relevant experience in the job at hand*<br>**Combination of experience in business with coaching skills**<br>*Client B: There are a lot of charlatans around so what you have studied is of passing interest*<br>*Client C: So, I would say that you are an expert and a skilled coach* |
| **Credibility** | **Experience linked with understanding**<br>*Client A: I think having somebody who has probably experienced that, or understands it, helps when coaching somebod*<br>*Client B: …there is a level of pre, assumed knowledge I guess that one needs to have*<br>*Client C: …some degree of empathy, fluency and understanding of the sectors in which I operate has always been incredibly helpful*<br>**Experience linked with empathy**<br>*Client A: …it's because you can show that empathy and understanding whereas I think if you went to a generic coach it' quite a different thing*<br>*Client B: …I don't think you and I would have struck up the relationship we have done had you not had it*<br>**Experience linked with challenge**<br>*Client C: ...because you understand how it works and some of the dynamic, you just instantly ask the right question*<br>**Experience linked directly with credibility**<br>*Client A: …but the key for me was that you had experience within the fund management industry*<br>*Client B: To be credible you need to…'get' the context, the politics, I guess the scenario*<br>*Client C: …one of the things that was compelling for me to work with you was the fact that you had sufficiently differen experience to this point as well as your experience in my sector* |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Trust** | **Experience linked directly with trust**<br>*Client B: …in establishing your credentials, which in my mind was critical to establishing trust, I think it* (experience) *doe all sort of hang together*<br>*Client B: Thinking about it, I think of you as a peer and we have a peer to peer relationship*<br>*Client C: …with someone who has got relevant experience trust in the discussion is high* |
| **Value** | **Experience linked directly or indirectly with value**<br>*Client A: …I think it was providing a reduction in the level of stress and anxiety and providing a bit more space and context*<br>*Client B: I think if there wasn't this sort of shared understanding…I wonder whether I would have lost interest or it just wouldn't have turned into the productive relationship that it has done*<br>*Client C: …I think with someone who has got relevant experience trust in the discussion is high and I know you are going to get to the value quite quickly and I then have quite a lot of confidence in the output…* |

## Appendix I – Applied research project

**Schedule of questions for semi-structured interviews of coaches (and their clients)**

- In your experience of executive coaching, what characteristics, qualities, behaviours or expertise do you feel are important in a coach?
- What qualities do you bring to your work with clients?
- (What do you look for in a coach?)

- (Going back to when you were deciding whether to work with ABC as your coach, what factors would you say influenced your decision?
- Was there anything that you felt would make the coaching more or less effective or attractive for you
- What did you think, feel or hope ABC would be able to bring to your work together?)

- How would you now describe your (ABC's) credentials to (be your) coach?
- What do you highlight when describing yourself as a coach to buyers of coaching?
- (What would you highlight if giving a reference for ABC to a prospective client?)

- How would you say any aspect of your (ABC's) non-coaching career or experience outside coaching has been evident in (your) work (together)?

- How would you say that non-coaching experience has influenced how you coach (your work with ABC?)
- Has it been evident at all in questioning, probing or challenging (of you)?

- How would you say your (ABC's) non-coaching experience has influenced how you coach (what you have taken out of coaching)?
- And how would you say your (ABC's) non-coaching experience has influenced your overall coaching relationships (relationship with ABC)?

## Appendix J – Applied research project - Participant profiles – coaches

| Coach | A | B | C | D |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Coaching training** | Ashridge Business School<br>Masters' | Professional Development Foundation<br>Master Coach | Meyler Campbell<br>EMCC Accredited | Meyler Campbell<br>EMCC Accredited |
| **Years of coaching experience** | 10 | 21 | 3 | 7 |
| **Prior role** | Group Executive | Partner | Vice chairman | Chief Executive |
| **Prior sector** | Financial services<br>International banking | Professional Services<br>Big Four | Financial services<br>Investment banking | Marketing Services and Retail |
| **Gender** | F | F | M | M |

## Appendix K – Applied research project - Participant profiles – clients

| Client | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Coaching relationship** | 7½ years | 1 year | 2 years | 5 years |
| **Current role** | CEO | Partner | Country Head | Business unit Managing Director |
| **Current sector** | Sport & Leisure | Operations Consulting | Fashion | Defence |
| **Gender** | M | M | M | M |

Note: Coaches and clients as set out above do not correspond with the coaching dyads.

Appendix L – Applied research project – Super-ordinate and emergent themes in coaches' and clients' interview transcripts

| Super-ordinate themes | Emergent themes – coaches | Emergent themes – clients |
|---|---|---|
| **Important but not sufficient** | **Listening**<br>Coach B*: "I think the ability to listen is really important…"*<br>Coach C*: "First and foremost as a coach the ability to listen"*<br>Coach D*: "It is the ability to listen and engage using non-verbal signals as well as verbal ones"*<br>**Understanding**<br>Coach A*: "…depth of understanding of the person, so the person feels really understood"*<br>Coach B*: "I think it's observing the body language and the comfort or discomfort"*<br>Coach C: *"…coaches want to understand different aspects of human psychology"*<br>Coach D: *"…they* (clients) *need to explore who they are, what makes them who they are, what makes them successful, what challenges they have…in a safe place"* | **Listening**<br>Client 1*: "It starts I think with empathy…part of empathy is you want a very good listener "*<br>Client 2*: "I found the balance of what you want to be a good listener, listening is absolutely important, and someone who can understand where I'm coming from"*<br>Client 3*: "…s/he's very patient, s/he waits for me to kind of get everything out…"*<br>Client 4: *"The ability to listen, really actively, and interpret without reframing"*<br>**Skills**<br>Client 1*: "…the process of collecting one's thoughts to make sure you don't come across as a blithering idiot in front of your coach was in itself a helpful process"*<br>Client 2*: "…s/he is good at stopping me avoid things with superficial answers to a question"*<br>Client 3: *"I also appreciate that he brings me what s/he's heard around"*<br>Client 4: *"I think that emotional intelligence and ability to pick up on nonverbal cues is essential, but I think being able to verbalise those…being prepared to sort of challenge in a way that builds the relationship rather than takes something from it"* |
| **Credibility** | **Credibility**<br>Coach A*: "decades of business experience…which means I have real credibility at the most senior levels…"*<br>Coach B: *"It gives me more credibility with senior people, rightly or wrongly, I think they feel I do understand their world* | **Credibility**<br>Client 1*: "I think it added credibility and substance"*<br>*"It's very difficult to evaluate in a quantitative way, but in a qualitative way, I think it's really an essential ingredient"* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *and therefore they're more open with me, and they can talk more about it"*<br><br>Coach C: *"…the sense that one's had the resilience to be able to get through it...that's helpful"*<br><br>Coach D: *"I think if you've been there yourself, I think it enhances the credibility of you coaching them through a scenario that you've been in"*<br><br>**Practical experience**<br><br>Coach A: *"…not just saying it from a theoretical perspective from a textbook or something, it's real life experience..."*<br><br>Coach B: *"…there would be a very clear set of things I would say from that experience….let's look at the risks…"*<br><br>Coach C: *"…I do think that it is important to be able to use the sort of language that is appropriate for the coachee and to be able to drill down and show an understanding of the corporate environment…"*<br><br>Coach D: *"…there are times when it is valuable to say 'hang on a minute', let's just think about the risks of doing what you're proposing because I've seen stuff happen…you can see the practical impacts, not just the theory"*<br><br>**Shared problems**<br><br>Coach A: Specific example of sharing a problem<br><br>Coach B: *"I think it has made more equal relationships"*<br><br>Coach C: *"…to treat one's client very much as an equal…"*<br><br>Coach D: *"…sometimes it's valuable to say, look, I've been in that place, I know what you're feeling right now…I think it's a problem shared; I think it's a deeper engagement"* | Client 2: *"…the credibility of having done similar roles before and been successful in his own right"*<br><br>Client 3: *" I think the fact that s/he's been in my shoes is extremely important, s/he comes with opinions from a place of experience…I value that very, very much"*<br><br>Client4: "*I think that somebody has been in similar environments for a period of time and has had success with it means that they have navigated discussions like this, and their knowledge as we are talking about it, helps the credibility build…"*<br><br>**Practical versus academic**<br><br>Client 2: *"I just think that the fact that s/he'd been there and seen and done it was helpful…most of the time s/he wasn't actually sharing it or an opinion…but it just felt like s/he understood the challenge, and therefore, understood how to unpick it"*<br><br>*"…I felt like s/he was much more immersed in the challenge, rather than just trying to pick the right framework off the shelf…"*<br><br>Client 3: *"I like the learning from experience and think it is very valuable"*<br><br>*"…her/his way of working is very much at the same level and says 'let me embrace you in my energy"*…whereas the sort of coaching that "*said blah, blah, blah, I would find that a bit annoying because it's like a professor to the alumni…"*<br><br>Client 4:*"My more positive* (coaching) *experiences have been with people who've been in the world, the same boardrooms, the same type of intense moments. And some of my less positive experiences have been with the more academic coaches"* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Confidence** | **Confidence**<br>Coach A: *"I think it means that I am more confident"*<br>Coach B: *"I think it informs the questions you ask the client"*<br>Coach C: *"And, without a doubt, the fact that I'd been doing that for a long time…."*<br>Coach D: *"I think you can empathise with people, when they get into trouble, when they're suffering from high stress"*<br>**Bolder**<br>Coach A: *"…confidence manifests itself in, maybe, I will try things out that I wouldn't otherwise try out"*<br>Coach B: *"I would have a mental measure or standard of what I thought should be happening and I would use that in deciding how hard I pushed someone"*<br>Coach C: *"…being pushed to sort things out, but feeling that's safe and not going to blow the relationship…"*<br>Coach D: *"I think you need to be quite bold at times to be an exceptional coach….exploring things that you have an intuitive feel for is a value to the client"* | **Confidence**<br>Client 1: Of a coach lacking business experience *"…it's a bit like a politician who's only ever been a politician, you just sort of think 'you don't really know what it's like'…"*<br>*"Reassuring, thought provoking and uplifting"*<br>Client 2: *"I think it certainly brings confidence…it's useful to have the confidence that if I'm coming up with something really daft or an approach that is not going to work, s/he would step in a say 'let's think about that'…"*<br>Client 3: *"…it gives me a lot of confidence, a lot of trust…"*<br>Client 4: *"*My coach's business experience *made me think about absolute credibility…if I talk to* them *about diversity and inclusion or COVID, having a coach who's sat on the board of an organisation while I a trying to lead an organisation through it, it's really, really helpful"*<br>**Knows what it is like**<br>Client 1: *"…someone who gives you instant reassurance, they understand what it's like to be where you are"*<br>Client 2: *"Whereas I think maybe someone who hasn't had a career before wouldn't really understand the stress, challenges, then how could they have confidence that the solution is going to work… "*<br>Client 3: *"s/he's been interacting with boards, s/he's been interacting with senior people* like me*"*<br>Client 4:*"*My coach's *knowledge of that environment really helped them good open questions* but about the pertinent topics*"*<br>**Trust**<br>Client 1: Example of taking challenge more seriously due to the coach's experience<br>Client 2: *"I definitely feel trust, feel the value and feel confident in the solutions…partly through knowing that if I've come up with something that was wacky and way off, s/he would have steered me back to something that would work"*<br>Client 4:*"It allows me to have much higher trust and confidence in* my coach. *It allows me to engage in more important* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | *discussions…the more you trust them to talk about more important topics…and for the business, that's great…"* |
| **Learning from mistakes** | **Cautionary tales**<br>Coach A: *"…one thing stood out for me as a constant refrain that I either consciously or unconsciously chose to ignore…..I just don't want him to make that mistake"*<br>Coach B: *"…wisdom comes from having made a lot of mistakes and I sometimes ask 'you sure you want to make as many mistakes as I have made?'*<br>Coach C: *"it was certainly useful that I had the cautionary tales around it"*<br>Coach D: *"I think in some ways the failures are more valuable than the successes"*<br>**Normalising**<br>Coach A: *"…it's really a segue into saying no one's perfect, let's look at what might enable you…"*<br>Coach B: *"I used to be quite shy…so I understand how they feel and the impression they may be giving…so I can pass that on"*<br>Coach D: *"I'll talk about my own experience of having been coached in an executive role"* | |
| **Risks** | **Direction**<br>Coach A: *"I've noted to myself afterwards 'too pushy, too suggesting, too advisory'…"*<br>Coach D: *"…the very, very best coaching is helping people find the answers themselves, and there's a risk if you know the answer that you tell them early"*<br>**Assuming one's own experience**<br>Coach A: *"…it's really easy to jump to conclusions…and jump to the solutions "*<br>Coach B: *"I think you do have to guard against the degree that you recognise yourself in somebody as it can make you too sympathetic"* | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Coach C*: "…I am very conscious of not trying to transpose my own experience with that of the coachee"*<br><br>Coach D: "*…you can question people from the viewpoint of you think you know the answer yourself, rather than a genuine inquiry to help them understand"*<br><br>**Buying for the wrong reasons**<br><br>Coach B*: "I get in the door because the person feels I have been in the sort of place they've been*<br><br>Coach C*: "…it sort of get's you the business…they like and feel it's good to have someone who has been there and done it"*<br><br>Coach D*: "My own view is they're probably more influenced by wanting someone who's done what they've done than should be the case"* | |

**NB. Quotes not italicised have been summarised in order to maintain confidentiality.**

## Appendix M – Small scale research project – Information sheet

# Canterbury Christ Church University
# and Professional Development Foundation

## PhD in Professional Practice: Psychological Perspectives

### Fact sheet for participants in an academic research project

Robin Hindle Fisher is a candidate in the PhD Degree Programme in Professional Practice: Psychological Perspectives at Christ Church Canterbury University (CCCU), which is run in association with Professional Development Foundation (PDF). The topic of his research focuses on how the prior career experiences of business coaches affect their relationships with their clients.

**About the PhD**: The PhD programme that Robin is pursuing is unique in Europe and differs from traditional approaches in that its focus of study is on the application of research to practice. This means that students admitted to the programme are experienced professionals who are judged by the university to be in a position to make a contribution to both the knowledge and practice of their area of expertise.

**About Christchurch Canterbury University**: CCCU is a modern university with an international profile, attracting students from across the world. It has a network of five campuses and offers courses in the arts and humanities, applied and social sciences (including business) and health to around 17,000 full and part-time students. CCCU produces research that has been assessed as world-leading, internationally excellent and internationally recognised. For further details about CCCU go to: www.canterbury.ac.uk

**About PDF**: PDF Net is a separate limited company whose purpose is to enable individuals and organisations to develop work-based research, consultancy and educational activities. It is a recognised institution for the development of work-based postgraduate awards and research and creates bespoke accreditation through its partner institutions, including CCCU. It currently provides practitioner-based Masters and Doctorate programmes and draws upon nearly 40 years' experience with a network of world class professionals. For further details about PDF go to: http://www.pdf.net/

February 2020

## Appendix N – Small scale research project – Consent form

# Canterbury Christ Church University
# and Professional Development Foundation

Canterbury Christ Church University

Professional Development International

## PhD in Professional Practice: Psychological Perspectives

### Informed consent for participation in an academic research project

**Research project: 'How does my prior career experience affect my relationships with coaching clients?'**

The purpose of this document, in accordance with the requirements of CCCU'S and PDF's codes of research ethics, is to make explicit the nature of the proposed involvement between the researcher and the person or organisation agreeing to supply information (the participants) and to record that the research participant understands the nature of their involvement and that they are satisfied with the proposed arrangements.

The researcher leading this research is: Robin Hindle Fisher (contact details: robin@hayhillpartners.com and 07813 800 441).

The purpose of Robin's project is for him, the 'researcher', to gain an understanding of how his prior and non-coaching career experiences affect his relationships with coaching clients.

**You, the 'participant', are being asked for your permission for Robin to:**

1. **Digitally record one of your 2 hour coaching sessions with him**
2. **Digitally record an interview with you at a later stage for between 30 and 60 minutes about certain aspects of your relationship with him and the coaching session recorded**

If you do agree to participate, you will be free to withdraw from the project at any time, to decline to answer any question, to terminate the interview at any time and/or to require that any section or the whole of the recording or interview be deleted from the project. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of the interview and will be invited to comment on any aspect of its contents.

Use of data: The results of this project will ultimately form one part of Robin's PhD thesis. Aspects of the completed research may eventually be presented in appropriate academic and professional contexts such as publications, conference presentations and teaching. Aspects of the data collected from you maybe included in this dissemination but will be anonymised at all times. If so requested, the researcher will be happy to refrain from using any data that the participant considers to be sensitive and/or private. The participants will be given copies of any publications based on the research.

Anonymity of participants: All information acquired from you will be treated as 100% confidential. Unless specifically agreed otherwise, all references in any publications, lectures or talks to particular organisations, individuals and situations will be anonymised and features that might make identification possible will be removed.

**Declaration by the research participant: I confirm that have read the details above and that I agree to participate in Robin's project with the arrangements as set out above.**

**Signature of the participant** **Date**

**Signature of the researcher** **Date**

## Appendix P – Applied research project – Information sheet

Canterbury Christ Church University

**How does executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients?**

**<u>Participant information</u>**

I would like to invite you to participate in a PhD research study that I am conducting in conjunction with Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU). Please refer to CCCU's Research Privacy Notice for more information on how your personal would be used and stored if you agree to participate.

**<u>Background</u>**

Understanding of the characteristics of executive coaches that are important to coaching outcomes, as opposed to the approaches, tools and techniques they use, is a notable gap in the academic and practitioner research on the industry. In particular, the role played in coaching by coaches' prior career experience is contentious – with views ranging from those who believe a coach's knowledge and experience in the client's world is essential to others who suggest that "coaching requires expertise in coaching but not in the subject at hand" (John Whitmore, 1974). This research project is exploring how coaches' prior career experience affects their relationships with their clients.

Having conducted a similar project focussed on my own coaching of a selection of my clients, I am now seeking to deepen my research by interviewing two sets of participants. First, a cohort of experienced coaches who have prior business experience similar to the roles of the coaching clients they work with. Second, a selection (one each) of the clients of the coaches in the first group.

The project is a major component of a part-time PhD programme I am undertaking through the Professional Development Foundation (PDF) and CCCU. The project and the PhD programme are both entirely self-funded and no other organisations or individuals are involved.

**<u>What would you be required to do?</u>**

Participants who agree to participate in this study will interviewed by me (for approximately 30 to 45 minutes), either via video conference (Zoom etc) or, preferably but only if CV19 restrictions permit, at a face-to-face meeting at a venue that is suitable for a confidential conversation and is convenient for both of us. The coaches participating will be asked how they sense their prior business experience affects how they coach and their relationships with clients; the clients will be asked how they sense their coach's prior experience affects them, their relationship with their coach and their coaching.

**<u>Criteria for participation in this research</u>**

I am seeking participants who match the following criteria:

Coaches who:

- Are trained and accredited executive coaches with at least three years' experience of coaching;

- Had 15 years or more business experience prior to becoming a coach, including roles at Board, Exco or one level below;
- Are paid by companies to work one-to-one with senior executives (Board, Exco or one level below);

Clients of the coaches participating who:

- Have been clients of their coach for 3 months or more (and/or have had at least 3 coaching sessions);
- Are in senior executive roles (Board, Exco or one level below).

## Procedures

As noted above, if you agree to participate you will be asked to a 30 to 45 minute interview with me about your coaching. My preference would be to not provide you with the specific questions in advance but to give you ample opportunity to influence the direction of the interview, to express your views and to revise, remove or add to anything you say at the meeting. The interview would be digitally recorded on my iPhone and an anonymised transcript would subsequently be produced.

## Feedback

If you do participate, I will provide you with as much feedback as you would like, including, but not limited to, a follow up meeting to de-brief you, a copy of the digital recording, a copy of the transcript of your interview and copies of all subsequently submitted or published assignments or articles.

## Confidentiality and Data Protection

The recording of your interview, the associated transcript and all references to you in the resulting research would coded (Coach A, B, C etc; Client 1, 2, 3 etc) to guarantee anonymity. Consequently, no categories of personal data (as defined by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)) will be processed in the course of undertaking this project.
However, a selection of verbatim quotes of comments made by the participants will be included in the final PhD thesis submission and subsequent articles and documents – meaning that they will be 'in the public domain'. Although all quotes will be coded in the way described above, unattributed and anonymised, they may be recognisable to you and potentially to other people who are intimately familiar with your context. If you do agree to participate, you will be asked to give your consent to anonymised quotes from your interview being included in my thesis and subsequent articles and documents. Please do not hesitate to decline if you are uncomfortable in any way with this suggestion.

If you would like to obtain further information related to how personal data is processed please contact me at one of the addresses below. You can read further information regarding how the University processes personal data for research purposes at the following link: https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/university-solicitors-office/data-protection/privacy-notices/privacy-notices.aspx

## Dissemination of results

The results and findings of this research project will be submitted to CCCU in partial fulfilment of its PhD in Professional Practice: Psychological Perspectives and will be published in its library if my PhD is granted. It is also my intention to have articles based on its findings in at least one of the coaching industry’s journals. All participant details will be anonymised and references limited in order to maintain confidentiality.

**Process for withdrawing consent to participate**

If you do agree to participate in this project, you would be free to withdraw your consent, without having to give any reason, at any time prior to the finding’s submission to CCCU or to the publishers of journal articles. You could do this by contacting me directly at any of the address above. You may read further information on your rights relating to your personal data at the following link:

https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/university-solicitors-office/data-protection/privacy-notices/privacy-notices.aspx

**Any questions?**

Please do not hesitate to contact me at:

robin@hayhillpartners.com; r.hindle-fisher605@canterbury.ac.uk or on 07813 800 441 or my academic supervisor, Professor Bob Garvey, at r.garvey@easynet.co.uk if you would like any further information about this project or your potential participation.

**Robin Hindle Fisher**

March 2021

## Appendix Q – Applied research project – Consent form

Canterbury Christ Church University

**Research consent form**

Title of Project: **How does executive coaches' prior career experience affect their relationships with their clients?**

Name of Researcher**: Robin Hindle Fisher**

Contact details:


| | |
|---|---|
| **Address:** | C/o Hay Hill Partners LLP,<br>29 Farm Street,<br>London W1J 5RL |
| **Tel:** | 020 3008 7559 or 07813 800 441 |
| **Email:** | r.hindle-fisher605@canterbury.ac.uk or robin@hayhillpartners.com |


**Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I confirm that I agree to any interviews I may have with the researcher being digitally recorded.
3. I understand that any personal information that I provide to the researcher will be kept strictly confidential and in line with the CCCU's Research Privacy Notice.
4. I understand that verbatim quotes from interviews I may have with the researcher may be included in academic submissions, articles and documents that will enter the public domain but that they will be unattributed and anonymised.
5. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time and without giving any reason whatsoever.
6. I agree to take part in the above project.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Name of Participant: | Date: | Signature: |
| Researcher:<br><br>**Robin Hindle Fisher** | Date: | Signature: |

## Appendix R – Report of Professional Practice – Information sheet

**How does a leading provider of coaching training prepare coaches to use their prior career experience in their work with clients?**

**Participant information**

You are being invited to participate in a PhD research study being conducted in conjunction with Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) by Robin Hindle Fisher. Please refer to CCCU's Research Privacy Notice for more information on how your personal would be used and stored if you agree to participate.

**Background**

Our understanding of the characteristics of executive coaches that are important to coaching outcomes, as opposed to the approaches, tools and techniques they use, is a notable gap in the academic and practitioner research on the industry. In particular, the role played in coaching by coaches' prior career experience is contentious – with views ranging from those who believe a coach's knowledge and experience in the client's world is essential to others who suggest that "coaching requires expertise in coaching but not in the subject at hand" (John Whitmore, 1974). My overarching research project is exploring how coaches' prior career experience affects their relationships with their clients.

I have conducted two research projects on this topic to date. The first focussed on my own coaching of a selection of my clients. The second was based on interviews of a cohort of four experienced coaches who had prior business experience similar to the roles of their coaching clients plus a selection (one each) of the clients of those coaches. I am now seeking to work with one of the leading coaching training providers to examine how coaches' training influences how they use their prior experience in their work with clients.

The project is one component of a part-time PhD programme I am undertaking through the Professional Development Foundation (PDF) and Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU). The project and the PhD programme are both entirely self-funded and no other organisations or individuals are involved.

**What would you be required to do?**

The organisation participating will agree to allow me to have access to and study all of the course materials used in coaching training. The individuals who agree to participate will be interviewed by me (for approximately 30 to 45 minutes), either via video conference (Zoom etc) or, preferably, but only if CV19 precautions permit, at a face-to-face meeting at a venue that is suitable for a confidential conversation and is convenient for us both. The participants will be asked about how coaches' prior career and business experience features in the training provided.

**Criteria for participation in this research**

I am seeking participants who match the following criteria:

A coaching training company that:

- Is a market leading provider in the UK;
- Offers training courses up to the standards of the international accrediting bodies (preferably ICF and / or EMCC);

- Has a proportion of its clients / students / graduates who have prior senior level executive career backgrounds (board/exco members, partner, divisional heads etc).

Representatives and a client of the provider (one each of the following):

- Head of faculty / Director of Studies – the individual with overall responsibility for syllabus content;
- Course Tutor – an individual who delivers training courses or sessions to clients / students;
- Recent client / student / graduate of the provider's training.

**Procedures**

If you agree to participate you will be asked to allow me to have access to all of the materials used in your coaching training courses and for the individuals outlined above to be interviews by me for between 30 to 45 minutes about the topic being researched. My preference would be not to provide specific questions in advance but to give participants ample opportunity to influence the direction of the interview, to express their views and to revise, remove or add to anything they say at the meeting. The interview would be digitally recorded on my iPhone and an anonymised transcript would subsequently be produced.

**Feedback**

If you do participate, I will provide you with as much feedback as you would like, including, but not limited to, a follow up meeting to de-brief you, a copy of the digital recording, a copy of the transcript of your interview and copies of all subsequently submitted or published assignments or articles. I would welcome all corrections of factual inaccuracies and be receptive to feedback of any kind.

**Confidentiality and Data Protection**

The recording of all interviews, the associated transcripts and all references to you and your organisation in the resulting research would be anonymised (Provider XYZ; Director of Studies; Tutor; Client). Consequently, no categories of personal data (as defined by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)) will be processed in the course of undertaking this project.

However, a selection of verbatim quotes of comments made by the participants will be included in the final PhD thesis submission and subsequent articles and documents – meaning that they will be 'in the public domain'. Although all quotes will be coded or anonymised in the way described above, they may be recognisable to you and potentially to other people who are intimately familiar with your context. If you do agree to participate, you will be asked to give your consent to anonymised quotes from your interview to be included in my thesis and subsequent articles and documents. Please do not hesitate to decline if you are uncomfortable in any way with this suggestion.

If you would like to obtain further information related to how personal data is processed please contact me at one of the addresses below. You can read further information regarding how the University processes personal data for research purposes at the following link: https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/university-solicitors-office/data-protection/privacy-notices/privacy-notices.aspx

**Dissemination of results**

The results and findings of this research project will be submitted to CCCU in partial fulfilment of its PhD in Professional Practice: Psychological Perspectives and will be published in its library if my PhD is granted. It is also my intention to have articles based on its findings in at least one of the coaching industry's journals. All participant details will be anonymised and references limited in order to maintain confidentiality.

**Process for withdrawing consent to participate**

If you do agree to participate in this project, you would be free to withdraw your consent, without having to give any reason, at any time prior to the finding's submission to CCCU or to the publishers of journal articles. You could do this by contacting me directly at any of the address above. You may read further information on your rights relating to your personal data at the following link: https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/university-solicitors-office/data-protection/privacy-notices/privacy-notices.aspx

**Any questions?**

Please do not hesitate to contact me at robin@hayhillpartners.com; r.hindle-fisher605@canterbury.ac.uk or on 07813 800 441 or my academic supervisor, Professor Bob Garvey, at r.garvey@easynet.co.uk if you would like any further information about this project or your potential participation.

**Robin Hindle Fisher**

November 2021

## Appendix S – Report of Professional Practice – Consent form

Canterbury Christ Church University

# Research consent form

**Title of Project:** How does a leading provider of coaching training prepare coaches to use their prior career experience in their work with clients?

**Name of Researcher:** Robin Hindle Fisher
**Contact details:**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Address:** | C/o Hay Hill Partners LLP,<br>29 Farm Street,<br>London W1J 5RL. |
| **Tel:** | 020 3008 7559 or 07813 800 441 |
| **Email:** | r.hindle-fisher605@canterbury.ac.uk or robin@hayhillpartners.com |

**Please initial box**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information sheet for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions. | |
| 2. | I confirm that I agree to any interviews I may have with the researcher being digitally recorded. | |
| 3. | I understand that any personal information that I provide to the researcher will be kept strictly confidential and in line with the CCCU's Research Privacy Notice. | |
| 4. | I understand that verbatim quotes from interviews I may have with the researcher may be included in academic submissions, articles and documents that will enter the public domain but that they will be unattributed and anonymised. | |
| 5. | I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time and without giving any reason whatsoever. | |
| 6. | I agree to take part in the above project. | |
| 7. | **Where applicable only:** I am an authorised signatory of XYZ and confirm on its behalf that it agrees to take part in the above project. | |

| Name of Participant: | Date: | Signature: |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Researcher: | Date: | Signature: |

Copies: 1 for participant: 1 for researcher