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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unfolding executive coaches' identity work through the social constructivist lens: Coach–coachee–organisation

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Abstract

This study responds to a recent call on coaches' professional identity work through a socially contextualised lens. Coaches, as the freelancer, encounter complex working relationships with clients due to multiple contracting entities; yet coaches' identity work has been neglected in the extant training and development courses. A total of 36 semi-structured interviews with coaches and relational others (e.g., coachees and organisational stakeholders) were conducted to understand how coaches develop professional identity as part of their career development in responding to interactions with relational others. The research findings identify that learning facilitator is the core identity of coaches regardless of varied stages of the coaching process. Three layers of sub-identity are distinguished for them to handle a multi-level working relationship with clients. Coaches often 'travel' in-and-out between layers of these sub-identities to incorporate micro-personal career interests, meso coaching dyadic working relationships and the macro-level organisational scope into their identity development and negotiation. Accordingly,

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coaches' learning agility is required to remain identity flexibility for coping with varied coaching scenarios. This study outlines a conceptual framework which illustrates coaches' identity work as a conscious cognitive learning process embedded social and psychological exchanges. This framework offers coaching professional development courses a groundwork to facilitate coaches' identity development.

INTRODUCTION

Given that executive coaching has been confirmed as an effective learning and development (L&D) approach to strengthen individuals' working life, such as self-efficacy, goal-attainment, and psychological well-being (Jones et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2022); there has been a strong calling from coaching practitioners, researchers, and corporate clients for the professionalisation of coaches (Gray, 2011; Moore & Koning, 2016). Yet the process of professionalisation has been rocky due to the breadth of theoretical groundings in coaching and techniques used in coaching sessions (Du Toit, 2014). Hence, the approach of developing professional identity may offer a more flexible way to help coaches to have a greater understanding of their professional status (Brown, 2015) and to distinguish themselves from other similar occupations such as consultants and counsellors (Clegg et al., 2007; Gray, 2011; Moore & Koning, 2016). Identities, people's subjective understandings and interpretations of who they are (Brown, 2015; p: 3), has received enormous attentions from scholars in organisation studies (Miscenko & Day, 2016). Considering that identities provide adequate and explanatory information of individuals' cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social boundaries that incorporate the "self" with social worlds (Brown, 2020), a comprehensive understanding of work-related identities offers the clarity of influential factors on individuals' motivation and performance (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Pearson et al., 2012). For instance, some studies (e.g., Ménard & Brunet, 2011) have confirmed that individuals' true understanding the meaning and value of their work (i.e., authenticity of their professional identity) is positively related to job satisfaction and work performance. The present study makes a distinctive contribution to coaches' identity development as we focus on aspects of freelancing and contracting employment relationships with the organisation in coaches' identity work process. According to Ashford et al. (2018), different theoretical lens (e.g., the social constructive learning theory) should be applied to the study of freelancers' career development due to uncertain job opportunity, frequent environment changes and remote working relationship. The social constructive learning theory which values people's participation and interpretation of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1986), can offer scholars in the field a comprehensive picture of freelancers' identity work when facing blur work boundaries and assist them to thrive in this new and undetermined working environment.

Despite that the executive coach (hereafter coach) is generally recognised as an elite profession by working with C-suites (Whitmire, 2019), coaches, like other similar freelancers in knowledge economy (e.g., trainers, consultants and workplace counsellors), usually encounter sophisticated contracting processes and divergent outcome expectations with multiple entities.

For instance, the sponsoring organisation and individuals receiving the training or coaching service have contrasting views on learning objectives and outcome evaluations (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014). However, coaches often experience a greater level of anxiety and doubt than other similar helping professionals given that coaching sessions are commonly taken place in a "black box", that is, a private one-on-one conversation (Fleddermann et al., 2023; Patrick et al., 2021). The coach has the main responsibility to ensure an effective three-way communication and joint alliance among all related parties, such as the coach -coachee – sponsoring organisation (de Haan & Nieß, 2015; Lai & Smith, 2021). Otherwise, coaches need to deal with confidentiality issues, loyal conflicts and their own emotional challenges when there is a discrepancy within the relevant parties (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014). Indeed, recent literature regarding coaches' development has emphasised on their psychological experiences since coaches normally share significant emotional moments with coachees (de Haan et al., 2010) and negotiate expectations and hidden agenda with multiple parties (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014) to achieve greater coaching outcomes. Therefore, coaching is described as a social and political process in which oppressive structures and power dynamics from different stakeholders are the common challenges of coaches in the coaching process. Yet, extant coaching literature is positioned within skill-based competency. Hence, the increased number of coaching scholars call for a greater understanding of coaches' identity development via a social constructivist stance for the enhancement of their professional career (Lai & Smith, 2021; Shoukry & Cox, 2018).

In fact, several studies have explored similar issues in coaching, such as issues of coaches to be's identity sensemaking in situations of dynamic complexity (Moore & Koning, 2016) and business coaches' legitimate organisational identity work (Clegg et al., 2007). Both studies revealed that identity work of coaches is on-going and socially constructed. In addition, future related studies should focus on the relational construction of identities from different parties. Hence, the present paper draws upon a social constructive paradigm, which considers that the individual's development is shaped through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1986), to further investigate all coaching-related parties' (e.g., coaches, coachees, coaching educators and commissioning stakeholders) views on coach's professional identity and how coaches develop their identity in response to interactions with relational others.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Identities in the new world of work: Freelancing in the knowledge economy

Identity in general refers to the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves through social interactions to seek the answer of 'who am I?', 'who do I want to become?' and 'how shall I relate to others?' (Brown, 2015; p. 23). Identity has been distinguished as a popular topic in contemporary organisational studies (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; p. 1163) given that identities inform individuals' thoughts and actions through their distinctive definitions of "the self" and authentic values for a specific subject (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001). Explicitly, a good understanding of individuals' self and work-allied identities offers comprehensive explanations of employees' attitude, motivation and performance (Dutton et al., 2010). Contemporary literature and research primarily stressed on practices and strategies that individuals develop professional identities, which is also understood as identity work. Identity

work is the process that people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the sense of coherence and distinctiveness in the institution (Spyridonidis et al., 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). It is an on-going cognitive activity that the individual negotiates and re-negotiates between self and relational societies for developing a positively valued individuality (Alvesson et al., 2008). The concept of identity work has been researched in various occupations, such as first-time managers (Bolander et al., 2019) and public relations (Reed, 2018). These studies all stressed on the micro-level analysis in professional identity and discovered identity work is a continuous self-reflections and social negotiations. Yet, there is a lack of similar empirical research in the freelancing type of work, specifically in knowledge economy, such as trainers, workplace counsellors and executive coaches (Brown, 2020; Currie & Logan, 2020).

According to the Self-employed Landscape report by the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed (IPSE) in 2021; the freelance workers have contributed £303 billion to the UK economy since 2008. In particular, the highly skilled freelancers made nearly 50% of the input (£147 billions). Hence, scholars in organisational behaviours have stressed on the research areas in freelance workers' psychological well-being and identity work (Ashford et al., 2018). Ashford et al. (2018) specified that freelance workers deal with more complex psychological challenges in comparison with work done in organisations, such as job uncertainty and insecurity, work transience, and physical and relational separation from co-workers due to short-term working relationships and multiple contracting entities. Regardless of high level of autonomy enjoyed by freelance workers (Petriglieri et al., 2018), they often encounter viability, emotional and identity challenges (Ashford et al., 2018). For instance, they may suffer from loneliness or inadequate career support due to physical separation from others (Garrett et al., 2017). Meanwhile, freelance workers frequently experience emotional labour from a higher load of so called "front stage work" due to constant relationship building and contract negotiation with clients (Winkler & Mahmood, 2018). Thus, it is more arduous for freelance workers to establish a coherent career pathway and professional identity (Caza et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2018). They must continually re-claim and revise their identities as they move in and out of organisations and roles (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018). Accordingly, cognitive adaptability, the general ability to switch between tasks and goals (Buttelmann & Karbach, 2017), may facilitate freelance workers adapting to continual changes and developing novel strategies to address work challenges (Chong & Leong, 2017; Steffens et al., 2016). Furthermore, identity flexibility, referring to the degree to which individuals imagine different identities for themselves (Grotevant et al., 1982; Winkler & Mahmood, 2018), could lead to greater proactive behaviours for future work opportunities (Gaither et al., 2015). Therefore, a research agenda to understand behaviours that enable highly skilled freelancers thriving via identity work is urged (Winkler & Mahmood, 2018).

Contemporary research in professional identity of executive coaches

The present study investigated identity work of coaches who are contracted to assist organisations in improving senior managers' learning and development, workplace well-being and leadership behaviours. Regardless the variety of coaching definitions, executive coaching is usually described as a one-on-one learning intervention, or change process, which takes place between a hired facilitator (the coach) and a senior manager in the organisation (the coaching recipient, often known as the coachee) through systematic interpersonal interactions and

behavioural techniques (Grant, 2014; Sperry, 2008). The range of ultimate coaching purposes is varied from specific performance-related goals to a desire for self-growth and enhanced self-awareness (Wang et al., 2022). Several meta-analyses (Jones et al., 2016; Sonesh et al., 2015; Theeboom et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2022) have asserted the effectiveness of coaching on individual-level outcomes in organisations (e.g., self-efficacy, job satisfaction, leadership behaviours and psychological well-being). In addition, a recent meta-analytical study ascertained that quality of the coaching relationship as the common factor for greater coaching outcomes beyond varied coaching approaches (Graßmann et al., 2020). Accordingly, coaching primarily relies upon people's interpersonal interactions and collaborations in all settings (Lai & Smith, 2021). Compared to other similar freelance work, such as trainers and workplace counsellors, coaches encounter a more complex multi-level contracting and negotiation procedures. In contrast to training, conversations and negotiations in the coaching process are often considered "mysterious" as it is taken place in a private one-on-one setting (Fleddermann et al., 2023; Patrick et al., 2021). In addition, the sponsoring organisation (i.e., social factors) has a consequential influence on coaching outcomes than workplace counselling given that the ultimate objective of coaching is primarily related to coachees' growth at the workplace. Overall, coaches establish the so-called 'business' or 'commercial' contracts with the sponsoring organisation which is often conducted with certain HR professionals (especially those who are responsible for employees' L&D) to specify objectives and outcomes of this coaching engagement, roles and responsibilities, financial terms, and ethical issues (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014). Meanwhile, the learning contract, including learning activities, preferences and outcomes, should be discussed between the coach and coachee privately in consideration of individual resistance and change (Brandes & Lai, 2021). However, there is often a conflict regarding learning resources, outcomes and evaluations between the coaching recipient and sponsoring organisation (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014). Thus, coaches frequently act as a mediator between the coachee and organisational stakeholders to facilitate negotiations and alignment (Lai & Smith, 2021). Accordingly, there can be a discrepancy between coaches' self-interpreted meaning of work and other related parties' perception (Clegg et al., 2007). This is also where the contextual factors (e.g., power relationships) emerged in the coaching process (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018).

With the increase acknowledgment of contextual factors in the coaching process, coaching has been described as a social process (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). Shoukry and Cox (2018) pointed out that plenty organisations deny the existence of social context and diversity in the coaching process whereas using coaching as a control mechanism for coachees' conformation. Conformity may result in limited opportunity for coachees to critically examine the implications of their actions (Kempster & Iszatt-White, 2013). This approach can be problematic since recent research has indicated the quality of coaching process is determined by all coaching parties' concurrent emotional and critical moments (de Haan & Nieß, 2015). Given the emergence of critical social stance in coaching literature, identity approach which promotes flexible reflective spaces may suite greater with the heterogeneity of coaching (Grant, 2011; Moore & Koning, 2016).

However, existing research tended to study professional identity in a social vacuum which merely acknowledged the individual's inner sense of self (Koster et al., 2018). Indeed, certain scholars in the field emphasised on the social structure in identity work research (Ybema, 2020) considering that humans are social animals. Humans usually interact with society and other people in their organisation through a highly structured way (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005). Moreover, Caza et al. (2018) argued that identity work in the organisation is relational and

shaped with others over time. Specifically, 'relational others' (e.g., peers, clients, or line managers) and organisational structure (e.g., hierarchy and power) make significant influences on the individual's identity interpretation and sensemaking. Hence, Ybema (2020) proposed that identity work is a continuous interpersonal reciprocation between the self and social definition; precisely, self-interpretation and labelling by others. Furthermore, identity work is an open-ended negotiation proceeding in which inform that identity is fluid, adjustable and amenable. People's outer behaviours and performance are often contingent on inner conversations and miniature reflections of interactions between the self and social worlds. These inner conversations facilitate individuals to accommodate a current self to future self (representing sociality). In fact, 'relational societies and others' whom individuals encounter or interact with offers a greater picture of how they cope with conflicts and incongruent identity work processes with their community (Koster et al., 2018). Koster et al.'s (2018) empirical study indicated that identity only makes sense in interaction with others given that healthcare workers' 'relational others' (e.g., patients and their family) co-construct their professional identity via offering nurses certain reflective opportunities. The recent literature has also urged the critical and holistic approach in coaching research by applying for social lens (Lai & Smith, 2021; Shoukry & Cox, 2018). In fact, Clegg et al. (2007) has indicated that business coaches' identity is an on-going fashion and rooted in a mutually agreed understanding (amid differences and similarities) between coaches and other parties in the coaching process. Whereas Clegg et al.'s (2007) analysis took the pioneering step in this subject, they indicated future research should shed light on the relational construction of identities and focus on accounts from different parties.

In summary, a good understanding of professional identity promotes individuals' self-awareness, work motivation and performance. With the increasing study of work-related identity, professionals on the contract basis with different commissioning organisations, including external trainers and coaches, are still under-researched. Meanwhile, existing identity research primary emphasized on individual sense-making in lieu of holistic contextual factors. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate coaches' professional identity work via a social constructivist approach which considers identities are socially and subjectively made meaningful (Ybema, 2020). We attempted to answer the following research questions by interviewing all coaching-related parties (i.e., coaches, coachees, sponsoring organisations and coaching educators).

(1) What is the overall understanding of executive coaches' professional identity through the self and relational others' interpretation?
(2) In what way executive coaches develop their identity in response to interactions with relational others in the coaching process?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted an inductive interpretative methodology to explore experiences and insights of coaches and relational others in the coaching process. An inductive approach provides spaces to the informants (i.e., participants) to explain their thoughts, intentions and actions. The researchers do not presume to impose prior constructs or theories on the informants as preferred or prior explanation for understanding or explaining their experience (Gioia et al., 2013).

Participants, data collection and analysis

The participants were mainly recruited by a snowball approach via both authors' coaching-related professional connections. A total of 36 interviewees, including independent coaches, coachees, academic educators in coaching fields, senior management in the coaching recruitment agencies as well as commissioning organisational stakeholders, took part in a one-on-one interview of approximately 1 h in duration. All interviewees had more than 10-years' experience in their current job roles. Most independent coaches and coaching recruitment agencies were working internationally with clients from different countries. Hence their experience was international, as opposed to restricted to a national perspective. The main purpose of interviewing different groups of participants was to seek and integrate their distinct views about the role of coaches established from their relevant coaching experiences. Interview questions with coaching educators consisted of questions exploring programme design pedagogy (philosophical position) including content, format and evaluation methods considering that these questions can draw out their philosophical position of coaches' learning and development to achieve an ideal professional status. In the second set of participants, from coaching recruitment agencies and commissioning stakeholders, were asked to share their involvements with the recruitment and selection of coaches and illustrate their prospect of an "ideal" professional identity of coaches from the corporate clients' aspect. Moreover, coach and coachee participants were invited to express their interpretations of a professional coach drawing upon their significant coaching incidents (Table 1).

TABLE 1 Interview groups and purpose.

Code	Group	Numbers	Purpose of interview
G1	Coach	10	To probe critical coaching moments to understand their self-defined identity and in what way they construct and negotiate their professional identity since they started the coaching career.
G2	Coachee	8	To probe critical coaching moments and expectations of an "ideal" coach based on their specific coaching experiences, in what way their construct and negotiate their professional identity.
G3	Coaching educators	6	To explore their experience and philosophical position in coaching programme design pedagogy (philosophical position) including content, format and evaluation methods as well as interactions with coaching students to elicit their view on coaches' learning and professional development process.
G4	Executive coaching recruitment agents	5	To explore their experiences from the recruitment and selection of coaches to understand an "ideal" professional identity of coaches.
G5	Stakeholders	7	To investigate coaches' attributes through organisational stakeholders' experiences in facilitating coaching sessions in their respective organisations and their expectations of the identity a professional coach should present.
	Total	36	

Stage One Open coding First author	Stage Two Clustering / Theorizing First author	Stage Three Swapped coding First author	Stage Four Combining Evolved theme

Transcriptions:
- being able to engage in processes like supervision
- be able to make the people learning how to become coaches aware of the research as well
- we're suggesting that our coaches have supervision or have an opportunity to have peer-to-peer conversations, or even conversations with me
- constantly learning and being open to that learning

Initial themes:
- Bring their experience into learning
- Self-directed
- Meta-cognition
- Learning from self and coachee's partners
- Coaching supervision
- Continuing professional development

Learning and cognitive agility in the identity work process.

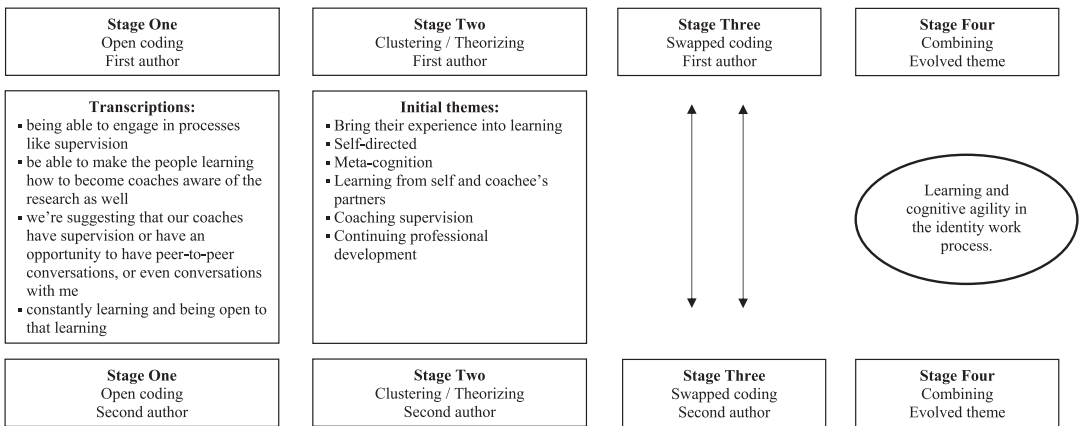| Stage One Open coding Second author	Stage Two Clustering / Theorizing Second author	Stage Three Swapped coding Second author	Stage Four Combining Evolved theme

FIGURE 1 Coding process and themes generation (one example).

All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data analysis contained four stages (Gioia et al., 2013). Initially, the first author conducted an open coding with all transcriptions through a random order (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Statements relevant to research objectives, such as, expectations of a "good" coach (e.g., required knowledge, attributes, skills and behaviours), identity evolvement, construction and negotiation and so forth, were marked and displayed in an Excel sheet for the second-stage coding. The second-stage coding focused on clustering the similar statements from the previous stage and associating these clustered initial codes with relevant theories. At a third stage, intended to demonstrate the rigour of the qualitative research, the two authors swapped the interview groups and repeated the coding as stage one and two. Then the codes identified by both authors were examined in contrast. Some codes were found to overlap conceptually and so were merged; other codes identified as being not highly relevant were eliminated. Finally, the identified codes from all interview groups were re-examined through a correlative comparison. One coding example is presented in Figure 1. This study generated four main themes which are presented and explained in the following section.

FINDINGS

In general, most of interview participants indicated that coaching does not have to be a standardised profession. Explicitly, coaches usually obtain a fluid and flexible identity due to complex contracting processes with multiple stakeholders. Interviewees also suggested a coaching certificate or qualification as useful but not the only criterion for a coaching practitioner, recognising that coaching is a dynamic and cross-disciplinary intervention. However, participants recognised coaching practitioners should demonstrate an appropriate professional impression that corresponds to specific scenes, such as an executive presence, business acumen and competent verbal and body language. Meanwhile, coaches should possess high-level understanding of clients' industry and proficient learning facilitation skills. More importantly, participants stressed on the apprehension of clients' organisational culture (e.g., power and political issues) and coaches' advanced negotiation

ability with all relational parties to draw an autonomous and independent space for the coaching dyad to explore coachees' learning and development. Accordingly, coaches are expected to handle both front stage work for business partnership building as well as psychological and learning contract for the enhancement of coachees' learning process. Four significant and frequently discussed arguments (i.e., themes) are discussed in detail below.

Learning facilitator as the core identity of coaches

First, this study initially clarifies a longstanding debate about diverse roles of a coach, previously been seen as a management consultant, performance instructor or business advisor (Gray, 2011), and suggests that the primary responsibility of a coach is to facilitate coachees' work-related learning and growth. The data analysis reveals that the ultimate goal of a coaching intervention is to identify coachees' strengths, to assist the progress of coachees' transformation so that eventually coachees can perform at their best. Thus, strength-based learning in positive psychology and other adult learning theories, like self-determination, social cognition theory and transformative learning, were specified in most interviews as important knowledge a professional coach should obtain to help their coachees to evolve, develop, transform and flourish. After a cross-analysis of all interview transcriptions, a 'learning facilitator' has emerged as the core identity of coaches regardless of disparate coaching outcomes and evaluations agreed in the commissioning contract. For instance, certain coach interviewees disclosed that the main purpose of being an executive coach is to '*help people grow, we help people step up to their growth edge and transcend it*' (coach-04).

Meanwhile, coachee participants expressed their expectations from a professional coach is to help '*changing, growing and thriving, and performing at my best*' (coachee-07). Moreover, some coachees were hoping to '*go to the next level in the team.*' (coachee-06).

Whereas most of the recruitment agencies and stakeholders suggested that a coachee could be benefited more from a coach who has had similar professional or business experience, which implies the coach is expected to share personal experiences in the coaching sessions; some participants, however, pointed out that they prefer coaches to 'facilitate and support' the learning and to understand what these executive managers want and strengths to achieve in their role despite concrete coaching outcomes such as leadership behaviour changes. Hence, '*a coaching practitioner needs to genuinely understand the difference between coaching which highlighting facilitation, developing coachees' strengths and advice-giving directly*' (agent-04). Explicitly, a learner-centred (i.e., coachee-led) and strength-based coaching process being essential indicated by most participants. This finding also resonates with coaching educators' aspects in this study, coaches should be '*sensitive with human actions, such as how people think, behave and learn; and how to keep positive bonding in the coachee's learning process*' (coaching educator-02). Accordingly, a learning facilitator who '*could master adult learning theories such as self-determination theory, motivational interview model and social cognitive theory to unlock coachees' potentials to grow and thrive, was recognised as the core identity of coaches despite heterogeneous coaching approaches and scenarios*' (coaching educator-04, stakeholder-07).

Multiple layers of coaching identity: Micro, meso and macro-focused

In addition to the core identity being a learning facilitator, interview participants indicated coaching processes are often fluctuating given that coaching objectives or agendas may be substantially changed over the course of coaching engagements due to coachees' learning progress or other contextual factors in the organisation. Hence, coaches may need to shift away from their core identity intermittently and evolve secondary identities to accommodate to various scenarios. This study outlines three layers of identity that freelance coaches may have evolved as a result of the multiplex working relationships with commissioning organisations and coachees (Table 2).

First, as a freelancer who needs to be responsible for their financial incomes, coach participants stressed on the establishment of business relationships by demonstrating their

TABLE 2 Three-layers identity of coaches.

Layers	Definitions	Relationship types	Examples
Layer 1 Micro individual-focused	It refers to coaches' self-interpretation of a professional practitioner's individuality and competency to help them securing business contracts and establishing business relationships (front-stage work) and generating positive coaching outcomes.	Business relationship	• Marketing activities through social medias (e.g., blog, social media domains and public social exposure). • Frequent communications and knowledge sharing with potential clients.
Layer 2 Meso dyadic-focused (coach and coachee)	This layer mainly stresses on the learning and psychological contract with coachees to identify learning objectives, action plans and resources. The organisational concerns (e.g., selection of goals and request for resources) might be referred in this level of interaction.	The professional helping relationship (i.e., learning and psychology contract) between the coaching dyad	• Proficient learning facilitation skills to develop a suited and applicable plan for coachees' changes and development. • Advanced interpersonal skills to establish trust and remain effective working relationships.
Layer 3 Macro collective-focused (coach-coachee-organisation)	This layer considers all coaching related parties' needs, requirements and expectations.	Collective coaching relationship (i.e., alliance)	• To explain boundaries of the coaching engagement sponsored by the coachee's company. • To keep a transparent three-way contracting process.

expertise to help organisations to achieve their objectives through coaching approaches. This layer is usually a micro-level self-interest positioning that coaches intend to present their professional coaching capabilities and differentiate themselves from other competitive coaches to ensure a continual commitment with commissioning organisations. Therefore, coaches make greater efforts on "front stage work" since they are conscious of being observed by potential clients in this business relationship.

'I often updated my blog and LinkedIn page to demonstrate my professional image (i.e., identity)...also attended business events to ensure my executive market acumen' (coach-06)

'I would say good communication and knowledge sharing. this is the way I help my potential clients and HR contacts to understand the effectiveness of coaching intervention and what I can offer' (coach-10).

This micro level identity which mainly focuses on the entrepreneurship in their coaching career did not usually come to light until they approached organisations to compete with other coaches to secure contracts.

'I really focused on learning coaching skills that facilitate the coachee's change and growth during my coaching qualification training. I never saw myself as a coaching businessperson until I had the first coaching project bid with several competitors, I realised I needed to distinguish myself from other coaches via advanced business skills' (coach-06).

'I learnt about these skills to establish strong connections with HR professionals and secure sustainable business since starting my freelancing career. No one taught me about this in my coaching qualification course, I would say learning coaching business by doing it' (coach-08).

The middle layer of identity was described meso-level and 'dyadic-focused' within the coaching pair (i.e., the coach-coachee). This is the closest layer to coaches' core identity being a learning facilitator. Coaches tend to create a collaborative and mutually respected learning environment for coachees, with this dyadic-concerned identity. Coaches draw on open dialogues to explore the coachee's learning needs and resources collaboratively. Hence, this dyadic-focused identity was often the output of interactions between the coach and coachee. Several interviewees indicated a trust relationship and effective psychological contract are essential antecedents for coachees' motivation to change. The initial meeting (so-called chemistry meeting) where the coach and coachee physically meet each other was recognised as an important step to establish working relationship and to understand coachees' learning needs and preferences.

'I see this (coaching) as a collaborative partnership between two people, my coach often asked me to bring in my experience and learning preference, which can work either towards more depth in the conversation' (coachee-01).

'I (coachee) really enjoy and motivated in these coaching sessions......I feel I got my coach's attention, facilitating me to think, basically I am the centre of this coaching process' (coachee-04).

In fact, this meso-level identity which urges coaches to develop learning and psychological contracts with their coachees is generally cultivated from their coaching education or training programmes.

'I recalled my coaching qualification content, they were mostly relevant to adult learning theories and coachees' motivation to change. I really saw myself to come in the organisation to support learning's growth and change. However, I developed different thoughts of my role here throughout my career' (coach-05).

Meanwhile, this meso-level identity as a "competent" learning facilitator is strengthened throughout the course of coaching sessions. Coaches tends to draw upon proficient interpersonal skills and senses to establish a clear picture of coachees' learning needs,

preferences and styles after building a closer professional relationship with coachees and commissioning organisations.

Several organisational stakeholders also expected an effective working relationship between the coach and coachee for sustainable outcomes. Some HR professionals who help the arrangement of coaching programmes within their organisations indicated *'the concept of partnership in the coaching process is very important to us, we would be very happy to see coaches partnering with us demonstrating empathy, the connection, deep listening, and mindfulness with our senior managers (i.e., coachees) to build up their positive emotions, confidence, building motivation and vision'* (stakeholder-01)

The third layer of identity was considered as a macro-collective level among all related parties (coach- organisation-coachee). The majority of interview participants indicated that organisational culture, power hierarchy and relationship with coachees' direct supervisors had influential impacts on coachees' choice of goals and action plans over the course of coaching sessions. For instance, several coachee participants expressed that the involvement with senior stakeholders for coaching objectives and resources alignment should be taken place at the early stage.

'It can be and always been a challenge for me, I told my coach, it is not easy to ask for the resources I need or work on the objectives I prefer, I sometimes hope this coaching can involve senior management team more' (coachee-02).

Meanwhile, senior managements and stakeholders also expected the merging between individual goals and organisational objectives given that coaching is often perceived as a resourced-based human capital investment to maximise organisations competitive advantage.

'I need to know that they (coaches) are thinking about partnerships....with coaching recipients, with us (stakeholders), with the HR party, whoever the client includes in this team' (stakeholder-03).

'This is always in my mind – ah there's a way I can approach what my client is doing, what my client (both coachee and stakeholders) needs. I see myself as a coordinator in this process and bridging gaps between my coachee and their organisation' (coach-07).

The third layer of identity appreciates influences from all coaching-related parties, including the coachee, the coachee's line manager, peers and relevant organisational stakeholders. This can be described as a shared and collective identity with everyone. The collective identity occurred in the coaching process usually reduces psychological barriers and encourages interactions among all parties. Hence, all collaborators had a greater understand of each other's objectives and concerns.

'We (HR department) usually explained what would be involved and we would give them some information about the coach... and offered them opportunities to clarify any doubts and inquiries before the first session starts... so they (coachees) know they are not in the dark' (stakeholder-07).

'A three-way contracting process was preferred, to have coach, coachee and their line managers all together to negotiate and validate objectives, development activities and resources from the company' (stakeholder-04).

Usually, coaches flourish their macro-level identity until they gain satisfactory coaching experiences.

'I become more confident to reach out to my coachee's line manager to understand their expectations and seek alignments among different parties after five years of my coaching practice. I couldn't see the value of multi-parties' negotiations when I started my career, I was running around between securing more projects and facilitating coaching outcomes' (coach-01).

'My coach made a lot of efforts on aligning goals, outcomes and resources with me and my supervisors or senior-level managements before our first session. She was very good at bringing us together and ensure all terms and conditions are overall agreed. My coach had 15 years' experience she was convinced this alignment is critical for the rest of coaching sessions' (coachee-03).

In addition to three layers of sub-identity evolved from coaches' career growth, interviewees also indicated conflicts and tensions among these layers. For instance, there is often a clash between coaches' micro and meso identity as a result of divergent expectations (e.g., goal setting, outcome evaluation and resources) among coaching parties.

'It is not that easy, on one hand, the sponsoring company insisted on the 360-degree evaluation after coaching sessions, on the other hand I could see my coachee was resistant to it by being silent in most sessions. But I had to secure a more sustainable income, I cannot afford to lose this client (i.e., organisation) at the early stage of my coaching career, I had few sleepless nights' (Coach-09).

Similar perspectives were also raised by coaching educators.

'Most of the topics we discussed in the supervision sessions were about the power dynamics, multi-parties' negotiations and seeking the alignment between the stakeholders and coachee. It doesn't matter what kind of frameworks being used in their (i.e., coaches') practice, the things really mattering to them were the negotiation skills. They sometimes wondered whether coaching is a merely business model or a process to help my coachee to change' (coaching educator-03).

Learning agility in the identity work processes

Whereas varied attributes, characteristics, skills and theoretical knowledge have been discussed and highlighted by all participants in their interviews, learning agility and cognitive exercises like *'reflective ability'* (coaching educator-01), *'continuous learning'* (agent-05) and *'negotiating boundaries and adjusting behaviours'* (coach-06) are identified as the most significant skills in the coaches' identity work process. To keep up to date with the changing nature of coaching and business, coaches need to demonstrate swift understanding of situations and develop ideas flexibly in their professional development both within and across experiences. For instance, some coach interviewee indicated that:

'I am usually very alert with any external messages or signs from my clients or coachees and I am sensitive with my own responses to these interactions. After that I would spend some time to reflect on my responses and actions. It is important for my relationship building and coaching practice when I could unpack any learnings from these interactions. I need to be sensitive with all little communications and interactions as a professional coach' (coach-04).

Coaching recruitment agents and educators indicated that coaches and coaches-to-be are expected to continue developing by means of receiving feedback, engaging with supervision programmes, writing a reflective diary and maintaining a high awareness of the research evidence in their coaching practice:

'We're (coaching recruitment agents) suggesting that our coaches have supervision or have an opportunity to have peer-to-peer conversations, or even conversations with us. The expectation of coaching supervision is to 'have a *self and group reflective opportunity for them (coaches) to review and re-negotiate their role in coaching'* (agent-05).

In addition, coaching educators indicated that a professional coach should be able to demonstrate their cognitive reflection:

'A reflective practitioner consistently reviews what they did, is able to explain why they took the decisions that they took.' (coaching educator-05).

Summarising from these conversations with all interview participants, coaches′ identity work is embedded with the interplays of self-understanding, reflections, negotiations and adjustments, this process is also understood as the transformation of relevant coaching experiences to integrate coaches′ and relational others′ (e.g., coachees and stakeholders) understanding of coaching and actual encounters in the coaching process. Therefore, coaches should be able to reflect on coaching events via observations, conceptualise new ideas as the basis for future events. Coaches develop, revise and negotiate their identity through recurrent relevant experiences.

A multifaceted identity work process through social and psychological exchange

Given that multiple layers underpinning the core identity of coaches, interview participants indicated that coaches need to 'travel' between these layers to integrate micro individual interests and characteristics, meso dyadic working relationships and a macro collective scope into their identity work process. This is also understood as a process of interpersonal and psychological exchange (i.e., observations, reflections, applications and negotiations): to act like, behave like, think like and engage with all relational others, such as coaching recipients and stakeholders over the course of identity development, revise and negotiation (Figure 2).

Effective interpersonal techniques were frequently mentioned to strengthen coaches′ sensitivity with human actions, such as *'questioning, listening, contracting, understanding, connecting, summarising and giving feedback…'* (coaching educator-01, coaching educator-03, coaching educator-04, agent-03 and agent-05).

'Coaches need to understand the truth is that they have available knowledge and how to use multiple approaches with different stakeholders and know why' (stakeholder-02)
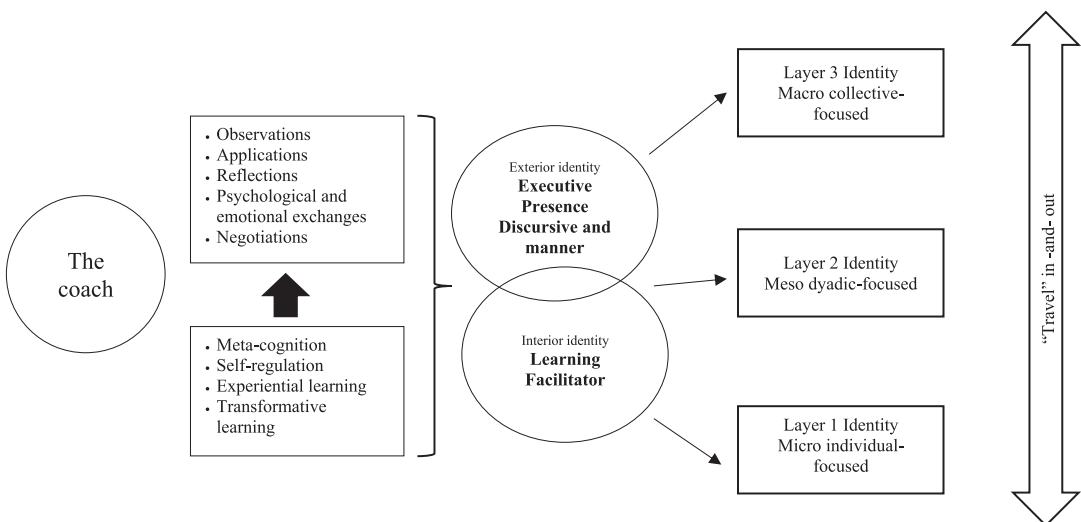

FIGURE 2 A conceptual framework for coaches' identity work.

'We're not making them into professional coaches, we're asking them to be masterful at the deep parts of coaching... coaching is not a profession but an identity transformation, it cannot not be taught but systematically reflect on.' (coaching educator-05).

In addition, negotiating with the organisation through advanced level skills to assure an independent and empowering coaching space is also the key to enhance this psychological exchange quality. Therefore, a thorough understanding of *'needs of the organisation'* (stakeholder-03) and *'organisational dynamics'* (stakeholder-05) was highlighted in the interviews.

In addition, the present study further clarifies that a professional coaching identity is not built on specific theoretical knowledge due to the diverse techniques and approaches (Gray, 2011). Instead, coaching is grounded in interpersonal reciprocations with all related parties to show how much the coach truly understands their clients' positions, thoughts, logic, and challenges. In addition, coaches use their in-depth understanding of coachees' needs and organisational dynamics to negotiate the most "desirable" learning space and contract for coachees. Specifically, coaches' identity work is embedded with systematic critical reflections and evaluations of interactions with relational parties to reach a mutually acknowledged arrangement. Nevertheless, the critical reflection and identity negotiation could cause psychological distress to coaches given that coaches often experience critical emotions with coachees during sessions, in particularly compromises and jeopardies were made to meet organisational objectives. Accordingly, coaches' meta-cognition which is a critical awareness of one's thinking and learning is acquired to plan, monitor, and assess their understanding of complex scenarios in the coaching process.

'These three-way discussions helped me to see things in a different way, I realised that coaching is not just about my coachee's individual learning, is not just about the organisational expectations, I see myself in a different level in this negotiation process. I am the mediator who tries to bridge all parties' distance and establish a shared vision for coaching' (coach-06).

DISCUSSION

This study reinforces that the primary responsibility of an executive coach is to facilitate coaching recipients' (i.e., coachees') learning and change regardless of the variety of coaching purposes and context (Gray, 2011). Instead of demanding a standardised coaching protocol, most interview participants stressed on multiple layers of coaches' identity to accommodate varied stages of working relationship and hidden agendas from all related parties. This discovery indicates that professional identity of coaches is socially constructed and intertwined with relational parties. To answer the research questions, this study outlines a preliminary conceptual framework (Figure 2) of a freelance coach's identity work. Overall, the coach's professional identity is more dynamic than liner due to the multi-layer contracting process and working relationships with the coachee and organisational stakeholders. A multifaceted coaching identity which reflects on freelance coaches' varied professional aspects should satisfy the new era of coaching that considers a broader social dynamic perspective in coaching practice (RQ1). In addition, this study illustrates the process of coaches' identity work through learning from self and others, including peers, coaching educators and clients. This identity construction and development process is embedded with cognitive learning such as observing, experiencing and reflecting on incidents, conversations with all coaching process-related parties and self-inner negotiations over roles and responsibilities in the coaching process.

Given that coaches often 'travel' in-and-out between different layers of identity to deal with micro, meso and macro concerns in the coaching process; cognitive exercises are essential capabilities assisting coaches to contemplate, assimilate and extract abstract concepts from previous experiences to inform new implications and meaning of their work (RQ2). Several implications for research and practice as well as future research suggestions are elaborated in the following sections.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

This study contributes to several theoretical areas, which are explained in the following sections. First, this research expands current coaching literature into a new era by allowing voices of relational parties into the coaching identity work process. A social constructive paradigm has been employed to re-examine the longstanding debate about whether a standardised qualification for coaching profession is needed (Gray, 2011). The empirical analysis indicates that a one-size-fits-all professionalisation is not able to satisfy the complexity in the workplace coaching process. Instead, a multifaceted coaching identity with layers are outlined to further understand coaches' challenges and anticipated capability in dealing with multi-level working relationships with all related parties. The study results expand contemporary coaching literature which has shifted from a fixed and binary focus (i.e., coach–coachee dyad) into a fluid and flexible social and political negotiation process (Grant, 2017; Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018; Shoukry & Cox, 2018). This multifaced professional identity reinforces the recent contention, 'coaching as a social process' (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). Three layers of identity, which develop the multiplex working relationships with commissioning organisations and coachees, draw out clearer social influences in the coachee's working environment. These sub-identities (micro, meso, and macro) facilitate coaches to absorb and integrate information from different coaching parties. An integrative picture of social context helps coaches and coachees to critically analyze or reflect on their working relationships and ethical boundaries amid make changes through coaching (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). In addition, the 'movement' between layers of identity bolster the concept of 'political coaching space' since it allows coaches to navigate power relationships within or among coaching parties (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018). When coaches have had sufficient experiences and stronger confidence in dealing with political issues in the coaching process, they are able to empower the 'coaching space' by establishing strategic working relationships to positively influence the system (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018). Hence, the shift between sub-identities increases the 'free access' to varied information and materials for coaches to gather a wider realty and greater understanding as a whole system (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018). Whereas coaches are allowed to access to varied coaching parties via 'travelling' between sub-identities, the study results disclose that tensions and conflicts are often emerged among layers of identity. For instance, coaches often experience a clash between the micro and meso identity as a result of divergent expectations (e.g., goal setting, outcome evaluation and resources) among coaching parties. However, coaches' career stage and experience play a substantial influence on their reactions to or coping mechanisms with these conflicts. A starting-up freelance coach may suffer more severe psychological distress and compromise to the system due to business partnership consideration, i.e., micro-level identity. Instead, an experienced coach inclines to take initiatives and develop strategies to transform these conflicts into alliances and greater outcomes. This research finding offers a further insight into coaching

literature on the 'power relationships' generated by political issues (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018) by indicating that multiple layers of coaching identity that allow coaches to shift focus on various organisational affairs can increase coaches' awareness of political dimensions and facilitate an empowering coaching space for coachees' growth and change. Moreover, the promotion of a macro-collective level of professional identity strengthens the contemporary three-way coaching relationship literature through emphasising on an integration of related parties' needs, requirements and expectations to support an empowering and influential working climate as well as a convergent alliance among all parties (Lai & Smith, 2021). Overall, the conceptual framework outlined in this study elaborates the latest critical arguments in coaching literature by bringing new voices and a more comprehensive contextual picture into the coaching community.

Second, this study strengthens the argument of purposeful identity work, in particular the socio-cognitive approach (Brown, 2017) by eliciting specific cognitive learning behaviours that facilitate coaches' identity development. Despite debates between intentional and unconscious identity work process (Brown, 2017), there has been a growing realisation that identity work inhabits attentive processes of socialisation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Vough & Caza, 2017). The empirical analysis of this study distinguishes that learning agility, a person's ability to understand a situation promptly and to move across ideas flexibly both within and across experiences (DeRue et al., 2012; p. 264) as the most significant skill to support coaches' identity development. Behaviours to support coaches' learning agility include 'reflective ability', 'continuous evaluations' and 'negotiating boundaries and adjusting behaviours'. Generally, individuals with high levels of learning agility are often prone to experimentation and self-reflections for new challenges (Sonenshein, 2017). Hence, learning agility allows freelance workers to adapt and transfer their experiences to multiple short-term projects and working parties for the future success (Ashford et al., 2018). Furthermore, coaches' metacognitive awareness, i.e., self-understanding of their learning preferences and curves (Efklides, 2011; Marton & Booth, 2013) from their coaching practice, plays a critical role to facilitate a systematic and self-regulated process since the research results indicated that coaches often preplan, implement, monitor, assess and reassess their interactions with relational others in the coaching engagement. Hence, the present research offers a further insight of socio-cognitive identity work by implying that certain theoretical frameworks, like cognitive exercises and meta-cognition, in adult learning process may offer an in-depth account of in what way coaches form, reform, maintain, strengthen, and revise the distinctiveness of their profession.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Several research limitations are identified in this study. First, the demographic background of participants is restricted to regions identified as established coaching markets, such as the USA and Europe (International Coach Federation/ICF, 2017) due to their flourishing coaching education and professional development courses; yet a wider cultural consideration in the coaching process is demanded as it needs to ensure that theorists and practitioners from all social contexts are invited to participate in redefining the nature of coaching (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). Second, the present study interviewed participants from disconnected coaching settings, the future research should incorporate with participants who shared the same coaching events (e.g., the coaching dyad and their sponsoring organisation) should be included to grasp a comprehensive picture of coaches' identity development over the course of time.

Finally, a longitudinal study, such as periodic interviews with coaches at different stages of their career, to capture specific interactions with the different stakeholders that impact on coaches' identity work is needed to grasp how coaches re-visit and negotiation their professional identity over time.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In terms of practical implications, the present identity work framework overall provides coaches and commissioning organisations a roadmap to facilitate a greater working relationship and project outcome. Meanwhile, the research findings offer new insights into existing coaches' professional development programmes. For instance, most coaching training courses emphasise on skill-based competency instead of long-term professional identity work. The present study reveals that an on-going identity development and negotiation play influential roles in enhancing coaches' motivation, self-awareness and working relationships with clients. Hence, the topic of professional identity work should be covered in the future coaching education and professional development courses. In addition, this study indicates identity work as an open-ended negotiation process, coaching supervision, a formal professional support for coaches, should offer opportunities for coaches to reflect on their interactions with relational parties and adjust their identity to accommodate fluid coaching context. Finally, this preliminary framework suggests coaches' learning and reflections are mainly drawn upon social and psychological interactions with relational others, therefore contextual factors must be acknowledged in their professional and career development process (Carden et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study extends existing coaching and professional identity literature by investigating contract-based coaches' identity work. In general, the present research first acknowledges coaching as a social and political process that all contextual factors should be considered. Therefore, a flexible social constructive approach, allowing all relational parties' voices in coaches' identity work process has been used. In addition, the study result indicates that multiple layers of identity emerged to facilitate independent coaches' identity flexibility while encountering with divergent contracting parties and agendas. Finally, this study reveals that cognitive learning theories, such as learning agility for coaches' flexible learning and re-evaluation of their role in the coaching engagement, offer an indicative schema for the identity negotiation and re-negotiation. Overall, the ambiguity and ambivalence of coaches' circumstance has been highlighted in this study; hence, all contextual factors and relational others' voices should be embraced into their identity work process. Considering that executive coaching shares certain degree similarities with some professional helping interventions (Passmore & Lai, 2019), part of research results (e.g., layers of sub-identity and cognitive learning in the identity work process) can be transferred into workplace training, counselling and full-time internal coaching context. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that this study is a "kick-off" of identity work of the new world of work, further examinations with different contract-based professionals are necessary to draw out distinct research evidence in relevant settings.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study has been reviewed and approved by the second author's current institution.

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