EXPERIENCING
EXECUTIVE COACHING

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge and belief, understand that it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with the normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of theses.

Julie-Anne Tooth
PROFESSIONAL EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE

Paid editorial assistance was provided by Joan Rosenthal, Professional member, Society of Editors (NSW). This assistance was limited to formatting, grammar and style and did not alter or improve the substantive content or conceptual organisation of my thesis. I also note that Joan Rosenthal does not have any current or former academic specialisation similar, or relevant to, executive coaching or related activities.
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**ABSTRACT**

This research focused on illuminating the phenomenon of executive coaching, an emerging occupation and field that is pursuing a pathway towards professionalisation. However, although executive coaching has risen in prominence as a commercial service offered by executive coaches and as a leadership development initiative utilised in organisations, it remains neither clearly defined nor well understood in both theory and in practice.

The aim of this research was to make a contribution to the practice and the future of executive coaching (particularly in Australia) by developing a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomenon utilising interpretive paradigm research. I explored the nature of executive coaching and how it can be experienced (and practised). In doing so I addressed my primary research question: What is the nature and experience of executive coaching? My secondary research questions were: (1) What is executive coaching (and how is it emerging as a concept and a practice); and (2) How do *client executives* and *executive coaches* experience executive coaching?

Through this research I identified several key features of the current status of the practice and knowledge base of executive coaching that made this research particularly challenging. Most evidently, there was no common or widely understood notion of executive coaching and there was a lack of agreement around common principles, practices and models underpinning executive coaching. From this challenging baseline I conducted two studies with the aim of expanding this limited understanding of executive coaching.

The first study utilised philosophical hermeneutics to interpret a text set comprising executive coaching literature. From this study, I identified that the existing executive coaching knowledge base was characterised by many definitions and conceptualisations of executive coaching (without a common understanding or an agreed definition) and a dominance of psychological theories and approaches. Most research in executive coaching had utilised empirico-analytical strategies and focused on measuring the outcomes or effectiveness of executive coaching. The literature also contained a wide variety of executive coaching process models along with various descriptions (or prescriptions) of “best practice” which placed an emphasis on the processes and outcomes of executive coaching. These approaches largely lacked attention to understanding the context in which coaching occurs and the richness and potential of coaching activities and experiences. My research addressed a gap in the field by examining contextualised practices of executive coaching.

The second study utilised a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the executive coaching experiences of the two key parties in the executive coaching relationship: (1) *client executives* and (2) *executive coaches*. Through this study, I identified key features of their experience of executive coaching, which included (a) the various drivers for, and contexts in which, executive coaching occurred; (b) the emergent coaching relationship space that was co-created between each *executive coach* and individual *client executive*; (c) the critical dialogues, reflection and experiential learning journeys that were undertaken as part of the executive coaching interaction; and (d) the self-knowledge, capability development and transformations that were realised for *client executives*. 
The key contribution of my research to the knowledge of executive coaching is the recognition of the potential of executive coaching to be more than a process of job-specific professional development and instead, to become a transformative experience with short- and long-term gains in personal as well as work-related capabilities. On the basis of this research I contend that executive coaching (at its best) involves the co-creation of a coaching relationship space between client executives and executive coaches for (self-)reflection and experiential learning by a client executive that is facilitated by an executive coach. For the client executive, executive coaching involves reflection and learning about self in a relationship with another (the executive coach) that is far more powerful than can be undertaken and achieved alone. My research supports the argument that executive coaching is optimal when it assists clients to develop the responsibility and capability to become their own self-coach through developing the (critical) self-reflective, self-management and self-directed learning capabilities necessary to continue their lifelong journey of learning from experience. These findings are encompassed in my emergent three-part model: *Creating spaces for reinvention through executive coaching*.

In my conclusion, I make recommendations for the future of the coaching industry and its professionalisation, the education and training of executive coaches, potential directions in research and practice in executive coaching, and for the organisational support of employees’ coaching experiences.
# GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Andragogy</td>
<td>A model of assumptions about how adults learn developed by Malcolm Knowles (1980).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Association for Coaching (AC)</td>
<td>A global, not-for-profit organisation that invites coach membership. First established in the UK. Members include professional coaches, training and coaching service providers, internal coaches and organizations building coaching cultures. The AC purpose is “to inspire and champion coaching excellence, to advance the coaching profession, and make a sustainable difference to individuals, organizations, and in turn, society”. <a href="http://www.associationforcoaching.com/pages/home/">http://www.associationforcoaching.com/pages/home/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association of Coach Training Organisations (ACTO)</td>
<td>A US member body for coach training organisations founded in 2000. The purpose of ACTO is to “continue to explore, challenge and evolve quality coaching training … support coaching as both a profession and as a skill, and advocate for the art and science of coaching and coach education and training”. <a href="http://www.actoonline.org">http://www.actoonline.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Psychological Society Interest Group in Coaching Psychology (APS/IGCP)</td>
<td>Member group of the Australian Psychological Society that is focused on the professional development of Coaching Psychology as an emerging theoretical and applied sub-discipline of Psychology. The purpose of the APS/IGCP is to operate as a benchmark forum that is “theoretically inclusive, independent of external organisational influences, promotes rigorous critical thought and the development of applied coaching skills, and adheres to the highest levels of professional integrity and practice as reflected in the APS Code of Ethics and Ethical Guidelines”. <a href="http://www.groups.psychology.org.au/igcp/">http://www.groups.psychology.org.au/igcp/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Public Sector (APS)</td>
<td>The group of people employed by departments and agencies under the Government of Australia to administer the working of the public administration of the Commonwealth of Australia. For the purposes of this research, participants were not selected from this type of organisation/sector.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching psychology</td>
<td>The use of this term reflects a view that coaching (including executive coaching) is a distinctive sub-discipline within the field of psychology. Coaching psychology has been defined as “the systematic application of behavioural science to the enhancement of life experience, work performance and wellbeing for individuals, groups and organisations who do not have clinically significant mental health issues or abnormal levels of distress” (Grant, 2006b, p. 12).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client executives</td>
<td>Research participants in this study who were the primary recipients of executive coaching services. For selection in this research, client executives had completed an executive coaching engagement with a minimum of 4 sessions; were employed by commercial organisations (excluding not-for-profit and government organisations) and were located in Australia.</td>
</tr>
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Commercial organisation: An organisation whose primary goal is focused on making money (a profit). For the purposes of this research, research participants were selected from commercial organisations in Australia. Commercial organisations were differentiated from types of businesses whose primary goal is not directly associated with profit making, for example, those in the not-for-profit and government sectors.

Community of Practice (COP): Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed that practitioners learn from each other in a process of sharing information and experiences with others in a community of practice (COP), developing themselves personally and professionally. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) defined a COP as “a set of relations amongst persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice”.

European Coaching & Mentoring Council (EMCC): A global, not-for-profit organisation that invites coach membership. Members include organisations from the voluntary and community, professional training and development, counselling at work, life coaching and academic psychology sectors. A key focus of the EMCC is to develop European standards, ethics and a professional code with a view to assure quality in the industry. The EMCC purpose is “to develop, promote and set the expectation of best practice in mentoring and coaching across Europe and beyond, for the benefit of society”. The EMCC vision is to be the "go to" body in mentoring and coaching.

Evidence-based coaching (EBC): “The intelligent and conscientious use of best current knowledge integrated with practitioner expertise in making decisions about how to deliver coaching to individual coaching clients and in designing and teaching coach training programs” (Stober & Grant, 2006, p. 6).

Executive coaches: Research participants in this study who were the professional coaches that provided executive coaching services. For selection in this research, executive coaches were professional coaches (employees and sub-contracted Associates) with the Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership (IECL) and were located in Australia.

Experiential learning: “The process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 22).

Global Coaching and Mentoring Alliance (GCMA): A working alliance formed between the Association for Coaching (AC), European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) and the International Coach Federation (ICF).

Graduate School Alliance for Executive Coaching (GSAEC): A US member body for graduate schools offering executive coach education programs. The purpose of GSAEC is “to be a leader in advancing worldwide graduate education for executive and organisational coaching”. http://www.gsaec.org
Human resources (HR): The business function that oversees and manages people within the employer-employee relationship (Stone, 1995). The role of the modern HR professional in organisations is described as a “strategic partner, an employee advocate, a change champion and a facilitator of skill development, communication and information” (Australian Human Resources Institute, n.d.). Titles for the function vary within organisations e.g. participants made reference to the “People and Culture” function in my research.

Human resource development (HRD): A process of developing and unleashing expertise for the purpose of improving individual, team, work process and organisational system performance. The term HRD can also be used to refer to a department, function and job. HRD contains two realms of practice: (1) organisation development (OD) and (2) training and development (T&D), which is sometimes referred to as learning and development (L&D) (Swanson & Holton, 2009).

International Coach Federation (ICF): A global, not-for-profit organisation that invites coach membership. Formed in 1995 for individual members who practice coaching, including executive coaches, leadership coaches and life coaches. The ICF purpose is as follows, “we exist to support and advance the coaching profession through programs and standards supported by our members and to be an authoritative source on coaching information and research for the public. http://www.coachfederation.org/

Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership (IECL): A commercial provider of executive coaching, coach training and related services. For the purposes of this research, research participants were sourced from the database and records of this organisation which is head-quartered in Australia. http://www.iecl.com

Lifestyles Inventory™ (LSI): The Life Styles Inventory™ (LSI) is a 360-degree feedback questionnaire developed by Human Synergistics. It describes constructive, passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive behaviours and provides for self-description (LSI 1) and feedback from others (LSI 2). http://www.human-synergistics.com.au/Solutions/DevelopingIndividuals/LifeStylesInventoryIndividual.aspx

Not-for-profit organisation (NFP): An organisation that does not operate for the profit or gain of its individual members but may have a primary goal such as helping the community. For the purposes of this research, participants were not selected from this type of organisation.
**Organisation brokers**: Research participants originally identified for this study who organised executive coaching services for others in their employing organisation. For selection in this research, organisation brokers had engaged executive coaching services for a minimum of 4 client executives; were employed by commercial organisations and were located in Australia.

**Organisation development (OD):** The practice of changing people and organisations for positive growth. OD is considered to be one of two realms of practice in human resource development (HRD), the other being training and development (T&D) (Swanson & Holton, 2009).

**Positive psychology:** A field of psychology that values positive “subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present)” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000 p. 5).

**Profession:** An occupational group that is able to claim a body of knowledge distinctive to itself, whose members are able to practice competently, autonomously and with accountability, and whose members contribute to the development of the profession’s knowledge base (Higgs, 1993).

**Professionalisation:** The transformation of occupations into professions. The process usually involves the development of a formal entry process based on qualification and examination, the establishment of regulatory bodies (with powers to admit and discipline members) and a degree of monopoly. Advocates of the process argue that it helps protect the public from the hazards of a buying in a marketplace in which their ignorance could put them at jeopardy (Bullock et al., 1999).

**Professionalism:** In this thesis the term is used to mean the conduct of a profession as a whole (Roe-Shaw, 2004).

**Société Française de Coaching:** The French Society for Coaching was established in 1996. Its mission is to develop and promote a demanding approach to professional coaching. http://www.sfcoach.org/

**Transformative learning:** “The process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative understanding of one’s experience” (Mezirow, 1990, p. xvi).

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1 During the course of interviews, I recognised that this participant group did not directly experience executive coaching in the same way as client executives and executive coaches (who formed the primary relationship) and did not include them in my study.

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PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THIS RESEARCH

Journal Articles

Conference Papers

Book Chapters
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

When planning for a year, plant corn.
When planning for a decade, plant trees.
When planning for life, train and educate people.

— Chinese proverb: Guanzi, c. 645BC

Finally, it remains to be said that – as the world goes – about the last place any of us can expect to learn anything important about the realities we have to cope with in our wistful pursuit of life, liberty and happiness is a classroom.

— Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, Teaching as a subversive activity, 1971

1.1 RESEARCH TOPIC AND RATIONALE

This thesis reports on the findings of research undertaken to explore the nature and the experience of executive coaching. The goal of this study is to produce a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomenon of executive coaching, which is not widely understood. While the use of a coach to increase individual performance in areas such as sport and education is well established, executive coaching (both as an occupation held by executive coaches and as a leadership development and learning intervention utilised in organisations) has only risen in popularity in the last two decades.

1.1.1 THE NATURE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

Coaching is a generic term, which is used to describe an activity that happens in a wide range of contexts. Coaches can be found in sports, schools, religion and everyday work life (Bjorkeng, Clegg, Pitsis, & Rhodes, 2008). The term “coaching” means different things to different people and definitions are many and varied (Jackson, 2005). For example, Bachkirova and Kauffman (2009) argued that the word “coaching” is frequently used in two different ways, leading to a wide variety of misunderstandings among practitioners and the public. Coaching can refer to a special conversation between two people and also a service or practice offered by a coach to a client under an explicit contract. In the first instance, coaching is a method that can be used by anyone (with natural or learned skills) and is utilised in any setting, for example, as used by parents, tutors, friends, colleagues and managers. In the second instance, coaching is a service and a set of practices offered by a person operating in a professional manner and possessing
specialised skills and knowledge, usually defined by a service contract. While both these views of coaching are valid (and useful), this thesis focuses on the latter utilisation of the term and specifically, executive coaching.

Executive coaching most broadly refers to the coaching services provided to executives and line managers for the purposes of improving skills, performance or work-related personal development (Standards Australia, 2011). This description emphasises that executive coaching is inherently practised and situated within an organisational context. Executive coaching is most frequently funded by an organisation and is provided to an employee with a development purpose that is directed towards producing results of relevance to both the individual and the organisation. While it is recognised that within organisational settings, coaching may sometimes be provided by dedicated or part-time internal coaches and mentors, managers and supervisors (as a favoured management style), human resources (HR) professionals, peers and others (who may not always label the activity as coaching), my research focuses entirely on the coaching provided by external executive coaches. This is also understood to be the most common way coaching is currently sourced and utilised within organisations (Standards Australia, 2011).

When this project commenced in 2008, existing executive coaching research had been dominated by psychologists (Gray, 2006) and focused heavily on establishing a scientific and evidentiary base for the use and outcomes of effective coaching. Research into coaching had been conducted with the application of research methods situated in the empirico-analytical research paradigm (commonly known as quantitative research). In this paradigm, knowledge is generated by the application of methods that aim to test, measure, generalise and identify cause-effect relationships (Higgs, Trede, & Rothwell, 2007). Truth and meaning are considered to exist independently of the knower and reside in the objects themselves (Crotty, 2003). In coaching, researchers have promoted the value of outcome-oriented research seeking to provide evidence of the efficacy of executive coaching and have advocated further application of the scientific method, particularly the use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs). In an article reflecting on coaching research, Grant and Cavanagh (2007b) wrote:

_The outcome literature only really started to emerge in any quantity in 2000, but it shows a promising progression in rigour from case studies, to group studies, toward randomised controlled studies. Such a progression is to be expected in the early stages of an emerging discipline._

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1 The Standards Australia (2011) definition of executive coaching was not adopted for my research. As argued in Chapter Three, I chose not to adopt an existing definition from the literature but rather to develop an understanding of executive coaching grounded in the actual experiences of client executives and executive coaches as explored in Phase 2 of my research.
In this thesis, I recognise that while the measurement of coaching efficacy has been aimed at increasing the overall credibility of the developing industry of coaching, it has been problematic in light of the limited (and lack of agreed) understanding of the phenomenon of executive coaching. In the coaching literature it is evident that there is no clearly applied (or understood) definition of executive coaching. The term “executive coaching” has been used interchangeably to mean everything from life coaching, process consultation, psychotherapy, career coaching to leadership development (Stern, 2004). It has been applied to many activities and to a range of different populations and issues (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Passmore, 2010). My research identified with Jackson’s (2005) argument that in order to speak meaningfully about the effectiveness of coaching, we need to first define more accurately what executive coaching is. My study was undertaken from a position that the establishment of a clear definition and identity for executive coaching was important for clarifying the nature of this phenomenon and as precursor to the further development of coaching. My research focused on developing an understanding of the nature of executive coaching: the essential qualities and distinguishing characteristics that make executive coaching what it is and what differentiates coaching practice(s) from other strategies.

1.1.2. The Experience of Executive Coaching

Importantly, I adopted the stance that there was need for a focus on executive coaching research conducted using the interpretive research paradigm (commonly known as qualitative research). In interpretive research, knowledge is generated by methods that seek to understand, interpret and illuminate (Higgs, et al., 2007). Executive coaching is a complex, human phenomenon and much of its process and practice remains “shrouded in mystery” (Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009, p. 362). The interpretive paradigm was an important choice for my study as it values the subjective experiences of individuals. My research explored the executive coaching experiences of two sets of participants, client executives and executive coaches, recognising that their individual experiences of executive coaching differed. Hermeneutic phenomenology was an ideal research approach for investigating executive coaching as it studies “persons” and respects the uniqueness of each human being and their individual experiences (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on understanding and describing the nature of a phenomenon through the experiences of the everyday world (or “life-world”) of individual participants. In

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2 See Chapter Three for my examination of key terms including “executive coaching”, “executive”, “client” and coachee” and for my interpretation of the definitions and conceptualisations of executive coaching as presented in the literature.

3 Subjectivity is considerably valued in the interpretive paradigm as part of the unique experience and frame of reference of the individual. Subjectivity is the way that individuals make sense of their world; as a world that values multiple constructed realities within an ontological sense (Higgs et al., 2007).
doing so, hermeneutic phenomenology is interested in human beings as they are “naturally engaged in their worlds” and embedded in their situations (context) as “situated persons” (van Manen 1990, p. 18). In the developing field of executive coaching, interpretive paradigm and specifically phenomenological research has been promoted by Joo (2005, p. 483) as particularly valuable:

*Because executive coaching is still in its infancy ... interpretive research using a phenomenological approach that examines the perspectives of executives being coached could add significantly to knowledge about executive coaching.*

In my research I sought to address a significant gap in coaching research by undertaking a hermeneutic phenomenological study of executive coaching in the Australian context, an approach that explored the experiences of both *client executives* and *executive coaches*. Of the 11 existing phenomenological studies of the experience of executive coaching that I included in my constructed text set (see Chapter Three and Appendix H), none had been conducted in Australia. Eight phenomenological studies had explored clients’ experiences. These were undertaken in Europe and South Africa (Chapman, 2006; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006, 2007; Mackenzie, 2007) and in the US and Canada (Brodrick, 2010; Galuk, 2009; Kress, 2008; Meneghetti, 2008; Sztucinski, 2001). Two phenomenological studies had explored the experience of executive coaches, both conducted in the US (Clayton, 2011; McCleland, 2005). Only one piece of phenomenological research in my constructed text set had explored the experiences of both clients and coaches in one study (Marlatt, 2012) and this research had been undertaken in Canada. As in the study by Marlatt, I focused on coaching undertaken in the for-profit sector, but unlike that study, chose not to include myself as an executive coach subject in my research or to interview my own coaching clients.  

In undertaking this research, I selected 12 *client executives* and 12 *executive coaches* who were representative of the two key parties who come together to form a primary executive coaching relationship. Making sense of executive coaching from the perspectives of these two different participant groups was an important feature of my research design. I chose not to include the perspectives of other organisational stakeholders who might be involved in the executive coaching relationship, such as line managers and HR professionals. The involvement of organisational stakeholders in coaching has been referred to as “three or four cornered” contracting, depending on the number of other parties involved (Standards Australia, 2011). In coaching assignments where other stakeholders are involved, the input of these parties at regular intervals has been portrayed as an important source of support for the person being

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4 See Chapter Six for reasons and evaluation of this decision in my research.
coached, for ensuring organisational alignment with coaching objectives and for assessing the impact of coaching to the business (Standards Australia, 2011). Initially, I considered involving HR representatives in my study as brokers of coaching, terming this group *organisation brokers*. After interviewing four *organisation brokers*, I concluded that the comments from this group focused more on the organisational processes of coaching rather than contributing to my particular research questions, and so excluded them from my study. Similarly, in their study of HR representatives in executive coaching, Walker-Fraser (2011) found that these stakeholders focused primarily on the management and procurement of coaching, strategic deployment and evaluation. Future research into the procedures of recruiting clients for coaching and other organisational processes could benefit from involving HR representatives. Another characteristic of my research was the limited involvement of line managers in executive coaching as experienced by *client executives* and for this reason I did not find it necessary to extend my research to these stakeholders. Future research could also benefit from exploring in depth the role of the line manager in coaching engagements.

1.1.3. **THE EMERGENCE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING**

Executive coaching has been popularly portrayed in the literature as a science, specifically an applied behavioural science (Grant, 2006b) and sometimes as an art (Drake, 2008; McCleland, 2005; Sherman & Freas, 2004). In undertaking my research, I adopted the stance that executive coaching is emerging as an occupation and as a “practice”; practice is what executive coaching practitioners (termed executive coaches) do with their clients (following Higgs, 2010). I propose that, as an emerging practice, executive coaching involves a great deal of craft; it relies on experience and learning on the job and it incorporates many aspects of the art of coaching and theory (drawn from within coaching itself as well as from other occupations) and behaviour that can be linked to marketing and professionalism. My research assumes that executive coaching involves the application of an evolving range of practices and a sphere of craft knowledge that collectively encompass the overall practice of executive coaching. Importantly, coaching is “what coaches do” (rather than a clear and predetermined set of strategies that can be learned and implemented) and therefore coaching should be defined and framed by its actions. In my study I saw the need to examine the activities and underlying strategies/rationales of *executive coaches* to provide valuable information to explore the nature and boundaries of coaching. My research sought to develop greater

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5 See Chapter Three for my detailed interpretation of the emergence of executive coaching and the history of executive coaching as presented in the literature.

6 The term “practitioner” is not generally used throughout this thesis since I am referring to two different groups of people in this research: (a) the *executive coaches*, who would not uniformly regard or label themselves as practitioners, and (b) *client executives*, who did not belong to any one field of practice but rather shared the common role of executive in various industries and workplaces.
understanding of the emerging practice(s) utilised by the executive coaches in my study and to illustrate the emerging practice of executive coaching.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research focused on answering the question: What is the nature and experience of executive coaching? In answering this primary research question, the following secondary research questions were also explored:

1. What is executive coaching?
   a) How is executive coaching emerging as a concept?
   b) How is executive coaching emerging as a practice?

2. How do client executives and executive coaches experience executive coaching?

1.3 CONTEXT, SCOPE AND BOUNDARIES OF MY RESEARCH

1.3.1 Industry Context

My research is set within the context of executive coaching as currently practised within Australia. Recent literature has reported the growth of the emergent executive coaching industry, which appears to be expanding rapidly and becoming an extensive field of practice (Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2008). Frish (2001) argued that in terms of management and executive development, coaching has become a mainstream offering. While the numbers of individuals who practise as executive coaches is unknown, a global study in 2011 estimated there were 47,500 coaches worldwide, with the highest concentrations in North America (33.3%) and Western Europe (37.5%) (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012a). Further, it was estimated that Oceania (primarily Australia) had a total population of 2,400 coaches (5.1%) (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012a). In one study of Australian coaches (n=228), the average experience as a coach was reported as 6 years, with 25% of coaches having less than 2 years’ experience. These figures provide some indication of the popularity of coaching but should be interpreted with caution as the research was commissioned by the ICF, whose membership extends to other types of coaching such as life coaching. In determining how many executive coaches may have been represented in that study, the majority (89.6%) of Australian respondents (n=577) indicated that they were external coaches. 20.5% of respondents indicated that executive coaching was their primary coaching type (n=580) and 28.8% identified leadership coaching. Combining the latter two categories would suggest that approximately 49.3% of the total sample may have been executive coaches. However, it remains unclear how representative ICF (and other member bodies) are of a total executive coach population. It is also quite possible that a number of coaches did not respond to the survey and are not included in the data.
experience\textsuperscript{8} (Standards Australia, 2011). In the same study, only 16\% of coaches had 11 years’ experience or more as a coach, suggesting a developing occupation. There is also evidence of the widespread adoption of executive coaching amongst Australian organisations. For example, it has been estimated that 67.57\% (n=111) of organisations have employed executive coaches (Begley, 2012) and 61.9\% (n=1164) have used coaching as a learning and development activity (Sardo & Begley, 2011). Interestingly, the lack of a common understanding or definition of executive coaching (as identified earlier in this chapter) has not prevented the commercial coaching industry from growing in size and popularity and the increased use of coaching within organisations.

a) \textit{Professionalisation}

Executive coaching is not an established profession. Any person can identify and practise as an executive coach, without possessing or adhering to any requirements for education, training, registration or ethics. There is currently confusion, however, both in the marketplace and among coaches themselves, about the progress of coaching towards professionalisation.\textsuperscript{9} This is hardly surprising when coaching is described in many (inconsistent) ways, including as a profession (Brockbank, 2008; Gilbert & Rosinski, 2008; Hawkins, 2008; Kauffman & Bachkirova, 2008a), an emerging profession (Brennan, 2008; Drake, 2008), a relatively new profession (Abbott, Stening, Atkins, & Grant, 2006), a more mature profession (Kauffman & Bachkirova, 2008b), an industry moving towards professionalisation (Grant, 2008b), an industry just beginning to be regulated as a profession (De Haan, Duckworth, Birch, & Jones, 2013) and a fair distance from becoming a profession (Rostron, 2009). The extent of the confusion among coaches was illustrated in a global survey of coaching in which 10.2\% of Australian coach respondents (n=578) indicated that coaching was an industry, 64.9\% a profession and 24.9\% a skill set (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012b).

The most common way of assessing the progress of coaching towards professionalisation has involved assessing compliance with a list of criteria considered essential for recognition as a profession. This approach is consistent with what Eraut (1994) termed an “ideology of professionalism”, where attempts are made to define a profession based on comparing an occupation against a list of traits associated with an “ideal type” profession. For example, Bennett (2006) argued that coaching is not a profession as it lacks the following characteristics: (1) an identifiable and distinct skills base for coaches; (2) specialised training and education as a prerequisite to practice; (3) recognition as a profession among the general population and by

\textsuperscript{8} Further, 27\% of coaches had 3-5 years’ experience and 32\% of coaches had 6-10 years’ experience.

\textsuperscript{9} This term is used throughout this thesis to describe the transformation of occupations into professions. See Glossary for more details.
other professions; (4) an established community of practitioners belonging to a professional association; and (5) a body of defined theory on which coaches base their practice. Vaartjes (2005) argued that coaching is a long way from meeting the basic requirements of a profession as it lacks a holistic theoretical framework and a unique body of knowledge. Similarly, other authors (Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylyshyn, 1998; Grant & Cavanagh, 2004) reasoned that coaching may have grown in importance but remains an unregulated and poorly defined arena as it lacks the following: (1) barriers to entry, (2) formal university qualifications, (3) regulatory bodies, (4) a code of ethics, (5) licensing and (6) a shared, common body of knowledge. Alternatively, Palmer (cited in Palmer & McDowall, 2010) argued that in the UK, coaching is more advanced (particularly in terms of the development of national standards and competencies) and in his view is a profession. It is evident that there are many ways of viewing a profession, and a list of criteria typically reflects an individual author’s views on the most important characteristics of (high-status) professions (Eraut, 1994). The problem with listing characteristics such as these is that the tasks and notions of a profession are constantly evolving and changing (Roe-Shaw, 2004). Regardless of which criteria are identified as important (by whom and at which particular time), it is evident that questions related to how executive coaching should develop towards being a profession (and indeed whether it should do so) continue to dominate the coaching literature and agenda.

b) Professional interest and involvement

In a profession there is commonly an accepted, representative body with terms of reference and roles in gatekeeping, standard setting and establishing codes of conduct. In the context of executive coaching, there are several organisations in the marketplace that present themselves as emerging professional associations and invite executive coach membership. These organisations include (but are not limited to) the International Coach Federation (ICF), the Association for Coaching (AC) and the European Mentoring & Coaching Council (EMCC). The existence of multiple organisations has meant these bodies have historically had to compete for members; it is understood, however, that coaches frequently belong to two or more of these bodies simultaneously (Lane, 2010). Typically, these organisations provide a code of ethical conduct, access to professional development, information and research, and a range of benefits for members. Some organisations have also implemented accreditation processes for coaches (based on their view of essential coach competencies) which vary

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10 Formed in 1995 for individual members who practise coaching, including executive coaches, leadership coaches and life coaches. See Glossary for more details.
11 Members include professional coaches, training and coaching service providers, internal coaches, and organisations building coaching cultures. See Glossary for more details.
12 Members include organisations from the voluntary and community, professional training and development, counselling at work, life coaching and academic psychology sectors. See Glossary for more details.
markedly. This type of activity perpetuates confusion about the professional status of coaching when these organisations, for example the ICF, refer to coaching as a profession and replicate aspects of what a professional association for coaching might do. For example, the ICF states:

*ICF is ... dedicated to advancing the coaching profession by setting high standards, providing independent certification, and building a worldwide network of credentialed coaches. The ICF’s core purpose is to advance the art, science and practice of professional coaching* (International Coach Federation, 2013a).

A detailed profile of the executive coach membership of these emerging professional associations in Australia is not available. However, the ICF is considered the largest member body at present (Griffiths & Campbell, 2008), with an estimated 18,606 members in 107 countries (International Coach Federation, 2013a). Current ICF membership in Australia is reported at 893 members, representing 4.8% of the total global membership of this body (International Coach Federation, 2013a). In a survey of coaches in Australia (n=197), 38% of coaches identified that they were members of the ICF and 21% were members of the APS Interest Group in Coaching Psychology13 (APS/IGCP) (Standards Australia, 2011). In the same study, coaches also indicated that they had maintained relevant membership of their former profession, including 13% who indicated membership of the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI) (Standards Australia, 2011), suggesting a career path that former HR professionals have followed into coaching practice. In terms of coverage in Australia, it is understood that membership of the EMCC and the AC organisations is almost negligible.14

Co-operation among these emerging professional associations has been seen as an important precursor for the professionalisation and potential regulation of coaching (Lane, 2010; Lane, Stelter, & Stout Rostron, 2010). Regulation, either self-regulation or by external bodies (e.g. by government bodies through licensure), is an expected feature of professions (Eraut, 1994). There appears to be some support for regulation amongst coaches today, but also uncertainty. In a global study of coaching, 54.1% of Australian respondents (n=547) indicated they believed coaching should be regulated, 22.1% supported no regulation and 23.8% were unsure (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012b). In the same study, 81.6% of Australian respondents (n=424) suggested that professional coaching associations were best placed to regulate coaching, 12.3% proposed government as an ideal regulator and only 6.1% identified that individual practitioners should self-regulate. Grant (2006b) argued that the absence of a central

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13 A special interest group of the Australian Psychological Society (APS) for members who identify themselves as “coaching psychologists”. See Glossary for more details.

14 Information obtained from the EMCC suggests there are fewer than 15 Australia members (EMCC General Secretary, personal communication, 18 March 2013), which is not surprising when only 6% of the total membership is outside Europe. Similarly, the AC have indicated they have only a “couple of dozen” members in Australia (S. W Whelan, personal communication, 20 March 2013).
regulating body in the coaching industry in Australia is a concern as there is no avenue for dissatisfied clients to complain about unethical practices. Similarly, in the UK, Lane (2010) argued that purchasers of coaching, especially large corporate organisations, are frustrated with the lack of cooperation among coach member bodies as they seek a lead industry body that can assist them to make informed decisions. Alternatively, Armstrong et al. (2005, p. 4) have suggested that this lack of regulation in coaching at present has advantages (as well as disadvantages). In their view:

The advantage is that before it gets reified and rigidified by regulations, standards and theoretical truths, it [coaching] has the opportunity to stay open, fluid and responsive to the complexity that characterises (and should continue to characterise) the executive coaching field. The challenge is how to build a strong disciplinary basis while maintaining the flexibility and responsiveness as well as protecting individuals from shonky practices and unqualified practitioners.

Internationally, coach member bodies have collaborated to position themselves as potential self-regulators of coaching. In 2011, two prominent coach member bodies (the ICF and the EMCC) filed a Professional Charter for Coaching and Mentoring\(^\text{15}\) with the EU as a common code of conduct for the coaching and mentoring industry (European Coaching and Mentoring Council, 2011). The AC and the Société Française de Coaching\(^\text{16}\) have subsequently joined as signatories. The scope of this charter does not currently extend beyond the EU to countries such as Australia, and until adopted by a regulatory body the charter does not have the force of law. In accordance with the charter, subscribing coach member bodies have been required to have and enforce a disciplinary and complaints procedure to deal with cases of alleged breaches of their respective ethical codes, including the application of sanctions. Further evidence of co-operation internationally also occurred in 2013 when three of these organisations announced a partnership to work more closely together. The AC, EMCC and ICF formed a working alliance, the Global Coaching and Mentoring Alliance (GCMA). It is unclear whether the three organisations see this as potential step towards amalgamation. This development is significant in light of views that each of these bodies has historically been seen to represent diverse interests and to take a different view of the criteria for professional status (Lane, 2010; Lane, et al., 2010). The purpose of the GCMA is to “professionalise the industry” and “express a shared view of the practice of professional coaching” (Association for Coaching, 2014). The GCMA has publicly acknowledged coaching as an emerging profession (even if the respective individual websites still refer to the profession of coaching). The formal agreement between the three organisations declared:


\(^\text{16}\) The French Society for Coaching was established in 1996. See Glossary for more details.
As a collective of global professional coaching and mentoring bodies we seek to build alliances, a cooperative spirit, purpose and initiatives where we can partner to make a difference to the emerging profession and society as a whole (Association for Coaching, 2013).

c) **Worth of the executive coaching industry**

The financial worth of the executive coaching industry is unclear. Global revenue from coaching has been estimated at $1.98 billion globally and $139 million in Oceania (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012a). In a survey of executive coaches in Australia, none was found to charge less than $200 an hour and reported rates ranged from $200 to $799 per hour (Binstead & Grant, 2008). In another Australian study, the median rate paid to executive coaches was $667 per hour (Dagley, 2009). In the same study, the average cost of coaching per executive was estimated at $10,800 ($2,800 to $37,000) for an average of 9.2 sessions (6 to 13 sessions) over an average period of 6.6 months (3 to 12 months). While the actual costs of coaching are not known, they do appear higher than the cost of other professional services in Australia. For example, the APS schedule of recommended rates suggests an hourly rate of $222 per hour for psychological services (APS Professional Practice Advisory Group, 2012-2013). The hourly rate for counselling (an unregulated industry like coaching) has been estimated at $57.60 per hour (Pelling, 2005). The seemingly higher rates paid to executive coaches is interesting, in light of the fact that substantial remuneration is typically a feature of professions and, in particular, those which are afforded high status by society, such as medicine and law (Eraut, 1994). In executive coaching, higher fees might be reflective of the attitude and social status of executive coaching clients (or the organisations that employ them) who are willing (and able) to pay significant amounts for coaching services. It may also reflect the mystique associated with executive coaching and the willingness of the market to pay a higher fee for a service they do not really understand.

d) **Provision of executive coaching services**

In Australia, it is understood that the majority of executive coaches practise either as sole practitioners or in small (2-3 person) companies (Standards Australia, 2011). There are larger coaching service provider firms in existence, for example, the Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership (IECL) which provided database information to recruit participants for this research. In Australia, both the larger firms and smaller operators typically have networks of subcontracted coaches who come together when a coaching project in an organisation or government agency requires a number of executives to be coached. It is common, therefore, to find an individual executive coach working with a range of coaching firms and also operating as a sole practitioner (Binstead & Grant, 2008).
With the predominance of individual practitioners and small firms, it is probably not surprising that the most common reported method of sourcing coaches by organisations that employ them is via informal methods. In a study of 20 HR professionals (as purchasers of coaching services), almost all indicated they most commonly sourced coaches through processes of referral and networks (Dagley, 2009). In the same study, participants expressed mixed views regarding the value of obtaining coaches via supplier organisations or broker firms (Dagley, 2009), favouring informal approaches. Similarly, in a study conducted by AHRI (Begley, 2012) (n=111), the most common methods of sourcing coaches were via existing contacts (75%), the direct knowledge of a coach’s work (58.67%) and word of mouth (41.33%). In the AHRI study (Begley, 2012), 41.33% of purchasers also had sourced coaches via a professional body or organisation. Interestingly, sourcing coaches via methods which include the utilisation of networks and referrals emphasises recommendations and experience as evidence of the quality and expected benefits of coaching. Further, in the context of an industry characterised by a lack of professional regulation and clear standards of performance, it is likely that potential purchasers may feel compelled to choose known providers.

Most executive coaches provide a range of other services in addition to executive coaching (Binstead & Grant, 2008; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012a). Findings from the PricewaterhouseCoopers (2012a) global study indicated that coaches in Oceania (n=579) undertake coaching for an average of 14 hours per week and provide a range of other services including consulting (63.4%), facilitation (62.9%), training (61.1%), mentoring (48.7%), teaching (15.7%) and counselling (13.1%). Consulting, training and facilitation appear to be the most common additional services provided by executive coaches (Binstead & Grant, 2008). It is also likely that the diversity in service offerings contributes to the difficulty in estimating the number of practising executive coaches as those coaches who do not provide coaching services exclusively might not identify themselves as executive coaches. This was confirmed in research undertaken by Binstead and Grant (2008) in which only 6 of the 28 participants referred to themselves as an “executive coach”. The participants reported that they used a range of different titles (e.g. leadership coach, organisational coach, career coach, skills coach, coaching psychologist, consultant and facilitator) for the varying markets and audiences in which they offered services. Swan (2010) also suggests that titles change as different practices come to the fore, for example, she argues that many management trainers have now become executive coaches. Overall, the range of services offered by coaches suggests that executive coaching can also be viewed as a functional activity or service that is provided, rather than a full-time occupation or role. The implication here is that if executive coaching is conducted mostly as a part-time activity by practitioners who also provide a range of other services, then
the development of a unique professional identity for executive coaches appears more difficult and less likely.

e) **Executive coach demographics**

Little is known about the demographic profile of executive coaches in Australia. In one global study, 66.6% of Australian respondents (n=578) were female and 33.4% were male (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012a). An earlier survey had also suggested that “coaching is currently a predominantly female profession” (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007, p. 7) but, given the lack of existing demographic data and regular data collection, it is not possible to assess now in Australia whether this is accurate. In a study of executive coaches in New Zealand (n=59), the ratio of male to female coaches was closer to 1:1 (Brooks & Wright, 2007). The most common age range for coaches in the PricewaterhouseCoopers (2012a) study was 46 to 55 years (36.6%), but once again it is uncertain how representative this figure may be. Further, in the same study, almost no coaches (0.9%) were 25 years and under and only 7.6% were between 25-35 years (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012b). This may suggest an unofficial minimum age of entry into the coaching industry, before which coaches might find it difficult to demonstrate sufficient experience to be credible (Brooks & Wright, 2007).

It is evident that the backgrounds of executive coaches in Australia vary greatly (Spence, Cavanagh, & Grant, 2006; Standards Australia, 2011). In a small study of executive coaches in Australia (n=28), participants reported a wide range of past work experience before becoming coaches, including senior manager or executive (25%), consultant (19%), teacher or lecturer (16%), psychologist (13%), accountant (6%), business development manager (6%), business owner (6%), speech pathologist (3%), sports coach (3%) and board member (3%) (Binstead & Grant, 2008). It is interesting that, despite the predominance in Australia of coaching research and education being undertaken by psychologists, only 13% of this sample were previously psychologists. The smaller percentage of former psychologists practising as coaches was also noted in other studies (Grant & Zackon, 2004; Spence, et al., 2006). It has been suggested that the diversity of past work-life experience amongst coaches is a product of the ease of entry into the unregulated industry for aspiring coaches, together with a desire in some individuals to transfer from their existing careers into the more meaningful “feel good” industry of coaching (Spence, et al., 2006). However, this diversity could also suggest that a wide variety of different disciplinary areas and practitioner experiences are meaningful (and relevant) to coaching practice. Significantly, these multiple paths of entry into executive coaching has not only influenced the breadth of theory and literature applied to coaching practice, but also the lack of a common definition. Practitioners entering the field of coaching from different socio-cultural and occupational backgrounds have bought with them different emphases and
definitions for executive coaching as well as different approaches to executive coaching practice.

f) **Executive coach education and training**

The education and training of executive coaches is also a developing industry. Few universities offer executive coaching qualifications in Australia and there are no requirements for coaches to undertake education or training prior to commencing practice. This differs from established professions, where entry requires an extensive period of specialised training in higher education and may also require competency assessment via examination and a period of supervised apprenticeship/internship (Gray, 2011). Garman et al. (2000) indicated that because of the absence of universally recognised standards of expertise in executive coaching, the only real ‘entry criterion’ is the coach’s ability to solicit clients. This leads to concerns of quality which “inevitably arise with any unregulated commercial activity and executive coaching is apparently no exception” (Garman, et al., 2000, p. 201).

In Australia, higher education programs in coaching are predominantly located in psychology schools and departments, which is potentially one explanation for the dominance of psychological theory and its application to executive coaching (see Chapter Three). Comparatively, in the UK, coaching qualifications are located in schools of business and education (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007a) and psychology (such as the Coaching Psychology Unit in the University of East London). In the US, the majority of coaching degrees are offered by Business Schools (Grant, 2006b).

The longest-running higher education courses in coaching in Australia are offered by the School of Psychology at the University of Sydney. Established in 2000, the Coaching Psychology Unit at Sydney University offers postgraduate programs up to master level in applied science (psychology of coaching) and enrolls approximately 70 students each year (Lebihan, 2012). For the first time in 2013, Deakin University offered postgraduate qualifications in the combined fields of coaching and counselling through the School of Psychology in the Faculty of Health. The Australian College of Applied Psychology (a private college and higher education provider) offers a bachelor degree in applied social science (coaching). The University of Wollongong offers a Graduate Certificate and Master in Business Coaching through its Sydney Business School. A number of universities in Australia have also introduced coaching subjects into their existing courses. For example, Macquarie University has included an executive coaching subject in its Master of Business Administration (MBA) and also has a subject in coaching and positive psychology in its Master and Doctoral programs in psychology. Interestingly, Monash University previously offered postgraduate qualifications in mentoring and coaching but they
have since been discontinued due to low enrolments (Lebihan, 2012). A Graduate Diploma in Coaching at Curtin University was also discontinued in 2012. The lack of enrolments at Monash and Curtin Universities is interesting in light of the anticipated (and potentially increasing) numbers of individuals who practise as executive coaches. However, this could be reflective of the high levels of education already held by many executive coaches. For example, in one Australian study of executive coaches (n=28), 93% of coaches were found to be university educated, with 53.6% possessing a qualification at master degree level (Binstead & Grant, 2008). It may also be reflective of the ability of coaches to secure sufficient work through networks and contacts (as outlined earlier), not needing to utilise educational qualifications as a means of providing legitimacy in the marketplace.

The limited availability of university education in executive coaching contrasts markedly with the prevalence of coaching-specific training courses offered by private organisations in Australia. The most popular method for developing knowledge and skills as an executive coach has been attendance at these type of programs, offered both locally and from overseas (and in a variety of face-to-face, blended and online formats). These short courses, which also frequently provide some kind of coaching credential, have been criticised by academics (for example Grant, 2006b) as being based on proprietary models and lacking theoretical grounding. In a study conducted by Spence, Cavanagh and Grant (2006) with 148 coaches, 90% of respondents had completed coach-specific training, of whom 62% had completed training with a coach training school, 20% had completed tertiary study in a coaching-related field (such as psychology or social work) and 13% had completed training in a helping-related methodology (e.g. in-house workshops) or neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). Only 5% of respondents reported possessing no coach specific training, suggesting an appetite for coaching courses in the industry. In another study of 28 executive coaches in Australia, 86% had completed specific executive coach training with private training organisations including Coach U, Coachville, Human Synergistics and the IECL (Binstead & Grant, 2008).

Executive coach training is also an unregulated industry and offerings vary substantially between different training organisations. In a study by Grant and O’Hara (2008) of the websites of 16 executive coach training schools, considerable variation was found across training organisations in the cost, duration and assessment processes undertaken. The costs of courses ranged from $3,245 to $14,795 (Grant & O’Hara, 2008). The majority of trainers were found to possess tertiary qualifications relevant to coaching, although some trainers had no qualifications at all. The average age of coach training organisations was 6.75 years, suggesting a developing marketplace (Grant & O’Hara, 2008).
Coach training and education is also unregulated overseas, although in the US, member bodies have been established as a forum for collaboration among coach training organisations and graduate schools. In 2000, the Association of Coach Training Organisations (ACTO)\(^{17}\) was founded as an organisation of independent coach training schools, focused on being “the steward of high quality coach education and training”. In 2005, the Graduate School Alliance for Executive Coaching (GSAEC)\(^{18}\) was formed by a group of educators from graduate schools, seeking to develop curriculum standards for executive coach education (Stein & Page, 2010). No similar bodies exist in Australia, where coach training and education remain largely a focus for individual service provider organisations and universities. Further, another aspect of regulation needing exploration is the role of university self-regulation (e.g. through curriculum development and review systems, committees of approval, external committees of review/advice and ongoing course evaluation).

In an unregulated coach training industry dominated by short courses, training organisations have attempted to give legitimacy and status to their programs by obtaining a form of external recognition or registration. In Australia, the most typical means of achieving this is via accreditation with the ICF or by obtaining registration through the vocational education and training (VET) system (Grant & O’Hara, 2008). For example, the IECL offers coach training programs that are accredited by the ICF and also offers a Certificate IV in Coaching Skills in the Workplace in conjunction with the registered training organisation (RTO) SydneyLearning.\(^{19}\) Another RTO, Open Door Coaching, also offers a Certificate IV and Diploma of Workplace and Business Coaching, which is affiliated with a number of organisations including the Australian Institute of Management (AIM).

In this current landscape, an increasing number of Australian universities have also moved into the coaching industry as suppliers, offering both professional development programs in coaching (Grant, 2008a) and the provision of executive coaching services. For example, Swinburne University of Technology and the Queensland University of Technology each offer executive development programs and short courses in coaching. The Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM) offers a range of executive development services to organisations including internal coach training programs and executive coaching. Similarly, Melbourne Business School (MBS), through its Centre for Coaching in Organisations, offers executive coaching and other services which are focused on the professional development of coaches. It has been suggested that the entry of universities into the executive coaching

\(^{17}\) A member body for coach training organisations founded in the US in 2000. See Glossary for further details.
\(^{18}\) A member body for graduate schools offering executive coach education programs. See Glossary for further details.
\(^{19}\) This latter qualification was discontinued in 2014.
marketplace is a positive development which has “raised the bar” for coaching in Australia (Grant, 2008a). There is no evidence, however, to suggest that coaching service provision by universities is of a higher standard than that provided by any other commercial provider. This is especially the case when, as outlined earlier in this chapter, individual executive coaches typically provide services both as sole traders and via a range of coaching organisations, including these university providers. For example, it is not uncommon to see the same executive coaches positioned on a range of organisations websites across both the private and educational sectors.  

**g) Industry guidelines**

The introduction of standards is also viewed as typical of the journey that occupations attempt to make through professionalisation (Gray, 2011). An interesting characteristic of the coaching industry in Australia is the publication of an industry guideline for the practice of coaching in organisations, which was published in 2011 as an “aspirational document for an emerging discipline” (Standards Australia, 2011, p. 2). The guideline, *HB 332-2011 Coaching in organizations*, was prepared for Standards Australia by a working party which included this author²¹ and representatives from a variety of organisations including purchasers of coaching services, suppliers, training organisations, universities, professional associations and government. The guideline was developed by sharing the collective experience of the working party in brainstorming sessions and also from drawing on the existing knowledge and research in coaching. The purpose of the guideline in Australia was not to “prescribe how coaching must be conducted”, but “to capture emerging practices and processes that many (if not all) stakeholders” would “see as valuable” (Standards Australia, 2011, p. 2). While this is a valuable (and practical) document for the coaching industry, it does not diminish the need for research into actual coaching practices and experiences that contributes to a deeper understanding of executive coaching and how it is practised (as pursued in my research).

This development of an industry guideline for coaching in Australia contrasts with overseas experience. In Norway, for example, disagreements between committee members on a similar project led to it being disbanded and the coaching industry being viewed as too immature to be able develop a joint national standard (Svaleng & Grant, 2010). In light of the focus of my research it is interesting to note that one of the reasons that the Norway initiative was reported as unsuccessful was that the representatives could not agree upon a common definition of coaching (Askeland, 2009). However, other authors have suggested that the

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²⁰ For example, see the executive coaching service offering brochure provided by the University of New South Wales at [http://www.asb.unsw.edu.au/executive/Documents/Coaching_Program_Brochure.pdf](http://www.asb.unsw.edu.au/executive/Documents/Coaching_Program_Brochure.pdf). A simple Google search reveals that individual coaches are not exclusive to this one organisation.

²¹ I represented the coaching supplier, the IECL in this forum and also assisted with research and writing activities.
initiative failed as the committee in Norway was dominated by coach training schools that would have had to make significant changes to their products to meet the proposed standards (Grant, Cavanagh, Parker, & Passmore, 2010). It has been argued that globally, there is increasing cooperation between different coaching and coaching psychology bodies aimed at fostering the mature development of the broader coaching industry, and that the Norwegian experience is an exception (Svaleng & Grant, 2010). It is difficult to ascertain whether this latter view is correct, but the development of a guideline in Australia is certainly evidence of increased industry cooperation in Australia. It is also evident that this type of document could be a precursor to the development of an Australian standard in organisational coaching at some stage and politically could be viewed as a potential step towards the professionalisation of coaching.

1.3.2. Scope and Boundaries
As outlined earlier, executive coaching is an individual process situated in the context of organisations. In my research, seeking to understand the influence of the context of the wider organisational systems in which executive coaching occurs was seen as fundamental. In this study I adopted the perspective that it is not possible to understand any phenomenon without reference to the context in which it is embedded (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Context includes the circumstances and settings that surround an object of inquiry (in this instance executive coaching), and that “help[s], by its relevance, to explain it” (Abrandt Dahlgren, Richardson, & Sjostrom, 2004, p. 73). Furthermore, personal relationships (including coaching) are shaped by the environment in which they occur, and the parties involved bring with them contextual understandings, beliefs and perceptions that influence the relationship (Cox, 2003).

In selecting organisational contexts in which to conduct my research, I chose participants from commercial (for-profit) organisations in Australia (that is, excluding government and not-for-profit organisations). Although organisations in all sectors of the economy use executive coaching services, the characteristics of organisational and industry contexts differ between sectors, and I propose that this affects the way executive coaching is brokered, utilised, and therefore potentially experienced.

For instance, commercial (for-profit) organisations are not constrained by the types of regulation that govern the purchase of coaching by departments and agencies in the Australian public sector (APS). The APS provides for a sector-wide approach to the planning and delivery of coaching and involves the application of competitive tendering processes and transparency in provider selection. In Australia in 2009\textsuperscript{22}, the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC)\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} This was re-tendered again in 2013.
re-established its Capability Development Panel (which includes executive coaching services) with approximately 800 individual coaches, deemed “specified personnel”. For departments that elect to access the APSC Panel, coaches must be selected from this specified personnel list. The processes for the procurement of coaches are regulated and managed closely by the APSC. The APSC suggests that in providing this service to the APS, they know and understand the “needs, culture, future challenges and Government expectations of the APS like no other provider” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). In contrast, coaching panels in the commercial sector (if utilised at all) are typically smaller, organisation-specific, and have greater flexibility in approach and administration. Moreover, for coaches working in the APS, “the concept of stakeholder or clients is a little different”; language and capabilities can be perceived differently and the public sector has “different challenges and constraints” from the private sector (Fewtrell, Wyse, & Bryant, 2008, p. 13).

In another example, commercial organisations are not affected by the financial constraints and reliance on government funding that limit the ability of the not-for-profit (NFP) sector to invest in executive coaching services. In 2008, FAR Social Enterprise released the Alchemy Project Feasibility Report, summarising the leadership development issues, needs, challenges and strengths within the NFP sector. Findings from the Alchemy Project indicated that many NFP services operated in survival mode and were driven by 12-month competitive funding cycles (Taylor, Hardie, & Illoski, 2008). These funding structures commonly provided for the funding of direct service provision only and precluded the allocation of funds to capacity-building programs such as coaching. Many of the NFP organisations that participated in the Alchemy Project reported that funds and time were not available, or not allocated, for staff and leadership development. Executive coaching involves a considerable financial investment when compared to professional services such as counselling or therapy. According to an Australian study published in 2008 which included interviews with 28 executive coaches, the majority (54%) of executive coaches worked mainly with senior management and charged per individual client executive $400 to $700 per hour or $11,000 to $17,000 for a 6–12 month package (Binstead & Grant, 2008). I suggest that the limited learning and development budgets of most NFP organisations in Australia would not accommodate expenditure of these amounts.

As I was interested in understanding executive coaching as a contextualised and situated experience, I chose to select participants for my research from the commercial sector only.

23 The APSC is a central agency that acts to ensure future capability and sustainability within the APS.
24 Interpretive paradigm research seeks to study individuals within the context of their practice and experience. In the interpretive paradigm there is a focus on preserving the context of the phenomenon and exploring its influence versus the empirico-analytical paradigm where context is defined and limited.
Future research could explore the nature and experience of executive coaching in other sectors of the Australian economy.

1.4 KEY DIMENSIONS OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While a range of professional associations have developed competency frameworks around the world for coaching, no common body of knowledge exists (Standards Australia, 2011). There is agreement in the literature that executive coaching draws on a range of existing knowledge bases, but there is diversity of views about which knowledge is relevant and appropriate for coaching. Standards Australia (2011) states that the knowledge for coaching practice comes from insights and findings from other fields including business, psychology, health, education, philosophy and the sciences. Grant (2005) suggested that coaching draws on four key knowledge domains: the behavioural sciences, business and economic science, adult education (including workplace learning and development) and philosophy. Kilburg (1996) argued that executive coaches draw on traditional organisation development methods, adult education, management training, industrial/organisational psychology, generic consultation skills and clinical psychology in the practice of coaching. There has also been some suggestion in the coaching literature that coaching as a tradition needs to continue to draw on a multidisciplinary knowledge base and that the development of unified framework might be restrictive (Armstrong, et al., 2005).

In responding to this diversity, I chose not to locate executive coaching in any one (or more) potential fields of literature at the outset of my research. With my professional background and education (see section 1.5.2 later in this chapter) I could have naturally been drawn to a research topic that explored executive coaching in the context of a number of theoretical areas such as human resource development (HRD), management development and leadership. However, recognising that the focus of my research was on the nature and experience of executive coaching and that coaching was an area that was not well understood, I chose not to privilege any one theoretical area in the conduct of my research. While the investigation of the applicability of a wide range of theoretical frameworks to executive coaching is useful research for a new and developing field, it was not the focus of my inquiry. Rather, in Phase 1 of my research I chose to undertake a hermeneutic study of the executive coaching literature as a means to pursue a deeper understanding of the horizons of the authors and to explore the theoretical perspectives that had been examined (and privileged) in the literature. Importantly, in responding to the diversity (and lack of a common theoretical framework in the literature), in Phase 2 of my research I also accessed participants’ experiences as a means of illuminating
the phenomenon of executive coaching. Although it was not the intent or focus of my research to identify the theoretical perspectives relevant to executive coaching practice, the findings of my studies have suggested that executive coaching can usefully draw more than it currently does from the field of experiential education (in particular) to understand and envision coaching as a learning process.

1.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

1.5.1. OVERVIEW

As outlined earlier, executive coaching is a complex, human phenomenon that is not well understood. The interpretive paradigm was deemed most suitable for my research because it values both the subjective nature of individual experiences and the context in which these experiences occur, both of which were important aspects of my study. In choosing interpretive research for my study, I sought to contribute to the field of research into executive coaching by choosing a research topic and questions that were focused on illuminating the phenomenon of executive coaching, intentionally deviating from (but complementing) the predominance of empirico-analytical coaching research in Australia.

In this thesis I argue in favour of expanding the range of research strategies in the investigation of executive coaching to include hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches. Such approaches seek to interpret executive coaching as a human and engaged phenomenon and to portray the experiences encountered by coaches and clients during executive coaching and to consider these experiences contextually. I contend that these aspects of coaching are important not only to the understanding of executive coaching as a life-changing professional development strategy, but also as a contribution to the evolution of the knowledge base of executive coaching and its development towards a profession.

Two research approaches frequently used within the interpretive paradigm, philosophical hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology, were adopted for my research and were chosen as the most appropriate for answering the research questions explored in the two phases of my study. In Phase 1, I selected a philosophical hermeneutics approach and utilised its text construction and interpretation strategy to gain deeper understanding of the executive coaching literature. In Phase 2, I selected the research approach of hermeneutic phenomenology to access participants’ experiences of executive coaching. Detailed information on my chosen research method and approaches is provided in Chapter Two.

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25 Executive coaching can be conceptualised as a life-changing professional development strategy as reflected in the language used by my participants during interviews conducted in Phase 2 of my research.
1.5.2. **Locating Myself within this Study**

This section briefly describes my initial pre-understandings as I entered this research and also what prompted my interest in this research. From the perspective of hermeneutics, interpreters possess a historical standpoint (or horizon) which they cannot avoid bringing to the process of interpretation (Bontekoe, 1996). Gadamer termed this standpoint “prejudices” or “pre-understandings” and argued that interpreters must be aware of their biases as essential features of the research process (Koch, 1996). I repeatedly revisited my pre-understandings as they evolved during the course of my research, and documented them in my research logs (see Chapter Two). In ensuring rigour in interpretive research, Cherry (2010) also proposed that researchers need to contextualise their work in a helpful way, highlighting what triggered their interest.

The idea for my study emerged towards the end of a 15-year career as a senior HR professional in a range of organisations and industries. I had become intensely curious about executive coaching; it had become a topic of interest within my profession and was increasingly being used within organisations. This curiosity led to a couple of defining events. After researching the available training and education pathways, I chose to undertake a coach training program with the IECL with the aim of finding out more about executive coaching and comparing it to the activities I already undertook in my “day-job”. I soon discovered that I was well suited to coaching practice and, through participation in the highly experiential training program26 (and being coached by fellow attendees), I became clearer about my goals and ultimately resigned from my unfulfilling, full-time corporate role. While undertaking work as an executive coach27 I became increasingly interested in what I was doing and why it seemed to work for my clients. Around the same time, I also attended the “Second Australian Evidence-based Coaching Conference” in 2005 at the University of Sydney with a former colleague. The conference (conducted by the School of Psychology) promoted coaching as an emerging sub-discipline within psychology, namely “coaching psychology”.28 My colleague and I wondered if we were the only attendees at the conference with qualifications in other disciplines (particularly business and education) and who considered these equally relevant to the practice of executive coaching. It was this curiosity for further insight and understanding, as well as a desire to develop my own coaching practice, that ultimately led to this research and the formulation of the research questions as outlined in section 1.2.

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26 The IECL program comprises workshops, asynchronous discussion forums, reflective learning tasks and coaching practice sessions. See http://www.iecl.com for further information.
27 See Chapter Six for my reflection on how the use of the reflexive strategies of hermeneutics were strengths in the conduct my research by assisting me to ensure credibility as both a researcher and coach/“insider”.
28 See Chapter Three for further information on the emergence of “coaching psychology”.
1.6 STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter Two presents the interpretive paradigm as the philosophical framework underpinning my research and justifies its selection. It also describes the two phases of my research and the rationale for the chosen research approach (philosophical hermeneutics or hermeneutic phenomenology) in each phase. Chapter Three presents the findings from Phase 1 of this research, a hermeneutic interpretation of the executive coaching literature as it relates to the nature and experience of executive coaching. Chapters Four and Five present the findings from the hermeneutic phenomenological study conducted in Phase 2 of my research, including the executive coaching experiences of my two participant groups: (1) client executives and (2) executive coaches. Chapter Six presents the emergent three-part model that is the product of my research and discusses implications for the coaching industry and professionalisation, executive coach education and training, research and practice and organisations.

For the benefit of the reader, a detailed glossary is also provided at the beginning of the thesis. As executive coaching is a new field, footnotes are used extensively throughout this thesis to provide further explanation of a range of terms and concepts. As a deliberate strategy in the reporting of my research findings I have also included a set of appendices at the end of this thesis (and referenced throughout). The appendices provide further detailed information and the results of my analyses conducted in Phase 1 and the additional presentation of themes and concepts that emerged during the analysis of the data collected during Phase 2. The information contained in these appendices also supports my continuing post-doctoral research program in the emerging field of executive coaching.

29 See Appendix D, E, F, G and H.
30 See Appendix J.
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CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH METHOD

The thinker tries to determine and to represent the nature of the world through logic. He knows that reason and its tool, logic, are incomplete - the way an intelligent artist knows full well that his brushes or chisels will never be able to express perfectly the radiant nature of an angel or a saint. Still they both try, the thinker as well as the artist, each in his way.

— Hermann Hesse, *Narcissus and Goldmund*, 1968

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I describe the research purpose and questions and justify the selection of the interpretive paradigm for this research. The chapter presents the two phases of my research and the rationale for my chosen research approach (philosophical hermeneutics or hermeneutic phenomenology) at each phase. The chapter details how text construction was undertaken in the first phase of my research and how texts were interpreted using strategies from philosophical hermeneutics (fusions of horizons, hermeneutic circle and a dialogue of questions and answers). The recruitment of research participants in the second phase of the research and the selected data collection methods (interviews, participant reflection, field notes and researcher reflexive journals) designed to capture participant’s experiences and interpretations of executive coaching are also described. The four-stage method of phenomenological data analysis used in Phase 2 of my research is also explained. I also discuss issues of quality (credibility, rigour and ethical conduct) in interpretive research.

2.2 RESEARCH PURPOSE AND QUESTIONS

The purpose of my research was to develop a deeper and richer understanding of executive coaching as a complex, human phenomenon that is not well understood. This study sought to understand the nature and experience of executive coaching as it is currently practised. In doing so, it accessed directly the experiences of the two key parties in the executive coaching relationship: (1) client executives and (2) executive coaches. To achieve this understanding, one primary and two secondary research questions were developed to guide the research process.

The primary question of my research was as follows:

- What is the nature and experience of executive coaching?
The secondary questions of my research were as follows:

1. What is executive coaching?
   a) How is executive coaching emerging as a concept?
   b) How is executive coaching emerging as a practice?

2. How do client executives and executive coaches experience executive coaching?

The secondary questions were addressed in various phases of my research. The two phases of my research are explained in section 2.4.1 of this chapter and detailed in sections 2.5 and 2.6. The research questions addressed in each phase are also presented in Figure 2.1.

2.3 RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Research paradigms can be defined as “a model in which a community of scholars or scientists generate knowledge” (Higgs, 1997, p. 5). They provide an essential framework for generating knowledge. Each paradigm has a “unique philosophical underpinning which defines the stance taken by researchers in that paradigm” (Higgs et al., 2007, p. 36). The three core research paradigms proposed by Higgs et al. (2007) are illustrated in Table 2.1. These are: (1) the empirico-analytical paradigm, (2) the interpretive paradigm, and (3) the critical paradigm. In broad terms, “quantitative research” relates to the empirico-analytical paradigm and “qualitative research” is conducted in the interpretive and critical paradigms. However, Higgs (1997) argued that it is desirable to describe research in terms of the paradigm which forms the context of the study, rather than using the more general terms of quantitative and qualitative research. My research was conducted in the interpretive paradigm.

Table 2.1 also addresses the relevant philosophical stance of each of these research paradigms. Higgs et.al (2007) contended that it is important for researchers to be clear about the philosophical stance underlying their chosen research paradigm and strategy. Each of these frameworks contains different ontological (world-view) and epistemological (knowledge generation) perspectives. This ultimately means that “different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world” (Crotty, 2003, p. 66). To be able to justify chosen methodology and methods, researchers need to understand the kind of knowledge they are hoping to generate and how it compares to the knowledge generated in different types of research approaches and paradigms (Crotty, 2003).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research paradigm</th>
<th>Philosophical stance</th>
<th>Research goals include:</th>
<th>Research approaches include:</th>
<th>Data collection methods include:</th>
<th>Data analysis methods include:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empirico-analytical paradigm</td>
<td>Positivism (knowledge and meaning exist objectively in the world to be discovered – objective truth, sense data determine reality)</td>
<td>Measure, test hypotheses predict, explain, generalise, identify cause-effect</td>
<td>Experimental method (scientific method), descriptive, comparative studies (testing hypothesis)</td>
<td>Randomised controlled trials, experiments, surveys</td>
<td>Statistical analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive paradigm</td>
<td>Idealism (knowledge and meaning are constructed by people and in different ways – respects multiple constructed realities)</td>
<td>Understand, interpret, seek meaning, describe, illuminate, theorise</td>
<td>Hermeneutics, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, naturalistic inquiry, historiography</td>
<td>Interviews, case studies, storytelling, textual review, observation, focus groups</td>
<td>Repeated return to the data, extraction of themes, theorisation, interpretation of texts and other media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical paradigm</td>
<td>Historical realism (social practice and culture shape practice)</td>
<td>Improve, reform, empower, change reality or situation</td>
<td>Action research/collaborative research, Praxis – acting on existing conditions to change them</td>
<td>Interviews, case studies, storytelling, review of texts, critical debate, review of espoused theory/theory in action</td>
<td>Scholarly analysis of action/effects, critical debate, review of espoused theory/theory in action, sharing knowledge and experience, reflecting upon data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2.3.1. Overview of Research Paradigms

The empirico-analytical paradigm is based on the philosophy of positivism (Higgs, 1997). In this paradigm, knowledge is discovered and justified on the basis of empirical processes, resulting in generalisations which can be used to predict the course of future experience (Moore, 2009). Knowledge is generated by the application of the scientific method and is measured against criteria which include objectivity, reliability and validity (Higgs et al., 2007). Empirico-analytical researchers aim to discover the objective truth or meaning that exists inherently in objects independent of people’s consciousness (Crotty, 2003). Research goals in the empirico-analytical paradigm include a focus on measuring, testing, predicting, explaining and
generalising. As my research sought to understand, interpret and illuminate the phenomenon of executive coaching, the empirico-analytical paradigm was not appropriate.

Empirico-analytical research methods, particularly randomised controlled trials (RCTs), have been promoted in the coaching literature as important for the research base of coaching and for the credibility and development of coaching towards the status of a profession (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007). Although popular, however, the scientific method, and outcome studies in particular, have been criticised for their inability to assist us to develop an understanding of the complex processes of coaching (de Haan, 2008b). This view is not uncommon. In many fields, the past emphasis on empirico-analytical research is being challenged for its inability to serve the interests of researchers who seek to understand and interpret the human world (Higgs et al., 2007; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). As suggested by the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, “science manipulates things and gives up living in them” (Merleau-Ponty cited in Palmer, 1969, p. 7).

The critical paradigm is based on the philosophy of historical realism (Higgs, 2001). The critical paradigm aims to change the status quo by integrating theory and practice in such a way that individuals and groups become aware of their contradictions and conflicts within their belief systems and practices and are inspired to change (Schwandt, 2001). It assumes that knowledge is acquired through critical debate and “immanent critique” (Higgs, 2001; Schwandt, 2001, p. 45). The paradigm therefore focuses on generating knowledge on how to transform current structures, relationships and conditions which constrain development and reform (Higgs & Cant, 1998). Examples of research approaches include action research and collaborative inquiry. As my research sought to deeply understand but not to change executive coaching practices, the critical paradigm was not appropriate. Future studies exploring executive coaching activities within organisations or among coaching suppliers, with a view to enhancing those practices, could adopt a critical paradigm approach.

The interpretive paradigm is based on the philosophy of idealism (Higgs et al., 2007) and emerged in response to a growing dissatisfaction with the scientific method for undertaking research into the human and social sciences. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) defined interpretive paradigm research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (2005, p. 3). Interpretive paradigm research is conducted in the natural settings of participants and consists of a set of practices that are focused on interpreting the world to make it visible (Higgs et al., 2007; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). In this paradigm, knowledge is constructed by individuals and is generated through a search for meaning (Higgs, 2001) as researchers seek to understand, interpret, illuminate and make sense of phenomena from the meanings that
people bring to them (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). People construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon (Crotty, 2003). Interpretive researchers insist therefore that there is no objective truth waiting to be discovered, but rather people ascribe subjective meanings to objects in their world (Crotty, 2003). Examples of interpretive research approaches include hermeneutics and phenomenology, both of which were utilised in my study.

2.3.2. RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING THE INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM

The interpretive paradigm was chosen for my research into executive coaching for the reasons of (a) its suitability for developing an understanding of executive coaching as a phenomenon that was both human and complex, and (b) its ability to take into account the contextual and subjective nature of individual experiences of executive coaching. The value of interpretive research into coaching has been recognised by scholars who have argued for studies that are grounded in social science disciplines (Laske, 2006), utilise qualitative methods (Stober et al., 2006), and allow us to explore the personal side of coaching (de Haan, 2008b).

Executive coaching is a process that needs to be understood in context, and the interpretive paradigm allows research to be undertaken in the real and natural settings of participants, where “everyday experience takes place” (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005, p. 27). The context of the organisation is an important part of the landscape of executive coaching which is commonly portrayed as a three-way relationship between the executive client, the coach and the organisation (which typically pays). Various subjective factors in organisations influence executive coaching. Despite the illusory existence of predictability, order and control, organisations are saturated with subjectivity, equivocality, abstractness and ambiguity (Du Toit, 2007). These factors are best understood via a situated and interpretive approach rather than an objective and reductionist approach.

The interpretive paradigm was also an important choice for my research as it values the subjective experiences of individuals. My research explored the executive coaching experiences of participants, recognising that each of their experiences of coaching (and, for client executives, their individual learning from coaching) differs.¹ Interpretive research was well suited to this study as it acknowledges that humans do not discover meaning but instead construct meanings from their experiences (Crotty, 2003). The interpretive paradigm values

¹ As illuminated in my findings (Chapters Four and Five), a regular and routine pattern to coaching was not the experience of my participants. While there existed a broad set of steps in the process of executive coaching that participants experienced, it was consistently reported (by both executive coaches and client executives) the necessary adaptiveness and responsiveness of the coaching process to the unique needs, objectives and goals of the individual client. It is this variability, which is subjective rather than routine and consistent in executive coaching.
individual and multiple constructed realities (Higgs et al., 2007). This was an important
distinction for my study, as an existing focus of research in coaching had been predominantly
empirico-analytical, with the aim of quantifying outcomes or determining a “best practice”
formula for coaching. The interpretive paradigm helped me to explore and understand the
complexity and diversity of executive coaching (as it was actually experienced and practised)
as a complex, situated and highly individual human experience, instead of generalising to a
“one-size-fits-all” or a “best fit” approach. I sought understanding of good practices rather
than one prescriptive best practice.

2.4 OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH APPROACH

Two research approaches frequently used within the interpretive paradigm, philosophical
hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology, were adopted for my research. Giorgi and
Giorgi (2003) argued that method and data are “intimately” connected. They contended that
harmony is needed between the raw data obtained, the method of analysis, and the outcomes
that are sought. In this study, this congruence was achieved by dividing the research into three
phases and utilising the most suitable research approach and associated strategies at each
phase.

2.4.1. PHASES OF THE RESEARCH

This study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, I selected a philosophical
hermeneutics approach and utilised its text construction and interpretation strategy to gain a
deeper understanding of the executive coaching literature. In the second phase, I selected
hermeneutic phenomenology to access participants’ experiences of coaching and to explore
the nature and essence of executive of coaching. Figure 2.1 identifies the research questions
addressed in the three phases of my research.

The two phases of my research are examined in detail in the following sections. In the
discussion of each phase, I have included the following: an overview of the selected research
approach, i.e. philosophical hermeneutics or hermeneutic phenomenology; the approaches of
philosophers who have informed my research strategy, i.e. Hans Georg Gadamer (1975) (1900-
2002) and Max van Manen (1997); the conduct of my research as informed by the selected
research approach; and the congruent data collection and data analysis methods used.
What is the nature and experience of executive coaching?

1. What is executive coaching?
   a) How is executive coaching emerging as a concept?
   b) How is executive coaching emerging as a practice?

2. How do *client executives* and *executive coaches* experience executive coaching?
2.5 PHASE 1 – PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

2.5.1. HERMENEUTICS

The focus of my research was on developing a deeper understanding of executive coaching as a human phenomenon that is not well understood. Paterson and Higgs (2005) proposed that a deeply interpretive research approach such as hermeneutics can examine complex human phenomena from multiple perspectives to produce rich theoretical and experiential interpretations.

Hermeneutics can be defined as the theory and practice of the interpretation of meaning and the construction and interpretation of texts (Creswell, 2007; Paterson & Higgs, 2005; van Manen, 1997). The term “hermeneutics” derives from the Greek word hermeneuein which means to interpret or understand (Crotty, 2003; Palmer, 1969). Underpinning the process of understanding are notions of “saying”, “explaining” and “translating”, which suggest that interpretation occurs when “something foreign, strange, separated in time space or experience, is made familiar, present, comprehensible” or “brought to understanding” (Palmer, 1969, pp. 13-14). In the 17th century, hermeneutics became associated with the interpretation of texts, particularly in the context of biblical studies (Crotty, 2003).

The German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is often credited as the founder of modern hermeneutics for extending the focus of hermeneutics from illuminating sacred texts to the illumination of human understanding (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). Schleiermacher aimed to frame a general hermeneutics as the art of understanding rather than specific hermeneutics for disciplines such as theology, literature and law (Palmer, 1969). The concept of the hermeneutic circle was recognised by Schleiermacher who attributed its discovery to the German philosopher and philologist Georg Ast (1778-1841) (Bontekoe, 1996). Schleiermacher contended that understanding is a referential operation: we understand something by comparing it to something we already know (Palmer, 1969). What we understand forms itself into a circle made up of parts. The circle as a whole defines the individual parts, and the parts together form the circle. In dialectical interaction between the whole and a part, each gives the other meaning; understanding is circular (Palmer, 1969). For example, we understand the meaning of a word by seeing it in reference to the whole sentence; and reciprocally, the sentence’s meaning as a whole is dependent on the meaning of individual words (Palmer, 1969).

For Schleiermacher, reading a text was very much like listening to someone speak (Crotty, 2003). There is a speaker who constructs a sentence and a hearer. The hearer receives a series of mere words but through some “mysterious” process (of interpretation) defines the meaning
of these words. For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was also the art of hearing (Palmer, 1969). In this way, hermeneutics can be seen as starting from the conditions of dialogue (Palmer, 1969).

Schleiermacher was interested in the interpretation of both language and thought. “Grammatical” interpretation shows a work in relation to language, both in the structure of sentences but also in the interacting parts of the work and to other works of the same literary type. “Psychological” interpretation focuses on what is subjective and individual (Palmer, 1969). A work is seen in the context of the author’s life and works and in contrast to other lives and works. In this way, Schleiermacher was interested in the reconstruction of the mental experience of a text’s author; he wanted to re-experience what the author had experienced. In Schleiermacher’s view, understanding is an art of reconstructing the thinking of another person (Palmer, 1969). In this way, his aim was to understand authors as well as, or even better than they understood themselves (van Manen, 1997).

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) was inspired in part by the works of Schleiermacher and is credited with broadening hermeneutics beyond a focus on the individual to include cultural systems and organisations (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). Dilthey was a German historian, psychologist and sociologist, who saw the relevance of hermeneutics as the foundation for the humanities and social sciences. He focused on the historical character of human existence and believed that people’s speech, writings, art and behaviour were very much the “product of their times”, and this could not be discounted in hermeneutics (Crotty, 2003, p. 95).

Dilthey was interested in Geisteswissenschaften, the sciences of the spirit, in contrast with the natural sciences (Crotty, 2003; Palmer, 1969). He was interested in the human world characterised by Geist – minds, thoughts, consciousness, values, feelings, emotions, actions and purposes (van Manen, 1997). In Dilthey’s view, human phenomena differed from natural phenomena in that they required interpretation and understanding whereas natural phenomena involved mostly external observation and explanation (van Manen, 1997). As Dilthey argued, “we explain nature, humans we must understand” (cited in van Manen, 1997, p. 181). However, while recognising the subjectivity of human phenomena and reacting to the reductionism and mechanism of natural science, Dilthey was still focused on developing methods aimed at gaining “objective, valid” interpretations (Crotty, 2003; Palmer, 1969, p. 98) and in this way described himself as a “stubborn empiricist” (Creswell, 2007). Historical events were objectified by Dilthey (taken as “given”) and he believed that these events could be deciphered with the help of hermeneutics (Creswell, 2007). This objectivist stance was to be rejected other scholars, including Gadamer and Ricoeur, in favour of the “hermeneutic
experience” and the recognition that the interpretation of a historical “object” is always influenced by the interpreters’ tradition and language which form the basis of their thinking (Creswell, 2007).

2.5.2. PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

Philosophical hermeneutics is attributed to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), who was a student of Heidegger. Following Heidegger, Gadamer argued that hermeneutics is ontological (since understanding is our very mode of being in the world), universal (in that understanding underlies all human activity) and, importantly, conversational (because the interpretation of an object is always a dialogical encounter) (Schwandt, 2001).

In his book *Truth and Method* (1975), Gadamer argued to that the focus on objectivity in the human sciences by Dilthey and Husserl led to their being “alienated from the actual content of the concept of life” (van Manen, 1997, p. 3). However, like Dilthey, Gadamer took it as one of his primary tasks to show that hermeneutic disciplines could also be rigorous and could uncover truths of their own, in spite of the fact that their methodology was not that of the natural sciences (Bontekoe, 1996).

Gadamer was interested in the nature of understanding as an event or process that one participates in, rather than a process that is constructed by the knower (subject) to make sense of (discover the meaning of) an object (action, text) (Schwandt, 2001). For Gadamer, meaning was not attached to objects, but was rather a product of the many possibilities projected onto an object by the various individuals who viewed it (Bontekoe, 1996). In reading a text, according to Gadamer, we are focused not on finding the one meaning, such as what was intended by the author at the time of writing the text, but rather, during the process of interpretation, on finding our own understanding of what the text is speaking to us about (Bontekoe, 1996).

For Gadamer, understanding is always open and anticipatory, and a final, complete interpretation is never achieved; we are always interpreting in light of prejudice (or prejudgement, preconception) that comes from the tradition of which we are part. This tradition does not stand apart from our thought but constitutes the “horizon” in which we do our thinking (Schwandt, 2001). Gadamer used the term “prejudice” in a positive and descriptive rather than a negative manner, equating it with the term “pre-understandings”. In this view, it is only through pre-understandings that understanding is possible, as we only have access to the world through our prejudices (Koch, 1996). These prejudices are taken into the research process and they help us to understand (Koch, 1996).
Gadamer used the metaphor “fusion of horizons” to explain how different interpretations of a phenomenon are bought together through dialogue to produce shared understanding (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). In the metaphor, our “horizon” relates to everything that we can see from a particular vantage point. Individuals’ horizons change constantly as they move through the world acquiring new experience (and thus altering their prejudices) (Bontekoe, 1996). A “fusion” occurs when different vantage points come to together. The essential task of understanding is to show that a fusion has occurred (Koch, 1996). For example, when we are trying to understand the meaning of a text, our horizon of meaning is not identical to that of the author. As interpreters we have a horizon which we cannot avoid bringing along to the text (Bontekoe, 1996). The author of the text also has a horizon, seeing the world in a certain way (Bontekoe, 1996). It is possible to bring the horizons closer together and reach an understanding of the text through a “fusion of horizons”. With repeated reading of the text, we come to understand its language, what the words meant and also the historical context in the “life world” of the person who wrote the document (Svenaeus, 2000). Through the process of repeated reading our horizons broaden and our taken-for-granted prejudices are tested and either confirmed or questioned by what the text has to say (Bontekoe, 1996). For Gadamer, this fusion of horizons is not synonymous with reaching the same understanding of the document as the person who wrote it; we will always come to understand the document from our point of view, with the prejudgements of our context (time, place and experience) (Svenaeus, 2000). Consequently, we will always reach a different, ideally richer, understanding of the text than that reached by the author and the readers of its time and place (Svenaeus, 2000).

Gadamer also used the metaphor of a “dialogue of questions and answers” to highlight the view that, in hermeneutics, meaning emerges through a questioning dialogue between the text and the reader. For Gadamer, reading a text was very much like a conversation in which the text takes the place of the author (Bontekoe, 1996). As in a conversation, the text speaks to the reader and the reader speaks to the text in the process of determining its meaning. Like a successful conversation, the reading of the text results in an understanding between the speakers concerning the subject matter under discussion, with each individual coming to see the subject under discussion in a richer light than before. According to Gadamer, the nature of questions is to open possibilities and to keep them open, to look beyond what is close or immediate, without neglecting it (Lindholm et al., 2006).

For a text to become an object of interpretation, it must ask a question of the interpreter (Creswell, 2007; Koch, 1996). To take some text as an object of interpretation is initially to determine the question to which it stands as a reply (Bontekoe, 1996). But this question can
only be found if we are prepared to look behind what is actually said in the text, that is, to consider motivation or why what the text has to say is worth saying (Bontekoe, 1996). It takes us to the discovery of something new and not recognised before (Koch, 1996).

In a dialogue, participants change (Widdershoven, 1999). For Gadamer this process was a “convergence of insight”, which is the same process as when a reader comes to understand what a text has to say. At first, a text might not appear to make much sense to readers, but generally it will make sense after they grasp what is actually being said and also after carefully considering their own beliefs by testing preconceptions against the ideas and arguments they are confronted with in the text. This process for Gadamer was both the act of interpretation and the convergence of insight on the part of the reader and the text (Bontekoe, 1996). Each reader will ultimately arrive at a convergence of insight which is uniquely his or her own (Bontekoe, 1996).

Gadamer adopted the metaphor of the “hermeneutic circle” from earlier scholars to describe the experience of moving dialectically between the part and the whole of the text. The hermeneutic circle is represented in Figure 2.2. In the hermeneutic circle, the object of comprehension is considered as a whole and as comprising its various parts. Understanding and interpretation are viewed as a movement between the parts (data) and the whole (evolving understanding of the phenomenon), each giving meaning to the other, such that understanding is both circular and iterative (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). In Figure 2.2, the left arrow indicates that the object taken as a whole is understood in terms of its parts and this understanding involves the recognition of how these parts are integrated in the whole. The parts, once integrated, define the whole. The right arrow indicates that the individual parts of the object are understood in terms of their participation in the whole and that this understanding involves recognition of how the whole contextualises each of its parts. In this process of contextualisation, each part is illuminated in its own integrity (Bontekoe, 1996). The researcher becomes part of this circle, moving repeatedly between interpretations of parts and the whole text, representing an emerging understanding of the phenomenon (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). The hermeneutic circle, with its ongoing movement between the parts and the whole, cannot be avoided, as all human understanding is hermeneutically circular (Bontekoe, 1996). Humans appropriate information in a sequential manner and understanding only occurs when we “recognise the significance of the various items we notice – when we recognise the way in which those items relate to each other” (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 2). As depicted in Figure 2.2, experience provides new information which enters the hermeneutic circle and continually adds to the researcher’s understanding. Experience is temporal in nature; information gained from experience is incorporated into the hermeneutic circle (and our understanding of the
object of comprehension) in a piecemeal fashion and at particular points in time (Bontekoe, 1996). It is this process of continually adding new information gained from experience into the hermeneutic circle that leads to the progressive development of new insights and the researcher’s emerging understanding of the phenomenon.

**Figure 2.2 Hermeneutic circle** (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 4)

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### 2.5.3. HERMENEUTIC TEXT CONSTRUCTION

In the first phase, data collection involved conducting literature searches for executive coaching. From that literature I then constructed a set of texts pertinent to my research questions on executive coaching. This included journal articles, books, popular press articles, research reports and conference presentations. I also created a summary table which I used to collate details and my interpretations of the journal articles. This table also was included in the text sets for data analysis.

In constructing a text sets for the literature on executive coaching I believed it was important to search a wide range of databases, recognising the multidisciplinary knowledge bases for coaching. Grant (2007) produced a bibliography on executive, workplace and life coaching that initially included papers from two databases: PsychInfo and Dissertation Abstracts International (DAI), and then in 2009 and 2011 added papers from the Business Source
Premier database (Grant, 2009, 2011). In my research, I accessed multi-subject databases and selected additional databases including: EBSCOhost (a collection of databases including Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, Education Research Complete, E-Journals, ERIC, Health Business Fulltext Elite, Professional Development Collection, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, SocINDEX with Full), SAGE Journals Online, Emerald Complete, Informaworld, SpringerLink, Wiley InterScience, and Psychnfo and DAI. In these database searches I was specifically interested in individual *executive coaching* provided by an external coach, not other forms of coaching such as group/team coaching, life, sports or business coaching, or coaching provided by internal organisational coaches.

I also accessed other material on the web and distributed via email and joined professional associations to receive updates on latest developments, which were added to my text sets. Material accessed via this process included articles from online coaching journals (e.g. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*), reports of research studies engaged by professional associations, newsletters and information such as provided by the International Coach Federation (ICF), practitioner research studies undertaken by companies including the Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership (IECL) and Whyte & Coaches, journals of professional member bodies, such as the Association for Coaching’s journal, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*.

### 2.5.4. **Hermeneutic Text Interpretation**

In the first phase of my research I used approaches informed by the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer. Philosophical hermeneutics assumes that a phenomenon needs to be interpreted to be understood and that this understanding is developed through dialogue. It was an ideal choice for this phase of the research as it gave me the opportunity to deepen my understanding of the executive coaching literature. Phase 1 involved two activities: (1) use of the hermeneutic circle to develop an understanding of the literature on executive coaching; and (2) a dialogue of questions and answers with my constructed text sets of the executive coaching literature and a fusion of my horizons with those in the texts.

a) **Phase 1**

The first activity in Phase 1 was application of the hermeneutic circle in my review of the executive coaching literature. The hermeneutic circle involved repeatedly moving between the parts or aspects of the phenomenon of executive coaching and the whole, with the aim of gaining a greater understanding of coaching. This meant in this part of Phase 1 that I repeatedly returned to the texts (parts), including articles and books, and my emerging interpretation of executive coaching (whole).
The second activity involved constructing a number of text sets from the executive coaching literature containing existing concepts and ways of understanding executive coaching. My goal here was to understand the phenomenon of executive coaching from the horizons of other authors in order to answer and clarify my research questions. I then developed a series of questions that I wanted to ask the texts and entered into a dialogue of questions and answers with the texts. Philosophical hermeneutics was chosen for its ability to deepen my understanding of the literature as presented in the texts and as a tool enabling me to undertake a deeper interpretation of relevant executive coaching literature. The dialogue of questions and answers helped me to clarify what the literature (in the form of the texts) was saying in relation to my research goal and the phenomenon of executive coaching and to identify underlying meanings and assumptions in the literature. Through this process I achieved a fusion of my horizons with those of the text authors. Also arising from the dialogue of the texts was a clarification of my research questions. Palmer (1969) would suggest that it is this dialogue, not dissection, that opens up the world of a piece of literature. In this way, literature is best regarded not as objects of analysis but as humanly created texts which speak. Palmer argues we should view literature not as objects but as a “human voice from the past that must be brought to life” (Palmer, 1969, p. 7).

b) Phase 2

In Phase 2, when I was analysing data from interviews with participant groups, I repeatedly returned to the texts (parts), including recorded interviews, transcripts, logs and field notes arising from interviews with participants, and my emerging interpretation of executive coaching (whole). In this way, as the researcher I became part of the hermeneutic circle, moving repeatedly between interpretations of parts and the whole, representing an emerging understanding of the phenomenon (Paterson & Higgs, 2005).

The phases of the research diagram presented in Figure 2.1 displays what appears to be sequential phases of the study, but the research involved an ongoing and circular process of movement between parts and whole that occurred for the entire duration of the research. This is depicted in Figure 2.3.
Figure 2.3 Application of the hermeneutic circle in this research
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c) **Use of hermeneutic strategies throughout this research**

The philosophical hermeneutic strategies of a dialogue of questions and answers, fusions of horizons and hermeneutic circle, as informed by Gadamer, were used for text interpretation and meaning making in all phases of my research. In such meaning making or knowledge generation, following Gadamer, data is viewed as “text” and researchers bring their interests to the interpretation (Koch, 1996). Understanding is made, not found (Koch, 1996).

I applied key Gadamerian principles in my research approach, as described by Fleming, Gaidys and Robb (2003). For example, I engaged in an ongoing dialogue of questions and answers with my texts in Phases 1 and 2 and also with the overall hermeneutic circle overview of the research. This included the development of research questions at the outset of my research and the ongoing development of text interpretation questions to ask my data. Gadamer suggested that it is questions that lead to an opening up of possibilities for developing an understanding of a phenomenon (Fleming et al., 2003). It is the activity of questioning that leads to understanding.

In my research, understanding appeared through the fusion of horizons of my understandings with those in the texts and those identified by the participants. Fleming et al. (2003) suggested that because understanding depends on the particular historic situation, it is essential to speak with research participants two or three times. I interviewed all participants in Phase 2 of my research twice. This acknowledged that the participants’ understanding of their experience of coaching and my understanding changed over time through our engagement and dialogue. The second interview was necessary with each participant, as I recognised that the first interview transcript captured a historical moment and provided a text through which to engage in further dialogue. I also chose to undertake the interviewing myself and not use other researchers, as I acknowledged that the conversation between me and my participants was an essential part of the interpretive process of the research project. This is consistent with the views of van Manen (1997), who contended that the “gathering” and “reflecting on” elements of the research process are inseparable and should be seen as part of the same process in hermeneutic interviews.

Gadamer suggested that by explicating and periodically reviewing pre-understandings, researchers can enter the hermeneutic circle and remain oriented to the phenomenon (Fleming et al., 2003). At the outset of my research, I identified my pre-understandings in a conversation with a colleague, and these are described in this research report. As they changed during the course of my research, I recorded my thoughts in my analytical log to ensure that I focused actively on these changes as they occurred. As suggested by Fleming et
Also, I also attempted to understand if personal experiences and feelings were influencing my research. My primary method was to record these in my analytical and procedural logs. These logs were my reflexive journals and, as suggested by Koch (1996), such journals are essential for becoming deeply emerged in the hermeneutic circle through recording the researcher’s changing horizons.

The application of the hermeneutic circle in my research involved repeatedly moving between the parts or aspects of the phenomenon of executive coaching, as illuminated in my various texts, and my whole emerging understanding of executive coaching, with the aim of gaining a deeper interpretation of the phenomenon. This is represented in Figure 2.3. This meant in Phase 1 that I repeatedly returned to the texts (parts), including articles and books, and my emerging interpretation of executive coaching (whole). Similarly, in Phase 2, I repeatedly returned to the texts (parts), including recorded interviews, transcripts, logs and field notes arising from interviews with participants, and my emerging interpretation of executive coaching (whole). This was an ongoing, circular process throughout the research.

### 2.6 PHASE 2 – HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY

#### 2.6.1. PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is the science or study of human phenomena. Its origin is attributed to the German mathematician, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who believed that there was nothing more fundamental than experience (Ashworth, 2003) and introduced the concept of “Lebenswelt” (life-world) or “lived experience”. The phenomenology of Husserl focused on the study of this life-world – the world as humans immediately experience it, rather than as they conceptualise, categorise or reflect upon on it (van Manen, 1997). Through this focus on everyday experience, Husserl wanted to provide a foundation for all disciplines (sciences, arts and humanities) by establishing the meaning of their most basic concepts (Ashworth, 2003). He argued that the scientific world was not what people actually experienced, and was critical of psychology for developing abstract and unexamined concepts that were not grounded in experience. In his view, these concepts were therefore seriously lacking in clarity and appropriateness to the subject matter they were intended to reflect. The solution to this problem existed in the Husserlian slogan – ‘return to the things themselves’ (Ashworth, 2003).

Husserl was interested in the way people experience the world, but his primary interest was consciousness, or the way in which people describe events and attach meaning to their experiences (Lawler, 1998). In phenomenology, the individual is viewed as a conscious agent.
whose experience must be studied from the first-person perspective (Ashworth, 2003). Research situations are therefore sought in which individuals have first-hand experiences. In undertaking research, phenomenologists insist on people carefully describing their conscious experience of everyday life (the life-world) – a description of “things” (the essential structures of consciousness) as individuals experience them (Schwandt, 2001). These things include perception (hearing, seeing for example), believing, remembering, deciding, feeling, judging, evaluating, and all experiences of bodily action (Schwandt, 2001). In seeking these descriptions, phenomenological researchers ask questions such as, “What is it like to experience?” (Koch, 1996) and aim to remain as faithful as possible to the phenomenon and the context through which it appears in the world (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

Phenomenology attempts to discern the essence of a phenomenon from the rich, contextual example of the phenomenon as lived by the participant (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). In doing so, proponents seek to understand the very nature of a phenomenon – what makes it what it is and without which it could not be what it is (van Manen, 1997). Phenomenology entails a systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning of structures, of lived experience and in doing so to identify the essence of a phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). Husserl was interested in identifying, naming, and describing these essences and articulating the meanings people associated with them (Lawler, 1998). For Husserl, looking for the essence of an experience in its pure form meant that researchers should screen out distractions, preconceived ideas, assumptions and language. This phenomenological reduction (or “epoche”) entails “bracketing” or suspending what the researcher already knows about the phenomenon (Schwandt, 2001; van Manen, 1997). Husserl’s view was that researchers could apply this kind of reductive process to understanding human experience and, in doing so, achieve a form of objectivity (Lawler, 1998).

### 2.6.2. Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) studied theology before becoming a student of Husserl. Heidegger explored Dilthey’s hermeneutics and the phenomenology of Husserl and developed a method that that could be applied to the study of ontology. For Heidegger, phenomenology was ontology (Crotty, 2003; van Manen, 1997); he was interested in the question, “What does it mean to be?” (Bontekoe, 1996)

Heidegger rejected Husserl’s notions of phenomenology because he believed it was burdened with the categories of natural science, namely the idea of certainty and absolute clarity (Fleming et al., 2003). Heidegger believed that in comparison to nature, a variety of direct experiences existed in consciousness; no experience could be like another and every
experience was unique (Fleming et al., 2003). In this way, Heidegger’s work focused attention on the way people interpreted their experiences of the world and the way they constructed their sense of being in that world (Lawler, 1998). He described the concept of “dasein” or “there being”, which is the individual’s awareness of being and belonging to the world, the availability and use of the world and relating with others (Bontekoe, 1996; Fleming et al., 2003). Part of this “being in the world” is intentionality, and Heidegger believed that intention influenced human interpretation and meaning making (D. L. Smith, 1998).

Heidegger also rejected Husserl’s concept of “bracketing”. According to Heidegger, to approach a phenomenon with no presuppositions (and to bracket them as Husserl advocated), was inadvisable and also impossible (Bontekoe, 1996). Heidegger contended that an interpreter inevitably brings certain background expectations and frames of meaning to bear in the act of understanding and these cannot be bracketed (Koch, 1996). Further, when researchers investigate a phenomenon they inevitably approach it from the standpoint of the tradition in which they have been educated, and these presuppositions can be both insightful and misleading (Bontekoe, 1996). Instead, Heidegger believed that researchers should not try to eliminate preconceptions concerning a phenomenon they are investigating but should become conscious of them and test their legitimacy through an examination of the phenomenon itself (Bontekoe, 1996).

Max van Manen developed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to human science research and writing grounded in the notion of everyday lived experience. In his view, human sciences research is phenomenological because it involves a descriptive study of lived experience (phenomena) in the attempt to enrich the lived experience by finding meaning (van Manen, 1997). In this way, the understanding of lived experience is focused on more than just appearance, but rather on the essence of an experience and that which renders it of special significance. Van Manen suggested that an approach such as phenomenology also offers insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world (and in this instance, executive coaching). This was identified as an ideal fit in the context of my research.

Van Manen (1997) believed that human sciences research is also hermeneutic, because it is the interpretive study of the expressions and objectifications (texts) of lived experience in an attempt to determine the meaning embodied in them. Providing a practical, methodological structure, van Manen (pp. 30-31) proposed that hermeneutic phenomenology consisted of the following six research activities:

- turning to a phenomenon that interests us and commits us to the world
• investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualise it
• reflecting on the essential themes which characterise the phenomenon
• describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting
• maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon
• balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

In exploring the nature of lived experience, van Manen (1997) contended that research is not a disembodied process. Rather, it is undertaken by researchers, in the context of their individual, social and historical life experiences, who set out to understand and make sense of a certain aspect of human existence. Researchers orient themselves to a phenomenon from a particular interest, station or vantage point in life. Van Manen also believed that researchers cannot bracket out or simply forget or ignore what they already know. It is better for researchers to make explicit their understandings, beliefs, theories and assumptions, for example. The nature and scope of a phenomenological project is therefore an interpretation of human experience by a researcher and is only one, possible interpretation. The possibility of other interpretations will always exist.

Van Manen (1997) suggested that hermeneutic phenomenology research is focused on human beings where they are naturally engaged in their worlds and not in artificially or experimentally created test environments as may be employed in the natural sciences. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher is interested in the situation in which the person is embedded and, in this way, human beings can be found as “situated persons” (van Manen, 1997).

In the philosophy of van Manen, hermeneutic phenomenology is fundamentally a writing activity. Research and writing are aspects of one process (van Manen, 1997). Writing is closely fused into the research activity by the reflective nature of writing. In terms of the quality of writing, van Manen referred to the concept of the “phenomenological nod”, identified by the European phenomenologist Frederick Bultendijk as a way of acknowledging a good phenomenological description. In this way, the quality of the description of the phenomenon as portrayed in the research report is something that can be recognised as an experience that we have had, or could have had.

In the second phase I used hermeneutic phenomenology informed by van Manen’s approach. The goal of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to develop a rich or dense description of the phenomenon being investigated in a particular context (van Manen, 1997). This study was designed to understand the nature and experience of the phenomenon of executive
coaching from the perspectives of two participant groups: (1) client executives and (2) executive coaches. Hermeneutic phenomenology is fundamentally a method that researches and presents lived experience and is well suited to investigating the executive coaching experiences of the participant groups in this study. I sought to understand the essence of the lived experience of executive coaching (its nature, characteristics and features), how it came to be that the participants were involved in executive coaching, and their interpretations and meanings of their experience. I interviewed the participants after they had experienced or participated in executive coaching.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is also useful in the context of my research as there is no commonly agreed definition of executive coaching. In this context, Husserl would suggest that coaching (like psychology) may have adopted terms that are not grounded in experience and that may be seriously lacking compared to the subject matter they are intended to reflect (Ashworth, 2003). My research explored the participants’ interpretations of their experience of executive coaching and how they had arrived at some meaning from their experiences. Hermeneutics provided the interpretative aspects and enabled me to reflect interpretations at two levels: the interpretations that participants had made of their executive coaching experiences and also my interpretations of their experiences (Lawler, 1998). This enabled me to draw out of the texts the underlying assumptions and meanings of what the participants had said. The outcomes of the analysis of the findings from Phase 2 are reflected in Chapters Four and Five. In accordance with the outcomes of this type of research (D. L. Smith, 1998), they are descriptive, interpretive texts.

2.6.3. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this research in Phase 2 were two groups in the executive coaching relationship: (1) client executives and (2) executive coaches.

Typically an organisational player in the process of establishing an executive coaching program for client executives is the organisation broker. Initially I considered involving representatives from this group in the study. However, in a preliminary trial of this idea I interviewed four organisation brokers and from their comments (which focused mostly on organisational processes, rather than the experience of coaching) I concluded that the input of brokers would add little to answering the research questions and so excluded them from this study. Similarly, in a hermeneutical study undertaken in Sweden of the ‘buying-in’ processes of executive coaching, Eriksson (2011), found that coaches and coachees were more aligned in their views of coaching, than purchasers. Coaches and coachees emphasised a more personal and holistic individual view of coaching when compared to purchasers who were more focused on results.
tied to company development (Eriksson, 2011). However, future research into the procedures of recruiting client executives for coaching programs, for example, could benefit from involving this organisation broker group.

a) Selection

The method of selecting participants for my research was purposive sampling. This involved choosing information-rich cases (people in relevant situations) for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which a researcher can learn a great deal about the issues of central importance to the research (Patton, 1990). Using this type of sampling, participants are chosen for their relevance to the research questions, analytical framework and explanation being developed in the research (Schwandt, 2001). The development of a set of criteria is important for the selection of participants using this type of sampling (Schwandt, 2001). Criteria were developed for each key group from the outset and are shown in Table 2.2. They explain why particular participants were chosen for this study. Participants were chosen on the basis of having had an experience of executive coaching within the context of the commercial sector chosen for this study.

Table 2.2 Participant selection criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client executives</th>
<th>Executive coaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completed an executive coaching engagement</td>
<td>Professional coach (employee or subcontracted Associate) with the Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership (IECL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with a minimum of 4 executive coaching sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed by a commercial organisation</td>
<td>Located in Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(excluding not-for-profit and government organisations)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Located in Australia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) Recruitment

In Phase 2, organisations that had executive coaching services provided in Australia by the IECL were selected as sites for the recruitment of client executive participants. Although the IECL provides services in other countries (for example Hong Kong, Philippines, India, China), this research was focused only on the experiences of participants located in Australia, for reasons of accessibility as well as comparable socio-cultural backgrounds and workplace characteristics. Future research could explore the experiences of participants in other countries.
For these sites, ethics approval was obtained from the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee. The approved approach was for the IECL to contact potential participants who met my selection criteria, forward details of the project and invite them to participate in my research. The email invitation would include an attached information sheet about my research and my contact details. However, the IECL suggested an alternative approach and, following approval of the variation by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, the IECL provided me with a list potential participants for each group from its database, including name, organisation, and email address and phone numbers. I was then able to contact potential participants directly via email and invite them to participate in the research and provide them with my contact details and a detailed information sheet (see Appendix A and C).

With the client executive details provided from the database of the IECL, I was able to source client executive participants who had experienced executive coaching at some time during the 12 months prior to my first contact with them. This ensured that their experience had been recent enough for them to be able to recall it in sufficient detail for the purposes of this study.

c) Introducing Phase 2 Participants

The participants were from two key groups in the executive coaching relationship: (1) client executives and (2) executive coaches.

Client executives

As presented earlier, client executives were eligible for selection if they had completed a minimum of 4 executive coaching sessions and were employed by a commercial organisation (excludes non-profit and government organisations). Table 2.3 presents the background information for the client executive group at the commencement of data collection. Table 2.4 presents their background information specific to work experience and executive coaching.

Twelve client executives volunteered to participate in my research. Eleven were interviewed twice, with each interview lasting an hour. One was interviewed only once and did not respond to invitations for a second interview. Seven client executive participants were male and five were female. Eight were based in Sydney and four in Melbourne. Only one of the twelve participants did not possess a tertiary degree qualification. Six participants had completed postgraduate qualifications. Participants had an average of 21.3 years of work experience, ranging from 12 to 36 years. They had spent on average 13.6 years in a leadership role, ranging from 2 to 26 years, demonstrating a wide range of experience and various stages of executive development. Advantages of having a range of experience include the richness and depth of

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2 The Committee was assured that I had no power or interest in coercing participation and that all potential participants had the right to refuse involvement in my research.
data obtained and the multiple perspectives illuminating the phenomenon (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). As well, participants were at various stages of their career and life and therefore had different life experiences, aspirations and goals. This diversity also contributes to the richness of data and is a valued aspect of interpretive research (see Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Many of the participants reported needing further development in areas related to their management practice.

Table 2.3 *Client executives*’ background information – general

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Position in company</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Highest qualification earned</th>
<th>Postgrad education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CE1</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>Product Manager</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree/MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE2</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>Head of People and Communications</td>
<td>Finance and Insurance</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree/MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE3</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>Financial Controller</td>
<td>Finance and Insurance</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE4</td>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>Global Procurement Manager</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree/MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE5</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>General Manager/Executive Manager/Partner/Director</td>
<td>Finance and Insurance</td>
<td>Postgraduate diploma</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE6</td>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>Head of Technology</td>
<td>Finance and Insurance</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE7</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>National Manager</td>
<td>Finance and Insurance</td>
<td>Higher School Certificate</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE8</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Property and Business Services (incl. Legal)</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE9</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>Manager, Group Reporting</td>
<td>Finance and Insurance</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE10</td>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Property and Business Services (incl. Legal)</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE11</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>Business Solutions Manager</td>
<td>Retail Trade</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree/MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE12</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>Head of Corporate Affairs</td>
<td>Finance and Insurance</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree/MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.4 *Client executives’* background information – executive coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years of work experience</th>
<th>Years of experience in leadership role</th>
<th>Number of EC sessions</th>
<th>Duration of time of EC (hours)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CE1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(range)</td>
<td>(12-36)</td>
<td>(2-26)</td>
<td>(4-15)</td>
<td>(3-18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were more male *client executive* participants in my research than female. Similarly, in the 2006 Global Coaching Study conducted by PriceWaterhouseCoopers for the ICF, coaches reported the highest proportion of male clients in the following coaching areas: executive (57.0% male), business/organizations (53.9% male), and leadership (49.8% male). This predominance of male executive coaching clients in my study is probably a reflection of the higher proportion of males in senior leadership roles in organisations. It has been estimated that women hold only an estimated 12% of management jobs in private sector organisations in Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2008). However, in the next iteration of the Global Coaching Study conducted in 2011, 53.92% of coaching clients globally were female (52.52% in Australia) (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012b). This could reflect a greater intent of females for undertaking professional development in the form of coaching. It should be noted, however, that the findings from the PriceWaterhouseCoopers studies should be interpreted with caution as they represent all types of coaching undertaken by members of the ICF, not just executive coaching.

In my research, *client executive* participants had experienced an average of 9.3 coaching sessions over an average period of 8.9 months. These averages are consistent with those in an Australian study by Binstead and Grant (2008), in which 28 executive coaches reported an average of 9 sessions and an average duration of their coaching program of 8 months per client. In my research, *client executives* had experienced between 4 and 15 sessions over a
period ranging from 3 to 18 months, illustrating the variation in coaching programs undertaken by individual client executives. This variation was also seen in the research undertaken by Binstead and Grant (2008), with the number of sessions ranging from 3 to 12 and the duration of coaching ranging from 4 to 12 months. For the 12 client executive participants, this coaching program represented their first experience of executive coaching. Future research could usefully explore the experiences of client executives who had participated in several executive coaching programs.

Executive coaches

As presented earlier, executive coaches were eligible for selection if they were professional coaches with the IECL in Australia. The main advantage of a purposive sampling approach from the one coaching organisation was the ease of identification of potential executive coach participants for this study. The executive coach participants had also been trained and undertaken continuing professional development with the IECL, providing for perceived consistency in coaching approach and practice. As coaching remains an unregulated industry in Australia, it is difficult to identify easily professional coaches in the marketplace, particularly for research (see also Binstead & Grant, 2008). In this context, selecting executive coach participants from one coaching organisation (which is also an established coach training organisation) was viewed as a suitable approach. Potential future research could include coaches from other coaching organisations. Table 2.5 presents the background information for the executive coach participant group at the commencement of data collection. Table 2.6 presents the background information specific to work experience and executive coaching. Table 2.7 presents an interpretation of the information specific to executive coaches’ education, qualifications and memberships as obtained from publicly available coach biographies from the IECL website (http://www.iecl.com). It has been presented in a grouped table format to maintain coach anonymity.
**Table 2.5 Executive coaches’ background information – general**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Highest qualification earned</th>
<th>Postgrad education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EC1</td>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>Executive Coach/Facilitator</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree/MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC2</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC3</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>Executive Coach</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree/MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC4</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>Executive Coach</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC5</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>Executive Coach</td>
<td>School Certificate</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC6</td>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>Executive Coach/Facilitator</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC7</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>Executive Coach/Facilitator</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC8</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC9</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>Executive Coach</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree/MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC10</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>Executive Coach</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree/MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC11</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree/MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC12</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>Executive Coach</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.6 Executive coaches’ background information – executive coaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years of work experience</th>
<th>Years of coaching experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EC1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC5</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC8</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC9</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (range)</td>
<td>28.2 (16-40)</td>
<td>8.3 (4-13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2.7 Executive coaches’ education, qualifications and memberships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Education**                     | PhD (Coaching topic area)  
Master of Applied Science (Coaching Psychology)  
Diploma of Transpersonal Coaching  
Certificate of Transformational Coaching  
Master of Education  
Master in Human Resource Management  
Master of Counselling  
Post graduate qualifications in Logistics Management, Government Administration and Finance  
Bachelor of Arts (x4); Bachelor of Arts (Hons) (x2)  
Bachelor of Economics; Bachelor of Economics (Hons)  
Bachelor of Naturopathy  
Graduate Diploma in Counselling  
Diploma of Education (x2)  
Certificate IV in Training and Assessment |
| **Coach specific (and associated) training** | Accredited Coach, Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership (IECL) (x11)  
Level Two Certified Coach, Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership (IECL)  
Graduate, Martin Seligman’s Authentic Happiness Coaching Program  
Executive Coach Training, Moreton Executive Coaching  
Coaching for Performance, Australian Institute of Management (AIM)  
Transpersonal Advanced Coaching, Sir John Whitmore, Institute of Human Excellence (IHE)  
Masterful Facilitation Certificate, Gadria  
Counselling Skills, The Lux College  
Supervision Training (Level Three), Association for Supervision Coaching and Consultancy in Australia and New Zealand (ASCANZ)  
Advanced Supervision Skills, Centre for Supervision Training, UK  
Grove Advanced Facilitation Skills  
Brain Based Learning for Practitioners |
| **360-feedback tools and other diagnostic instruments** | Human Synergistics: Life Styles Inventory™ (LSI) (x5); Leadership Impact™ (L/I); Group Styles Inventory™ (GSI) (x4); Organisational Cultural Inventory™ (OCI); Organisational Effectiveness Inventory™ ( OCI)  
Cultural Transformation Tools (CTT – Values)  
Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) (x3)  
Benchmarks® 360°  
Situational Leadership II  
Belbin Team Roles Accreditation  
Rueven Bar-On Emotional Intelligence Quotient (Bar-On EQ-i)  
Scenario Planning Accreditation  
Certified Meditation Facilitator  
Genos – Emotional Intelligence profiling accreditation (x2)  
Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI) accreditation  
Accredited NLP Practitioner (Advanced)  
DISC Accredited Practitioner |
| **Professional memberships**       | Member, International Coach Federation (ICF) (x6)  
Member University of Sydney Coaching and Mentoring Association (USCMA)  
Member, Australian Institute of Management (AIM) (x3)  
Executive Member, Knowledge Management Community of Practice (actKM)  
Member, Organisational Development Australia (ODA)  
Accredited Member Institute of Arbitrators and Mediators Australia (IAMA)  
Member, Australian Institute of Training and Development (AITD)  
Member, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), UK  
Member of the APS College of Organisational Psychologists  
Registered Psychologist (NSW)  
Member Australian Psychological Society (APS) |
Twelve executive coaches volunteered to participate in my research. Each executive coach was interviewed twice, with each interview lasting an hour. Eight participants were female and four were male. In the Global Coaching Study conducted by PriceWaterhouse Coopers for the ICF in 2011, 67.5% of respondent coaches were female (67.9% in Australia) (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012b). However, as identified earlier and also in Chapter One, it is problematic to generalise from these studies to my own research as it was undertaken with members of the ICF, which represents all types of coaching, not just executive coaching.

In my study, nine executive coaches were based in Sydney; two were based in Melbourne and one in Canberra. Only one of the 12 participants (8%) did not possess a tertiary degree qualification. This is consistent with a study of 28 executive coaches conducted by Binstead and Grant (2008) in which the majority of coaches (93%) were university educated and 7% had completed secondary education only. It is also consistent with a recent study of executive coaches in Australia (n=229) of which 91% were reported to possess a university degree of some sort (Standards Australia, 2011). In my study, five executive coach participants (42%) had completed postgraduate qualifications, which represents a lower figure than the 61% of coaches in the Binstead and Grant (2008) study and 51% of coaches as reported by Standards Australia (2011). The education, qualifications and memberships as detailed in Table 2.7 reflects the diversity in professional backgrounds of those who practise as executive coaches in the marketplace. It also reflects the limited number of practising coaches who are qualified psychologists. In my study, executive coaches had an average of 28.2 years’ work experience, ranging from 16 to 40 years. In my study, executive coaches had an average 8.3 years of coaching experience, ranging from 4 to 13 years, demonstrating a wide range of experience and varying stages of coach development.

2.6.4. DATA COLLECTION METHODS

a) Interviews

The interviews followed a semi-structured format consistent with the recommendations of Minichiello et al. (1995) and Smith and Osborn (2003). Minichiello et al. (1995) advised that the types of interview chosen for research should relate to the assumptions of the chosen theoretical and methodological approach. As my research was interpretive and sought to understand participants’ lived experiences and perspectives of executive coaching, semi-structured interviews were selected as more appropriate than closed, highly structured interviews. That is, the semi-structured interviews allowed for the use of planned questions;

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3 As detailed in Chapter Three, there are only a comparatively small number of executive coaches who are actually qualified psychologists when compared to other professional backgrounds, for example consultants, managers, executives, teachers, salespeople and counsellors (Grant & Zackon, 2004).
follow-up, provoking questions; and opportunities for expanded answers and participant comments.

The interviews were akin to conversations between the participant and me, focusing on the experience and perceptions of participants expressed in their own words (Minichiello et al., 1995). They were used as a means of exploring and gathering the narrative material that was used during analysis to develop a deeper and richer understanding of executive coaching. The interviews also enabled me to focus on the meanings that participants accorded to their experience of executive coaching and facilitated the exploration of, as Burman (1994) suggested, complex issues, contradictions and complexities. The interviews were typically intense and involved. As I was interested in gaining a deep understanding of the participants’ experiences, follow-up interviews were utilised. Consistent with the advice of Smith and Osborn (2003), the interviews lasted for an hour at a time.

Between their two interviews, participants reflected upon issues and topics raised in the first interview and brought these reflections to the second interview. The first part of the second interview was devoted to discussing these reflections.

While the interviews were conversational and flexible, they followed a semi-structured approach to ensure that key topics of interest were discussed. Interview guides were devised for each participant group in Phase 2 of the research. These are included in Appendix B. I used the interview guides to remind myself of the key areas for discussion throughout the interview. In this way, the interview was guided by my list of questions but not dictated by it (following J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003). In preparing for each interview, I re-read the interview guide so that I was familiar with the questions. The use of an interview guide enabled me to occasionally monitor the coverage of my desired topic areas in the conversation while being fully present and concentrating on what the participant had to say (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003). The semi-structured nature of the interview gave me sufficient freedom to explore new issues as they emerged during the discussion. Maintaining this balance between openness and a focus on the research topic is consistent with the views of van Manen (1997) who advised that the art of researchers in a hermeneutic interview is to keep the meaning of the phenomenon open and also to keep themselves (and the research participant) “oriented to the substance of the thing being questioned” (van Manen, 1997, p. 98).

The questions in the interview guides were structured around the research questions. For example, the first interview with participants in Phase 2 related to the nature and purpose of the participants’ experience of executive coaching, focusing on what it had been like for them, what had led them to the coaching, the key phases of their coaching program, key success
factors and perceptions of value. The second interview with participants in Phase 2 focused on the influence of coaching and outcomes, expertise, relationships and roles of the parties involved in their coaching. In developing questions and prompts I focused on encouraging participants to share concrete examples from their experience, rather than theoretical or abstract examples. A common prompt question I asked participants during interview was, “Can you give me an example”?

I practised my interview technique with an experienced researcher. A process of self-reflection after each interview also enabled me to modify and improve my technique and the interview guides on an ongoing basis. I completed a written reflective exercise at the completion of the first round of interviews, that is, the first set of 12 interviews with client executives, detailing what had gone well, key learnings about my technique, and areas for improvement for the next round. Between interviews (following Minichiello et al., 1995), I also made changes to the interview guides to include additional useful information and to include other ideas. I also changed the wording of questions that had proved to be problematic, difficult for participants to understand or when the question was poorly worded. For example, one question I had originally asked was “can you describe the history of your experience with executive coaching”? I found it was more straightforward and less confusing for participants when I asked the simpler question, “What has been your experience of executive coaching”?

In accordance with the recommendations of Smith and Osborn (2003), the interviews were conducted with the participant alone and in an appropriate location. Typically this was an office or meeting room at the participant’s workplace or another suitable location. This allowed interviews to proceed without workplace interruptions. One exception was an interview conducted at the participant’s request in a noisy coffee shop. This was one of the most difficult interviews to conduct due to noise and distractions, and the quality of the digital recording was poorer than any other interview. This meant that I had to undertake a careful review of the transcript to ensure an accurate record.

Interviews with four of the executive coaches were conducted by telephone. Although initially I considered this interview medium less desirable than face-to-face conversations, it was necessary to accommodate the work and travel schedules of those coaches and to obtain their participation in the research. Creswell (2007) suggested that telephone interviews deprive the researcher of important nonverbal cues, but are appropriate when the researcher otherwise lacks direct access to respondents. In my research, having the coach participate in the research was considered more important than the medium utilised. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) suggested that telephone interviews can be used successfully in qualitative projects and
reported that in their experience there was no difference in quality or quantity of data collected. Over the telephone, researchers may not be able to observe visual cues but participants provide verbal cues, such as hesitations and sighs, that can indicate a follow-up question or probe is needed. Conducting telephone interviews can also be seen to have advantages in that the researcher can take notes without distracting interviewees, something that has to be carefully handled in face-to-face interviews which often require the researcher to maintain eye contact (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Sturges and Hanrahan further suggested that, in deciding whether to use telephone interviews, researchers must consider how the technology in question fits in the lives of potential participants. Among executive coaches, many utilise the medium of the telephone for undertaking coaching with their clients. Thus, telephone interviews were not considered problematic for executive coaches who generally would have a high comfort level when discussing sensitive issues over the telephone.

When interviews occurred, client executives had completed their series of executive coaching sessions and executive coaches had completed many coaching engagements with individual executives. This is consistent with the views of van Manen (1997), who suggested that phenomenological reflection is retrospective. A person cannot (readily) reflect on lived experience while living through the experience; reflection about experience always occurs after the experience has occurred.

b) Field Notes and Logs

At the end of each interview, I recorded field notes in my notebook which I subsequently transferred to the analytical and procedural logs on my PC. The procedural log included details relating to participants, timing and location of interviews, and reflective notes on the research experience, circumstances and changes that occurred during data collection and other methodological issues. This procedural log also included a description of the context of interviews, participant and researcher participation, and any impact of contextual issues on the research process. This enabled me, for example when listening to recorded interviews, to “take myself back” to the conversation by reminding me of what was happening at the time the interview occurred. This contextualisation through the use of this type of personal file was suggested by Minichiello et al. (1995).

The analytical log contained my emerging ideas and thoughts in relation to my research questions as the research progressed. An analytical file was also suggested by Minichiello et al. (1995). This formed an ideal journal for me to record emerging thoughts and connections I was making across emerging ideas and to retain a record of my developing interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon of executive coaching over the entire period of my
research. It was, in essence, a living record of my hermeneutic circle reflections and experiences.

2.6.5. **DATA MANAGEMENT METHODS**

The data management methods utilised for my research included the digital recording and transcription of interviews, storage of files, and NVivo software.

a) **Digital Recording**

Interviews were recorded using specialised digital recorders (Olympus WS200, WS300). Two recorders were used, with one operating as a back-up in case of failure. Digital recorders had a number of advantages. The recorders:

- were very small and not intrusive in the interviews. It seemed participants were soon able to relax and forget that the recorder was present, speaking openly and comfortably about their experiences. All participants were advised that at any time they could ask for the recorder to be turned off. No participant chose to do so.

- produced a high quality recording, ensuring that the interviews themselves were clearly audible on play back. This assisted with ease of transcription, maximised accuracy and supported data analysis by ensuring interviews could be easily listened to.

- possessed a large storage capacity (128MB and 256MB), which meant that no interruptions were required to change tapes during the course of interviews, which typically were conducted for an hour. This also meant that I could undertake travel to a number of interviews in one day and not need to download data until the end of the day.

- provided a memory alert warning when the storage capacity was getting low. This meant that there was no loss of data at any stage, as might be associated with cassette tapes running out.

- allowed the recorded files to be easily uploaded via a USB connection to a computer, providing a secure backup copy of the data. As I used a professional transcription service with web access, I could upload my file for transcription immediately. This meant that there was no concern about loss of cassette tape and confidential data in transit or in the mail. It also meant that I could easily maintain a backup of all recordings via my normal computer backup process, without the need for extra equipment such as would be necessary to make copies of cassette tapes.
b) **Transcription**

All interviews were fully and confidentially transcribed by a professional transcription service. I checked all transcribed files for accuracy against the digital recording and made any necessary corrections. Mostly these corrections related to terminology or acronyms used by participants. To maintain the anonymity of research participants, pseudonyms were also inserted into the transcribed files at this point.

Field notes were recorded during and after the interviews in a note pad and I transferred thoughts and ideas into my analytical log regularly (a Microsoft Word file). Interview details (dates, times, locations) were also transferred from my field notes to my procedural log (also a Microsoft Word file). The note pad was also reviewed during data analysis.

Participant background information obtained from the signed consent forms was typed into a casebook in NVivo software maintained on my computer. A casebook is a storage feature in NVivo designed for the keeping of records relating to the research participants, including biographical data.

c) **Storage**

All recorded interview files and transcribed files were maintained electronically in folders on my password-protected computer. Hard copy printouts of transcribed interviews used for data analysis were maintained in a folder for each participant group and stored in locked filing cabinets either at the University site or in my home office. An external hard drive was also maintained for the safe storage of all data. All electronic files were copied as a back-up to this device on a fortnightly basis. This drive was also stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office.

d) **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

As already mentioned, pseudonyms were used for participants in reporting the research to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. In accordance with guidelines provided by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, hard copy files will be stored for 5 years before being destroyed.

e) **NVivo**

Copies of transcribed interview files and tables of participant background information were also imported in NVivo software which was maintained on my password protected computer. NVivo, developed by QSR International, was used as it provided a set of tools for managing the

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4 The Committee indicates that the retention period for research data involving human participants in accordance with the provisions of the State Records General Retention and Disposal Authority (University Records) GDA23 23.6.2. In my study, hard copy records are to be kept for 5 years post-completion.
large amounts of qualitative data and recording, sorting, matching and linking data without
losing access to the source data itself (Bazeley, 2007). NVivo facilitated management of data
and ideas with rapid and ready access, querying of data as part of the ongoing enquiry process,
building of graphic models and easy presentation of data (Bazeley, 2007). The use of a
software package as a tool also supports researchers’ needs to have both closeness to and
distance from their data (Richards, 1998). Researchers are able to have closeness to their data
for familiarity and understanding of subtle differences and distance from their data for
theorising, abstraction and synthesis (Bazeley, 2007).

2.6.6. Phenomenological data analysis
In my research, a systematic method of phenomenological data analysis was used for the
analysis of Phase 2 data, based on the work of Titchen and McIntyre (1993). That phase
included a series of interviews conducted with two groups: (1) client executives and (2)
executive coaches. This method required me as researcher to make explicit and suspend my
personal and theoretical understandings at the outset. This allowed the identification of
participants’ interpretations (first order constructs) before I generated my own abstractions
(second order constructs) drawing on my experience, interpretations and the social sciences
literature discourse. Data was analysed in four discrete stages, as shown in Figure 2.4.

Figure 2.4 Four stages of data analysis (Titchen & McIntyre, 1993)
a) **Stage 1 – first order analysis, second order analysis**

Before commencing analysis, I collated all data for each participant. This included the digital recordings of the interviews, the formatted transcriptions of interviews and also my notes. It also included the biographical data interviewees had provided on their signed consent forms. In preparation for analysis I pasted the transcript data for each participant into a table which contained two additional columns for first order and second order constructs. This provided the necessary space for me to write on printed copies and a hard copy that I could easily carry with me for analysis.

Consistent with the approach of Titchen and McIntyre (1993), first order analysis commenced with me immersing myself in the data. This included listening to how people talked about their activities, going backwards and forwards between the digital recordings, interview transcripts and notes. I found it very useful to copy the digital recordings on to an MP3 player that enabled me to listen to the interviews while walking around the bay near my home. I found this “taking my data for a walk” very helpful. I found that changing my physical outlook enabled me to listen differently and I would hear things that I had not heard before in what participants were saying. Fleming et al. (2003) suggested that in gaining an understanding it is essential not to rely on written transcripts alone but to read while listening to the words on tape. Following the listening activity, I then recorded first order constructs on the printed transcripts, using the participants’ words and phrases to capture the precise detail of what each person was saying. I found this challenging, as often I wanted to summarise what a participant was saying with a word or two from my own vocabulary and experience, but in keeping with the approach it was important to suspend this activity until the development of second order constructs.

Second order constructs were developed by going back to the transcripts and abstracting ideas from each participant’s account. This was where my prior theoretical understandings and interpretations were introduced. At this point, participant stories were retold using my own words in a process of moving away from the conversational everyday language of the interviews to the more formal and exact language of the social sciences (see Titchen & McIntyre, 1993, p. 34). Each transcript was then checked back against these constructs and attempts were made to make sense of the whole.

b) **Stage 2 – generation of themes**

From my repeated reading of the data and the development of second order constructs it became possible to see where constructs, distinctions and concepts were generalisable across all the participants. These common abstractions comprised the themes. It is important to note
it that it was the commonality of second order constructs that was used to generate themes, not the first order constructs, in accordance with Titchen and McIntyre (1993).

At this point, I also entered the data into NVivo software. I used the development of first and second order constructs as a means of working with the data before starting to code it in NVivo. In doing so, I was mindful of the experience of Angie Titchen as described by Titchen and McIntyre (1993), in which she had moved to coding and imposing a thematic structure too early. I believed I needed to generate themes first before coding data, to ensure that these themes were emerging from the data rather than from what might have been my own pre-determined structure. This was important to ensure that I saw the executive coaching experience through the eyes of the participants rather than through my eyes as a researcher or “before bringing the mind of the social scientist into play” (Titchen & McIntyre, 1993, p. 45).

As I worked with the data, NVivo allowed me to identify quotes related to the themes, to critique the robustness of my emerging themes based on the richness of the data, and to check for ideas and potential themes not yet identified. The themes that emerged are detailed in my findings chapters, Chapters Four and Five.

c) **Stage 3 – elaboration of themes and their relationships**

The next stage involved the activities of expanding on my understanding and depth of each of the themes generated in previous stage. I also explored potential relationships between the themes. The concepts were elaborated by writing a memo in NVivo and also by including a table of themes and explaining each theme in a Microsoft Word file. The memo feature in NVivo provides a space to record reflections, thoughts and ideas as one works through documents and, as suggested by Bazeley (2007), the use of “reflective memos” supports the ongoing process of analysis that occurs during the research project.

d) **Stage 4 – testing out the themes, generalisation**

Consistent with the phenomenological approach of Titchen and McIntyre (1993), the theoretical framework was developed after all data collection and analysis had been completed, and was generated from the themes that had emerged from the research.

In my research, some preliminary data analysis was completed at the end of data collection with each group: (1) **client executives** and (2) **executive coaches**. As this research explored the phenomenon of executive coaching from the perspectives of these two groups, it was considered important to collect data from these two groups in separate activities and to undertake some preliminary data analysis on each data set. This enabled me to make some early comparisons between the two groups during the field-work phase, allowing some
emerging themes (which differed between groups) to be built into an emerging picture over time, and also to highlight and explore the relationships between them. It was a process of “testing out” themes as they emerged. Titchen and McIntyre (1993) also suggested that this type of approach might be helpful to fill gaps or test out hypotheses. I recognised that the full picture would not be available until all data had been collected. At the completion of all data collection (with both groups) it was appropriate to undertake data analysis on the full data set. During this process, I was able to test out the emerging themes and refine them or change them where necessary in light of what had emerged from the full data set.

2.7 ENSURING QUALITY IN THIS RESEARCH

Quality criteria of validity, reliability and empirical generalisability that are applied to empirico-analytical research are not applicable to interpretive research because of the different philosophical frameworks, approaches, sampling and goals of this type of research (Kitto et al., 2008). According to Côté and Turgeon (2005), researchers cannot and should not evaluate research undertaken in different paradigms in the same manner. Koch and Harrington (1998) have argued that “borrowing” evaluation criteria from one paradigm and applying it to another is problematic. Koch (1996) recommended that for research in the interpretive paradigm, researchers need to decide or develop the most appropriate criteria for each study; they must show how the study addresses the issues of quality and rigour and it is for the reader to decide if the study is believable. For this study, on the basis of my review of the literature on research quality, I selected credibility, rigour and ethical conduct as criteria.

2.7.1. CREDIBILITY

Credibility implies that the research and findings can be believed or trusted (Higgs, 2009). In interpretive paradigm research, aspects of credibility include authenticity, plausibility, trustworthiness (Paterson & Higgs, 2005) and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; J. A. Maxwell, 2005). These were considered important areas for ensuring quality in my research.

a) Authenticity

Silverman (2001) suggested that authenticity rather than reliability is a key issue in qualitative research, as the aim is to obtain an “authentic” understanding of participant experiences. Authenticity refers to the degree to which participants’ understandings have been adequately represented (Higgs & Adams, 1997). In Silverman’s view, the use of open questions is the most appropriate way to achieve this during data collection. In my research, I used open questions at interview wherever possible, also using a funnelling approach as suggested by Smith (1995).
This involved starting the interview with general questions designed to prompt the participant to talk about the subject and then using more specific questions when the participant was “warmed up” and rapport had been established. Importantly, this ensured that I allowed participants to give their views first and share their experience, before focusing on my prior and specific concerns and interests (J. A. Smith, 1995).

Authenticity is also important in terms of the writing produced as an outcome of my research. The writing must contain elements or strategies that enable readers of the research to make the connections with participants’ experiences ideas and voices (D. L. Smith, 1998). Guba and Lincoln (2005) referred to this as a form of “fairness” whereby all stakeholder views, perspectives and voices are appropriately reflected in the text. All voices that have been included in the inquiry effort should be represented in “any texts and to have had their stories treated fairly and with balance” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 207).

b) **Plausibility**

Plausibility is concerned with whether the findings “fit” the data from which they were derived (Sandelowski, 1986). This was addressed in my research by providing sufficient transparency in method and findings to enable readers to critique evidence provided to support the conclusions and to assess the adequacy of the research (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). Koch (2006) termed this process *auditability*. Koch suggested that a “decision trail” is essential, whereby the research explicitly discusses decisions taken about the theoretical, methodological and analytic choices throughout the study. This chapter has detailed the decision points in this study. During the research process, field notes and analytical and procedural logs were my method of recording decisions and actions. Mays and Pope (2000) proposed that research reports should include sufficient data to allow readers to judge whether the interpretation is adequately supported by data. This was my intent for Chapters Three, Four and Five, which contain the findings of this research.

c) **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is concerned with confidence that the quality of the information provided in the research is accurate and reflects reality (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998). To ensure the trustworthiness of my research, I presented my findings and emerging model for critique by peers and leaders in the field of executive coaching at conferences.

I undertook to ensure the trustworthiness of my research by sharing my findings with others. This activity is similar to the form of *peer debriefing* as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which is an important technique for establishing credibility. It is described as a process of exposing the researcher’s ideas and strategies to a peer for the purpose of exploring aspects of
the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the researcher’s mind. At all stages in my research I presented my emerging findings regularly to my PhD peer group, the Community of Higher Degree Students Optimising Research and Training Studies (COHORTS) at Charles Sturt University. These sessions were particularly valuable in critiquing all aspects of my research method, as well as my emerging findings. I also presented at conferences and published in journals of professional associations that were interested in executive coaching or interpretive research. Further details are provided in the thesis section, Publications Related to this Research. For example, I presented at the Charles Sturt University’s Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE) Action Research and Professional Practice Conference, 2008; and the Catalyst Australasian Executive Coaching Summit, 2008. Feedback from these presentations was recorded in my analytical log and incorporated into my data analysis. Findings from my research and my research approach were found trustworthy by attendees. Some items of feedback related to research design and were not actioned, for example the suggestion provided by an attendee at the Australian Institute of Training and Development (AITD) National Conference, 2008 that I extend my current study to incorporate representatives from public sector organisations. This was acknowledged as an area of possible future research.

As I undertook analysis of data in Phase 2 of this study it became apparent that learning related theory and concepts were relevant to participants’ executive coaching experiences and my research. I extended my presentations to learning-related conferences in 2008 including the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Transforming Futures Conference and the 11th International Conference of Experiential Learning. These sessions confirmed that adult learning and experiential learning were topics that were relevant to my research.

d) **Transferability**

Transferability is an issue for consideration in quality interpretive research. Interpretive research does not seek to make claims about the generalisable nature of findings, as is common in the empirico-analytical paradigm. Interpretive researchers often study a single setting, a smaller number of individuals, and use techniques such as purposive sampling that do not aim to be representative of a larger population (J. A. Maxwell, 2005). This was certainly the case in my study, which used purposive sampling to select groups of client executives and executive coaches. Joseph Maxwell suggested that although “external” generalisability beyond the setting or group of the study might not be relevant to qualitative or interpretive research, “internal” generalisability is appropriate. This refers to the generalisability of the conclusion

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5 See the section in this thesis, ‘Publications related to this research’ for details.
within the setting or group studied. Instead of permitting the precise extrapolation of results to defined populations as in empirico-analytical research, interpretive research relies on consumers of the research to make their own assessments of the transferability to their context. A number of authors have argued that the researcher must describe the original context adequately and transparently so that a judgement about transferability can in fact be made by the readers of the research (Higgs, 2009; Mays & Pope, 2000) and other researchers can use the information to design and implement further research (Higgs, 2009). My research aimed to provide adequate information about the process and context of the study for the findings to be critiqued and reviewed for transferability to other settings by executives, executive coaches, organisations, providers of coaching services, and other researchers.

2.7.2. Rigour
The term “rigour” in the interpretive paradigm has a very different meaning from that in the empirico-analytical paradigm, where it is commonly related to reliability and validity (Koch, 1996). Van Manen (1997) suggested that the term “rigour”, meaning “hardness” or “stiffness”, has been applied in empirico-analytical research to reflect an attitude that research is focused on hard-data, is strict and is not compromised by subjectivity. Paterson and Higgs (2005) proposed that rigour in interpretive research relates to the manner in which the research is undertaken and reported. Smith (cited in Higgs & Adams, 1997, p. 88) portrayed rigorous interpretive research as a “consistent, systematic enquiry”. This consistency or congruence deals with the appropriateness of match between method and phenomenon and between method and research paradigm (Higgs & Adams, 1997). Research design that demonstrates the rigour of congruence also has enhanced credibility. The design of my research is illustrated in Figure 2.5. This chapter illustrates my pursuit of rigour in my chosen research strategies.

Different paradigms yield different types of knowledge and the research question should be a major factor in the paradigm selected (Higgs & Adams, 1997). As portrayed in Figure 2.5, my research sought to understand the human phenomenon of executive coaching, and the interpretive paradigm and the interpretive research approaches of philosophical hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology were chosen as a matter of congruence or fit between these factors. Methods of data collection were aligned to these approaches and included semi-structured interviews. Data analysis used both hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches. The research questions were the starting point of my research, as proposed by Crotty (2003) and Higgs and Adams (1997), and are therefore presented in the centre of Figure 2.5. As advised by Côté and Turgeon (2005), research questions must be clearly stated, flow logically from the issue and be relevant to interpretive research.
Figure 2.5 Research design (adapted from Higgs copyright 1998 cited in Higgs & Llewellyn, 1998)

Primary Research Question:
What is the nature and experience of executive coaching?

Secondary Research Questions:
1. What is executive coaching?
   a) How is executive coaching emerging as a concept?
   b) How is executive coaching emerging as a practice?
2. How do client executives and executive coaches experience executive coaching?

Research Approaches

Philosophical Hermeneutics (PH) & Hermeneutic Phenomenology (HP)

Research Quality
Credibility (authenticity, plausibility, trustworthiness, transferability); rigour; ethical conduct

Text Construction & Data Collection
PH: Development of text sets
HP: Interviews; participant reflection, field notes, logs

Data Interpretation & Analysis
PH: Dialogue of Q&A; fusion of horizons; hermeneutic circle
HP: 4 stage phenomenological analysis
Methodological congruence also extends to the writing of the research. The writing style needs to match the overall research approach. The writing should reflect the methodology used (Higgs & Adams, 1997). Indeed, it is through the phenomenological writing that the reader gains access to the phenomenon which is described. This means the writing must be concrete in describing the world of the familiar but it also needs to make the “familiar strange”, so that readers can experience the rich texture of the everyday phenomenon being described (Delamont, 1992). In my research, I attempted to write thick, rich descriptions of participants’ experiences that used descriptive words, provided examples, and portrayed emotions and feelings to illuminate the facets of the phenomenon of executive coaching and to portray participant voices. My aim was to increase readers’ understanding of the phenomenon by using the style qualities described by Smith (1998): “concreteness” in describing the familiar; “evocativeness” to draw out the sounds, colours and feelings of the experience; “tonalism” to describe feelings; and “intensification” through the thickening of language and use of imagery.

Koch (1996) contended that presenting multiple data sources contributes to the rigour and trustworthiness of the research process. Mays and Pope (2000) suggested that this is a way of ensuring comprehensiveness in qualitative research. In my research, data was collected from a range of sources, including literature searches, interviews with participants, field notes, and analytical and procedural logs, to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of executive coaching. This approach is sometimes termed “triangulation” a term that was rejected by Richardson and St Pierre (2005) in favour of “crystallisation” for interpretive research. A triangle represents a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. This notion does not fit well with the multiple constructed realities valued in the interpretive paradigm (Barbour, 2001). A crystal is a prism that grows and changes. Crystals contain an infinite variety of shapes, substances and angles and cast off a variety of different colours, patterns and arrays (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). What is seen depends on where the viewer is situated. Interpretive research enables a research question to be examined from various angles (like a crystal) and “harnesses exceptions”. In the overall design of my research, I used two different participant groups and completed the study using two research phases, deploying a range of strategies at each. This enabled me to view the phenomenon of executive coaching from different perspectives, which added to my emerging interpretation.

A number of authors have suggested that attending to “negative cases” is important in ensuring rigour in interpretive research (Kitto et al., 2008; Mays & Pope, 2000), rather than negating or excluding them. These are cases that contradict the researcher’s overall explanatory account of the phenomena (Kitto et al., 2008) and that help to refine the analysis until it can explain the majority of cases under scrutiny (Mays & Pope, 2000). This was applied
in my research by inviting a range of participants to be involved in the research without any consideration or pre-qualification of their experience as favourable or unfavourable. I was careful in my questioning during interview to assume a neutral stance in terms of valuing experiences. I then focused carefully on negative cases as they emerged and sought to understand them carefully and deeply.

### 2.7.3. Ethical Conduct

Higgs (2009) suggested that it can be easily argued that all research needs to be conducted ethically. All participants in my research consented voluntarily and without coercion and signed consent forms. They were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time; two participants chose not to attend a second interview. Participants were also fully informed about the research and were provided with a detailed information sheet about the project before agreeing to be involved. Details are provided in Appendix C.

Ethical conduct in my research also included being concerned about any potential negative impacts to participants from involvement in my study. I did not anticipate that asking the research participants questions relating to their reflections and experience of executive coaching or their perception of the impacts of coaching would cause them any upset or harm. However, access to an independent counsellor was provided in case any participant had emotions or deep feelings arising from being reminded of the experience. None of the participants reported any negative effects of being involved in my research.

One area that I identified as important in my research in terms of ethical conduct was ensuring that the research activities were respectful of the other demands, employment and activities of research participants who were busy client executives and executive coaches. This meant that interviews were conducted in a reasonable time frame of no more than an hour. In one instance, the first interview with a participant was split into two shorter interviews of 30 minutes’ duration to support the participant’s needs and requirements. Participants were each interviewed no more than twice. It also meant that although I had developed an intended plan for data collection interviews, timeframes altered due to the availability of research participants. For example, if a participant was working towards a major deadline or travelling overseas, I waited (e.g. until the following month) to obtain a time for interview.

Maintaining confidentiality is another major ethical concern of interpretive research because of the personal nature of the research and the questions that are asked (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Confidentiality was maintained in my research through the use of pseudonyms for all participant groups and ensuring that access to storage and data was available only to me as
the researcher and to my research supervisors. Wherever possible, I removed specific contextual details that might have identified participants or their organisations.

2.8 CONCLUSION

The interpretive paradigm was selected for my research. The research was conducted in two phases using the approaches of philosophical hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology, informed by the work of Gadamer (1975) and van Manen (1997) respectively. The first approach involved text construction and interpretation. The methods of data collection in the hermeneutical phenomenological study included in-depth interviews, participant reflection, field notes and researcher reflexive journals (logs), and data analysis was undertaken using the four stages of phenomenological analysis, informed by Titchen and McIntyre (1993). Quality criteria of credibility, rigour and ethical conduct were applied to my research.
CHAPTER THREE: A HERMENEUTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE EXECUTIVE COACHING LITERATURE

'And how many hours a day did you do lessons?' said Alice...
'Ten hours the first day,' said the Mock Turtle: 'nine the next, and so on.'
'What a curious plan!' exclaimed Alice.
'That's the reason they're called lessons,' the Gryphon remarked:
'because they lessen from day to day.'

— Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, 1865

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the first of three chapters that present findings from my research. This chapter details the findings of a study conducted in Phase 1 and provides my interpretations of the current knowledge, theory and research as it relates to nature and experience of executive coaching. Consistent with my chosen research approach of philosophical hermeneutics for Phase 1 (as described in Chapter Two), I constructed text sets relevant to my research questions from the executive coaching literature. I utilised three main hermeneutic strategies (fusions of horizons, hermeneutic circle and a dialogue of questions and answers) to interpret these texts. These strategies helped me to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of executive coaching from the horizons of other authors, to deepen my understanding of these literature texts and to identify underlying meanings and assumptions in the texts. The hermeneutic processes utilised in Phase 1 of my research are explained in section 3.2.

In structuring my findings in this chapter, I adopt the strategy of providing a summary of my interpretations and critical evaluation of each topic in the body of this chapter and also, where appropriate, including selected detailed reports of my interpretation and analysis in relevant appendices.¹ This strategy has enabled me to (1) demonstrate the depth of my interpretation and critical analysis of the literature, (2) illustrate the extensive text sets that have been constructed and interpreted in this research and (3) maintain the ease of readability of this chapter.

Findings in this chapter are presented in two sections: Section A and B.

¹ These appendices provide a reference for readers wishing to explore a particular topic in more detail.
Section A explores the literature that relates to the nature, history and evolution of executive coaching. It examines how executive coaching is defined, its purpose(s), its history, how it has emerged, how it has been researched and how it is currently practised. The chapter critically evaluates the influence of psychological theory in the executive coaching literature and the models and values of this discipline that are frequently (and unquestioningly) applied to executive coaching.

Section B examines the experience of executive coaching as portrayed in the literature. The argument in this section is that development of a deeper and richer understanding of executive coaching as a new phenomenon requires exploration of the actual experience of those who directly participate in it, that is, the executive coaches (who provide coaching services) and also their clients. Section B highlights the importance and value of interpretive research, specifically phenomenological research, for providing insights into the nature, processes, practices and outcomes of executive coaching.

3.2 HERMENEUTIC PROCESSES

In this section, I justify my selection of the executive coaching literature and the construction of text sets for interpretation in my research. I also explain how I utilised the core hermeneutic strategies of fusions of horizons, hermeneutic circle and a dialogue of questions and answers to interpret my constructed text sets and to produce the findings presented in this chapter.

The overall methodology of philosophical hermeneutics and its application to my research was detailed in Chapter Two. Undertaking the hermeneutic study conducted in Phase 1 of my research involved several practical steps:

- determining the appropriate scope of literature that is necessary to answer the research questions and then constructing meaningful text sets for this study.
- reading in-depth the whole text set and critically appraising and interpreting each item of text using the hermeneutic strategies identified in section 3.2.2, contributing to my emerging interpretation of executive coaching.
- identifying major answers to the research questions and presenting these interpretations in the research findings report that is contained in this chapter.
3.2.1. Justification for my literature selection and text construction

As outlined in Chapter One, the knowledge base of executive coaching has emerged from a wide range of disciplinary areas, with little agreement on a common body of knowledge. Executive coaching knowledge and practice are often described as “eclectic” (Kilburg 1996a; Brock 2008). As argued later in this chapter, this lack of consensus and diversity in the types of knowledge and approaches applied to executive coaching practice is a product of the diverse professional backgrounds of executive coaches who have entered the field from a wide variety of former disciplines. Each of these executive coach practitioners brings a unique set of knowledge to their practice of executive coaching and this knowledge is gained from their individual practice experience and from the theoretical underpinnings of their former discipline(s). For example, psychology, business, sports, adult learning and philosophy are understood to be some of the primary disciplinary areas applied to executive coaching practice, reflecting the vast diversity in backgrounds of executive coaches.

In undertaking my research into this emerging field and “eclectic” (Kilburg 1996a; Brock 2008) practice of executive coaching, it was important that I identified the appropriate scope and focus of my literature study. I made a decision from the outset to identify and construct texts from the executive coaching field of literature and not to investigate the many potential and historical underpinning domains of knowledge. There were a number of reasons for my decision.

First, I identified that it was beyond the realm of my thesis to explore the extensive breadth of literature from all of the areas of knowledge underpinning executive coaching practice. To review the encyclopaedic knowledge of these disciplines would have been unmanageable and impractical. My decision was informed by the work of van Manen (1990) who proposed that in making any human science research more manageable it is helpful for researchers to narrow their focus to an identifiable and manageable topic or question. Further, as argued later in this chapter, when I commenced my research in 2008 the emerging executive coaching literature (while still growing in volume and evolving), had reached a substantive stage of development, subsuming and integrating its underpinning fields of knowledge. The executive coaching literature and published knowledge base had reached a point of maturation that enabled me to construct a text set directly from this literature that were relevant to my research topic and questions. See Table 3.1.

Second, my selection of the executive coaching literature was congruent with my overarching research question: What is the nature and experience of executive coaching? It was also congruent with my secondary research question: How do client executives and executive
coaches experience executive coaching? The focus of my research in Phase 2 was on the experience of executive coaching from the perspectives of the two primary parties who engage in it i.e. client executives and executive coaches. Therefore the executive coaching literature (especially that which explored the experience and practices of executive coaching) was most relevant to my research. For example, my interpretation of the constructed text set of the 11 existing phenomenological studies of the experience of executive coaching (see later in this chapter) was a highly suitable point of comparison and critical evaluation in light of my research in Phase 2, the experiential study.

Third, my decision to focus on texts from the executive coaching literature was methodologically congruent with my chosen research paradigm and research approach. My literature review was not a traditional literature review conducted prior to data collection, but rather an integral part of my research process undertaken as a hermeneutic study conducted as Phase 1 of my research. Further, the interpretation produced from my hermeneutic interpretation of the executive coaching literature (in Phase 1) and from the hermeneutic phenomenological interviews (conducted in Phase 2), were included in the final integrative stage of my research. This process ultimately resulted in the products of my research, including my emergent three-part model of executive coaching presented in Chapter Six.

3.2.2. Text Interpretation Strategies

This section details the text interpretation strategies employed in Phase 1, the hermeneutic study. The strategies used were: fusion of horizons, hermeneutic circle interpretation and dialogue of questions and answers.

The fusions of horizons strategy involved examining the horizons of authors as presented in the literature and comparing these to my evolving horizon and emerging interpretation of executive coaching. In my research, fusion of horizons was linked to the cyclical process of the hermeneutic circle\(^2\), whereby I examined each literature text (part) in depth and then progressively incorporated my understanding of that text into my emerging interpretation of the (whole) phenomenon. Iteratively, I reviewed and added each text interpretation in a continuing process. In this way, the fusion of horizons in my study occurred through a progressive blending of each of the horizons of various authors into my developing picture or horizon as the researcher.

Hermeneutic strategies were applied intensively to the literature over a three-year period (and throughout my entire research journey)\(^3\) and involved a detailed reading of executive coaching

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\(^2\) See Figure 2.2 in Chapter Two.

\(^3\) See Figure 2.3 in Chapter Two.
texts, the ongoing testing of my emerging interpretations and the critical appraisal and reinterpretation of the whole. My interpretation was focused through the lens of my primary research question: What is the nature and experience of executive coaching? However, also embedded in my approach was a dialogue of questions and answers strategy. This involved creating a list of text interpretation and foci questions relevant to my research questions. These questions were used in a dialogue with the texts to critically evaluate and deepen my understanding of the executive coaching literature. These questions are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Dialogue of questions and answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructed Text Set</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the nature of executive coaching? (What is it?)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of executive coaching</td>
<td>How is executive coaching defined and conceptualised? What approaches are used to define executive coaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose/types of executive coaching</td>
<td>What are the purposes and uses of executive coaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of executive coaching</td>
<td>What is the history of executive coaching? How has executive coaching emerged?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive coaching research and publications</td>
<td>How has the published knowledge base and research in executive coaching developed? What research has been undertaken into executive coaching? What are the key foci of the research, theoretical and practice-based literature on executive coaching? How can these foci be understood/explained in the context of this emerging field?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the experience of executive coaching? (How is it experienced?)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenological studies of the experience of executive coaching</td>
<td>How is executive coaching is experienced by coaches and clients? What insights into executive coaching do phenomenological studies of the experience offer? How is phenomenological research, alongside the dominant tradition of psychological and empirico-analytical research in executive coaching, contributing to a broader and deeper understanding of the knowledge base needs and the current practices and future directions of executive coaching?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My adoption of the reflexive strategies of hermeneutics was important in ensuring the quality of my research, recognising that I was both a researcher and practising coach (“insider”). The practical use of my analytical and procedural logs as reflexive researcher journals enabled me

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4 See Chapter Six for my evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of being an “insider” in my research.
to remained oriented to the phenomenon and to recognise if personal feelings and experiences were influencing my research (see Chapter Two). I maintained these logs in Microsoft Word files and used them as the central place to record my thoughts, interpretations and emerging horizon as I was reading and dialoguing with texts. The maintenance of an electronic file format was very convenient and practical, enabling me to easily search and review my journal entries throughout the research. For example, I was able to easily access and revisit my initial “pre-understandings”\(^5\) which I had documented at the outset of my research as I had recorded these in my analytical log file. In the same way the use of reflective memos was an important means of recording my thoughts and interpretations when reviewing my interview data in NVivo software in Phase 2 (see Chapter Two), my researcher logs provided me with a similar electronic journal format for recording my evolving horizon while I was reading and interpreting executive coaching texts in Phase 1.

SECTION A: THE NATURE, HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

3.3 TERMINOLOGY

There are many conceptualisations and definitions of the types of coaching that takes place within business and organisational contexts (Ellinger et al., 2003; Hamlin et al., 2008; Standards Australia, 2011). Several terms are used in the literature, often interchangeably, and applied across a range of different activities. For example, executive coaching is sometimes called leadership coaching (D. Anderson & M. Anderson, 2005; Ely et al., 2010), workplace coaching (McComb, 2009), business coaching (A. Maxwell, 2009), development coaching (Clutterbuck, 2008; Grant et al., 2010b) and a number of other terms.

For the purposes of this thesis I have chosen the term *executive coaching*. I am interested in executive coaching as a learning and development process conducted by executive coaches from outside organisations and experienced by individuals within organisations who may or may not be employed in a formal “executive” position per se. This approach rejects the assumption made by other researchers (for example McCleland, 2005) that executive coaching is used to address the development needs of those at the top of the organisational ladder only (and not other members of an organisation). In this way, I am reflecting the progression of executive coaching from an early history as primarily a remedial intervention, focused on fixing “toxic behaviour at the top” and dealing with poor performers, to a practice of developing the capabilities of high-potential performers throughout the entire organisation (see Bono et al.,

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\(^5\) See Chapter One for further information.
This is an important distinction for investigating executive coaching as it is currently practised today.

The other area of debate relates to who is considered the “client” in executive coaching. In some coaching situations, the organisation is viewed as the client and the executive coach is expected to report to a supervisor, HR representative or some other company representative (Berman & Bradt, 2006). In such three- or four-cornered contracting scenarios (Standards Australia, 2011), all stakeholders comprise the coaching relationship, and aspects such as reporting, trust and confidentiality must be managed carefully. This is typically portrayed as a triangular relationship, an example of which can be seen in Figure 3.1.

In other coaching assignments, however, the individual executive is the sole client. To make this distinction and avoid confusion, some authors in the literature refer to the individual directly receiving the service as the “coachee” (Standards Australia, 2011) or the “coaching counterpart” (Tooth et al., 2013). For the purposes of the hermeneutic phenomenological study conducted in Phase 2 of my research, the specific term client executive is used to refer to the participants who are the direct recipients of executive coaching. In this chapter based on current literature, the terms “client” and “executive” are used interchangeably to describe the direct recipient of coaching services (as opposed to the organisation). This is an important clarification in my research, as the primary relationship that is developed between the coach and the client is fundamental to the learning process that occurs in executive coaching and is also critical to its overall success.

**Figure 3.1 Stakeholders in executive coaching** (Rosinski, 2003, p. 50)
3.4 DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

There is no agreed definition of executive coaching in the literature and there is ongoing debate about the nature of coaching and its limits and boundaries (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). One reason for this lack of consensus around a definition of executive coaching may relate to the relatively recent introduction of the practice of executive coaching. Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) proposed that various definitions of executive coaching began to emerge in the literature around the year 2000. Further, it is acknowledged that the task of definition is difficult, especially for an emerging field such as executive coaching, and that definitions evolve and change over time (Standards Australia, 2011).

There are four main ways in which authors have attempted to define and conceptualise executive coaching. These include defining executive coaching by (1) using broad or general descriptive terms, (2) comparing it to other types of coaching, (3) comparing it to other (employee) development activities, and (4) emphasising the system and organisational context in which it occurs. Each of these is considered briefly in this section. I then highlight the problems associated with each approach and at the end of this section I support my decision not to adopt any of these existing definitions from the literature as a basis for my research. My detailed hermeneutical analysis of the literature that compares executive coaching to other development activities is provided in Appendix D.

a) General definitions

First, authors have provided very broad descriptions that attempt to encompass the full range and diversity of coaching practice. For example, executive coaching was defined by Tobias (1996, p. 88) as encompassing “virtually any useful intervention that the consultant [coach] may do”. This recognises that the term executive coaching has been applied in organisations to a wide variety of activities geared towards improving staff relations and/or performance (Garman et al., 2000). While general definitions encapsulate the diversity of models and approaches used in executive coaching (and the breadth of executive coaching practice as described in the literature), they are unsatisfactory as they do not effectively differentiate coaching from other practices. Stern (2004) argued that executive coaching needs to be defined using a comprehensive approach that focuses on understanding what coaching is and how it is similar to (and different from) other activities.

b) Comparative conceptualisations—other types of coaching

Second, authors have attempted to differentiate executive coaching from other types of coaching (e.g. business and life coaching). This approach is predicated on the assumption that
different types of coaching have novel or distinguishing characteristics. This approach has also proven problematic, as it appears that there are more similarities than differences between the different types of coaching. For example, Grant (2005) differentiated executive coaching from the personal issues focus and non-workplace context of “life coaching”. However, research undertaken by Sparrow (2007) suggested that life coaching is being procured and practised within workplaces, making this distinction from executive coaching less defensible. Further, to be effective, executive coaches must also address the personal when coaching on professional and business related issues (Cavanagh & Grant, 2004), and a holistic focus on the client (as a person) is an inevitable and essential aspect of the practice of executive coaching.

In a study Hamlin et al. (2008), substantial commonality (and few differences) were found between composite definitions of coaching, executive coaching, business coaching and life coaching in the literature (see Table 3.2). Executive coaching is seen to uniquely assist individuals to acquire new skills, although Hamlin et al. (2008) argued that this is also a core purpose of contemporary human resource development (HRD) practice and is not an exclusive characteristic of executive coaching per se. The processes common to all four types of coaching identified by these authors included providing help to individuals and organisations through some form of “facilitation” activity and a holistic focus on development (Hamlin et al., 2008). Executive and life coaching were both viewed as utilising a one-to-one helping relationship.

Table 3.2 Composite definitions of the different types of coaching (Hamlin et al., 2008, p. 295)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories/variants</th>
<th>Derived unified perspectives/composite conceptualisations of coaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>is designed to improve existing skills, competence and performance, and to enhance their personal effectiveness or personal development or personal growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive coaching</td>
<td>is a process that primarily (but not exclusively) takes places within a one-to-one helping and facilitative relationship between a coach and an executive (or a manager) that enables the executive (or manager) to achieve personal-, job- or organisational-related goals with an intention to improve organisational performance. is a helping and facilitative process that enables individuals, groups/teams and organisations to acquire new skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business coaching</td>
<td>is a collaborative process that helps businesses, owners/managers and employees achieve their personal and business-related goals to ensure long-term success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life coaching</td>
<td>is a helping and facilitative process – usually within a one-to-one relationship between a coach and a client, which brings about an enhancement in the quality of life, and personal growth of the client, and is possibly a life-changing experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 These composite definitions were developed from a total of 37 published definitions.
7 HRD is defined as a process of developing and unleashing expertise for the purpose of improving individual, team, work process and organisational system performance (Swanson & Holton, 2009). See Glossary for more details.
c) **Comparative conceptualisations – other development activities**

Third, authors have attempted to differentiate coaching from other helping or developmental activities (including consulting, training, mentoring and counselling/therapy). This is certainly the most popular way that authors have attempted to define executive coaching. However, the literature is confusing as descriptions of the similarities and differences between coaching and other functions appear to vary from one author to another (based on their individual interpretations) and there is little consistency and agreement (see Appendix D for a detailed analysis). The most cited argument is that executive coaching can be distinguished from counselling and psychotherapy by its focus on working with mentally healthy individuals (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004). As can be seen in my hermeneutic analysis in Appendix D, this distinction is problematic for many reasons. For example, some authors (Bachkirova & Cox, 2005; Buckley, 2007) have argued that attempting to define the coaching client as a “healthy” client is impossible and the definition of mental health is still an area of academic debate.

Confusion in the literature is also exacerbated by the absence of definitional clarity around some of the activities to which executive coaching is frequently compared. For example, there is lack of agreement in the literature as to what mentoring represents (D’Abate et al., 2003; Lippi & Cherry, 2011). Similarly, Buckley (2007) suggested that it is impossible to identify unambiguous definitions of any of the psychotherapies, and the terms adopted vary greatly between different countries, making comparisons difficult. Bachkirova and Cox (2005) reasoned that debates about definitions of coaching and counselling are political, as counsellors and coaches tend to over-emphasise some factors (and downplay others) in support of their agenda to position themselves in the marketplace. Boniwell (2007) contended that the boundaries between coaching and other “helping by talking” activities are controversial, mainly because of the substantial overlaps in skills, techniques and knowledge base employed by the practitioners who provide these services.

Further evidence that different authors refer to a range of different characteristics when describing executive coaching can be found in the findings of a study undertaken by D’Abate, Eddy and Tannenbaum (2003). These authors examined the definitions of 13 development interactions\(^8\) in the literature (including executive coaching) and discovered that from a list of 23 characteristics, only two were identified as critical to executive coaching in the majority of the definitions reviewed (i.e. more than 50%) (D’Abate et al., 2003). These included executive coaching: (a) accommodating a general object of development (as well as developing highly

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\(^8\) Developmental interactions involve exchanges between two or more people with the goal of personal or professional development (D’Abate et al., 2003).
specific skills and knowledge) and (b) possessing a programmatic or formal structure (versus informal and unstructured activities).

d) **Definitions that emphasise the context of executive coaching**

Finally, authors have developed definitions which give primacy to a systems perspective, emphasising the organisational context in which executive coaching occurs. The definition developed by Richard Kilburg (1996b) has been widely supported in the literature (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Libri & Kemp, 2006; Thach, 2002). Kilburg (1996b, p. 42) defined executive coaching as follows:

_A helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client to achieve a set of mutually identified 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._

Kilburg’s (1996b) definition emphasises that the main focus of executive coaching is on the individual’s performance in a specific organisational context and that executive coaching is driven by the needs and preferences of both the executive and the organisation (Stern, 2004). Executive coaching is viewed as enhancing organisational performance through increased individual performance, with the organisational benefits being accrued indirectly through the development of the individual (Garman et al., 2000). This dual focus of working one-on-one to develop an executive, while helping the executive to achieve business results, is viewed as a unique characteristic of executive coaching (Stern, 2004).

Kilburg’s (1996b) definition also highlights the role of the coach as a consultant, an “outsider” without organisational ties. Executive coaches are viewed in the literature as (usefully) someone from outside the organisation (with outside objectivity), in contrast to someone from inside the organisation who might have other interests apart from assisting the executive (e.g. preserving the status quo) (Judge & Cowell, 1997). The helping relationship between coach and client is also emphasised in Kilburg’s (1996b) definition. The coach-client relationship is regarded as a significant factor for change and intrinsically linked to the success of executive coaching (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007; Kemp, 2008b). Another key element of coaching that is highlighted by Kilburg’s definition is the aspect of executive coaching as a commercial service. The key parties have a contract (a formally defined coaching agreement) that is intended to set service-related conditions, responsibilities and an initial focus of work to occur within a specific organisational context (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009).
Each of these dimensions provides a valuable frame of reference for executive coaching. In my opinion, however, some aspects of Kilburg’s (1996b) definition are inadequate. Kilburg’s reference to behavioural techniques shows a strong psychological emphasis rather than a focus on learning. Typically, those who emphasise behavioural change as the dominant focus in executive coaching come from organisational or clinical psychology, psychotherapy or counselling or have added some element of psychological training (Bluckert, 2005). Kilburg’s background is in clinical psychology⁹ and it is therefore not surprising that his definition of executive coaching has been adopted by a number of coaching psychologists (for example Abbott et al., 2006; Grant, 2005). While the definition describes the one-on-one nature of the helping relationship formed between the coach and the client, it does not highlight that this relationship is anchored in trust, and importantly, is aimed at fostering learning and growth. Beyond changes in behaviour, there is scope in executive coaching for clients to become their own self-coach. This is lost in visions and practices of coaching that lack attention to, and valuing of, active learning and learning-oriented strategies. Kilburg’s definition also focuses on coaching as a professional service (with a formal contract between the parties) more than on the actual process or the conversation that occurs between coach and client (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009). This also possibly explains why an explicit reference to learning is missing from his definition.

e) **Critical evaluation of the literature definitions and conceptualisations of executive coaching**

Besides the issues highlighted throughout this section, there are a number of overall problems with literature definitions and conceptualisations of executive coaching. Definitions have been criticised for being too simplistic and as more of an aid to marketing than informing the reader in any real sense (Buckley, 2007). The definitions can also be viewed as inadequate for addressing what Donald Schön (1930-1997) (1987, p. 4) identified as the “messy, indeterminate situations” that characterise real-world practice. For example, Grant and Cavanagh (2004) proposed that the challenge in the search for a definition of coaching is that it results in authors approaching aspects in either/or terms, when the reality of practice is that elements are not easily separated, distinctions are blurred (Passmore, 2007b), and there are always “fuzzy spaces” in practice (Jopling, 2007). Literature definitions are also inadequate as they do not reflect, in Schön’s (1983, p. 16) terms, the “unique events” that characterise the situations of practice. For example, Jackson (2005) proposed that executive coaching definitions are abstractions of real-world experience, and every experience to which a definition refers is therefore unique. Ferrar (2004, p. 54) argued that the pursuit of an all-

⁹ A profile of Richard Kilburg can be found at http://www.instituteofcoaching.org/index.cfm?Page=RichardKilburg
embracing definition is a “holy grail quest – honourable in intent but ultimately fruitless” based on each individual’s unique lens and understanding of the concepts on which it is based. Other authors have agreed that there are problems in continuing to aim for universality in definitions of coaching (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009; Garvey, 2004), arguing that the opportunity exists for each practitioner to realise the meaning of coaching in particular setting in which it is used.

Yet, regardless of the problems associated with literature definitions, there is still a need to define executive coaching. Without a common understanding and definition, it is difficult for coaches to present an agreed image of the service of coaching to the public (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009). A definition provides a means of communicating to society what coaching is, what it can achieve and also what a coach does. The lack of this understanding can be seen to significantly impact views in the marketplace on the professionalism of executive coaching (and coaches). For example, Askeland (2009) was critical of the coaching community in Norway for being unable to agree on a definition of coaching and for frequently defining coaching as something that cannot be explained (the implication being that a client needs to “try it”, to understand it). Similarly, Bachkirova and Kauffman (2009) suggested that the ambiguity of the term coaching does not provide an excuse for coaches to be vague or over-ambitious about what they can offer to clients. Further, the lack of a common definition of executive coaching is a barrier to the professionalisation of an industry. It would be challenging, for example, to regulate executive coaching and introduce barriers to entry without a more precise concept on which to base such activities. It is an unregulated industry at present, and some of the resistance to defining executive coaching may be a reflection of the freedom and advantages afforded to a diverse range of practise coaching of not actually doing so.

In my study, in response to the problems associated with literature definitions and conceptualisations as outlined in this section, I did not adopt any of these existing definitions as a basis for understanding executive coaching. Instead, I chose to access the meanings and understandings of executive coaching from the experiences of those who have directly experienced it, namely my two participant groups, client executives and executive coaches. As I outlined in Chapter Two, by adopting the research approach of hermeneutic phenomenology, I sought to develop an understanding of executive coaching that is grounded in experience, rather than adopting the abstract concepts of coaching as portrayed in literature definitions.
3.5 THE PURPOSE(S) OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

Many explanations have been offered as to the purpose of executive coaching. For example, sustained behaviour change is most commonly presented as the ultimate goal of executive coaching assignments (Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylyshyn, 1998). However, Dagley (2010a) argued that behaviour change is an insufficient description of the often complex and idiosyncratic outcomes of executive coaching and also has an inappropriate flavour of remediation. Whitmore (2002, p. 97) proposed that coaching is a positive activity, directed towards “optimising people’s potential and performance”. This latter view was supported in research conducted by Kauffman and Coutu (2009) with executive coaches (n=140) who reported being most often engaged to develop the capabilities of high potential managers (28.1%), facilitate a transition for an individual (in or up the organisation) (19.4%) and act as a sounding board on organisational and strategic matters (25.8%). Addressing derailing behaviour (12.4%) was a less commonly reported purpose of executive coaching (Kauffman & Coutu, 2009).

A number of authors have developed generic typologies in an attempt to comprehensively describe and categorise the various purposes of coaching. Examples are provided in Table 3.3. There is some commonality amongst the most cited typologies (Grant, 2005; Standards Australia, 2011; Witherspoon & White, 1996). For example, Grant (2005) drew on the typology developed by Witherspoon and White (1996), suggesting that the purpose of coaching falls into one of three categories: (1) skills (acquisition), (2) performance (enhancement) and (3) (future) development.

In reviewing the typologies in Table 3.3, the purpose of executive coaching is understood to be primarily focused on the (executive’s) development, with skills and performance components interwoven (Grant, 2005; Grant et al., 2010a). Coaching that focuses on development deals with “intimate questions of personal and professional development” and often involves the creation of a “personal reflective space where the client can explore issues and options and formulate action plans in a confidential supportive environment” (Grant, 2005, p. 4). This type of coaching is sometimes termed “transformational coaching” as it focuses on intrapersonal development including self-awareness, an understanding of others and surrounding systems (Standards Australia, 2011). Witherspoon and White (1996) agreed that coaching for development purposes focuses on executive development and personal growth, but specified that it is also about focusing on the person’s future job. It helps the executive to prepare for advancement by strengthening leadership skills and addressing long-term development needs. In developmental coaching, clear, specific goals may initially be lacking or limited, so coaching involves more time (not only to reach clarity and consensus around goals) but also to realise the longer-term changes and development that occur (Witherspoon & White, 1996).
## Table 3.3 Typologies of executive coaching purpose(s)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| (Witherspoon & White, 1996)     | - Coaching for skills (acquisition) – learning sharply focused on a person’s specific task  
                                  | - Coaching for performance (enhancement) – learning focused more broadly on a person’s present job  
                                  | - Coaching for (future) development – learning focused on a person’s future job  
                                  | - Coaching for executive’s agenda – coaching for a purpose such as leading organisational change. |
| (Grant, 2005)                   | - Skills coaching – focuses on developing a specific skill set.  
                                  | - Performance coaching – improving performance over a specific period of time. Focuses on how clients can set goals, overcome obstacles and evaluate and monitor their performance.  
                                  | - Development coaching – takes a broader approach, often dealing with more intimate questions of personal and professional development. |
| (Standards Australia, 2011)     | - Skills coaching – aimed at developing or improving basic work-related skills.  
                                  | - Performance coaching – aimed at improving the client’s ability to achieve work-related goals, such as specific metric based organisational outcomes.  
                                  | - Developmental coaching (or transformational coaching) – produces change in people that better equips them to undertaken their organisational role. May include intrapersonal development.  
                                  | - Remedial coaching – remediation of problematic attitudes or behaviours interfering with the client’s organisational performance. |
| (Berman & Bradt, 2006)          | - Facilitative coaching – aimed at onboarding new leaders take on new challenges or move to high performing status. Short-term, business focused and directive.  
                                  | - Executive consulting – aimed at help a senior leader improve on an already successful career. Thoughtful, challenging relationship with a neutral third party to think through difficult issues and decisions. Uses a more Socratic (non-directive, questioning) approach.  
                                  | - Restorative coaching – helps a valued individual overcome short-term or temporary difficulty in the workplace due to personal or organisational challenges. Akin to short-term counselling in the business context.  
                                  | - Development coaching – build strengths and alleviates deficits in a mission critical individual who has substantial and long-standing challenges and interpersonal issues. |
| (Brockbank, 2008)               | - Functionalist coaching – the intended learning outcome is single-loop or improvement with no alteration to the status quo. The coaching method tends to be didactic and advice-driven.  
                                  | - Engagement coaching – recognises the subjective world of the client and the intended learning outcome is single-loop or improvement but the method tends to be humanistic and relationship-driven.  
                                  | - Evolutionary coaching – recognises the subjective world of the client and the intended learning outcome is double-loop or transformational (the individual, organisation, or both are radically changed) and the method is humanistic and relationship driven. The purpose is personal and professional development, promoting the client’s desires, and the learning outcome is transformational. This type of coaching supports lifelong learning. |
Besides growth and change goals, there a range of other terms and descriptions of purpose(s) are portrayed in these typologies, supporting Gray’s (2006) view that broad agreement on the goals of coaching is illusive. For example, Witherspoon and White (1996) offered an additional category (“coaching for the executive’s agenda”), which deals with the evolving agenda of the executive, and the role of the executive coach includes being a confidante and objective outsider. Standards Australia (2011) also included “remedial coaching” as a separate category that is focused on the remediation of problematic attitudes and behaviours. Berman and Bradt (2006) introduced the terms “facilitative coaching”, “restorative coaching” and “executive consulting” and used the term “development coaching” in a way that is more akin to problem-focused remedial coaching (versus coaching that focuses on long-term development) (Berman & Bradt, 2006). Similarly, Brockbank and McGill (2006) adopted a different typology based on social learning theory, classifying the purposes of coaching into four types (functionalist, revolutionary, engagement, evolutionary) on the basis of the following two dimensions: views of reality (objectivist versus subjectivist) and desired learning outcomes (equilibrium versus transformation). Their term “evolutionary coaching” seems to align most closely to the developmental or transformational coaching referred to in the other typologies.

a) **Critical evaluation of the purpose(s) of executive coaching**

Various difficulties are associated with the use of the typologies detailed in Table 3.3. The practice of executive coaching does not always fit neatly within one of these categories and frequently has multiple aims and purposes. For example, two or more of the types of coaching described in Table 3.3 might be needed in a coaching engagement with an individual client and even within one particular coaching session (Standards Australia, 2011). Executive coaches may also interpret the descriptions in Table 3.3 in unique ways, not guaranteeing uniformity in their use or application in the marketplace. Discrepancies also exist between the espoused purposes of coaching in organisations versus what actually happens. For example, organisations that state they are committed to transformative learning outcomes from coaching at the strategic level may have actual coaching programs provided to individuals that are aimed at equilibrium (Brockbank, 2008). There are also issues associated with ensuring alignment between the purpose of coaching at the individual and at the organisational level, with few organisations considering a predetermined intention for coaching that is consistent with the strategy of the business (Lawrence & Whyte, 2013a). It is also evident that even when alignment exists, the goals and purposes of coaching evolve and change over time. This was illustrated in a study undertaken by Gray et al. (2011), in which executive coaching was

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10 Remedial coaching may not feature prominently in most typologies because, as outlined earlier, coaching has evolved from an early focus on remediation to a more positive focus on enhancing individual potential.

11 Revolutionary coaching is coaching that seeks to promote the transformation of society and radical change. It adopts an objectivist view of reality. The authors concentrate on the other three purposes.
ultimately utilised by managers as a largely personal intervention, rather than building the business-oriented competencies associated with the intended performance coaching. Similarly, findings of a study by Lawrence and Whyte (2013b) suggested that goals cannot be clearly specified at the start of coaching (as implied by these typologies) because they evolve during a complex, adaptive process in which the coach’s role is to facilitate the emergence of goals that are meaningful to the client. Most significantly, Bono et al. (2009) argued (on the basis of their detailed comparison of the executive coaching practices of psychologists and non-psychologists) that the goals and purposes of executive coaching vary across coaches, client organisations, and executives, and vary over time as well.

In responding to the challenges associated with these literature typologies (and consistent with my adoption of hermeneutic phenomenology as my research approach for Phase 2), I have chosen in my study to explore with client executives and executive coaches their interpretations and understandings of the purpose(s) of executive coaching, based on their actual experiences. In this way, I am recognising that the purpose of executive coaching is situated within a specific organisational and individual context for each individual who experiences it, which clearly differentiates it from a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

3.6 THE HISTORY OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

There is little information in the literature regarding the history and origins of executive coaching, and what is available resembles “brief statements or speculations” (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001, p. 207). There is also a wide variety of timeframes suggested in the literature for the emergence of executive coaching. Executive coaching has been described as both a “millennium phenomenon” (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004) and an activity that has always existed (Natale & Diamante, 2005). This latter view suggests that there have long been coaches, described as consultants, mentors, managers or friends, whose role has been to help others solve problems and plan for the future (Natale & Diamante, 2005). A number of authors (Bennett, 2006; J. Rogers, 2012; Steinmetz, 2012; Whitmore, 2002) have even proposed that the first coach was the classical Greek Athenian philosopher, Socrates, who engaged people in dialogues and asked insightful questions that sought to “educe” (draw out) knowledge and “give birth”\(^{12}\) to understanding (Steinmetz, 2012). This is also understood to encapsulate what currently occurs in modern coaching (J. Rogers, 2012).

The most popular timeframe suggested in the literature for the emergence of the commercial activity of executive coaching is during the 1980s and 1990s. Tobias (1996, p. 87) suggested

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\(^{12}\) It is understood that Socrates described his role in this way as analogous to that of a midwife (Steinmetz, 2012).
that the term “executive coaching” first came into business parlance around the late 1980s. Natale and Diamante (2005) argued that executive coaching began in the 1980s when Thomas Leonard13 (1955-2003) (a financial planner in Seattle) offered his clients life-planning consultations and then in 1992 started Coach U14 (a training program for professionals). Whitmore (2002) proposed that coaching actually moved into business settings around the 1980s when sports coaching experts (such as Tim Gallwey15 and himself) were invited to consult with organisations. Judge and Cowell (1997) contended that the widespread adoption of executive coaching by human resource consulting firms occurred around 1990. Braham (2005) argued that executive coaching commenced when two professional coaching associations emerged in the mid-1990s (the Professional and Personal Coaches Association and the International Coach Federation) and then merged into one in 1998 under the International Coach Federation (ICF)16 banner. Brennan (2008) outlined that evidence for the emergence of the industry in the mid-1990s can be found in the increased amount of media coverage afforded to coaching at that time. Maher and Pomerantz (2003) indicated that executive coaching entered the growth stage of its product/market lifecycle in the early 1990s and became widely available with the establishment and growth of coach training schools, the publication of articles in prominent business publications (e.g. Fortune magazine, Newsweek and The Wall Street Journal) and when universities began to offer executive coaching degree programs (e.g. George Mason and George Washington Universities in the US) (Maher & Pomerantz, 2003). Grant (2008c) (a coaching psychologist) argued that evidence for the emergence of executive coaching can be found in 1996 when the American Psychological Association journal, Consulting Psychology: Theory, Research and Practice,17 published the first special issue on executive coaching and first lay public claim to the role of the psychologist as executive coach.

The emergence of executive coaching in Australia appears to have occurred in the late 1990s. Brock (2008, p. 440) identified that coaching “spontaneously arose from several different traditions around the same time” in Australia. This was characterised by a number of activities associated predominantly with the training and education of coaches, including Coach U obtaining a licence in Australia and New Zealand in 1998, the establishment of Results

13 It has been suggested, however, that Thomas Leonard was actually considered the “father of life-coaching”. http://www.coachville.com/home/html/about_thomas_leonard.
14 http://www.coachinc.com/CoachU/
15 Tim Gallwey published the book The Inner Game of Tennis, which was followed by a series of books including The Inner Game of Work. http://theinnergame.com/products/books/the-inner-game-of-work/
16 See Glossary for more details on the International Coach Federation (ICF).
17 The mission of this journal is to advance knowledge and practice in all areas of consulting psychology (including but not limited to coaching, assessment, leadership, corporate consulting, consulting to schools, team consulting, etc.). http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/cpb/index.aspx
Coaching Systems\textsuperscript{18} (founded by David Rock\textsuperscript{19} in 1998) and the establishment of the Coaching Psychology Unit\textsuperscript{20} at the University of Sydney in 2000. The other prominent event cited by Brock (2008) was the launch of the ICF in Australia in 1999 by Christine McDougall\textsuperscript{21} (see Chapter One for more information on the ICF). McDougall (personal communication, 17 June 2013) proposed that when she started coaching in 1997, her research indicated that there were only “five other people who had positioned themselves as a coach in Australia”, one of whom was John Matthews,\textsuperscript{22} suggesting an early, developing industry at this time.

In responding to this limited historical information, some authors have explored the etymological origins of the word \textit{coach}, which is understood to have been first used in the English language in the 1500s and developed from the Hungarian village of Kocs, where a covered carriage (\textit{kocsi székér})\textsuperscript{23} was used to carry passengers from one destination to another (Stern, 2004; Witherspoon & White, 1996). Since that time, it has been suggested that the term “coach” has been used in a variety of settings including academic coaching (to carry a student more safely through exams) and sports coaching (to carry an athlete through practice to the game) (Stern, 2004). The term “executive coaching” is viewed as just one more evolution of the term, where a coach helps to carry someone (in this case an executive) from one point to another. The root meaning of the verb “to coach” is to convey valued people from where they are now to where they want to be, and this is what coaches attempt to do in executive coaching (Spinelli, 2010; Stern, 2004; Witherspoon & White, 1996). However, the concept of coaches carrying individuals portrays the client as a “passive passenger”, which is contrary to the active, collaborative partnership that characterises typical executive coaching relationships (Zeus & Skiffington, 2002, p. 6). While the term coach is set to remain, understanding the practice of executive coaching more deeply (for instance through this research) is an important way of extending the vision of coaching beyond passive and coach-focused processes.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{a) Critical evaluation of the history of executive coaching}
\end{itemize}

Despite the diversity of opinions and the limited information on the historical development of executive coaching (as both an occupation and a commercial activity), it is clearly a recent phenomenon. This has a number of implications, particularly with regard to the available

\textsuperscript{18} http://www.resultescoaches.com
\textsuperscript{19} http://www.davidrock.net/about/
\textsuperscript{20} http://www.psych.usyd.edu.au/coach/
\textsuperscript{21} http://www.christinemcdougall.com
\textsuperscript{22} Information on John Matthews can be found at http://www.iecl.com/inside-institute/john-matthews.html
Notably, John Matthews was a founding Director of the IECL, an organisation established in Australia in 1999. The IECL provided me with information from its databases to assist in the recruitment of participants for my research.
\textsuperscript{23} ‘\textit{kocsi} (székér)’: (carriage) of Kocs. http://www.etymonline.com
executive coaching knowledge base and how executive coaching is practised. These topics are considered in detail in later sections.

3.7 THE EMERGENCE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

As illustrated in this chapter, there exists little consensus in the literature on the nature of executive coaching, particularly its definition and functions (Sperry, 2008). One of the major reasons for this lack of consensus (as outlined in Chapter One) is that coaching is emerging and is practised by individuals from a wide range of prior professional backgrounds, such as business consultancy, management, teaching, workplace training, learning and development and clinical, organisational and sports psychology (Grant & Zackon, 2004). Attempts to define the field of executive coaching are therefore often influenced (and rarely declared) by each author’s educational and professional discipline, training and the kinds of experience with which they are familiar (Douglas & Morley, 2000). Further, at the core of the debates about the nature of executive coaching are deep seated assumptions and views about the professional area or discipline to which it does (or should) belong.

While Grant and Cavanagh (2004, p. 2) contend that “no existing profession holds a corner on the market of coaching knowledge”, many professionals (such as industrial and organisational psychologists, consulting psychologists and retired business executives) have attempted to lay claim to the practice of executive coaching (Natale & Diamante, 2005). Clutterbuck (2008, p. 9) described this as a “land-grab”, where every related profession has tried to “stake out its own coaching territory with definitions, rules and practices based on its own particular perspectives and interests”. Brock (2008) suggested that while executive coaching is seeking to define itself as a separate and independent discipline (with a clear identity), it is also regarded by some of its “root disciplines” as an integral part of those disciplines and practices. For example, executive coaching has been argued to belong to the fields of psychology, consulting and human resource development. The emergence of executive coaching from each of these areas is now considered briefly.

a) Psychology

One of the most dominant views in the literature is that coaching (including executive coaching) has emerged as a distinctive sub-discipline within the field of psychology. Grant (2006b) argued that “coaching psychology” was established with the creation of the Coaching Psychology Units at Sydney University in 2000 and City University, London in 2005. Whybrow (2008, p. 227) proposed that coaching psychology subsequently developed from an initial
“area of psychological enquiry to a young, but strong area of professional practice”. Grant (2006b, p. 12) defined coaching psychology as

*the systematic application of behavioural science to the enhancement of life experience, work performance and wellbeing for individuals, groups and organisations who do not have clinically significant mental health issues or abnormal levels of distress.*

There are two key characteristics of Grant’s (2006b) definition that may explain why psychologists have extended their practice from a traditional focus in health care to working with individuals in organisations. First, the focus of coaching psychology is not defined (or linked) to a specific context. As per the definition, coaching psychology focuses on improving the work and personal lives of individuals, groups and organisations. In this way, coaching psychology is defined by its purpose, rather than the context in which it is deployed (Whybrow, 2008). This has enabled psychologists to apply coaching in a wide range of environments, such as in schools with high school teachers (Grant et al., 2010b) and also as executive coaching with individuals in organisations (Grant et al., 2009). Second, coaching psychology includes working with “normal”, well-functioning adults (such as executives) as opposed to the traditional domain of illness and mental health. The growth in coaching psychology parallels the emergence of positive psychology (Grant, 2006b), which rejects aspects of the biomedical (illness) model by working with healthy populations and helping individuals to realise their potential and expand their sense of what is possible in their lives (Davison & Gasiorowski, 2006). Campbell (2001) suggested that it is this opportunity to work with normal life problems that potentially attracts counsellors to coaching practice. In addition to these two characteristics, the literature also suggests a number of practical reasons for psychologists practising executive coaching. For example, counsellors may be responding to a lack of job opportunities in mental health (Fronczak, 2005), as a means of gaining more control over their time and their lives (Davison & Gasiorowski, 2006) and to “easily make a six-figure income” (Campbell, 2001, p. 1). Overall, psychologists may also be seen as simply re-evaluating their work identities and moving into “newer areas of occupational expression” (Rotenberg, 2000, p. 654)

The emergence of coaching psychology can be seen to influence the emergence of executive coaching in a number of ways. Coaching psychologists see themselves at the “forefront of the development of coaching excellence” (Whybrow, 2008, p. 227) and they promote activities that are focused on providing legitimacy to coaching as an emerging profession, for example, regulation, supervision and ethics. In supporting the publication of relevant articles, they have developed journals dedicated to promoting the field of coaching psychology internationally,
such as The Coaching Psychologist\textsuperscript{24} and International Coaching Psychology Review\textsuperscript{25} which are found on the Internet (Cavanagh & Palmer, 2006).

A major theme in the literature arising from the dominance of psychology is the argument that psychologists are the most qualified to conduct executive coaching, particularly when behavioural change is required (Brotman et al., 1998; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Kemp, 2005; Tobias, 1996; Winum, 2003). Psychologists are considered to be uniquely qualified to be executive coaches because of “professional tactics” and psychological tools and because they have undertaken graduate training, internship rotations, and hundreds of hours of supervision (Brotman et al., 1998). Berglas (2002, p. 86) argued that executive coaches who lack rigorous psychological training do more “harm than good as they “downplay or simply ignore deep-seated psychological problems they don’t understand”. In the context of coaching being a service industry and not a recognised profession, psychologists are presented as bringing credentials, credibility and professionalism to executive coaching. For example, Grant (2006b, p. 15) argued that the entry of psychologists into the coaching arena has “noticeably raised the bar for the coaching industry in general”. Winum (2003) presented the view that the issue of professional integrity had become critical to business, in the context of recent accounting and leadership scandals in corporations, and that psychologists operate under a well-developed professional code of ethics, unlike many practitioners in the coaching and leadership development marketplace.

b) Consulting

Another perspective presented in the literature is that executive coaching is actually a competency area or role function within the field of consulting (Stern, 2004), practised by consultants and “consulting psychologists” (Diedrich & Kilburg, 2001; Sperry, 2008) and is a new and emerging area of consulting practice (Diedrich & Kilburg, 2001; Kilburg, 1996a). Sperry (2008) argued that executive coaching is a vogue term for the specific type of intervention in consulting which reflects situations where the client or “consultee” is an executive, rather than the entire organisation. In this way, executive coaching is just one method that can be applied as part of an organisational consulting intervention, and coaching entails working one-on-one with executives to assist them learn how to manage and lead their organisation (Stern, 2004). For example, Sperry (2008) argued that executive coaching can be perceived as one of three main functions that consulting psychologists provide to executives in organisations, the others being executive consultation and executive psychotherapy. In these

\textsuperscript{24} http://www.sgcp.org.uk/publications/the-coaching-psychologist/

\textsuperscript{25} http://www.sgcp.org.uk/publications/international-coaching-psychology-review/
roles, consulting psychologists function as facilitators of the coaching process, a sounding board/advisor and a therapist, respectively.

Authors who suggest that coaching is a consultative function place far more importance on the need for coaches to understand the organisational context in which executive coaching occurs. Executive coaches are viewed as needing a broad range of skills, particularly business knowledge, to be effective (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). Executive coaches must understand how business organisations function and grasp different industries and their particular needs (Hart et al., 2001). They need to be viewed by their clients as authoritative in their knowledge of their business world (Levinson, 1996). Berman and Bradt (2006) argued that knowledge and understanding of the business world (including the rules, cultures, values and systems in corporate settings) are virtually impossible to master without experience in these settings, and the majority of psychologists are limited in this regard. Mental health professionals can also have many attitudes, values, and behavioural patterns that make it difficult for them to adapt to a corporate setting (Kilburg, 2000). The importance of business knowledge has been summarised as follows:

*Coaching executives require knowledge about organizations, management, leadership, economics, and a host of other disciplines. Psychologists who coach executives need not necessarily be executives themselves, but they must have an in-depth feel for the lives that these most competent, ambitious, and talented people lead and how to successfully intervene with them* (Diedrich & Kilburg, 2001, p. 203).

c) **Human resource development (HRD)**

One argument that has received scant attention in the executive coaching literature is whether coaching has its own unique identity and body of empirically tested knowledge, as distinct from HRD. On the basis of research undertaken of definitions of coaching and HRD in the literature, Hamlin et al. (2008, p. 299) argued that the emergent field of coaching could fit within the “existing and firmly established broader HRD field of study and practice”. Coaching is considered an important aspect of learning and development (L&D), which is conceptualised as a core component of HRD. As argued by Hamlin et al., both coaching and HRD study and practice are based on the same three constructs: people, learning and organisations. Similarly, Jenny Rogers (2004, p. 17) also identified executive coaching as a “branch of management development” in contrast with psychotherapy and counselling, which are “part of the health sector”, and life coaching as an “approach to personal development”. Authors such as de has also Haan et al. (2010) clearly identified executive coaching as a discipline within the broader field of organisation development (OD) which is also a component of HRD.
It is also likely that many HR generalists would suggest that coaching has always been part of their jobs, even if it was conducted in an informal and transactional manner (Frisch, 2001). In recent research conducted with 800 L&D professionals and commissioned by the Australian Institute of Training and Development (AITD)\(^{26}\) to develop a model of L&D practice, coaching (and mentoring) were identified as core techniques utilised by L&D practitioners in Australia (Hodge, 2013). Coaching and mentoring were identified as part of a learning facilitation and support cluster and part of the contemporary L&D practitioners’ toolbox (Hodge, 2013). Grant et al. (2010a) suggested that the overlap between professional coaching and HRD/OD is exemplified when it is considered that OD practitioners use process consulting methodologies which, like coaching, focus on facilitating clients’ self-directed learning and growth. In terms of HRD, Joo (2005) also argued that coaching has become a significant part of many organisations’ L&D strategies and that executive coaching is within the domain of HRD. Despite, these views, Joo (2005, pp. 463-464) indicated that there has not been a resultant emergence of executive coaching publications in the HRD literature:

> However, not a single article about executive coaching has been found in the HRD journals yet; although there are some articles about the manager as a coach. Thus, little attention has been paid to the emerging practice of executive coaching by HRD scholars and no efforts for theory building to guide future research have been made yet.

Interestingly, if executive coaching is deemed to be part of HRD practice then this would suggest that the role of the coach can be appropriately undertaken by HRD professionals. However, this does not appear to be the case in practice. It is understood that most executive coaches do not perceive themselves, nor wish to be identified as HRD professionals, on the basis of their backgrounds and negative perceptions of HRD (Hamlin et al., 2008). There is also little, if any, identifiable literature of the HRD professional as executive coach. This is particularly interesting in light of research undertaken by Hamlin et al. (2008), in which HRD specialists and executive coaches were identified as possessing similar competencies in facilitating culture and change (within specific organisational contexts). It appears that the role of the HRD specialist in executive coaching is portrayed as a support and evaluation role (for example Dagley, 2006b; Standards Australia, 2011), rather than as a practitioner per se.

In an Australian study of executive coaching, (Begley, 2012) reported that in 80% of organisations surveyed (n=111), the HR team’s role was to “co-ordinate” coaching. The only exception here may be the recent emergence of the role of the internal coach,\(^{27}\) in which HR professionals may dedicate all or part of their time to coaching within their organisations (as

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\(^{26}\) The AITD is a professional association for training, learning and development professionals. The AITD mission is to be a leader in fostering excellence, innovation and professional integrity in training, learning and development for the workplace. http://www.aitd.com.au/about/default

\(^{27}\) The internal coach is a fellow employee of the same organisation as those he or she coaches (Frisch, 2001).
distinct from their HR advisory role). However, the numbers of internal coaches, their backgrounds and the organisations employing them is largely unknown, even if their presence may be clear (Frisch, 2001). According to Hamlin et al. (2008), arguments from coaching psychologists that coaching needs to “move from a service industry to a genuine coaching profession” (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004, p. 3) are a real competitive threat to HRD practitioners, as the potential exists for the practice to be subsumed by psychology.

d) **Critical evaluation of the emergence of executive coaching**

The emergence of executive coaching from a number of different disciplinary areas creates a number of key challenges. Each of these disciplines has its own knowledge base, comprising both theoretical framework and practical applied experience. Within each of these established fields of knowledge there are various schools, traditions, approaches and perspectives that contain their own set of assumptions about human nature, how people grow and change and how these processes can be facilitated (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2008). This diversity is potentially advantageous, enabling coaching practice to draw on the breadth of theoretical and methodological approaches, but it is also problematic as groups of coaches value and promote the views and methods characteristic of their disciplinary area. It can also be potentially restrictive in terms of practice. For example, if coaching psychologists utilise only psychotherapeutic approaches for executive coaching, this limits the application of models from other disciplines and areas (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). Further, it means that coaches (who were educated originally in different fields of knowledge and practice and trained according to different traditions) may diverge profoundly on their philosophy and their practice of coaching (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2008), making the development of a unique identity for coaching seem difficult and even impossible.

### 3.8 THE EVOLUTION OF THE EXECUTIVE COACHING RESEARCH AND PUBLISHED KNOWLEDGE BASE

The published knowledge base of executive coaching has increased since 1995 (Grant, 2007, 2009, 2011c), which is consistent with popular views on the timeframe for the emergence of the commercial coaching industry, as outlined earlier. For example, according to Grant (2013), a search of the database PsycINFO for publications in January 2013 using the keywords *executive coaching* found 487 citations, with the first published article by Sperry (1993). Since

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28 Between 1993 and 1999 there was a total of 31 citations, between 2000 and 2005 a total of 99 citations, and between 2006 and 2013 a total of 356 citations.
2000 there has also been significant growth in the number of PhDs and peer-reviewed papers in this field (Grant, 2007).

There has also been an escalation in the number of non-scholarly publications related to executive coaching. English (2006) reported a significant rise in the number of executive coaching articles published in the business-related media between January 1994 and December 2004 and the increased likelihood that an executive coaching article would appear in a non-scholarly publication than a scholarly one. Non-scholarly articles represented 74% of the total number of articles published during the time period (n=755), while scholarly articles represented only 26%. Similarly, in Joo’s (2005) review of the executive coaching literature it was reported that 71% of published articles were in practice journals, 15% in academic journals, and 14% in magazines, also suggesting a greater focus on publication among the practitioner community. Despite an increase in the number of publications (and especially practitioner contributions), the evidence base for coaching is viewed as not increasing at the same rate as practice (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006). This is not unexpected for a new and evolving area such as executive coaching, which is emerging from practice.

a) Development of the executive coaching research base

Executive coaching research can be best described as “developing” (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007b, p. 251) and “still in its infancy” (De Haan & Duckworth, 2013, p. 12). As a result, the lack of (and need for) research in executive coaching is a recurring theme in the literature (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Kilburg, 2000; McCleland, 2005; Natale & Diamante, 2005; Stober, 2005). Bennett (2006) suggested that little is known about coaching generally and research is an important way to support the establishment of coaching as field of study and practice. Most prominently, a focus on research in executive coaching is also tied to the discourse around the professionalisation of coaching. For example, Laske (2004) drew parallels with other helping professions and pointed to psychology as an example of discipline that had reached maturity as a profession once it possessed a shared knowledge base drawn from extensive research and had established processes for research-based training and supervision. Similarly, a knowledge base derived from research is viewed as critical for the establishment of coaching as a profession (Bennett, 2006; Grant & Cavanagh, 2004). Ironically, the challenge for an emerging industry such as executive coaching is that there is a lack of funding and opportunities for research and the lack of a central body to sponsor large-scale research projects (unlike the situation in established professions such as psychotherapy).

29 As found from a search of the Business Source Premier database.
30 See Chapter One for further information.
Executive coaching research has developed from an initial focus on the exploration and sharing of practice among practitioners (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007b; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011) to an increasing volume of outcome studies. These comprise the majority of studies in the executive coaching research base, and focus on justifying coaching as a “valid and reliable change methodology” (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007b). Examples of such studies can be seen in Table E1 in Appendix E. Outcome studies are typically concerned with measuring the value of coaching from the client’s perspective (De Haan et al., 2011), aim to evaluate the effectiveness of coaching and to obtain overall ratings of satisfaction. Overall, these studies suggest a number of positive benefits of executive coaching and indicate that everyone likes to be coached and perceives a positive impact on their effectiveness (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006).

Controversially, some outcome studies (for example M. Anderson, 2001; McGovern et al., 2001) have focused on estimating organisational benefits such as ascertaining the financial return on investment (ROI) of executive coaching. However, ROI is also viewed as an “unreliable and insufficient measure of coaching outcomes” and an approach which fails to take into account the non-financial and non-measurable outcomes of coaching (Grant, 2012, p. 74). Typical coaching goals are interpersonal concerns, which are best measured qualitatively (2003). Dagley (2006a) suggests that the issue with measurement is that many executive coaching outcomes are not related directly to financial gain at all but to a range of other intangible benefits such as leader satisfaction, building the capability of senior staff or dealing with people problems. However, it is understood that outcome studies are used by coaches to determine the value they provide to clients, to identify what works with clients, and for a range of other purposes including justifying the fees they charge for services provided (De Haan & Duckworth, 2013).

Outcome studies in executive coaching (as illustrated in Appendix E) have been criticised for being contextual, descriptive or survey-based rather than well-designed outcome studies (Grant et al., 2010a). This reflects a broader argument in the coaching literature for more empirico-analytical research using methods such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and following the example of the study conducted by Grant et al. (2009). Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011), drawing parallels with the evolution of the knowledge base in counselling, suggested that executive coaching has reached a phase of knowledge evolution that should be

31 Financial ROI is a formula or calculation that attempts to translate the outcomes of coaching into a monetary value (Lawrence & Whyte, 2013a). It is based on the view that if money is invested in executive coaching then there should be a return on this investment, with the financial gains being greater than the costs (Phillips & Phillips, 2005). A focus on ROI has been promoted based on an assumption that in the executive’s arena, ROI is used for investments in other areas such as plant and equipment and utilising it for measuring the outcomes of executive coaching demonstrates value in terms that managers and executives understand. ROI studies focus on the bottom-line impacts of the executive coaching undertaken, for example, 5.7 times (McGovern et al., 2001) and 529% (M. Anderson, 2001) the financial outlay for executive coaching.

32 See Chapter Two for a detailed explanation of research paradigms.
characterised by theory building, quantitative techniques and RCTs. According to Grant and Cavanagh (2007b, p. 245), the absence of RCTs represents a serious shortcoming in coaching research. These arguments place an inherent (and undeclared) value on empirico-analytical research for informing the practice of coaching and are based on an assumption that research develops theory, which (then) informs practice. Interestingly, Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) argued that it is when coaching research reaches a future and third phase of evolution that the focus should be on the exploration of individual differences and the use of other techniques (alongside quantitative methods) such as interpretive phenomenological analysis.

Alternatively, I argue that there is also value in undertaking phenomenological research into executive coaching as an important means of developing a greater understanding of a phenomenon that is not well understood. I support the “primacy of practice” (see Higgs et al., 2004) (versus a primacy of theory) argument and suggest that knowledge about coaching is also importantly obtained from the act of practising (and experiencing) it. De Haan et al. (2010, p. 110) also described the limitations of empirico-analytical research focused on outcomes and effectiveness for deepening our understanding of coaching:

> Outcome or effectiveness research reduces the whole of the coaching intervention to only one number, or perhaps a set of numbers, for example, averages of psychometric instruments or client ratings. Outcome research has to be silent on what happens within a coaching relationship: the many gestures, speech acts and attempts at sense-making that make up the whole of the intervention. At best it can tell us in a statistical manner how the full sum of all those conversations taken together may contribute to a digit on a Likert scale, at worst it may not even tell us that.

b) **The push for evidence-based practice and the scientist practitioner in executive coaching**

One of the major reasons for a focus on empirico-analytical research is the push for coaching practice to become evidence based. The concept of evidence-based practice (EBP) has been drawn from medicine where it applies to the “integration of best research evidence with clinical expertise and patient values” (Sackett et al., 2000, p. 1). Underlying the evidence-based approach is an assumption that if research evidence demonstrates that a particular approach is most effective for a type of client/situation, than it is then most suitable one to implement for a particular client or situation that belongs to (or resembles) that group. Research evidence is given priority over other sources of evidence in the delivery of services and is viewed as giving “watertight answers” to the questions posed in practice (Rycroft-Malone et al., 2004). The term “evidence based coaching” (EBC) was coined by Grant (2003) to support the application of evidence gained from research to improving practice and optimising outcomes. EBC was defined by Stober and Grant (2006a p. 6) as:
The intelligent and conscientious use of best current knowledge integrated with practitioner expertise in making decisions about how to deliver coaching to individual coaching clients and in designing and teaching coach training programs.

For coaching, the push for practice to become evidence-based has largely resulted in the explicit linking of coaching practice to existing psychological frameworks and empirical research (Latham, 2007). This is largely political (and commercial), associated with legitimising the coaching conducted by psychologists, in particular distinguishing it from the proprietary coaching services offered (by non-psychologists) in the marketplace. A key aspect of this differentiation for coaching psychologists has included the adoption of a revised version of the scientist-practitioner model (Cavanagh & Grant, 2007), which has also been proposed as an important requirement for the training of coaches (Stober & Grant, 2006a). In coaching, that model has also sometimes been termed the “informed-practitioner” model, with the suggestion that practitioners should be trained to have a working understanding of research principles and methodologies so that they can apply informed critical thought to the evaluation of their practices, draw on relevant academic literature to design and implement evidence-based interventions with their clients and to evaluate client progress, while adhering to ethical practice (Stober & Grant, 2006a). Through the application of research to practice, EBC approaches are positioned in the marketplace as better service offerings because they are deemed more rigorous and scientific. For example, Stober and Grant (2006a, p. 5) distinguished EBC from other coaching that was “developed from the pop psychology personal development genre”. Further, Spence (2007) argued that the widespread adoption of EBC is a matter of survival for the coaching industry and is directly related to its potential longevity.

Yet there are many issues associated with unquestioned adoption of EBC and the scientist-practitioner model in the context of executive coaching. The main issue relates to the narrow interpretation and application of evidence in EBC as knowledge primarily gained from research. In reality, practitioners (including coaches) draw on many sources of knowledge in the course of their practice, but this is rarely acknowledged or debated (Rycroft-Malone et al., 2004). Higgs et al. (2001) argued that professional practice requires three forms of knowledge: that derived from research and theory, from professional experience and also from personal experience.

A similarly broader conceptualisation of evidence in coaching was supported by Drake (2009) who suggested that there are (importantly) four domains of knowledge that coaches draw on.

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33 The scientist-practitioner model emerged in 1949 and was proposed as the most appropriate framework for the training and professional practice of the emerging profession of clinical psychology. Its aim was to train practitioners as both scientists and practitioners, enabling them to undertake research and apply it to practice issues (Corrie & Lane, 2009).
in their practice. These are (1) foundational knowledge (theories and models from research and scholarship), (2) professional knowledge (methods based on research and scholarship as coaches engage in coaching and reflect on outcomes), (3) self-knowledge (coach awareness, maturity and wisdom), and (4) contextual knowledge (subject matter expertise, organisational savvy and a systemic understanding of client and their issues). In recognising the value of each of these forms of knowledge, I propose that emphasis be placed in Drake’s (2009) professional knowledge category on the knowledge gained from experience, as this is the domain of craft knowledge, which arises from professional experience and is made credible by coaches through the process of reflection. Professional craft knowledge is developed from each practitioner’s practice experience and is tested and modified in daily experience and may be shared with others who then try to test this knowledge in the context of their own practice (Higgs et al., 2001). This process of acquiring knowledge from practice is akin to the concept of Schön’s (1983, 1987) reflective practitioner (as opposed to the model of the scientist-practitioner) in which experience, reflection and reflective practice are key dimensions of the development of professional expertise. Importantly, this valuing of practice-derived knowledge involves the incorporation of other knowledges and it includes a recognition that these, particularly propositional knowledge, can arise from theorising from practice.

c) **Critical evaluation of the evolution of the executive coaching research and published knowledge base**

When compared to other areas of practice, the research and published knowledge base for executive coaching is relatively small. As outlined in this section, research in executive coaching is currently conducted predominantly using the empirico-analytical research paradigm and there are calls for more of this “scientific” type of research in the context of EBC and professionalisation. However, Kilburg (2004a, p. 205) has expressed concern about executive coaching “implicitly embracing the scientific method as part of its conceptual and operational foundations”. Knowledge gained from empirical research is derived through generalisations made from statistical inferences obtained from sample population data, does not reflect the unique and individual differences between clients, and seeks to control context rather than recognising and researching its rich impact. These are significant aspects of executive coaching because not only are all clients unique, so are their particular contexts and circumstances within their organisation. Rather, the coaching relationship is an unpredictable, iterative process, something that cannot be adequately replicated in a laboratory (Cavanagh & Grant, 2007).

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34 Higgs and Andresen (2001) proposed that professional craft knowledge arises from professional experience including the tacit and procedural knowledge gained from ways of knowing and doing together with interpersonal interactions and techniques.
Although the volume of research evidence for executive coaching is growing, not all executive coaching practice has been examined through research and not all aspects of practice can be supported by this narrow view of evidence. For this reason, Drake (2008a, p. 23) has encouraged researchers to look beyond a definition of evidence for coaching that is “universal, static, objective and neutral” to a definition that views evidence as “contextual, dynamic, subjective, political and socially constructed”. However, even with continued efforts to expand the evidence base of executive coaching it remains unlikely that developments such as EBC (where evidence is defined in strictly scientific terms) will be able to account for all the dimensions of executive coaching practice, given the uniqueness of coaching experiences and the diversity of approaches used by coaches, applications of coaching used in organisations and client experiences.

3.9 THE DIVERSE PRACTICE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

The practice of executive coaching has evolved almost as quickly as its presence has expanded in the workplace and there are now a range of roles, coaching models and frameworks of practice (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006). In fact, Lowman (2005, p. 90) suggested that executive coaching has “caught on more as an area of practice than as one of theory or research”. There appears to be a diversity of coaching practice, where few established norms can be assumed (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006). Some authors (Armstrong et al., 2005; Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006) have argued that such diversity is to be welcomed, and indeed expected, as coaches respond to the individual needs of clients. This section considers how executive coaching is currently practised. First, I highlight the theories in the literature that have informed coaching practice and particularly focus on the dominance of psychological theory. Second, this section examines a selection of models utilised in executive coaching practice.

3.9.1. THEORETICAL APPROACHES APPLIED TO EXECUTIVE COACHING PRACTICE

Theories are proposals which give a reasonable explanation to an event and provide ideas about how or why something happens (Pearson et al., 1996). The literature in executive coaching has given little attention to the development and testing of theories that apply uniquely to coaching practice. Rather, as outlined in Chapter One, executive coaching draws on a range of theories and approaches from other disciplines, with little agreement on a common body of knowledge. Jenny Rogers (2004) described this in the context of coaching as “borrowed theory”, and Kilburg (1996a, p. 59) described the application of multiple theories and approaches to executive coaching practice as an “eclectic mix of concepts and methods”. Sherman and Freas (2004) argued that coaches rely upon their legacy field for their theoretical
grounding and Brock (2008) suggested that they eclectically use various tools and techniques from other disciplines in their coaching practice.

Research with coaches demonstrates the diversity of theories applied to executive coaching practice. In a global study (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012), coaches who worked mainly with executives (n=7736) reported utilising an average of 2.5 theoretical frameworks in their coaching practice, drawing from leadership, organisational development, organisational psychology, neuroscience, adult education, philosophy, economics/finance and others. Interestingly, in the same study, 6% of those coaches who dealt with executives reported using no theoretical frameworks in their coaching practice. In an Australian study of coaching (n=229), coaches reported using the following theories very frequently or always in their coaching practice: adult learning (76%), solution-focused (76%), positive psychology (73%), behavioural (66%), cognitive behavioural (60%), appreciative inquiry (57%) and systems (47%) (Standards Australia, 2011).

From the literature it is evident that the current body of published executive coaching knowledge is dominated and largely influenced by psychology (Brock, 2008; Drake, 2007; Gray, 2006; Judge & Cowell, 1997; Passmore, 2007c) and the range of approaches described as available to coaches owes more to the experiences of those with backgrounds in counselling and psychotherapy than those with backgrounds in business (Passmore, 2007c). Whybrow and Wildflower (2011) argued that psychology provides the primary theoretical underpinning to the theory and practice of coaching. Jenny Rogers (2004, p. 18) argued that coaching “owes a huge and often unacknowledged debt to … psychotherapy and counselling” and without these fields there would be no coaching. Similarly, Brock (2008) confirmed in a grounded theory study that the greatest disciplinary influence on coaching has been psychology, primarily humanistic and clinical (for theories and models) and then business (organisation development, management, and consulting), followed by sports, adult learning and development and philosophy (Eastern and Western).

a) Psychological theories and approaches applied to executive coaching

Psychological approaches to executive coaching are described in a number of ways in the literature, with some consistency, representing the fields of psychology from which they have been drawn. For example, Grant (2006b) suggested that coaching psychologists use a wide range of theoretical perspectives in their coaching (in addition to positive psychology),

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35 It is unknown whether these coaches did not use any theoretical knowledge as a basis for their coaching or whether they were utilising theoretical models at a subconscious or tacit level (and therefore could not identify or articulate them easily in this survey).

36 Respondents were not provided with a definition, so the responses were based on their understandings and interpretations of these theoretical areas.
including psychodynamic and systemic, developmental, cognitive behavioural, solution focused and behavioural perspectives. Besides these categories, Peltier (2010) also included person-centred approaches. Appendix F contains a detailed analysis of the psychological theories and examples of the associated coaching approaches presented in the executive coaching literature. For the purposes of this analysis, I have included (and labelled) these approaches as psychodynamic, developmental (adult), cognitive behavioural, behavioural, solution-focused, positive psychology and strengths-based, person-centred and humanistic, narrative and integrative. A summary (which also reflects the details of my constructed text set) is provided in Table 3.4.

The most popular psychological approaches applied to executive coaching appear to be cognitive behavioural and solution-focused. For example, in a study of coaching psychologists in the UK, the majority reported using a cognitive, behavioural and/or solution-focused approach in their practice (Whybrow & Palmer, 2006). As outlined earlier, cognitive behavioural, solution-focused and behavioural approaches are also understood to be used widely by Australian coaches (Standards Australia, 2011). Further, the longest established university coach education program in Australia, at the University of Sydney,\(^{37}\) is also understood to be informed by the cognitive behavioural model, with an emphasis on solution-focused coaching and goal setting theory (Abbott, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Examples of coaching approaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychodynamic</td>
<td>Kilburg, 2004b; Lee, 2010; Rotenberg, 2000</td>
<td>Psychodynamically informed executive coaching (Allcorn, 2006; Huggler, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive behavioural</td>
<td>Auerbach, 2006; Ducharme, 2004; Grant et al., 2009; Karas &amp; Spada, 2009; Libri &amp; Kemp, 2006; Neenan, 2008; O’Broin &amp; Palmer, 2009; Palmer, 2009; Palmer &amp; Gyllensten, 2008; Peterson, 1996; Smith, 2003; Williams et al., 2010</td>
<td>Cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) (Ducharme, 2004; Neenan, 2008; Palmer &amp; Gyllensten, 2008; Williams et al., 2010); Cognitive coaching (Auerbach, 2006; Smith, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational Emotive Behaviour</td>
<td>J. P. Anderson, 2002; Fusco et al., 2011; Palmer, 2009; Palmer &amp; Gyllensten, 2008; Sherin &amp; Caiger, 2004</td>
<td>Rational emotive behavioural coaching (Fusco et al., 2011; Palmer &amp; Gyllensten, 2008; Sherin &amp; Caiger, 2004); Rational coaching (Palmer, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimodal therapy(^{*})</td>
<td>Palmer &amp; Gyllensten, 2008; Richard, 1999</td>
<td>Multimodal coaching (Palmer &amp; Gyllensten, 2008; Richard, 1999)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{37}\) See Chapter One for more information about the context of coach education in Australia.
Solution-focused  
Cavanagh & Grant, 2010; Grant, 2010, 2011b; Greene & Grant, 2003  
Solution-focused coaching  
(Cavanagh & Grant, 2010; Grant, 2010; Greene & Grant, 2003)

Behavioural  
Behaviour based approach  
(Peterson, 2006)

Positive psychology  
Foster & Lloyd, 2007; Fronczak, 2005; Kaufman, 2006; Kaufman et al., 2010; Seligman, 2007  
Positive psychology coaching  
(Kaufman et al., 2010)

Strengths-based*  
Govindji & Linley, 2007; Linley & Harrington, 2006; Linley et al., 2009; Toogood, 2012  
Strengths-based coaching (Toogood, 2012), Strengths coaching (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Linley & Harrington, 2006; Linley et al., 2009)  
Flow*  
Wesson, 2010; Wesson & Boniwell, 2007  
Flow-enhancing model of coaching (Wesson & Boniwell, 2007)

Person-centred and humanistic  
Person-centred approach (Hedman, 2010; Joseph, 2010); Person centred coaching (Joseph, 2010); Coaching from the humanistic perspective (Stober, 2006)

Narrative  
Drake, 2007, 2008b, 2010  
Narrative coaching (Drake, 2010)

Other therapeutic techniques  
Motivational interviewing (Passmore, 2007a), Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (Foster & Lendl, 1996)  

Integrative models and approaches  
Psychodynamics and organisation systems (Kilburg, 2000)  
17 dimension model of psychodynamics and organisation systems (Kilburg, 1996b)  
Integrative coaching (Passmore, 2007c)  
Integrated model of developmental coaching (Laske, 1999)  
Integrated goal-focused approach (Grant, 2006a)

*These represent sub-categories of the main category listed.

Cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) draws heavily on the work of cognitive psychologists such as Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis (1913-2007) (Abbott, 2006; Neenan, 2008; Peltier, 2010). CBC proposes that executives can benefit by changing the way they think, especially when their thinking limits their success (Peltier, 2010). Research into CBC has found it efficacious for dealing with procrastination (Karas & Spada, 2009; Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008), potential mental health issues (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008) and for enhancing an executive’s sales performance (Libri & Kemp, 2006). Solution-focused coaching (SFC) has its origins in Milton H
Erickson’s (1901-1980) approach to strategic therapy and brief solution-focused therapy. SFC focuses attention on building solutions rather than talking about problems with clients (“solution talk” versus “problem talk”) (Cavanagh & Grant, 2010). Unlike other therapeutic approaches, SFC views the client as whole and resourceful and as fundamentally able to solve his or her own problems (Cavanagh & Grant, 2010). A detailed examination of both of these approaches is provided in Appendix F.

When these psychological approaches to executive coaching are reviewed, it is evident that person-centred or humanistic approaches are very relevant, but appear to receive significantly less attention in the literature compared to other psychological approaches. The person-centred (or client-centred) approach to executive coaching is based on the work of Carl Rogers (1902-1987) and assumes that people have a natural actualising tendency towards growth, development and optimal functioning (and, if provided with the appropriate nurturing conditions, will grow to their fullest potential) (Hedman, 2010; Joseph, 2010).

One reason why the person-centred approach may have not have been as widely adopted as other approaches (at least by psychologists) relates to its rejection of the “diagnostic” stance of the medical model, where the therapist (or coach) is the expert (Joseph, 2006, 2010). Rather, in a person-centred approach to coaching, the coach’s role is as a facilitator, not as a subject matter expert or more experienced guide (Stober, 2006). Consistent with this approach, the coach also does not direct the session but respects clients’ self-determination to choose their own values and goals (Hedman, 2010).

The person-centred approach is very relevant to executive coaching (especially in comparison to other psychological approaches) by virtue of its emphasis on the importance of the successful formation of a collaborative relationship in determining coaching effectiveness (Joseph, 2010). Through an optimal climate (empathy, positive regard, congruence) in the relationship (and provided by the coach), the client’s capacity for self-growth is accessed (Stober, 2006). The person-centred approach as applied to executive coaching is further detailed in Appendix F.

b) **Critical evaluation of psychological theories and approaches applied to executive coaching**

Although psychological perspectives have been considered useful when applied to executive coaching for inviting clients to talk freely about personal issues, to explore “blind spots” and to gain new perspectives and insights (Gray, 2006), there are also a number of general issues.

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38 Developed by therapists such as Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer at The Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee (Grant, 2010).
associated with the unquestioning application of psychological theory and approaches to executive coaching practice. Gray (2006) contended that psychotherapeutic techniques are not always appropriate for coaching in business settings. Neenan (2008) argued that some coaches (particularly from counselling backgrounds) are too eager to “dig deep” into psychological issues before there is evidence to warrant such an investigation or before the client has given them permission to do so. This can arise because many clinicians operate on the unchallenged assumption that deeper interventions or interpretations are better. However, this can ruin a coaching relationship with executive clients, who commonly trust analysis much less than action (Peltier, 2010).

Gray (2006) also argued that psychological approaches can require longer-term relationships (a “therapeutic alliance”), whereas organisations prefer short-term relationships with defined outcomes in executive coaching. It has also been suggested that the selection and use of different psychological frameworks may have more to do with the familiarity, comfort and expertise of the practitioner than consideration of the most appropriate approach for a given situation (Kilburg, 2004b; Whybrow & Palmer, 2006). Another issue associated with the adoption of a number of the psychotherapeutic approaches for executive coaching relates to their underlying basis in the medical model. Stober and Grant (2006b) argued that the medical model has been criticised for its emphasis on pathology, and this limitation is even more significant in coaching, where clients are not being treated for mental illness.

The most significant reason to challenge the dominance of psychological perspectives, however, relates to the comparatively small number of executive coaches who are psychologists. This was illustrated in a study of 2,529 professional coaches by Grant and Zackon (2004) in which only 4.8% had prior career(s) in psychology, compared to coaches who were previously consultants (40.8%), managers (30.8%), executives (30.2%), teachers (15.7%), salespeople (13.8%), counsellors (12.7%) and social workers (4.1%). Similarly, in a study by Liljenstrand and Nebeker (2008) with 2,231 international coaches, only 16.2% had an academic background in industrial/organisational or clinical psychology, versus 24.7% in business, 10.5% in education, and 48.5% with other backgrounds. Further, in a study of executive coaching articles in mainstream and trade management publications, Garman et al., (2000) revealed that psychology training was neither regularly or universally recognised in the media as useful (or even relevant) to practise in the field of executive coaching.  

39 In the articles published between 1991 and 1998, mentions of psychology declined steadily from 67% to 30%. When psychological training was mentioned (61% of the time), it was discussed in mixed terms including recognition of providing a unique skills base that added value (45%), was favourable or unfavourable (36%), and was potentially harmful (18%) (Garman et al., 2000).
Grant and Cavanagh (2007a) suggested that psychologists have just not been very effective at positioning themselves in the market and as such are underrepresented. Despite a focus on human behaviour, psychologists have been “slow to embrace coaching as an area of professional practice” (Cavanagh & Grant, 2007, p. 148). Overall, however, these studies suggest that the emphasis given to psychology in the scholarly literature actually reflects the achievements of an actively researching (and publishing) minority of psychologist-coaches. Support for the claim that psychologists are publishing more in the area of coaching (than other disciplines) can be found in the results of recent research undertaken by Stern and Stout-Rostron (2013). In their analysis of the 263 peer-reviewed articles published on coaching between 2008 and 2012, the vast majority (41%) were published in coaching psychology and psychology journals compared to 24% in coaching journals, 12% in business journals, 6% in HR journals and only 5% in education and training related journals (Stern & Stout Rostron, 2013).

In summary, Gray (2006, p. 475) has challenged the seemingly unquestioned application of theories from psychology to executive coaching in the literature as follows:

*Much of the literature on coaching has been written by those with a human psychology perspective and particularly psychotherapeutic processes to support. It brings the implicit assumption that to the extent that coaching practice is underpinned by any theoretical model, this will be from a human psychology and particularly a psychotherapeutic perspective. Whilst there will be circumstances where the coaching has to deal with managers who may be facing deep-seated problems, it is far from clear why coaching should necessarily so often adopt a psychotherapeutic approach.*

### 3.9.2. EXECUTIVE COACHING PRACTICE MODELS

There are no commonly accepted models in the literature that fully explain the practice or processes involved in executive coaching. As coaching draws on many disciplines and is practised by a range of different individuals, it is hardly surprising that many diverse models exist. A model for practice can be understood as a “descriptive picture which adequately represents the real thing” (Pearson et al., 1996, p. 2). Models are intended to approximate what actually happens and they can be used for a range of purposes, such as to support the training and development of practitioners.

There are a number of possible reasons for the absence of common practice models in executive coaching. One reason may relate to the occupation’s recent emergence. Secondly, while executive coaches are likely to draw on their own particular models when working with clients, these models remain implicit unless they are made explicit by talking and writing about them and sharing them with others. In a new field of practice, the opportunities for this to occur would not have been as extensive as in more established fields. Another reason may relate to problematic features of the commercial coaching industry. Coaches, coaching service
providers and coach training organisations have all developed their own proprietary coaching models and these represent a competitive advantage. These models are frequently presented as unique “products” or “tools” in attempt by service providers to differentiate themselves in the marketplace (Kemp, 2008a). This can make the sharing and publication of these models difficult. Lane (cited in Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006, p. 26) proposed that these proprietary models are generally untested and are “built on ideas drawn from sources both spurious and credible”, but there is no evidence to suggest that models developed in these contexts are better (or worse) than any others. This statement probably reflects the lack in the coaching literature of recognition of the value of knowledge gained from practice and the development of practice-based theory (versus theory-based practice).

In responding to this diversity of models in the literature and in practice, I have selected three examples of the most popular practice models presented in the executive coaching literature. These include the following model types: (1) those that outline the key steps in the overall process of an executive coaching engagement, (2) those that detail how to structure a coaching session, and (3) models of effective or best-practice executive coaching.

a) Coaching process models

Table 3.5 provides descriptions of the stages or steps in the overall process of an executive coaching engagement as derived from the literature. In Table 3.5, common stages in the process descriptions are evident. These are generally consistent with most consulting interventions (Barner, 2006; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001) and can be described as follows: data gathering and establishing client goals, feedback, implementation (coaching), and evaluation (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). While authors have been focused on defining the various stages of executive coaching as undertaken (and managed) by executive coaches, research also suggests that clients appreciate a structured process focused on development (Bush, 2004). In Bush’s (2004, p. 131) study, clients acknowledged that the coaching process had “a beginning, a middle, and an end”, and they appreciated the existence of processes in the selection of coaches, standard instruments and feedback.

The application of assessment techniques and diagnostics for providing data and feedback to the client appears to be the most identified (shared) element described in the models in Table 3.5. In the literature, the assessment stage includes the deployment of a range of 360-degree surveys\(^\text{40}\), interviews and psychological personality and leadership assessments with clients.

\(^{40}\) 360-degree feedback involves peers, subordinates and managers completing a questionnaire describing the individual’s performance (Australian Human Resources Institute).
(Brotman et al., 1998; Diedrich, 1996; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Kiel et al., 1996; Kilburg, 1996b; Peterson, 1996; Richard, 1999; Saporito, 1996; Tobias, 1996; Witherspoon & White, 1996). Feldman and Lankau (2005) have suggested that many coaching relationships begin with feedback, and enhancing the usefulness of such strategies is an important foundation for the success of executive coaching.

In a study undertaken with 100 coaches in the UK, 88% of coaches used assessments and found them useful for structuring and enhancing the process and for providing useful information for the coach, client and (sometimes) the organisation (McDowall & Chris, 2009). One reason for the prevalence of these assessment processes may also relate to the influence of psychology on executive coaching. Testing and assessment are central to the professional identify of psychologists and are also identified as a core competency of these professionals (Peltier, 2010).

### Table 3.5 Stages in executive coaching assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Key steps</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key steps</td>
<td>2. Initial discussion.</td>
<td>3. In-depth psychological study of the individual.</td>
<td>4. 360-degree feedback process (if appropriate).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. In-depth psychological study of the individual.</td>
<td>4. 360-degree feedback process (if appropriate).</td>
<td>5. Follow-up meetings (if appropriate).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. 360-degree feedback process (if appropriate).</td>
<td>5. Follow-up meetings (if appropriate).</td>
<td>6. Repeated meetings.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Follow-up meetings (if appropriate).</td>
<td>6. Repeated meetings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Witherspoon &amp; White, 1996</td>
<td>Commitment to a contract.</td>
<td>1. Commitment to a contract.</td>
<td>2. Assessment to set a goal or define a problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 steps:</td>
<td>2. Assessment to set a goal or define a problem.</td>
<td>3. Action.</td>
<td>4. Continuous improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiel et al., 1996</td>
<td>Over 2 years</td>
<td>1. Fact gathering – interviews, psychological tests.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 phases:</td>
<td>1. Fact gathering – interviews, psychological tests.</td>
<td>2. Planning and consolidation – 2- to 3-day “insight” session.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Planning and consolidation – 2- to 3-day “insight” session.</td>
<td>3. Implementation and development – meetings with stakeholders and then</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Implementation and development – meetings with stakeholders and then</td>
<td>coaching. Spot-check undertaken at 6 monthly intervals.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coaching. Spot-check undertaken at 6 monthly intervals.</td>
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<td>Peterson, 1996</td>
<td>Forge a partnership – build trust and understanding.</td>
<td>1. Forge a partnership – build trust and understanding.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Promote persistence – build stamina and discipline to make sure learning</td>
<td>4. Promote persistence – build stamina and discipline to make sure learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>lasts.</td>
<td>lasts.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Shape the environment – build organisational support to reward learning</td>
<td>5. Shape the environment – build organisational support to reward learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and remove barriers.</td>
<td>and remove barriers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 stages:</td>
<td>2. Assessment of individual – including 360-degree feedback.</td>
<td>2. Assessment of individual – including 360-degree feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orenstein, 2000</td>
<td>Initial contact.</td>
<td>1. Initial contact.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 steps:</td>
<td>2. Preliminary meeting.</td>
<td>2. Preliminary meeting.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Joint goal setting.</td>
<td>3. Joint goal setting.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8. Termination.</td>
<td>8. Termination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Stages/Phases</td>
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<td>2. Commitment – trust.</td>
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<td>3. Information gathering.</td>
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<td>5. Continuous improvement – ongoing feedback through one-on-one dialogue</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>between coach and client.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6. Closure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stern, 2004</td>
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<td>7 steps:&lt;br&gt;1. Initial needs analysis.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Contracting.</td>
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<td>3. Data gathering.</td>
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<td>4. Specific goal setting.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Coaching.</td>
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<td>7. Transitioning to a longer-term development effort.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trudeau, 2004</td>
<td></td>
<td>8 phases:&lt;br&gt;1. Establishing a relationship with the client.</td>
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<td>2. Contracting with the client.</td>
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<td>3. Assessing the client.</td>
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<td>4. Offering feedback.</td>
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<td>5. Developing an action plan.</td>
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<td>6. Coaching experience.</td>
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<td>7. Providing monitoring and support of the process.</td>
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<td>8. Termination of the contract.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natale &amp;</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>5 stages:&lt;br&gt;1. Alliance check – dealing with resistance and identification</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Diamante, 2005</td>
<td></td>
<td>of the circumstances.</td>
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<td>2. Credibility assessment – examining the coach.</td>
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<td>3. Likeability link – client compares preferred style with coaches style.</td>
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<td>4. Dialogue and skill acquisition – discovery, analysis, verification and</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>application.</td>
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<td>5. Cue-based action plans.</td>
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<td>2. Feedback (organisation and executive).</td>
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<td>3. Planning (development plan) with 1:1 meetings and 3-way meetings with</td>
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<td>stakeholders.</td>
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<td>4. Development (proper) – coaching in 4 phases over time.</td>
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<td>5. Integration – evaluate progress, ongoing recommendations.</td>
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<td>Feldman &amp;</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>4 phases:&lt;br&gt;1. Data gathering.</td>
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<td>3. Periodic coaching sessions.</td>
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<td>4. Evaluation.</td>
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<td>2006</td>
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<td>2. Relationship building.</td>
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<td>3. Assessment.</td>
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<td>4. Getting feedback and reflecting.</td>
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<td>5. Goal setting.</td>
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<td>6. Supportive implementation and evaluation (formal coaching sessions).</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2. Contracting.</td>
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<td>3. Assessment.</td>
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<td>4. Intervention.</td>
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<td>5. Follow-up.</td>
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<td>4 phases:&lt;br&gt;1. Defining formal organisation-bound objectives between coach,</td>
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<td>al., 2011</td>
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<td>client and employer.</td>
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<td>2. Self-reflection.</td>
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<td>4. Changes in behaviour and personal changes.</td>
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Some authors (Goodstone & Diamante, 1998; Gregory et al., 2008) have acknowledged that the provision of 360-degree feedback in itself is not sufficient to improve executive self-awareness and produce positive changes in managerial behaviour. In their model of the feedback process in executive coaching, Gregory et al. (2008) suggest that the client’s feedback orientation (receptiveness) and the organisation’s initiation and support for both coaching and feedback are important factors. The characteristics of the coach as an effective source of feedback is also a key variable (Gregory et al., 2008), particularly as the active ingredient of change in the context of executive coaching is the relationship between the executive and the coach. It is suggested that within the coaching relationship active agents of change are present, resistance can be overcome and positive managerial change (that considers the organisation’s demands) can be directed (Goodstone & Diamante, 1998).

While it is acknowledged that there are common process elements in most executive coaching assignments, there are still significant gaps in the literature in terms of what happens at each of the stages of the engagement and what is effective and ineffective. Feldman and Lankau (2005) suggested an agenda for future research that includes an investigation of the contract setting and expectation setting stages of the coaching process and the complexities of the coaching relationship. An example could be research that explores relationship aspects such as boundaries and confidentiality, particularly when organisational stakeholders are involved (Feldman & Lankau, 2005).

b) Coaching session models

There are many versions of coaching session models in the literature. These are used as frameworks for structuring executive coaching sessions. The most popular example is the GROW model, which was developed in the 1980s by Alexander (cited in Alexander & Renshaw, 2005) and subsequently adopted by a range of other authors including Whitmore (2002)41 and Landsberg (2002). The GROW model is portrayed in Figure 3.2. Other similar coaching session models include, PRACTICE (Palmer, 2007), ACHIEVE (Dembkowski et al., 2006), IMPACT (Cox, 2006), REGROW (2011a) and GIVE (Fusco et al., 2011).

Using the GROW model, the coach adopts a Socratic learning style, using open questions to help the client move through four steps: (1) goal, (2) reality, (3) options and (4) wrap-up (Passmore, 2007c). A fundamental assumption of the GROW model is that clients have an actualising tendency which the coach draws forth. The process is self-directed (as it follows the interest of the client) and is intended to lead to heightened awareness of goals (and their

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41 The GROW model is frequently associated with John Whitmore because it was included in his book Coaching for Performance: GROWing People, Performance and Purpose (first published in 1992) and it became attributed to him (Wildflower, 2013).
meaning and importance to the client) and specific actions to pursue them (Burke & Linley, 2007). Cox (2006) appropriately observed that these steps map directly to the four elements of the experiential learning cycle as depicted by Kolb (1984)\(^{42}\), although this connection is not widely acknowledged in the literature.

**Figure 3.2 The GROW model** (Alexander, 2010, p. 84)

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Grant (2011a) described GROW as following a cycle of self-regulation (see Figure F1 in Appendix F) which is also a self-directed learning process. Grant’s (2011a) version is REGROW,\(^{43}\) which illustrates that coaching assignments are typically structured around a series of coaching sessions and each coaching session needs to review and examine the outcomes of the previous session. Models such as GROW also emphasise the listening, questioning and clarifying skills which are viewed in the literature as indispensable to the executive coach (Bresser & Wilson, 2010).

Most commonly, the GROW model is considered useful to coaching practice because it is a simple tool that can be easily be taught (or learned) by clients during the coaching process (Passmore, 2007c) and is well suited to organisations and the world of work (Alexander, 2010). For coaches, it is viewed as a flexible model that enables them to respond to the demands of any coaching session (Grant, 2011a) and is valuable to the beginning practitioner (Kemp, 2008a). Little research has been undertaken into the effectiveness of coaching session models,\(^{43}\)

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\(^{42}\) The cycle contains four elements and commences with an experience (“concrete experience”) that becomes the basis for reflection and observation by the learner (“reflective observation”). These reflections are then assimilated by the learner into a theory or model (“abstract conceptualisation”) which is used to plan how to test a model theory or plan for a forthcoming experience (“active experimentation”) (Kolb, 1984).

\(^{43}\) REGROW model = R (review), E (evaluate), G (goals), R (reality), O (options) and W (wrap-up) (Grant, 2011a).
but one study undertaken with 26 senior managers demonstrated that a single executive coaching session using the GROW model led to heightened awareness and increased goal self-concordance,\footnote{Self-concordant goals are those which are consistent with an individual’s interests and core values. The more self-concordant a goal is, the more readily it will be pursued and achieved (Burke & Linley, 2007).} alignment with personal values and goal commitment (Burke & Linley, 2007).

A number of issues exist with the simplicity of models such as GROW when applied to coaching practice. These models portray coaching as a step-by-step, linear process, when the reality of coaching is that it continually oscillates between the various steps and is non-linear and evolving (Grant, 2011a). Coaches can rigidly apply models such as GROW, resulting in coaching becoming mechanistic and more focused on the coach’s agenda than the client’s (Clutterbuck, 2010). The GROW model also places a primacy on goal setting, particularly at the outset of the coaching process. This can lead coaches towards a focus on specific goals, rather than exploring with clients a broader picture and goals that are linked to a deeper sense of purpose and values (Jinks & Dexter, 2012). It can be more useful to have wider or more abstract goals and a broad vision at the outset of coaching (Clutterbuck, 2008; Grant, 2011a), recognising that in some cases a clearer sense of goals may actually be the outcome of the coaching process for the client (Clutterbuck, 2010). Clutterbuck (2008) proposed that, except for short-term task-related goals, the narrower the goal at the beginning, the less the chance the client has of achieving it. It has also been suggested that the process of setting a goal at the start of coaching may actually reflect the needs of the coach (particularly the less experienced coach) rather than those of the client (Clutterbuck, 2010). Furthermore, these models only provide a structure for the coaching conversation and do not reflect the other process aspects of executive coaching, including the creative and effective use of levels of reflection and methods of inquiry and the application of a range of techniques, such as role playing, reframing, simulations, confrontations and interpretations (Kilburg, 2000).

c) Models of effective or best practice executive coaching

There are various models in the literature which focus on effective or “best practice” executive coaching. These models typically define contextual, relationship and client and coach characteristics that are important for coaching to be viewed (and experienced) as effective. Table 3.6 contains examples of these models. Appendix G shows diagrammatic representations of these models (where appropriate). Each of these selected models is here discussed briefly.

In developing an eight-component model of coaching effectiveness, Kilburg (2001) drew on literature from health care to emphasise client adherence as one important factor that had generally been overlooked in the executive coaching literature. Adherence assumes that the client is voluntarily and actively involved in the design and implementation of the coaching
intervention. Kilburg (2001) suggested that it is important for coach and client to discuss potential adherence issues at the outset of the coaching process and to address resistance to learning and behavioural change issues before they are encountered. Similarly, in a study by Seamons (2006), coaches reported client adherence (defined as the client’s willingness to engage in coaching) as the most important component of successful executive coaching. Kilburg’s (2001) model also highlighted the importance of the coach’s and client’s organisational settings in supporting effective executive coaching. Support could be evidenced in the client’s organisation providing the client with the time and financial resources for coaching, giving the client the opportunity to experiment with behaviours and approaches, and supplying the client with feedback on progress. In Seamon’s study, the support of the client’s leader was identified as an important factor in coaching success. Elements of Kilburg’s (2001) model are among those listed in Table 3.6 and are displayed diagrammatically in Appendix G.

Joo’s (2005) conceptual framework outlines antecedents, processes and outcomes of successful executive coaching; it was based on a review of the executive coaching literature. Consistent with most models, the antecedents for successful coaching also include the characteristics of the coach, the coachee (client) and the support of the organisation. In exploring coach characteristics, Joo proposed that the academic background of a coach (counselling or consulting) determines the approach applied in coaching practice. Interestingly, in a study of the practices of psychologist and non-psychologist executive coaches, little difference was revealed between both groups, suggesting that academic background is not a sound indicator of the approach that a coach will use (Bono et al., 2009). Other significant antecedents in Joo’s (2005) framework include the proactivity and learning orientation of the coachee (client) and a high level of organisation support from top management and HR. Joo suggested that in terms of coaching process, the approach utilised by the coach will also affect the outcomes of coaching. For example, a counselling (remedial) approach to coaching will positively affect self-awareness, whereas a consulting (developmental) approach will affect learning. Interestingly, in the earlier section of this chapter that examined the purpose of executive coaching, self-awareness was also an aspect attributed to developmental coaching (Standards Australia, 2011), suggesting that Joo’s continuum of coaching approaches (from remedial to developmental coaching) may be somewhat simplistic when compared to the complexity of coaching practice and outcomes. Joo also proposed that factors important to the success of the coaching process include the coaching relationship and the client’s receptiveness to feedback. Joo divided successful outcomes from coaching into two categories: (1) proximal factors (self-awareness and learning) and (2) distal outcomes (individual and organisational success), reflecting the aspirational impact of executive coaching on both the individual and the organisation.
### Table 3.6 Examples of models of effective coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model of coaching effectiveness (Kilburg, 2001)</th>
<th>Components</th>
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<td>8 components:</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Client commitment to the path of progressive development.</td>
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<td>2. Coach’s commitment to the same path.</td>
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<td>3. Characteristics of the client’s problems and issues.</td>
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<td>4. Structure of the coaching containment.</td>
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<td>6. Coaching interventions used by the practitioner.</td>
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<td>7. Adherence protocol.</td>
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<td>8. Nature of the coach’s and client’s organizational settings.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Conceptual framework for successful executive coaching (Joo, 2005)</th>
<th>Antecedents:</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Coach characteristics</td>
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<td>2. Coachee (client) characteristics</td>
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<td>3. Organisational client support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Process:</td>
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<td>4. Coaching approach</td>
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<td>5. Coaching relationship</td>
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<td>6. Feedback receptivity</td>
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<td>Proximal outcomes:</td>
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<td>7. Self-awareness</td>
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<td>8. Learning</td>
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<td>Distal outcomes:</td>
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<td>9. Individual success</td>
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<td>10. Organisational success</td>
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<tr>
<th>Contextual model (Stober &amp; Grant, 2006b)</th>
<th>7 factors:</th>
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<td>1. An explicit outcome or goal that both parties collaboratively work toward.</td>
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<td>2. A sensible rationale or explanation for how coaching as a process fits the client’s need and situation.</td>
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<td>3. A procedure or set of steps that is consistent with the rationale and requires both the client’s and coach’s active participation.</td>
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<td>4. A meaningful relationship between a coach and a client such that the client believes the coach is there to help and will work with in the client’s best interest.</td>
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<td>5. A collaborative working alliance in which the coach’s explicit role is to expand the client’s development, performance, or skill set, appropriately pacing the intervention to maintain challenge and facilitate change.</td>
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<td>6. The client’s ability and readiness to change, and the extent to which the client is both able and willing to do the work of change.</td>
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<td>7. The coach’s ability and readiness to help the client change, in that the coach’s ability to facilitate the client’s change process will significantly rest on the coach.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Model of exceptional executive coaching (Dagley, 2010a)</th>
<th>Structural factors:</th>
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<td>8 factors:</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Environmental factors (involvement of the sponsoring manager, culture of the organisation, structure of the coaching programme).</td>
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<td>2. Executive (client) factors (motivation and commitment of the executive, personality factors, and outside influences affecting the executive’s professional life).</td>
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<td>3. Task factors (clarity of the objectives, and the perceived remediality of the work).</td>
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<td>Executive coach factors:</td>
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<td>1. The working relationship</td>
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<td>2. “Deeper conversations”</td>
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<td>3. Awareness and insight</td>
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<td>4. Taking responsibility for change</td>
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<td>5. Positive growth experience</td>
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Stober and Grant (2006b) presented a seven-factor “contextual model” as a meta-model and an alternative to the medical model for coaching. Details of Stober and Grant’s model are shown in Table 3.6. The model expands on the four components (or common factors) derived from Wampold’s (2001) contextual model of psychotherapy. In reviewing the outcome literature in psychotherapy, Wampold concluded that all the psychotherapies were generally equivalent and success was due to factors that were common to all approaches. In a similar way, Stober and Grant’s contextual model for coaching provides an overarching framework that aims to accommodate existing knowledge and approaches applied to executive coaching practice by focusing on the common themes relevant to all approaches. These themes are the coach-client relationship, characteristics of the coach and the client, and how they interface in the application of techniques to each individual client’s context. They also include the need for each coaching engagement to have a rationale for the techniques used and that fit the “particular coaching context of a particular client with a particular coach in a particular relationship” (2006b p. 358). Importantly, the model also focuses on the meaning attributed to the coaching experience by the coach and the client, the experience being ultimately successful because both parties act from a belief that coaching will be helpful. Research undertaken with 71 executive coaching clients by De Haan et al. (2011) provides further support for this common factors perspective in executive coaching and suggests that the “helpfulness” (of the process) is attributable not to the technique or approach used by the coach but to other factors including the client-coach relationship, the coach’s empathic understanding and client expectations. In a further study with 156 clients and 34 coaches, De Haan et al. (2012) confirmed that client perceptions of the outcome of coaching were significantly related to their perception of the coaching relationship (as the key factor), their own self-efficacy, and their perceptions of the coaching interventions used by the coach. Further, in the contextual model, Stober and Grant (2006b) identified seven key principles of effective coaching that underpin the human change process and represent the means by which the contextual themes in their model are enacted. These principles are (1) collaboration, (2) accountability, (3) awareness, (4) responsibility, (5) commitment, (6) action and (7) results.

Dagley (2010a) conducted research with 20 purchasers of executive coaching services in Australia and developed a model of exceptional executive coaching. The model is displayed in Table 3.6 and illustrated further in Appendix G. The model reflects that exceptional coaching

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45 A meta-model is described as a conceptual framework that “models other models” and contains higher-order themes and principles that guide thinking (Stober & Grant, 2006b, p. 357).

46 These components are (1) an emotionally charged, confiding relationship with a helping person, (2) a client who believes that the therapist will provide help and will work in the client’s best interest, (3) a rationale that provides a plausible explanation for the client’s symptoms and is consistent with the client’s world view, and (4) a procedure or ritual that is consistent with the rationale of the treatment and requires the active participation of both client and therapist (Wampold, 2001).
results are the product of both the coach’s delivery and other critical factors, namely (1) environmental, (2) executive (client) and (3) task factors (Dagley, 2010a) as shown in Table 3.6. Factors that detract from exceptional executive coaching can include, for example, an uncommitted or demotivated client, lack of clarity regarding the reasons or focus of the coaching task and lack of involvement or support from the client’s manager. Exceptional executive coaching is also related to a number of executive coach factors, which are the coach’s ability to facilitate the following with the client: (1) the working relationship, (2) in-depth conversations, (3) the development of personal insight and (4) responsibility for action, and (5) a sense of growth (Dagley, 2010a). Other coach factors include possession of the following exceptional coaching capabilities: (1) credibility, (2) empathy and respect, (3) holding the professional self, (4) diagnostic skill and insight, (5) flexibility and range in approach, (6) working to the business context, (7) a philosophy of personal responsibility, that is, the belief that change rests with the client, not the coach, and (8) skilful challenging (2010).

Although the types of best practice and effectiveness models presented above are useful for informing coaching practice, there are also a number of issues associated with their application. A number of these models were developed from the process of reviewing the executive coaching literature and therefore it can be argued they are untested in practice settings. The majority of these models also reflect the perspective of the coach and may (or may not) adequately accommodate the needs and interests of clients. The danger also exists for such models to be utilised too prescriptively by coaches as a simplistic and uniform “how-to-guide” (Feldman & Lankau, 2005, p. 843), rather than being adapted to the particular client, context and coaching engagement. Olsen (2005) criticised the use of how-to guides in executive coaching as a modernist approach that assumes the existence of an objective truth and which values factual methods of evaluation and prescribed methods of problem solving. How-to-guides also potentially position the coach as an expert. From the findings of her study of middle managers’ experiences of helpful (and unhelpful) behaviours in executive coaching, Olsen (2005) concluded that many perspectives and realities exist for different individuals who experience coaching. Clients expressed different perspectives on a number of dimensions from self-growth and company goals to support for expertise of the coach and desire for input into the coaching process. This gives further support to the view that the practice of executive coaching is not conceivable as a “one-size-fits-all” approach.
SECTION B: THE EXPERIENCE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

3.10 PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDIES OF THE EXPERIENCE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

My next text set for this philosophical hermeneutic study comprised phenomenological studies that explored the experience of executive coaching. Phenomenological studies were considered most useful as they provided thick, rich descriptions of the experience of being coached. Eleven key studies were identified that explored the experience of executive coaching. This type of phenomenological research is not widespread in the literature and these 11 studies were found in a wide reading of material that pertained to my research.47

Five of these phenomenological studies explored the clients’ perspective and were conducted in the US and Canada (Brodrick, 2010; Galuk, 2009; Kress, 2008; Meneghetti, 2008; Sztucinski, 2001) and three were conducted in Europe and South Africa (Chapman, 2006; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006, 2007; Mackenzie, 2007). Details are provided in Tables H1 and H2 (see Appendix H).48 I included two studies investigating executive coaching from the perspective of executive coaches. These were conducted in the US (Clayton, 2011; McCleland, 2005) and details are provided in Table H3 (see Appendix H). I also included one study that explored the experiences of both clients and executive coaches (Marlatt, 2012). It was conducted in Canada and details are provided in Table H4 (see Appendix H). As outlined in Chapter One, none of these studies were conducted in Australia, an absence that provides an important justification and rationale for the study conducted in Phase 2 of my research.

3.10.1. CLIENT PERSPECTIVE

a) Studies conducted in the US and Canada

Sztucinski (2001) undertook a phenomenological study with seven clients (five male and two female executives) in the US to explore how executives experienced the coaching process. She identified seven essential elements of executive coaching, namely: (1) path to achievement, (2) unique to self, (3) ownership, (4) confrontation with self, (5) array of emotion, (6) bond with the coach, and (7) achievement. The participants viewed executive coaching as unique and tailored to themselves because it was immediately relevant to them, was focused on their situation and was flexible and evolving over time. These executives experienced ownership of the coaching process, including the overall decision of whether to engage in the executive coaching experience.

47 See Chapter Two for details of my literature search strategy.
48 Due to the size of the tables that detail my phenomenological text set (Tables H1, H2, H3 and H4) they have been included in Appendix H.
Sztucinski’s (2001) study highlights the nature of the coaching process, including the importance of candid feedback, challenging questions, reflection and work assignments. She found that the coaching process confronted the executives’ views of themselves and fostered an array of emotions such as relaxation, inadequacy, guilt, vulnerability, energy, discomfort and turbulence. The key outcomes of executive coaching for these clients were related to increased self-awareness, self-esteem and a commitment to ongoing growth. Achievement in the context of executive coaching was experienced as multi-dimensional in nature. For example, any achievement experienced by participants contributed to their being a “better executive” and enhanced their personal life.

The most significant aspect of Sztucinski’s (2001) study was that it highlighted the importance of the relationship formed between the coach and the client as a key success factor in executive coaching. The executives felt a strong bond with their coach and perceived that the coach provided a deep sense of unconditional caring and support. This study also highlighted the importance of trust and confidentiality in terms of the nature of the coaching relationship and the significance of the coach listening to the client as an essential aspect.

Sztucinski’s (2001) study is relevant to my research as a phenomenological study that focused on developing thick, rich descriptions of the experiences of seven executives. As in my research, Sztucinski’s study assumed that executive coaching is a socially constructed phenomenon that is complex in nature and requires the development of an understanding that is multidimensional in nature. However, one of the limitations of the scope of the Sztucinski’s research was that the participants had to be employed in an executive-level leadership position to be included. As outlined earlier in this chapter, executive coaching has evolved as a learning and development activity for individuals at all levels of organisations, not just those in executive positions.

Meneghetti (2008) explored with six clients (three male and three female executives) in for-profit and not-for-profit organisations in Canada what it was like to be coached. As with Sztucinski’s (2001) study, the research undertaken by Meneghetti explored the experience of the executive coaching process. Meneghetti identified seven essential elements, namely: (1) embarking on the coaching relationship, (2) co-creating the coaching relationship, (3) learning to be coached, (4) healing ruptures, (5) valuing what the coach offers, (6) experiencing the impact, and (7) deciding on the future of the relationship.

Meneghetti’s (2008) study also illuminated the relationship as an essential part of the coaching experience, highlighting the various stages in its development. Participants in that study reported that coaching commenced when the executive embarked on the coaching
relationship and consciously choose to invest in coaching as a means of assisting them to be effective at work. In the majority of cases, the coach was referred to the client (by someone they knew or HR), and meeting with the coach confirmed the selection. Clients then described how, at the next stage, the coachee co-created the relationship with the coach, all the while learning how to be coached. This study pointed to the coach as an unbiased professional who could be trusted from the outset, which supported the development of a safe, honest relationship with the client.

A most interesting aspect of Meneghetti’s (2008) study is that it revealed that during the experience of being coached, moments occurred when the executive needed to heal ruptures in the coaching relationship. This signified that the coaching relationship did not always proceed smoothly and that sometimes client and coach disconnected from each other. However, the study also revealed that the executive ultimately valued what the coach offered. Coaching outcomes in that research also extended across several life domains, encompassing work and personal life. Interestingly, the participants reported that eventually it was the coachee who made the decision about when to cease the coaching relationship, but despite their conclusion of the interaction coachees were thankful for the changes brought about by the experience of being coached.

Meneghetti (2008) suggested that the findings of her study validated the research undertaken by Sztucinski (2001). Both these studies (as phenomenological research) are relevant to my study of executive coaching. It is useful to note that Meneghetti made no distinction between the different contexts of for-profit and not-for-profit organisations, including three participants from each sector. No differences between these sectors were explicated and revealed in Meneghetti’s findings. As I outlined in Chapter One, I proposed that the particular industry context might impact on how executive coaching was brokered, utilised and potentially experienced, and therefore chose to include participants from only the commercial (for-profit) sector.

Kress (2008) undertook a hermeneutic phenomenological study of 20 clients (executive leaders) in the US to explore how they experienced an executive coaching program and how they made meaning of their experiences in terms of self-awareness. This study highlighted the finding that for these clients (13 male and 7 female executives), the main purpose of executive coaching was leadership development, with a coach having been hired or assigned as a means of developing their leadership skills. All participants in the study experienced unique leadership issues and the coaching addressed individualised needs, using a customised approach. In the study, 19 of the 20 clients described their coaching experiences positively, and one participant was neutral about the experience.
The primary implication from Kress’ (2008) study was that the benefits of executive coaching for clients occurred because coaching changed their perceived levels of self-awareness, which led to positive changes in their leadership style or behaviours. Most significantly, by understanding themselves better, the clients became more aware of how their behaviours, decisions and actions impacted on others. Recognition of their strengths and weaknesses and feedback from others (as part of the assessment phase of coaching process) were the most important sources for the changing self-awareness, and became the input for initiating these leadership behaviour changes. The “power of reflection” was also an important aspect of the experience for some clients. Coaching provided the clients with a safe and confidential space for exploration and reflection about their leadership style and behaviours. Most importantly, after this study these clients recognised the importance of taking time to reflect, something that had not previously characterised their working lives.

Kress’ (2008) study relates well to my study reported in Chapters Four and Five, as it also utilised a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach and accessed the experiences of 20 executives who had a first experience of executive coaching. However, one of the limitations of the scope of Kress’s study is also that participants had to be an executive to be included. As outlined previously, this is problematic in terms of the current provision of executive coaching to individuals at all levels within organisations.

The role of the coach was also emphasised in Galuk’s (2009) hermeneutical phenomenological study of the executive coaching experience of 10 executive women in the US. The coach was viewed by these participants as a trusted professional who guided, strengthened and expected action from the client. In the process of being coached, these executive women experienced self-discovery, awareness and a range of emotions, and were committed to coaching as a development process. The coach challenged their thinking and utilised tools to guide their actions in different situations. Through the process, the clients were able to view their worlds differently, and that enabled them to act differently. Coaching resulted in these executive women being more effective with people, achieving a better work-life balance, identifying ways to work more effectively with their boss and better deal with gender-based workplace differences and challenges. Galuk also challenged the assumption that the executive coaching experiences of men were the same as those of women. She revealed that these executive women sought out coaching as they were motivated by challenge and growth, were committed to the coaching process, and also found coaching helpful for dealing with social exclusion.

Of particular interest in Galuk’s (2009) study is that the executive women sought coaching on their own and it was not actively encouraged or supported by their organisations. This
contrasts with popular views of executive coaching in the literature and descriptions of stakeholders (particularly organisations and employers as well as executives) as detailed earlier in this chapter. Participants pursued coaching on their own and then obtained reimbursement, with few conversations occurring with members of their organisations around the goals, processes or outcomes of their executive coaching experiences. This limited organisational involvement was also a characteristic of my study.

Brodrick’s (2010) study of the executive coaching experiences of 11 women in healthcare in the US reflected many of the themes identified in the studies already discussed. Brodrick identified six primary themes, namely (1) coaching as a positive coaching experience, (2) improved work relationships, (3) forced coaching experiences, (4) reflective awareness of self, (5) coaching as a tool that improved executive development, and (6) the relationship with the coach as a key to successful outcomes. One of the themes that did not occur in other studies related to the coaching being a forced (not voluntary) choice for some executives. In these circumstances, coaching was not (initially) viewed positively by the participants and resulted in the executives feeling guarded with the coach. However, for all but one executive, the overall coaching experience was ultimately positive. The specific focus on the healthcare industry is a distinctive characteristic of Brodrick’s study. As with the study of Galuk (2009), it focused specifically on the experience of women.

b) Studies conducted in Europe and South Africa

Gyllensten and Palmer (2006, 2007) undertook a phenomenological study of the workplace coaching experience of six clients from a UK organisation and three clients from a Scandinavian organisation (a total of three males and six females). Several main themes emerged (see Table H2). The main theme was that coaching was experienced by clients to have an indirect impact on workplace stress. Coaching helped clients to deal positively with stress, but also caused stress for clients who were not open to the coaching experience. Another significant theme relates to the value of the coaching relationship (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006, 2007). The relationship was experienced by clients to be dependent on trust (which was enhanced by confidentiality) and was improved by the coach being transparent about coaching practice (including the process and theory supporting interventions). In comparison to my study in Chapters Four and Five, the coaching in the research of Gyllensten and Palmer was conducted not exclusively by external executive coaches but by both internal and external coaches,\(^49\) and it is not clear how this difference influenced the findings of these studies (if at all).

\(^{49}\) Confirmed by Gyllensten (personal communication, 6 September, 2013).

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Chapman’s (2006) transcendental phenomenological study explored the learning experiences gained from coaching with 13 middle and senior managers (12 males and 1 female) in an IT company in South Africa. Chapman termed her model of executive coaching the “Integrated Experiential Coaching Model”, developed from the work of Wilber (1996) and Kolb (1984). She proposed that coaching involves facilitating the integrated experiential learning of individuals. The study identified 10 themes, shown in Table H2, which are broadly consistent with the other phenomenological studies already discussed. The participants in this study identified that coaching was worthwhile and was conducted in the context of a trusting relationship. Reflection was identified as important for learning and the role of the coach involved facilitating each individual’s learning journey. The executive coaching led to heightened self-awareness, self-autonomy and more complex strategic thinking and acting by participants. As participants were nominated for the executive coaching experience, some commenced coaching with mixed feelings, including reservations, cynicism and scepticism. This is similar to Brodrick’s (2010) study in which some executives were forced to undertake coaching. The managers in Chapman’s study commenced coaching with high dependence, inappropriately expecting the coach to set the learning agenda, prevent them from making mistakes and provide formal learning documentation. This is similar to Meneghetti’s (2008) study in which initially clients had to learn how to be coached. Chapman’s (2006) study is useful in the context of my research for emphasising that executive coaching is a form of experiential learning and for identifying the value of Kolb’s (1984) theories to the coaching process.

In a study set in the context of the Royal College of Nursing Clinical Leadership Development Program (RCN CLP), Mackenzie (2007) explored eight clinical leaders’ experiences of the coaching component of the program. The themes arising from this study are shown in Table H2 and indicate the importance of the processes of reflection in coaching. For these clients, coaching provided the opportunity for “stepping off the treadmill” and securing a personal, reflective space that was not achievable with the demands of nursing and their daily work lives. Coaching was experienced by clients in this study as enabling them to focus on self, their development and their leadership task, underpinned by a dynamic process of reflection.

Mackenzie (2007) drew links to the work of Carl Rogers (1961) and described the conditions for effective coaching (labelled using Carl Rogers’ term “unconditional positive regard”) as including the qualities of the coach, how clients experienced the coach in the relationship, and how both of these interacted to create a safe environment for coaching to take place. As in the studies of Brodrick (2010), Chapman (2006) and Meneghetti (2008), clients in Mackenzie’s (2007) study initially entered coaching with some anxiety and concerns, and it was the actions
of the coach that guided them through the transition, enabling them to meaningfully engage in coaching.

Mackenzie’s (2007) study is of particular interest as it emphasises the importance of reflection in coaching and leadership development. The coaching was one component of a broader leadership development program and it emerged as a theme that the coaching experience assisted to “lynchpin” [sic] the entire RCN CLP program, enabling participants to transfer (and sustain) their learning back in the workplace. Like the study of Brodrick (2010), this research is focused specifically in a healthcare context, which may or may not be applicable to the commercial (for-profit) sector context of my study.

3.10.2. EXECUTIVE COACH PERSPECTIVE

McCleland (2005) conducted a transcendental phenomenological study that focused on the executive coach’s experience of the executive coaching process. As with other phenomenological studies that explored the experience of executive coaching from the client’s perspective (for example Galuk, 2009; Sztucinski, 2001), McCleland viewed executive coaching as a complex, socially constructed phenomenon. This study explored the coaching experiences of five executive coaches (three male, two female) who had been coaches for a minimum of 5 years. Seven universal constituents of the coaching experience were identified, which also represented key stages or steps in the executive process. These were (1) authentic hope and understanding, (2) the big exploration, (3) intense client focus, (4) a valuable affinity, (5) coaching as art, (6) candid assessment, and (7) parting with a growing friend.

An important aspect emphasised by McCleland’s (2005) is the amount of time spent by coaches at the outset of the coaching process for preparation and contracting. The first meeting with the client was experienced by coaches as very important. In this meeting, the coach risked being authentic and modelled a trusting relationship with the potential client, aiming to ensure that the relationship commenced without pretence. In meeting with the client for the first time, coaches wished to be selected by the client for two reasons: (1) the feelings of affirmation that this generated for the coach and (2) wanting to collaborate with the client to achieve the client’s goals. This desire to be chosen was identified by McCleland as a new addition the coaching literature in terms of understanding the internal motivations of executive coaches. When chosen by the client, participants reported feeling affirmed and then focused on the development of a “clean business contract” that clearly defined contractual expectations, including the required reports for submission to the organisation at the conclusion of the relationship.
McCleland’s study (2005) highlighted the coach’s role in gathering as much information as possible after contracting was completed, including the completion of personality and behavioural assessments and viewing the client holistically. Coaches in this study experienced coaching sessions as client-directed, continually client-focused, involving collaborative processes of setting goals, and focused on understanding the client. Interestingly, this study also revealed that these executive coaches expressed a desire for coaching clients who were ready and motivated for growth (“developmental” rather than “remedial” clients). The coaches in McCleland’s study identified coaching as an art form, with the experience of coaching being shaped both by the individuality of coaches and by a range of unique situations. In this way, this study revealed coaching as a customisable intervention that was dependent on the coach’s unique experiences and that contributed to the ongoing growth of the coach. Coaching was characterised by coaches asking (“good”) questions to reframe conversations and clients’ thinking processes. Coaching was experienced by executive coaches in this study as a dynamic and fluid process (rather than a pre-programmed set of linear steps or actions).

A key aspect of the coaching experience as articulated by McCleland’s coaches related to the nature of the relationship formed with their clients. This “affinity” was characterised by mutual respect, empathy and goodwill. Trust was identified as a primary element of affinity by these coaches, as was the authenticity of the coach. Coaches reported that trust and affinity continued to develop throughout the relationship as the coach probed the client’s core (and deeper) issues and the client opened up to new possibilities. Coaches had a deep personal sense of caring for their clients, a “positive regard”. In this way, McCleland linked the positive relationship in executive coaching to the work of Carl Rogers (1958, 1961), which was discussed earlier in this chapter.

A primary implication of McCleland’s (2005) study is associated with how the coaching engagement was concluded by the coach. As the coaching engagement drew to the end (of a characteristic 6-month cycle\(^{50}\)), coaches reported undertaking (also for their reference) a candid re-assessment of the client, characterised by honest feedback and a range of emotions (for example, joy and frustration) depending on client growth. McCleland identified the frustration experienced by coaches as a new contribution to the coaching literature and an emotion that was experienced when the client did not appear to be growing, missed coaching sessions or when the relationship was not growing in affinity. These moments were experienced by executive coaches as feelings of disappointment and (sometimes) self-doubt in

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\(^{50}\) From the findings of this study, McCleland (2005) proposed that a 6-month engagement period would be an acceptable standard for the executive coaching industry.
terms of coaching ability. The coaches’ experience also reflected a range of pragmatic steps as
the coaching drew to a close, including finalising corporate responsibilities and contractual
agreements (as per the coaching contract). In some instances, however, the end of the
relationship was not clear or defined, simply “fizzling out” when the client did not return calls
to set up another appointment (McCleland, 2005, p. 250). For some coaches, the deep affinity
and trust developed in coaching led to a lasting friendship with a client, although this was not
clearly defined in the minds of coaches and occurred with only a few, select clients.

Clayton (2011) undertook a phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of 20
expert51 executive coaches (7 male, 13 female) in the use of interdisciplinary executive
coaching competencies. The 10 essential meanings derived from this study are shown in Table
H3. Executive coaches in this study experienced coaching as a process focused on improving
clients’ learning and potential and also their capability to lead self, people, and organisation
and gain technical credibility. Coaches described experiences in executive coaching where they
had to change roles and function as a facilitator, teacher, partner (considered complementary
to the coaching role and vital to the relationship and outcomes) or as a consultant or mentor
(considered to be in conflict with the nondirective, non-telling role of coach). Executive
coaches therefore experienced the importance of having an awareness of “who they were
being” in the coaching relationship at any particular point in time (Clayton, 2011, p. 132).
Participants in this study also reinforced the boundaries between executive coaching and
therapy, in that coaching has a future forward orientation and an emphasis on functional
behaviour. What transpired in coaching conversations, as experienced by these executive
coaches, was based on the executive’s agenda but also focused on their future.

As a tailored leadership development intervention, executive coaches in this study
experienced the application of two foundational competencies, namely (1) establishing the
boundaries of the coaching relationship and (2) developing the relational tenets for the coach
and client relationship. In establishing boundaries with a client, coaches focused on
contracting and working with the client to clearly articulate and define their goals for coaching.
Developing the relationship was considered consistent with the ICF coaching competency of
“co-creating the relationship”52 and included building trust, connection and rapport to
facilitate openness, transparency and honesty, as well as involving a deep dialogue. Within
coaching, participants also made use of other foundational core competencies, which were the
ability to (1) create a safe space and presence, (2) deeply listen, (3) ask powerful questions, (4)

51 Coaches in this study were deemed expert if they possessed a graduate degree in an executive coaching related
discipline and had at least 2,500 hours of executive coaching experience (of which 2,250 hours were billable to
clients) (Clayton, 2011).
52 http://www.coachfederation.org/icfcredentials/core-competencies/
conduct evaluations and assessments, (5) design effective actions for practice, exploration, and experimentation, (6) foster accountability, (7) provide feedback and feed-forward, and (8) manage self.

A unique contribution from this study lay in the requirement (and even advantage) of executive coaches applying interdisciplinary competencies (drawn from their experience, education, formal training and prior roles) to specific situations in their coaching practice. The application of interdisciplinary competencies, knowledge, skills and abilities was seen contribute to the development of a “well-rounded” executive coach. Prior executive experience and psychological/therapeutic training were viewed as unimportant to coaches in this study, but were perceived as enhancing credibility in certain situations. Participants experienced the outcomes of coaching for their clients as positive, contributing to the development of the executive and, as a positive consequence, their people, business and organisation (“constructive ripple effect”). Coaching resulted in more than just the attainment of specific coaching goals. The combination of the executive coach’s competencies with the readiness of the executive (“coachability”), positively influenced the client’s development, potential and transformation.

3.10.3. Combined client and executive coach perspective

Marlatt (2012) conducted a study informed by Husserlian phenomenology and Gadamerian hermeneutics to explore transformative learning in the context of the executive coaching relationship with three female business managers in Canada. Marlatt drew on Mezirow’s (1990) theory of transformative learning in describing the experience of executive coaching. In this study, Marlatt explored his lived experience as a client, as an executive coach, and also the experience of his three clients. The 21 meaning structures derived from this study are listed in Table H4 and were organised into six thematic patterns: (1) the catalyst for transformative learning, (2) the foundation of the executive coaching relationship, (3) the nature of the executive coaching relationship, (4) the nature of the executive coaching dialogue, (5) the ineffable influence of the executive coaching relationship, and (6) transformative learning and the executive coaching relationship.

A key theme in Marlatt’s (2012) study related to the role of disorientation in the process of transformative learning. Clients in the study were immediately receptive to executive coaching as it provided them with a “lifeline” for dealing with the unresolved issues, emotional angst and anxiety that arose from “disorientating encounters” they had experienced between themselves and others in their organisations. In this study, the coach was experienced in helping clients to surface the “rational from the emotional” and to come to terms with this
“enduring disorientation”. Although disorientation was found necessary for transformative learning to occur, Marlatt proposed that it was not sufficient and that the executive coaching relationship played a critical role.

Marlatt’s (2012) focus on an effective coaching relationship revealed a foundation based on an immediate and natural connection (or affinity) between the client and the coach and the evolution of trust. The nature of the relationship was characterised by free-flowing dialogue, which catalysed deep learning, and dialogic openings (“a-ha” moments) as discrete opportunities for transformative learning. In this mode of free-flowing dialogue, neither the coach nor the client presumed they could predict the outcomes of the conversation. This free-flowing dialogue was also experienced as having the potential to lead to performance anxiety on the part of the coach, depriving clients of learning opportunities. For example, this anxiety could lead the coach to move into a telling or using an advising mode in the coaching conversation, rather than remaining patient in moments of uncertainty.

The dialogue in this study was characterised by the clients’ anticipation of positive outcomes in the conversation, their authentic disclosure in the relationship (including the emotional impact of their disorienting dilemma), and limits to self-disclosure by the coach. An interesting finding of the study relates to the authenticity of the coach and how, without limits on self-disclosure, growing familiarity between coach and client could erode the executive coaching relationship.

The executive coaching in the study by Marlatt (2012) was seen to result in unknown, unacknowledged (or even) dire consequences that – when overcome – could be emotionally or physically rehabilitating for the client. Moving beyond the emotional angst of the disorienting dilemma could also result in the clients’ increasing self-awareness of their capacity for dealing with adversity. Shifts in the client’s mindset (“reflective leaps”) were experienced between coaching conversations. One of the pragmatic outcomes of executive coaching as experienced by clients in this study was the shift from an attitude of capitulation in coming to terms with disorienting events in the workplace, towards an attitude of self-control. Coaching conversations also could lead to discussions of life goals, extending beyond the focus on the immediate executive coaching topic. Transformative outcomes for the executive coaching relationship were also experienced to result in an inverted relationship between client and the organisation (where the client arrived at a different way of seeing and being in connection with their organisation) and improved work-life balance.

Marlatt’s (2012) study is of particular interest to my research in its use of the research approaches of both hermeneutics and phenomenology and for exploring the experiences of both coaches and clients in one study.
3.10.4. **CRITICAL EVALUATION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDIES OF THE EXPERIENCE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING**

As illustrated in this section, phenomenological research provides a rich source of information and insights into the phenomenon of executive coaching. Key findings from this text set led to my re-interpretation of executive coaching as a relationship based on trust formed between a client and coach that is fundamentally learning-oriented, in comparison to the predominantly process- and outcome-oriented findings from psychology-based research approaches. Phenomenological research illuminates executive coaching as an individual, customised relationship and intervention that is unique to each client. In this way, executive coaching cannot be simplified or codified into a series of steps or prescriptions that define a standard type of process and resultant outcomes. From my review of phenomenological studies, executive coaching can also be viewed as a deep, dialogical encounter that is characterised by reflection and learning, aspects not emphasised in empirico-analytical coaching research.

3.11 **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has presented my interpretations and critical evaluation of the literature as it relates to the nature and experience of executive coaching. In this hermeneutic study of selected literature text sets it is evident that in its short history as a commercial activity, executive coaching has had considerable attention dedicated to exploring its process and measurable outcomes, with much less (albeit growing) attention being paid to understanding the nature and essence of executive coaching as a living phenomenon and a field of practice. A focus on research that seeks to explore and understand executive coaching more deeply provides a considerable opportunity for the future development of the literature and research base.

The literature reveals that authors have attempted to define coaching in a number of ways and to categorise its multiple and various purposes. However, a range of different meanings and variations remains. One of the challenges associated with coaching is that can be viewed simply as a commodity and as a set of processes. Yet, in its complex reality, executive coaching needs to be understood as a socially constructed phenomenon, recognising that individual views and understandings of executive coaching are shaped by each person’s unique coaching experience (Bresser & Wilson, 2010). The value of this subjective and individual experience of executive coaching is important in understanding what executive coaching is, but this is problematic in light of the need for the development of commonly accepted definitions and concepts. Such definitions are critical to the further development of an emerging industry. For
example, it is difficult to imagine how coaching might advance in professionalisation without a shared understanding in the industry and the marketplace (and even among coaches) of what executive coaching is and what it can accomplish.

The practices of executive coaching are as diverse as the backgrounds of the practitioners who have entered the field. There is a prominence of psychological approaches and perspectives applied to executive coaching practice, which is disproportionate to the actual number of psychologists, therapists and counsellors who practise as executive coaches. The qualification of coaching as a psychological role has obviously been used in an attempt to endow the emerging practice with a certain aura of respectability, scrupulousness and social standing at the same time (Arnaud, 2003). This has also been reflected in a push for executive coaching practice to be evidence-based and has also influenced the type of research that has been undertaken and valued in executive coaching. Research in executive coaching has followed a similar path to the development of research in psychology, conducted using the empirico-analytical paradigm, with a focus on exploring outcomes and effectiveness in an effort to justify coaching as a valuable and worthwhile intervention. It is important that members of the executive coaching community openly acknowledge this pattern in the evolution and development of the field and recognise the dominance of psychology (and its underlying values) when reflecting on practice, planning future research and pursuing publications.

While the conduct of a range of types of research is vital to an emerging practice such as executive coaching, this chapter has demonstrated the value and richness of coaching studies that explore individuals’ experiences and are conducted using the interpretive paradigm, specifically phenomenological approaches. To date, phenomenological studies have received limited attention in the research literature in favour of what is frequently promoted as more “scientific” research, even though phenomenological studies have much to offer the emerging and evolving phenomenon of executive coaching. In interpreting my set of phenomenological studies that were conducted in a range of international settings, the value of such research to the study of executive coaching is evident. My next study (in Chapters Four and Five) pursues a phenomenological approach to researching executive coaching in an Australian context and in doing so addresses a much-needed gap in the literature.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE EXPERIENCE OF CLIENT EXECUTIVES

How can you get very far,  
If you don’t know Who You Are?  
How can you do what you ought,  
If you don’t know What You’ve Got?  
And if you don’t know Which To Do  
Of all the things in front of you,  
Then what you’ll have when you are through  
Is just a mess without a clue  
Of all the best that can come true  
If you know What and Which and Who.

— Benjamin Hoff, The Tao of Pooh, 1982

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is the first of a set of two chapters that present the findings of Phase 2 of my research. As detailed in Chapter Two, Phase 2 involved the application of a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach informed by the work of Max van Manen (1997) to explore the executive coaching experiences of (1) client executives and (2) executive coaches. This chapter details the findings from research undertaken with client executives. Chapter Five includes the findings for executive coaches. The systematic method of phenomenological data analysis utilised to analyse the interview data collected in Phase 2 was detailed in Chapter Two.

In these two findings chapters (Chapters Four and Five), individual participant voices (in the form of quotes) are indented and presented in italics or included in tables. The term “voices” is used in Chapters Four and Five to refer to the understandings and views held by participants to be their own. It reflects the importance in quality research of representing authentically my participant’s understandings and experiences of executive coaching. In keeping with my chosen hermeneutic phenomenological approach, I have utilised participant’s words where possible to represent their individual experiences and to ensure my writing is “evocatively vivid” (Smith, 1998, p. 189), so the reader can make connections with the descriptions of the phenomenon of executive coaching”. Participant quotes demonstrate that the findings are grounded in the data. Each quote is followed by a pseudonym for each participant (composed of the initials for their participant group and a number). Researcher quotes/questions are
identified by the use of my initials, JAT. Profiles of the research participants were presented in Chapter Two.

In exploring executive coaching with client executives, I sought to understand their experiences in relation to the principal question of my research as follows: What is the nature and experience of executive coaching? Specifically, I also sought to understand the following secondary question (which is reported on in this chapter): How do client executives experience executive coaching?

This chapter is structured as follows. In Section 4.2 an overview of the findings is provided, incorporating client executive voices and the use of their words or “first order constructs” (following Titchen & McIntyre, 1993) to describe key aspects of their experience of coaching. These aspects included the opportunity for client executives to: define coaching; identify the unique characteristics of coaching; and describe the purpose of coaching, based on their actual experiences. This focus on first order constructs is continued in Section 4.3 which includes two detailed client executive stories as thick, rich descriptions of their experience of executive coaching. The significance of the provision of “good” stories (like a “good novel”) was viewed by van Manen (1997, p. 70) as an important way for human science researchers to provide others with insights into an experience, and also the opportunity to live through it, without actually having to experience it themselves. In Section 4.4 of this chapter, I incorporate “second order constructs and themes” (following Titchen & McIntyre, 1993), introducing my interpretations of participant experiences.

4.2 OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

4.2.1. ACCESSING CLIENT EXECUTIVE EXPERIENCES

As described in Chapter Two, twelve client executives shared with me their experiences and reflections of executive coaching as an activity they had all undertaken for the first time. To access their experiences, I interviewed each client executive on two occasions. During participation in interviews, client executives were asked to reflect on their experiences of being coached and to make sense of, and derive meaning, from these experiences. My broad observations are as follows.

Participants shared freely of their experiences, provided detailed recollections and easily accessed details, thoughts and feelings, even when the coaching had been completed some months prior to the research interviews. The client executives shared detailed accounts of their reasons for engaging in executive coaching, outlined the special relationship they had formed
with their coach and described the process and experience of coaching sessions. They described the influence of their coaching experience in the short term and in the long term, where applicable. Between the first and second interview, participants undertook further reflection on their experiences (prompted by interview one) and also explored these reflections at second interview.

Client executives openly shared details relating to their executive coaching experiences and made comments on the organisational culture and context of their organisations. For the majority of participants there had been little, if any, follow up from their organisation regarding their experience of being coached or the perceived value of coaching to them. My research interviews provided an opportunity for client executives to share their reflections of their experiences and to generate deeper understandings of their experience of being coached. As one participant remarked,

No-one’s come and asked me. You’re the first person who has actually contacted me with regards to executive coaching and you don’t even work for my organisation. CE1

When invited to describe their coaching experiences, participants’ defined executive coaching in their own words, identified its unique characteristics, and also detailed its purpose(s). Specific client executive responses to these questions are detailed in the following sections.

4.2.2. **Defining Executive Coaching**

In the first interview, client executives were asked to define executive coaching. By grounding my resultant definition of coaching\(^1\) in the experience of my participant groups, I intended to develop an understanding of executive coaching that was reflected in actual experience, rather than drawing on pre-existing definitions of coaching from the literature. In addition to the problems with literature definitions as identified in Chapter Three, I also considered definitions in the literature could reflect the range of assumptions, standpoints and perspectives of authors who may (or may not) have had direct experience of executive coaching. Definitions presented in the literature might have also been developed for a range of other purposes (e.g. marketing, sales or publication) and not intended to provide a deep understanding of executive coaching as actually experienced or practised. Informed by the phenomenological tradition, I wanted to “return to the things themselves” (in this case, experiences of executive coaching) as a means for developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon itself (qua Ashworth, 2003). I also sought to understand how the different participant groups defined coaching and to explore the underlying assumptions and meanings each participant group ascribed to their experiences of being coached.

\(^1\) See Chapter Six.
Table 4.1 presents *client executive* definitions of executive coaching in response to the question: “How would you define executive coaching based on your experience”?

An interesting observation is that the responses of some *client executives* emphasised the organisational benefits and reasons for participating in coaching (akin to a “sales pitch”). One *client executive* even prefaced his response to the question in advertising-related terms as follows:

*It’s like one of those Weet-Bix ads isn’t it, in 25 words or less why would you like to go on a holiday?* CE8

In this way in Table 4.1, *client executives* used this language of sales and marketing to describe coaching as an organisational *investment in high potential* (CE2), provided to the *elite* (employees) (CE7) and *for the organisation’s* benefit (as well as the individual) (CE6). It was described as a *process* for the development (CE10, CE2) of *skills* (CE1) and *tools* (CE8, CE9, CE2) for *improving* (executive) *performance* (CE8). The implication of these responses is that the way executive coaching is promoted within the organisation, and the manner in which *client executives* are prepared for (and sold) the experience of coaching, both need to be considered carefully. It is important that *client executives* enter the process understanding that it is a very tailored experience for the individual versus an organisational intervention *per se*.

However, across the definitions articulated in Table 4.1 (and throughout the interviews), *client executives* portrayed a richer and more complex view of executive coaching than the sales pitch version, based on their actual experience. Executive coaching was described as of benefit to the individual, *tailored to individual needs* (CE12, CE1, CE4, CE2) and with a *results/goal orientation* (CE12, CE2, CE3). *Client executives* also emphasised the importance of executive coaching for developing their *self-awareness* (CE1, CE8, CE6) and *confidence* (CE2), reinforcing the highly individual and personal nature of the development they had undertaken (in contrast to a focus on developing *skills* and *tools*). Other client executives emphasised the relational and learning-related aspects of executive coaching as a *one-on-one relationship* (CE4, CE2) between a *willing participant* (CE7) and a coach, whereby their coach acted as a *facilitator* (CE1) and *sounding board* (CE11) and assisted them to *think differently* (CE9, CE11). Others chose to identify executive coaching as important *time out from workplace* (CE3, CE11) and as a space to *reflect* (CE11, CE3).
Table 4.1 *Client executives’* interpretations of the definition of executive coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Client executives’</em> definitions of executive coaching</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CE1</strong> The opportunity to develop your managerial skills, your relationship skills. I would put a strong focus on “it’s not about being coached”, it’s “about almost you coaching yourself”. It’s about you, coaxing what’s inside of you, to understand what’s better or what’s good about you (and maybe what’s not so good) so you can work on it. So the brochure would in many ways talk about the individual, less so about the coach. The coach is a facilitator. I think a good coach probably doesn’t talk too much and facilitates and probes to enable the individual to come up with the answers.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CE2</strong> Executive coaching is very career focused, so it’s very much around where I see myself going to and it’s individually focused too … It is one-on-one focused attention, very much individually driven, versus a team situation where I need everybody to sign up to the one sort of outcome. When it’s one-on-one, I have undivided attention. You do feel that it’s a significant level of investment from the organisation in your own development … From an organisational perspective, they see it as an investment in high potential; “What more can we get from this person that we’re not getting now, how do we build confidence with women within this organisation?” … But I think the approach is not dissimilar in terms of actually trying to get to an outcome and working through, “What is the problem that I’m trying to solve, for?” “What are my options there?” “And what is the kind of decision that I’m going to take?”… But I think coaching is for a “point in time”. If you’re very clear about what it is that you want it to achieve, I think it’s a really valuable tool.</td>
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<td><strong>CE3</strong> The coaching arrangement is kind of goal focused, so we’d agree to some goals and next session, I’d be asked, “last week, last month you said you were going to do this, have you done it?”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CE4</strong> It’s quality time with an individual who basically can answer questions or give you direction relating to a specific issue or issues.</td>
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<td><strong>CE5</strong> It’s about getting the potential of people and people understanding their own potential and how to. So, steering away from anything that has a remedial context to it, forget that, it’s not part of it, it’s about potential, exploring the potential, I think.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CE6</strong> Executive coaching is … opportunity and time out to assess were you’re at and what the things are holding you back …. It’s about opportunity for growth, at a personal level and ultimately for the organisation as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CE7</strong> if you’re open to change and open to new ideas and prepared to have the way that you work challenged, then coaching is probably something that would be good for you … it’s seen as being something for the elite, it sort of stops at different levels of management and if you’ve got a coach, then clearly you’re special and you’re an anointed one within the organisation. Part of that is because it’s so bloody expensive and the company’s not just going to throw that around … but there’s got to be preparedness from the person or a willingness to actually want to do things differently.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CE8</strong> It’s the process of helping your executives understand their key strengths and weaknesses and providing them with some practical tools on how to improve their performance.</td>
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<td><strong>CE9</strong> I would say that it may be a tool that can assist you when you need it, to think out of the square (of) your normal head.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CE10</strong> It’s a process that helps you develop.</td>
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<td><strong>CE11</strong> A sounding board, was my experience. It was somewhere where you went and said, “Well I’ve got this issue, this is my approach so far”. Then there was the questions which caused you to think a bit more … If you keep asking the question “Why?”, then you get back to root cause … So you’ve got somebody who takes you through that process … Giving yourself time outside of the workplace to be able to think more broadly and with a greater focus on better quality outcomes.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CE12</strong> It’s around the fact that it’s structured, results-driven and based on your personal needs, identified needs.</td>
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4.2.3. **EXECUTIVE COACHING AS A UNIQUE DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE**

In the first research interview, *client executives* were asked to describe what they thought was unique and special about executive coaching. In asking this question I sought to reach a deeper understanding of what was unique about coaching and potentially how *client executives* differentiated executive coaching from other development activities they had undertaken. As indicated in Chapter Three (and detailed in Appendix D), a typical approach undertaken in the literature has been to define executive coaching by focusing on its similarities to, or differences from other practices, including (but not limited to) consulting, training, mentoring and counselling/therapy. As discussed in Chapter Three, this has proved to be a problematic and complex exercise and has not resulted in a universally accepted definition or description of executive coaching as a distinct practice. Therefore, I sought to understand how *client executives* interpreted and made meaning of the differences around such strategies, based on their actual experiences of coaching.

Table 4.2 presents *client executives’* responses to the question: “Based on your experience, what would you say is unique or special about executive coaching?”

**Table 4.2 Client executives’ interpretations of the unique aspects of executive coaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client executives’ perspectives on what is unique and special about executive coaching</th>
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| CE1  
Again, what was unique for me was the ability to talk in confidence to someone who wasn’t aligned with the organisation and to have someone probing around what I was thinking and how I could articulate that into a solution. Again if you were trying to sell that to an organisation, they would say “Well hang on, you can talk to anybody in our business and we’ll help you articulate problems to solve them”, but it’s missing the point of the openness that is required and the confidence that’s required and the detachment from your organisation. So look, detachment, openness, confidentiality may be the unique selling proposition. |
| CE2  
I find the structure and the process quite unique. I’ve been in a mentoring relationship before where someone’s come to me for my experience and for my advice, and asked “What did you do, when you were in this situation?”—you’re in an advisory capacity then, you’re a bit more like a consultant than you are somebody who is facilitating the outcome. I think the coaching relationship is unique because I think it’s actually transferring capability. If I get to a point where I’ve spent enough time with a coach going through the same process of actually resolving an issue, my hope is that when I’m faced with a situation like that again, that I may go through a similar thought process. So I see quite a difference in that relationship because I see coaching as potentially, capability building if I can apply those skills in another situation. I don’t see that if I’m going to a counsellor and asking “Here’s my problem, help me solve it. With a coach I think it’s more facilitation to help me to resolve an issue and there is an element of repetition about that, it is a framework that you can actually work through. You know, that’s the whole goal, when you walk away from coaching, you need to apply that, it’s the practice, the practice, the practice that actually helps you ... then you probably don’t need a coach once you get to that point. |
| CE3  
I think where it’s unique is it just takes you away from the day-to-day of your job. That in itself is priceless ... I’ve kind of, found myself in a new job, a bigger team, not struggling but trying to, you know, learn the new role and engage the team. So to go where you just talk to someone, a third party that has no interest in it ... I felt like it was quite detached from
Coaching is probably more tailored to me, the individual as opposed to me having to fit a
generic type of training. In a session you’d probably cover say five points, where in other
training you cover so much, because they try to cram it into a six or a seven hour window.
Whereas this was, OK we’ll go as far as we needed to go in that session without really
saying, we didn’t cover that much in that session, it was never an assessment of what we
covered ... we’d start off with a conversation and we’d just move to different things, he’d
ask me a question about this and I’d respond and that would lead to this and I would say,
“Well now is that what I should do or is that something?” So that’s how the sessions work,
whereas with other training it’s, right well here’s the introduction, here’s the objective,
these are all the steps, we’ll do some exercises then we’ll do some role playing and that sort
of stuff and then you know, here’s a book to take away and get out of it what you want.
Whereas the coaching is more, I think, there’s a structure (it’s not a highly visible structure),
there’s an objective (not a highly visible objective) and it’s done more at a leisurely pace as
opposed to, we’ve got to get, by 11.00 o’clock we’ve got to have this done, because we’ve
got to break for morning tea and then get back at 11.15 and start on the next stuff.

I think the thing with the coaching is that follow-up. So you work through things, you come
up with an action plan and I don’t like to call it homework (but it’s sort of like homework)
and if you walk out of there and you get bombarded with your normal job it’s still knowing
that I’ve got some actions here that I need to somehow integrate into what I’m doing, and
then within a few weeks you know that you are going to be back and talking to your coach,
so you want to be able to come back with either positive or negative sort of responses on
what did happen. So I think that’s where it’s quite different because you know that it’s
ongoing concept, well how did you go, what did this circumstance come up and this person,
how did you come back to them? So that was one of things that stood out that ongoing and
refining and so on, refining your actions and approach.

No I don’t think it’s anything unique or special. I think it’s got, you know, you could get the
same, depending on what it is that you’re talking to your coach about, you could get that
same output through a psychologist, potentially a mentor if you’ve got the right
relationship with a mentor ... I do think though, that the one-on-one coaching, if you have
this approach, does help you to be a better coach because you do learn some things
through that process: “Well that worked well, I’m going to try that” and in fact that was
some of things that we did do, you know. “I want you go away and practice this and then
we’ll talk about that again” so that process is really quite effective. Because I think,
professionally people are, in the work environment, bad coaches, very bad coaches. I had
my performance review this year was, and I’ve been working for 14 years, it was the best
one I’ve had. That’s pretty sad indictment on the other 13 and that was simply because I
had somebody who sat down and went, “I know what you do, here’s your perform-
ance, here’s the things that you do well, here’s the things I’d like you to focus on, keep doing more
of that” and it was just that conversation about giving me feedback.

It’s the one-on-one nature, it’s the anonymity of it and it’s the feedback loop, as in, “OK,
you’ve tried this for a few weeks, how that worked, what’s been different”? . So it’s the
ability to feed back with somebody who understands where you are coming from. So it isn’t
a 2-week highly intensive bugger off, 30 grand later, yep, thanks very much, no feedback,
no positive or negative loop one way or the other, no way of saying, “Well actually you’re
kind of a little bit off track there”. So I think it was actually the time over which it was
spaced that meant I did start to put some of the stuff into practice and actually see the
positives come out of that which encourages you in the whole process.

It’s that, it is, even if the organisation is fully sponsoring it, it’s separate from the business.
The coach you’re dealing with is not one of the people you’re working with every hour of every day and it’s the openness and trust that comes from that that I think makes the difference. If I thought that that was being reported back (a discussion about all the people who were on the program) I wouldn’t have done it for the same reason; it would have been for the corporate benefit, not for my benefit.

CE11 Yes, it’s one-on-one. Well, it’s directly pertinent to the problem you’ve got on the table whereas in a training session it’s theory and you can choose whether or not to apply it. So this is being applied I guess.

CE12 Because it actually deals with a specific identified problem. Problem is too harsh a word, but a specific area that’s been identified that you can focus on, and that’s the difference. It makes it entirely different from anything else that I’ve ever done, because it actually narrows you down to “this is where you need to focus” and then any action planning that sits with it. So you’ve identified your focus and then you actually act on it.

Executive coaching was interpreted by client executives as unique because of three core factors: (1) the confidential, person-centred and open nature of the relationship formed between themselves and their coach; (2) the experiential and reflective aspects of the learning process over an extended period; and the (3) focus on their individual and personal needs as executives. Client executives emphasised the one-on-one nature (CE7, CE11, CE8) of the coaching relationship. They described a relationship based on trust (CE5, CE10) with an executive coach who was independent of their organisation (CE3, CE10, CE1). The independence of the coach provided confidentiality and anonymity (CE8, CE10, CE1) and enabled client executives to openly explore issues and try out different strategies in the workplace (CE5, CE10, CE1). As a result, the coaching relationship and process left client executives feeling positive, encouraged and confident (CE3, CE8, JS). The follow-up with the coach was also identified as a valued aspect of the coaching process (CE6, CE8).

Client executives emphasised the dialogical (CE4, CE1, CE7) and developmental (CE3, CE2, CE4, CE6) nature of the learning process, with the coach acting as a guide or facilitator (CE3, CE2). Executive coaching represented time out from day-to-day work and workplaces (CE3, CE4, CE8) to reflect about themselves and their work (CE6, CE8), to think differently (CE3) and to identify solutions to issues and problems and gain different perspectives about themselves in their work (CE1, CE12, CE3). Many client executives emphasised the importance of taking action and putting learning into practice following coaching sessions (CE7, CE11, CE2, CE6, CE12, CE8) that were appropriately spaced over a period of time (CE4, CE8). Three client executives also emphasised that through the process of being coached they had learned to become better coaches of others (CE7, CE2, CE3). In their responses, client executives also emphasised that coaching focused on their individual needs and benefits (CE11, CE4, CE10, CE12). Several client executives described coaching as enabling them to gain capabilities for problem solving in their organisational roles (CE12, CE1, CE11, CE3, CE5) and for the ongoing coaching of themselves (CE2, CE6).
Responses to my question about the uniqueness of executive coaching were lengthier and provided more depth in terms of unbundling the nature and experience of executive coaching than did the definitional statements. This question enabled client executives to be more descriptive in articulating the unique characteristics of executive coaching than was possible when they were asked to propose a definition. The quotations from the client executives highlighted that they viewed the context of their organisations as inherently political, aspects of which were not supportive of their development processes. For example, they described an organisational environment that contrasted to the trusting and confidential nature of the coaching space, where things were not reported back (CE10). In contrast, executive coaching was unique for these client executives as it provided a confidential space, with a third party (their executive coach) who was both independent of their organisation and interested in the client executives’ development, someone who understood where they were coming from (CE8), without being “on their side” in the sense of simply reinforcing the client executives’ existing behaviours. In response to my “unique and special” question, client executives also provided examples of how coaching provided them with essential elements for their development, including feedback (CE7, CE8) and targeted development experiences (CE11, CE4, CE12), which had been lacking for them in their organisations. Although executive coaching was described by client executives as being situated within the context of the organisational system and paid for by their organisation, for which the client executives were grateful (CE3), the coaching relationship and process was experienced by these client executives as delightfully (and essentially) separate from the organisation at the same time.

4.2.4. Purpose(s) of Executive Coaching

Client executives were also asked to comment on the purpose of executive coaching based on their actual experience. In the coaching literature, and as described in Chapter Three, executive coaching is undertaken for a range of purposes and these are categorised and presented in a variety of ways. I therefore sought to understand how individual client executives in my study interpreted and made meaning of the purpose of coaching, based on their actual experiences. Table 4.3 presents client executives responses to the question: “What would you say is the purpose of executive coaching?”

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2 See Table 3.2 in Chapter Three.
Table 4.3 Client executives’ interpretations of the purpose(s) of executive coaching

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<th>Client executives’ perspectives on the purpose(s) of executive coaching</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CE1</strong> I still think it’s about the individual. If I looked at executive coaching the purpose would be to strengthen an individual’s capabilities, and understanding.</td>
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<td><strong>CE2</strong> I see the coach as a facilitator and I see them facilitating an outcome, now whether that’s a performance outcome or whether it’s achieving a goal or whether that’s setting a path, I see them very much as the facilitator of that. I don’t really see them as, you know, coming up with the solution, I see them as being able to help you to think about the things that are actually important in that decision-making process ... The coach’s role is really to spend sufficient time with the person defining what that is, looking at what their options are then moving to the end, and I think that’s actually quite a skill, but it’s not giving them the answers, it’s getting them to think through all of the possible permutations and computations that might be there.</td>
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<td><strong>CE4</strong> Generate demonstrable improvement in either a personal sense or confidence. I think behaviour, confidence, knowledge and your ability to handle future situations differently ... it gives you ... more tools I guess to handle situations, because as I said before, a lot of the stuff that we talked about consciously I just never thought about, but when you get into a circumstance that you’ve discussed in a session it just comes out ... I said to him, a lot “I got in this meeting situation”, and he said “What have you done?” and I said “this”. I sort of found myself replaying and replaying ... I thought “How’s my conversation, how did I engage people, how was I, what was my body language?” It has changed the way I behave in meetings now, so that is probably one of the differences that subconsciously gives you that little prick to say, “Oh, here’s a circumstance we talked about, what have you got to do?”... maybe some of the stuff you do, you already do practise but you don’t really understand what you’re doing and what the context is and that certainly helped.</td>
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<td><strong>CE5</strong> Instrumental to the realisation of talents and potential ... Perhaps in my own context the self-awareness is important, the techniques to improve organisational success and realise potential</td>
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<td><strong>CE6</strong> I think it’s about being more effective, not necessarily more content, but just being more effective and keep coming back to the growth, because individual managers, if they are more effective, they can then grow and take on more challenging roles ... what’s really important is that you do have opportunity for the growth of potential, high potential people ... making people effective and more cohesive, because a lot of coaching is around conflict and management of conflict and if you’ve got a lot of conflict within an organisation it just holds it back, so it’s, for an organisation maybe it’s being more cohesive, working more cohesively.</td>
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<td><strong>CE7</strong> It has to be to improve business results. Otherwise why would you spend the money, it’s too nebulous and fluffy if it doesn’t say “Executive coaching improves commercial returns by bla bla, is proven to bla bla”.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CE8</strong> Improve executive effectiveness. That has sort of sub-streams to it, so it probably improves retention, in both at the executive level and below executive level and which hence reduces recruitment costs and it probably improves team output. But I would have thought that one of the key elements is that it effectively reduces executive frustration.</td>
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<td><strong>CE9</strong> I think its purpose is to help you achieve your objective; it’s all about yourself.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CE10</strong> It’s to deal with immediate issues that you are going through, to understand your own strengths and weaknesses better and to grow around that, to give some value back to the business that you are working for, that would be the three that I’d go with.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CE11</strong> It’s very individual, so I think that it’s largely around empowerment ... it’s helping real people surmount real issues or deal with real problems, so for themselves, rather than having to go to somebody in their line management. You’ve got to “fess up and say, “Well look I’ve got this issue”, now for some managers it’s great. You know they like getting involved and they are very helpful and very supportive and there are some people who don’t have the courage or whatever it is or the trust, to be able to do that, so if you don’t have that relationship with your manager then where do you go?... it does empower people outside of the line management to be successful and to kind of get a step up without people</td>
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CE12 The purpose becomes an individual purpose, that’s why I don’t believe it can be imposed. I think it comes back down to, we all, everyone wants an opportunity to learn and hopefully wants an opportunity to learn. It’s that individual learning; it’s really about you, the person as a leader.

Client executives emphasised the purpose of executive coaching as an individual learning and development activity. The highly individualised and personal purpose of executive coaching for client executives included the development of a range of individual qualities, predominantly self-awareness (CE10, CE5, CE4, CE12). Other individual qualities developed by coaching included, for example, empowerment (CE11), confidence and conversational behaviours (CE4) and reduced frustration (CE8). As experienced by client executives, the developmental purpose of executive coaching was appropriately directed towards goals that were focused on individual growth (CE6, CE10) and the achievement of individual objectives (CE9), for the benefit of both the organisation and the individual client executive. Executive coaching was also experienced as developing individual effectiveness (CE6, CE8) and individual capabilities and understanding (CE1). The reflective process of coaching was also seen to provide client executives with the knowledge to deal with future situations differently (CE4), and the facilitative role of the coach assisted client executives to identify and solve their own problems and issues (CE10, CE2).

The purpose of coaching, as experienced by client executives, focused predominantly on personal development and interpersonal capabilities, rather than on the development of the technical or functional skills and capabilities of being an executive in their organisation. As described by one client executive,

It’s that individual learning; it’s really about you, the person as a leader. CE12

Importantly, client executives emphasised the primary purpose of executive coaching as an individual development and learning process, rather than an organisational initiative per se. For these client executives, the focus of executive coaching was on the development of the individual client executive, with the organisational benefits being secondary or consequential. As reported by client executives, the benefits to the organisation included organisational success and business results (CE5, CE7), cohesiveness (CE6), retention and team output (CE8), the development of talent and potential (CE5, CE6), and value to the business (CE10). As suggested by one client executive, coaching was

Just personal development that’s good for you and it’s good for the company because of that, and if you stay, well that’s a nice by-product. CE10
The phenomenon of executive coaching is illuminated further in the following section with the inclusion of client executive stories.

4.3 CLIENT EXECUTIVES’ STORIES

In keeping with my chosen hermeneutic phenomenological approach, I have constructed two stories as descriptive, interpretive texts of the phenomenon of executive coaching. These stories illuminate characteristics of executive coaching by portraying what it is like to experience the phenomenon. They are thick, rich descriptions of the experience of executive coaching because they contain descriptive words and metaphors and portray the emotions and feelings of participants; enabling the reader to connect with the descriptions. These portray the coaching (and personal and professional) journeys of client executives as they experienced executive coaching for the first time. I have used first order constructs (their own words) as much as possible and have also bolded key words or phrases to reflect important concepts as per my interpretation. Participant names have been changed to maintain anonymity. I have included the stories of two participants, Alex and Lee.

4.3.1. Alex’s Story

I had been a Senior Partner in the firm for almost a decade when I was given responsibility for a large group of people spread around the country. I had never had responsibility for leading such a big group of people like that before. I really had no idea what leadership was, what my leadership style was or how was I going to lead these people. I wondered, “Why would these people bother following me, even if I wanted to lead them?” But I was stuck. I couldn’t let on to anyone else that I didn’t know what I was doing. It’s a very competitive environment in this organisation and in these types of firms. You don’t want anyone to know your weaknesses, certainly not when you get to my level. In fact, you spend all your time doing exactly the opposite, getting people to focus on how good you are.

I had this feeling that I had been doing much the same stuff for a long time and it was not working any more. I had a sense that things were not getting any better. We had some mixed feedback from the team about how things were going. It seemed like we had hit a roadblock and I didn’t really know what to do next. I wasn’t sure what I needed to change and if I was part of the issue. I had never had any formal leadership training, although I have done everything else, the executive MBA and all that, so I said that the firm should invest in some training for me. But, I thought I was probably too senior to get training. The HR person recommended coaching. He said that coaching would help me get down to the specific stuff that I needed to do differently.

The HR person set up an informal meeting with a coach. He made the arrangements and I trusted his recommendation. Really, I had no idea what I should be looking for. Actually, I had no idea what a coach did. I couldn’t pick a good coach from a bad one. What I found out was that the coach I met had worked a lot with one of the big banks, so she understood large organisations. I also felt more confident when I
understood that she had dealt with other people in my organisation. She knew the big picture of where the firm was at, the culture and structure of the place. People that I respect had worked with her and they had positive things to say. My sense was that she had credibility.

I trusted my coach instantly. She had laid down the ground rules in terms of her not reporting back to the organisation so I knew it was confidential. Nothing happened during our time together to take that trust away. In fact, it would seem to me that if anything did get reported back then that would have potentially resulted in her not getting any more work with the firm, so I believed it was probably in her best interests to maintain that trust. She was from outside of the organisation and that was also important. It meant I could say things to her that I couldn’t say to anyone else.

This was my first experience of coaching and I remember looking forward to it as a chance to learn about leadership and how I could execute that. I was looking for a couple of concrete things that I could do and also a bit of a framework that I could use. We had about a dozen sessions extended over a period of about 4 months as I remember I was travelling quite a bit at the time. I never contemplated the cost of the coaching and I think few people would. But, I knew the organisation had made an investment in me and I was grateful for that. And I saw myself as the client, not the organisation. But I would have liked to have had the coaching much earlier in my career, to assist with my learning about leadership.

In the actual coaching sessions, it was like I had stepped off the train for a little bit, even if it was only for an hour at a time. Taking the time seemed like such a luxury but also something that I couldn’t afford to be without. A chance to step back, reflect and see what was going on around me with no interruptions, no phone ringing. It was time to think. You need that reflection and that’s part of what the coaching practice is. It gives you the structure to do that and gives you guidance along that process. And my coach was really skilful at getting me to peel off the layers of protection that I had built up around myself over the years. She knew how to get me to talk. She understood where I was coming from. She knew how to ask me the right questions, to get me to relax and to draw things out. That was her art. She was very skilful at that. She seemed to have a lot of empathy and she did listen well. I could also say anything to her, stupid things, and it didn’t matter.

The process was really interesting. It was like she was facilitating a conversation that I was having with myself. I think the process was actually more important than the content. The content played the supporting role to the process, rather than the other way around. In fact, I was surprised that there was so little content. What she was doing was not giving me the answers, but getting me to talk. Almost like facilitated self-analysis. And I found that the answers were not “out there”, not on the internet or elsewhere but actually inside me. I was pleasantly surprised. I had actually considered most of the elements and when I talked through my strategies for dealing with people with my coach, I found I was not too far off.

So coaching gave self-confidence and self-awareness. Unlike the doubt and fear I would have felt working through this stuff on my own, my coach understood how I felt and what it felt like to be leader. She let me know that I was OK, my approach was OK. I would go away between sessions and put stuff into practice and then there was a feedback loop. I would try things for a few weeks and the we would meet and she would say, “What’s different?”, “How did that work?”. I could then see the positive stuff in what I had done and that really helped to encourage me further.

I am also probably better at communicating now because of the coaching. There is a real danger with leadership that is actually quite similar to the sensation of going to
the toilet in your wetsuit. You have a nice warm glow, but nobody else ever knows anything about it. **Coaching made me more aware that I need to actually act and communicate and not make assumptions** that people understand what I’m doing, where I’m going and what the big picture is. It was after my experience of coaching that we actually put the strategy for our group down on a piece of paper.

During the coaching I also decided that leadership was not my strength and I came to understand that it was not the thing that most interested me. **Coaching made me very aware of my own limitations as a leader, but also the fact that I don’t need to be Napoleon or Winston Churchill to actually feel good about myself.** I used to sort of think that I ought to be able to run the world. The coaching space helped me realise I wouldn’t do it very well and I wouldn’t enjoy it either. So, one of the things that I did do was move to a new organisation and **back into doing what I really enjoy, which is dealing with clients and not leading people.** I must say I think the coaching wasn’t necessarily the start of that journey, but it was certainly an accelerator on that journey, **the self-awareness around what I do well, what I enjoy, my style and what other people think of me.** You get a realisation that that’s not the way you’ve been heading and you are not where you should be. Almost as if you’ve gone off true North by accident. **It comes from the luxury of being able to sit back and reflect.** I now always try and focus on the things I am good at. Coaching helped me do that.

### 4.3.2. Lee’s Story

My coaching came about because of a management skills course I attended in my company. It was one of those offsite things, over 2 or 3 days. There were several coaches there and there were two coaching sessions included as part of the course and then we had the option to have another half-dozen after those. I actually thought coaching would be a waste of time. I thought I knew everything and all that I needed to know. So it was one exercise we did in the course that really opened my eyes, that led to the connection with the coach, which led to the two coaching sessions and then six after that.

There was only one coach there that suited me. If hadn’t have been him, it would have been no one. The coaches at the course may have been the greatest coaches in the world, but there was no connection. For me that was important. **Personal connection, trust and intellectual challenge were the things that were important for me in my selection of my coach.** I also quite liked his underlying values, to the point that I felt that **I could trust his judgement.** I’m arrogant enough to be cautious about trusting others. So I tend to trust myself more than I do others, so when I find someone that I can lean on, or feel that I can lean on, that’s important and unusual for me.

I found the **coaching was more personal than anything else I have ever done.** By comparison in a supervisor/ supervisee position, it’s not necessarily personal. In peer-to-peer relationships, the friendship gets in the way or the egos get in the way. So there is lots of noise in other situations that you don’t necessarily get in a good coaching relationship. So coaching is **unique in that ability to be open, but distant, and it is objectivity with openness.**

I don’t know how he did what he did in our sessions, but it worked. He seemed to have a series of techniques on the shelf that he would use. And some that I remember still; simple techniques. He would dive into my world and then reach to his shelf and say “oh well maybe this technique, mate, would work here”. He would bring that know-how or knowledge, whatever it was, and present it in a simple way that was useful and workable to me. **Coaching was more practical and relevant to**
me than other leadership training that I have done. Coaching dealt with my real situations, not with theory. Other leadership programs try to make stuff relevant to the work situation, but it doesn’t always succeed. It is a little too generic and too vague. Whereas coaching was very targeted and very relevant to a specific situation that I had, something that was hot for me at the time.

Like any investment, I thought the organisation would want to see a benefit from coaching. I thought that this was not something that the organisation could throw money at and walk away from. But as far as I know, there has been no evaluation process. Zero. No one has ever asked me internally how I found it, whether I got value from it, was it worth it or was I still doing it? So, I effectively did the coaching by myself. It almost wasn’t organisationally sponsored, just organisationally paid. I guess I should appreciate the investment the organisation made by paying for it. Curiously, there was no real assessment of whether or not it was worthwhile.

And I did get a lot of value from it. I don’t even know what it cost now, it must have been a few grand I guess, 3 or 4, maybe 5 thousand or somewhere around there it would have been. Any one of the initiatives that we covered in one of the coaching sessions would have more than generated that payback in terms of intellectual and interpersonal benefits to me. It’s probably kept me at the organisation whereas I might have left otherwise. So it has kept me there longer. And I think it’s more of a long-term investment in me as a person, an individual. You may not necessarily get the returns straight away. So the danger you have with any kind of benefits realisation is: how do you measure intangible benefits?

The greatest benefit for me from the coaching was self-awareness. I have a reputation as being pretty tough to deal with and I don’t see it that way at all. Well I didn’t, but now I try to work on it. So, for me, it was a personal thing, a real eye-opener. I suspect it isn’t for everybody, but it was for me. Coaching has helped me to modify my behaviours and attitudes a lot, but not to a life-changing level. I still revert to my old ways from time to time, but coaching has helped me do this much less.

What I learnt in coaching was the value of stopping to pause and reflect. We are all busy, caught up in the day-to-day and we don’t do it. We spend so much time on automatic pilot. I don’t stop and reflect enough because the inertia of life is often too strong. I mean today I’m in back to back meetings and I don’t have an opportunity in that sort of day to pause and reflect about what my priorities are. The coaching gave me that space. I still try to do it now but keeping it up after the coaching is hard. It’s hard; you’ve got to work at it.

What worries me is that coaching is flavour of the month at the moment and I think it tends to be used as a remedial thing, which is wrong. Coaches are appointed to people who are having issues or attitude problems, whatever it might be. For those that get sent to a coach with whom they have no connection, I can’t see it having any value. If a coach had been appointed to me, I think that I would have been defensive, suspicious, cautious, closed. I think coaching should be used for talented people. It’s about potential, and opening up potential, not for remedial. That’s what I think coaching is for.

The two stories highlight that although both Alex and Lee were highly successful and senior members of their organisations, they each had areas of development that the existing methods of leadership development they had experienced had not been able to provide for. Both individuals described a trusted and confidential relationship with their coach that was
fundamentally important to their coaching journey. Coaching was a highly valuable experience for both client executives, particularly in the areas of developing self-awareness and providing time and space to reflect. Coaching filled a development need for both, but more than that, coaching had also empowered them to both do something differently. In Alex’s case it was returning to the type of work he really enjoyed. For Lee, it meant using the increased self-knowledge to make important modifications in his behaviour and attitudes.

### 4.4 THEMES AND KEY DIMENSIONS - CLIENT EXECUTIVES

Client executives were asked to describe their experiences of executive coaching in both interviews and were asked probing questions to provide detailed examples and expanded descriptions. Data analysis resulted in four themes and associated key dimensions which illuminated the phenomenon of executive coaching as experienced by client executives.

The four themes are:

1. Executive coaching is situated within an organisational system and setting and a personal context that influences the success of executive coaching for individual client executives.

2. Executive coaching is conducted within a relationship of trust and connection with an executive coach; it involves the creation of a safe meeting space that is enabled by the outsider status of the executive coach and time away for reflection by the client executive.

3. The process of executive coaching for client executives involves client-focused conversations with an executive coach who facilitates engagement in self-awareness, reflection and learning from experience.

4. The effects/outcomes of executive coaching for client executives includes the development of individual capability and potential by fostering self-awareness, confidence and the capacity for ongoing self-development.

The four themes and associated key dimensions are detailed in Table 4.4 and are grouped in the following four categories: (1) context, (2) space, (3) process and (4) individual effects/outcomes of executive coaching. In labelling key dimensions, I utilised both first order constructs (participants’ words) and second order constructs (my interpretations), consistent with the approach I have used for phenomenological data analysis (following Titchen & McIntyre, 1993). Each theme and key dimension is discussed in turn in the following sections.
### Table 4.4 Themes and key dimensions: *Client executives’* experience of executive coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Category and Description</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Key Dimensions: First order constructs (Second order constructs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Context of executive coaching 1. | Executive coaching is situated within an organisational system and setting and a personal context that influences the success of executive coaching for individual *client executives.* | Organisational context  
  a) *(Not) too senior to need training*  
  (Supporting lifelong learning)  
  b) *Giving me free rein*  
  (Having minimal organisational constraints) |
|                                |                                                                       | Personal context  
  c) *(Making it) all about me*  
  (Pursing person(al) development)  
  d) *Wanting to be coached*  
  (Being motivated for coaching) |
| The space for executive coaching 2. | Executive coaching is conducted within a relationship of trust and connection with an *executive coach;* it involves the creation of a safe meeting space that is enabled by the outsider status of the *executive coach* and time away for reflection by the *client executive.* | e) *Having a connection*  
  (Being matched with the coach)  
  f) *Absolute trust*  
  (Creating a relationship of trust)  
  g) *No other agenda*  
  (Valuing coach independence and professionalism)  
  h) *Someone to talk to*  
  (Engaging in confidential conversations)  
  i) *Away from the day-to-day*  
  (Being reflective) |
| Process of being coached 3. | The process of executive coaching for *client executives* involves client-focused conversations with an *executive coach* who facilitates engagement in self-awareness, reflection and learning from experience. | j) * Entirely focused on me*  
  (Receiving full attention)  
  k) *Being treated as an individual*  
  (Having a tailored experience)  
  l) *Coach facilitating the conversation*  
  (Being facilitated – to dialogue)  
  m) *Constantly challenged*  
  (Facing learning challenges)  
  n) *Learning from real situations*  
  (Learning in context)  
  o) *Learning from action, follow-up and structured reflection*  
  (Learning through experience) |
| Individual effects/outcomes of executive coaching 4. | The effects/outcomes of executive coaching for *client executives* includes the development of individual capability and potential by fostering self-awareness, confidence and the capacity for ongoing self-development. | p) *Helping me to see myself*  
  (Developing self-awareness)  
  q) *Backing myself*  
  (Increasing self-confidence and self-efficacy)  
  r) *Transferring capability*  
  (Coaching self and others) |
THE CONTEXT OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

THEME ONE: Executive coaching is situated within an organisational system and setting and a personal context that influences the success of executive coaching for individual client executives.

Client executives described factors in the organisational system and setting that influenced their experiences of executive coaching and their perceptions of the success of coaching. The organisational factors included the supportive learning environment of coaching (as contrasted with the limited learning culture within their employing organisations) and the minimal involvement of organisational representatives in the coaching process (as a positive factor). Participants also described personal factors that influenced their coaching experience. These factors included their agency in identifying a goal or focus for their coaching experience which catered for their individual and person(al) development needs and the overall success of coaching as strongly linked to their own willingness to be coached.

a) *(Not) too senior to need training (Supporting lifelong learning)*

Client executives contrasted the learning they had experienced with their external executive coach with the limited opportunities for learning within their organisations. Unlike the team learning and other components of a learning organisation espoused by Senge (1990), the majority of client executives outlined that the culture of their organisations generally did not support or promote learning. As reported by client executives, coaching was successful, paradoxically, because the opportunity and context for a similar type of learning within their organisations was limited and was frequently considered unnecessary, especially for senior executives:

*We put a lot of people in leadership roles without training them or in leadership roles already without training on how to do them more effectively … Ok, I’m kind of treading water here, I’ve been doing the same stuff I’ve been doing for a while, I don’t seem to be getting any better at it, somehow I’m going backwards, there’s a frustration: “Well what am I supposed to do about this? I’ll no longer be getting training, I’m too senior to get training, so what happens, what am I supposed to do?”* CE8

*Look, I’ve worked in many different organisations and not had the opportunity to develop. On the occasions where I’ve gone back to develop myself from a qualifications perspective, or however you want to put it, I’ve done it off my own back. So, coaching was an opportunity to do something different.* CE1

Client executives described their focus on “doing”, with high workload levels and demanding roles in their organisations as major factors limiting individual time for learning and development. As described later in this chapter, client executives valued highly the opportunity that coaching provided to experience time out from their daily activities to focus on reflection,
growth and learning. The unrelenting focus on “doing” in organisations at the expense of development was described by client executives in my study:

The flow of work is so high, demands are so high; it pushes people beyond what would normally be expected of them. So I think it used to be easier ... whereas now, no one has a holiday, no one has an easy job at all... you don’t have time to be looking after people too much. CE10

It’s interesting because although people are hired for team work and their ability to [work in a] team... it is also a very competitive environment so who’s got time to help somebody else? And there’s also this huge workload that impinges on people’s time. CE11

Client executives described the competitive cultures within their employing organisations as a factor that made it difficult for them to open up and share their “vulnerabilities” (CE5) and development needs as part of a learning process. As discussed later in this chapter, the ability to open up with their external executive coach was highly valued by client executives. In contrast, participants described competitiveness within their organisations as a real barrier to openness and learning:

I think that most organisations these days are judgemental, competitive, all of those things. I’m not sure that individuals naturally want to expose their whole vulnerabilities in that situation and I’m no different in that respect. CES

At a trite level there is all the bravado that exists in an organisation ... there is an element of salesmanship to everybody ... I think that there is a fear that that information, that knowledge can be used against you. It’s a little bit like going into a playground. In a playground, the five year olds have worked out where the buttons are and where the weak spots are and they will press them just to see what happens. You don’t really want to be wandering around with your weak spots waving at the top of a banner if you’ve spent 20-odd years hiding those and polishing up all the things that shine. So most of your time you’re a little bit like a magician going, “Look at the shiny ball, look at the shiny ball”, when there is other stuff going on and you don’t really want to turn the shiny ball off. CE8

Another feature lacking in organisations as reported by client executives was the availability of feedback as part of learning process. In the literature, it is suggested that it is often difficult for individuals in organisations, in particular executives, to access reliable and honest feedback (Katz & Miller, 1996; Kiel et al., 1996; Witherspoon & White, 1996). As described later in this chapter, the opportunity for feedback was an important element for client executives in developing self-awareness through coaching. As reported by client executives, feedback about themselves was absent in their employing organisations:

One of the things that’s absent in a lot of professional environments, particularly when you work with people who have grown up in a “command and control” style of leadership, is feedback. You don’t get a lot of feedback. Positive feedback to say “I
observed you doing this the other day, this is the impact that it had, keep doing it because it was fantastic”, you get bugger-all of that. CE7

Yes, zero feedback. It’s the environment. This environment here does not give you feedback ... What I need is somebody to call a spade a spade and say, “You know you really need to smarten up in this area or what you need to do is this, this and this”. Getting that out of our management is impossible, because they don’t want to offend you. If I look at some of our management, what they do is say, “Ah yes, actually, I don’t like that” and they just ignore those people and focus on some other people ... My observation is that if for some reason senior management has chosen that they don’t want to deal with that person any more, they let their career wobble and they just focus on somebody else. So the person never finds out that they screwed up. Everyone is terribly nice to them but they don’t get told how to smarten up and how to get back on the conveyer belt. CE11

In contrast to the short-term focus in their employing organisations, executive coaching was valued by client executives as providing learning that was not confined to a single event in a classroom but was more akin to a continuous lifelong learning process, supporting development over a lifetime. As described,

Everything I’ve got from coaching was not about dying your hair overnight, it was about ongoing development. Some of the stuff that we learnt or some of the things we covered you could see some immediate success but it wasn’t overnight. It was gradual and it’s about developing the individual. The manifestation of what you learnt may not fully mature until 5 or 10 years but if you talk to most leaders in organisations, what’s their business strategy? They’ve got a 3 to 5 year window. This is not about a 3 or 5 year window, this is about coaching an individual who’s quite arguably another 20, 30, 40 years to live and that’s why I think the coaching is good because I think no one is really interested in looking beyond 3 to 5 years, ‘cause they don’t know where they’re going to be and they don’t know if they’re going to still be where they are now. I think that’s the key driver. CE4

b) Giving me free rein (Having minimal organisational constraints)

A key success factor for executive coaching as reported by client executives in my study was the “hands-off” (CE10) approach adopted by their employing organisation. In my research, organisational stakeholders, including HR professionals and line managers played a limited role in the coaching engagements as experienced by client executives. In the coaching literature, the role of organisational representatives (and extent of involvement in the coaching process) is not clearly defined, but has been portrayed as important for providing organisational support to the coachee, ensuring alignment of the coaching to organisational needs and working best when these roles “understand and respect” the coaching process (especially the need for confidentiality between coach and coachee) (Standards Australia, 2011, p. 34). In my study, organisational representatives were viewed by client executives as maintaining an optimal distance from their experience of being coached. Generally, client executives in my study reported that organisational stakeholders had brokered the coaching engagement,
identified or allocated a coach to participants but had limited further involvement apart from “paying the bill” (CE1). The disconnection of organisational representatives from their coaching experience was described by client executives:

The organisation supported me financially in utilising executive coaching as a part of my professional development, that’s really where it began and ended. CE12

Completely disconnected from the coaching process, so it would seem to be a personal thing for me that was funded by the business. But it wasn’t directly sponsored by the CEO. For example, he wasn’t saying to me, “How’s the coaching going”? It was almost treated like a very private thing, so it was for you, not for the company, but if there’s a benefit for the company that’s good. So the relationship was between me and the coach rather than a three-way thing, with the company … As a by-product, hopefully I was performing better anyway, so it didn’t worry me that no one was really sponsoring me from a company point of view. CE10

I guess one of the good things with the coach is that … there should be some structure within my organisation around managing the relationship but the fact that there wasn’t was also a good thing, because it meant it was just me and <coach> one-on-one. I could open up … so that gave us some freedom I guess to explore different things. CE3

Client executives reported the limited involvement of line managers in their coaching experiences. For many client executives, their line manager had no active role during the coaching engagement. This contrasts markedly with a study of internal coaching relationships by Machin (2010) in which the coach and the client agreed that involving the line manager was important (and missed when not present). Line manager involvement was depicted by client executives:

My manager pretty much gave me free rein … I said, “Look, I’ve got an idea, I want to do this” and he said, “Yes, that’s fine” and that was the end of his involvement. CE3

Interestingly, my immediate leader is less experienced in leadership than I am and his reaction at the end of it was, could he have some coaching himself as well. Other than the conversations with people in People and Culture right at the beginning, to say, “This sounds like a good idea”, he wasn’t directly involved in it in any way, shape or form. CE8

For one client executive (who had experienced the highest level of manager interaction in the coaching process), the manager had been involved in specifying goals for coaching at the outset and then participating in conversations to review coaching progress periodically. This type of line manager participation in meetings with the coach and their employee (the client) has been viewed as a value enhancing activity in other Australian research (Whyte, 2012). As described by the client executive in my study:

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3 This might suggest that there is something different in the context of internal coaching relationships (and the role of the line manager in these) versus relationships with external executive coaches.

4 Another title for the Human Resources (HR) department.
We next had a session where my manager, my coach and myself sat in a room and my manager outlined what his expectations were from the coaching. That was then the platform for my development, for the coach to develop a plan for me to move through this year, so that’s how it started … we had some follow-up sessions with my manager as well, to see whether there had been some changes. CE4

A number of client executives chose to engage with their manager directly, providing updates on the coaching experience. For some client executives, their manager demonstrated support by inquiring into their coaching journey and associated learning. As suggested by one participant, however, this engagement was nothing more than would be expected of leaders in their day-to-day role in managing employees and supporting their development, rather than a unique characteristic of the executive coaching process per se.

I spoke to my immediate manager about coaching periodically. Sort of gave him the run down on what was going on. CE1

The Managing Director asked me how I felt it went, whether I felt that I’d learnt from it. We discussed the process, so yes, there was support. CE12

In terms of my boss, I said I wanted to do this coaching and he said “yep”… he could see it was a good thing because in his mind he could see I’ve got a tick in that box because we’re developing our people. But he would sit with me and say, “How did you go, what did you learn, what are you going to do differently?” So you know, I guess the manager probably plays a role too. CE3

I think the way that some of the leaders that I worked with got involved after the event was to say “OK, is there anything you need help that you are working with, that you think you need help over the next few months, is there anything in particular that you are working on?”. So from that point of view that was some involvement, but I wouldn’t say that was involvement in the process. I would have just said that’s them doing their job. That’s them doing their leadership job, just to say, “Well OK, what are you working on?”, but I didn’t see that as part of the coaching process. CE8

Client executives described HR representatives in their organisations as also having a limited role in their coaching engagements, typically undertaking only coordination and sourcing related activities. For some client executives, a HR representative had suggested coaching as a possible development option for them and this had been viewed by client executives as favourable (and useful). For others, a HR representative had played a role in matching the client executive with a coach and this was also viewed as a positive activity.

The conversations that the HR person and I had were along the lines of “Well look, if you need to get down to the brass tacks of what it is concretely that you need to do, then coaching is probably the best way to go because that’s one-on-one”. Which is really the key element, I think, because it actually takes it from the abstract to the real. CE8

My experience came from some discussions with the HR Director who suggested it would be useful. I was finding very little in the way of coaching and mentoring within the company and that’s what got me to try it out … The HR Director was good at sizing up what the matches were going to be, how it was going to work … it seemed to happen
pretty naturally ... The HR Director and the coach had a relationship for a long time so she’d used that agency and that particular coach for quite some time so I think she could size up what the matches were likely to be, they’d worked together before, they’d sort of know the sort of people they’re dealing with. CE10

Client executives also commented on a number of areas in which HR representatives could undertake a more extensive role in executive coaching engagements. In the following examples, one client executive suggested that the HR function had an important role to play in positioning and framing coaching in the organisation as a strategically managed, targeted intervention for talented employees. Another participant suggested that in general, the HR function had shifted its attention away from employee development in organisations and could play a more useful role in terms of fostering (and supporting) career and individual development. One client executive highlighted a missed opportunity for the HR function who had not accessed and utilised the useful information arising from the coaching program conducted across his organisation. In offering suggestions, another client executive (who was also employed as a HR Director) suggested the value for HR professionals in experiencing executive coaching themselves as a means of developing an informed understanding.

You see the material come out from HR people, here is one of the menus of standard things to do for an individual’s development you know, pick coaching. I just think its overused and it’s not done in the right way, it’s done as “I’ve done coaching, tick, move on”. It’s not as part of ... it needs to be a little bit more thought out. I think it needs to be, “We are making investment in our talent”. CE5

I don’t look at HR that often as being a support. It’s more, you could call it a profit centre almost. They are looking at overheads, they are looking at salaries, they are looking at all these other things which, you know, obviously any business needs to control, but maybe they are doing more of that than [focusing on] development ... We’ve got a big HR organisation and they don’t often come to you and say “How are you going in your role, What are some of the issues that you are faced with, Where do you want to be in 12 months, 2 years, 3 years, What about you, What learnings do you want to invest in?”. CE1

I have seen the two extremes, however my current organisation had a very “laissez faire”, hands-off view in terms of coaching, “That’s interesting, if you want to talk about your coaching that’s fine”. I’ve seen other businesses where it’s almost like a mandatory program, you will be coached, this is the coach for the organisation they’ll be collective feedback and everyone will discuss. Something in the middle is the right answer, where the coaching organisation can help the senior executives of that business to understand their own executives better. That’s the bit that my organisation lost out of this, they didn’t learn anything as a corporate about the people that were going through the coaching, how to work with them what their strengths are, how to develop them. So that would be the nice middle ground. CE10

When you are in HR, sometimes, everybody else receives the benefit of the sorts of things that you are doing, and you don’t, because you are the constructor of those things, so, having the experience of my own executive coach was an important experience for me to have. CE2
c) **(Making it) all about me (Pursuing person(al) development)**

As illustrated in the examples that follow, the limited organisational involvement in setting or specifying goals for coaching empowered *client executives* to determine the focus or goal/s of their coaching experiences. In the literature, the identification of a compelling reason (or goal) for coaching by the client has been identified as important for ensuring a commitment to change and overall client readiness for coaching (Kretzschmar, 2010). In my study, the one *client executive* whose reason for coaching was identified by his employer (to improve his interpersonal skills), still reported agency in determining the focus or boundaries of his coaching.

What I got from the coaching which I didn’t get from a, say a text book, or from learning via a classroom environment is that it was very much specific to me ... So yes I think I definitely say it’s more individualised. You can create some goals which are very specific to your situation whereas I might be in a classroom and read about sort of coaching techniques or you know, but probably wouldn’t have been able to sort of apply it, or even sort of have that conversation. CE3

It’s very individual, so I think that it’s largely around empowerment. CE11

It worked for me because it was all about me, it was for my benefit, not for anything else. CE10

Whereas the coaching was more saying well, looking at me, the individual, and how I’m reacting in situations and it was certainly, I guess, an overriding element was to improve my interpersonal skills and improve people’s perception of me ... It was about me the individual, not me as an employee of the company I work for and I think that added to the experience and I think contributed a lot to getting better outcomes than if you were just treated as an employee trying to improve as an employee as opposed to trying to improve as an individual. CE4

In determining a focus for coaching, the majority of *client executives* described coaching as a highly individual and personal experience that enabled them to identify areas of development that were relevant to both their work and their personal lives. A number of authors (Katz & Miller, 1996; Kiel et al., 1996) have argued that organisations fail to provide support or opportunities for personal development, assuming that executives must be fully developed at appointment or promotion and no longer require personal growth and development. In contrast, these *client executives* valued coaching for providing them with an opportunity to undertake personal development but, importantly, personal development in the context of themselves and their work lives. This was also a finding in Alison Maxwell’s (2009) phenomenological study with coaches, who reported that their clients shaped the boundary of coaching to include undertaking a level of personal work and were highly willing to disclose personal material with their coach. This was articulated by *client executives*:
At the time I was working long hours, I was interested in getting a better work/life balance so some of them weren’t just focused on work, some of them touched into my personal life. CE3

Some of the things I was working on in leadership do spill over into personal life so therefore it did have an impact and because of that personal nature of areas we’d moved in there was a definite cross-over into personal life … I thought of the typical things like your career and your immediate job but as it progressed it really opened up a whole range of topics. Some personal type development areas that I wasn’t expecting, so it was much broader, as it turned out, which was positive … It was like stepping outside of your normal world and into this really intimate world, where you’re just opening up your inner self, because I was doing some of the personal development stuff rather than, this person said this, or this, or a career type thing. CE6

Oh I think it was for me, critical, because I think that I probably wanted it to. I mean you can improve your professional life, but again, I was looking maybe to leverage into my personal life what I was doing (and not doing) right. CE4

Interestingly, the client executive who had not found coaching to be a positive experience had not utilised coaching for matters that were more personal in nature, including pursuing a career path outside the employing organisation. This client executive was not satisfied with the career opportunities that existed within their organisation, but did not explore this topic in the coaching context. The client executive’s own values dictated that as the employer was paying for the coaching, it would be inappropriate to focus in the coaching space on finding ways of leaving the organisation. In this way, this client executive appeared to have restricted the boundary of her coaching experience (influenced by own underlying values relating to the appropriate use of company resources) when compared with other client executives’ experiences. This is one factor (in addition to the poor relationship and lack of boundaries experienced with the coach) that may explain why that client executive’s experience of coaching was lacking when compared to others.

Oh no, no, that’s just to do with me. I mean its <organisation’s> money. <Organisation> should be paying their money to benefit <organisation>, not anybody else. Even if it’s me personally it’s still not appropriate. So that’s to do with my take on the way things should be done. So if I’d gone in there with career aspirations that weren’t in line or with <organisation> then I don’t think it’s very appropriate to get the coach’s guidance on how to get out for instance. CE11

d) **Wanting to be coached (Being motivated for coaching)**

A key success factor reported by client executives was their willingness and motivation to engage in the coaching experience. All client executives approached their coaching experience with a commitment to being involved, even though the coaching had arisen for them in a variety of ways. For some client executives, coaching had been provided as part of a talent or
leadership development program and following the completion of a 360-degree feedback\(^5\) exercise. One executive’s leader had suggested coaching as a means for developing the executive’s interpersonal capability. Another executive had “inherited” (CE1) the coaching opportunity when a peer left the organisation and the coaching was reallocated by HR. At least half of the group had identified a particular area of development or set of challenges they were seeking assistance with and coaching had been recommended to them by someone, typically their HR representative. Client executives believed strongly that if an individual did not wish to participate in executive coaching then it could not be successful.

You’ve got to get the person in the right space and sort of want to be coached, because if they don’t want to learn anything then they’ll just dip their head in the sand and it’s become a completely useless exercise ... it’s a waste of time. CE8

It was because I wanted to do it. For those that I’ve encouraged to do it, I didn’t force them, they all took their own time. One of them said, “Great, I’ll set that up tomorrow”, through to another guy who took 3 or 4 months to think that he was ready for it. When he was ready for it, he got the benefit out of it. CE10

I’ve had a number of people within this organisation who’ve actually signed up for coaching relationships and who walked away disappointed. They don’t take the advice, they don’t actually do what they say they’re going to do, and then they don’t understand why everything hasn’t been fixed. Because fundamentally it’s a shift in themselves, either in their thinking or in their behaviour or in their relationships with others. So you have to be in the right mindset for change. If you’re not, then it’s a waste of time and money. CE2

I think you have to want to do it. I think you personally have to have a commitment that you see some value. I think that if it is imposed on you, it would probably be a very difficult thing to undertake. CE12

### 4.4.2. **THE SPACE FOR EXECUTIVE COACHING**

**THEME TWO:** Executive coaching is conducted within a relationship of trust and connection with an executive coach; it involves the creation of a safe meeting space that is enabled by the outsider status of the executive coach and time away for reflection by the client executive.

In my study, a number of components were identified by client executives as fundamental for the creation of the space for executive coaching to occur. Most significantly, client executives believed that the coaching relationship was a significant success factor. Client executives experienced a professional and individual relationship with their coach in which they felt very connected and trusting. The executive coach being an “outsider” was a significant factor in coaching success for client executives. This independence provided the essential safety which

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\(^5\) As outlined in Chapter Three, 360-degree feedback involves peers, subordinates and managers completing a questionnaire describing the individual’s performance (Australian Human Resources Institute).
enabled *client executives* to open up fully to their coach. Safety and learning were also supported by the coaching being conducted outside *client executives’* organisations. Coaching sessions provided a space for *client executives* to exit their organisation and to engage in reflection and learning.

e) **Having a connection (Being matched with the coach)**

A key finding common to *client executives* was that the relationship formed between themselves and their *executive coach* was one of the most significant success factors in their coaching experience. Eleven *client executives* reported a positive and value-creating match with their *executive coach*. Only one of the twelve *client executives* did not experience a positive match with their coach and had subsequently found the coaching to be a “*waste of time*” (CE11). Alternatively, for that *client executive*, value came from a comparably strong relationship with an external mentor. The “*connection*” with their coach was reported by participants as an important element of the relationship and critical for success.

*Be selective about the coach, it’s got to be somebody that works, that you have a connection with.* CES

*I think it’s very important to have a connection and I think it would be a really difficult; it would be a challenge if you were to go into coaching with a purely unknown person with whom you perhaps didn’t connect with.* CE12

*I guess, to me, I think to know, or to feel comfortable with that person is probably the number one thing. So that you have a bit of a rapport because the process will probably be the same and the questions, the digging would probably be similar and I guess all coaches have a knack, you know, that’s what they do, in terms of drawing out and delving into particular areas … I’m a little bit out of my comfort zone, you know, opening up so the number one priority would be someone I felt comfortable with … I think that having a connection within the relationship was very important for me.* CE3

This sense of *connection* was assessed by *client executives* when they met their coach in person. *Client executives* reported feeling a *connection* to their coach after having observed them in a forum such as a training session or when they met the coach face to face. For some participants, this *connection* developed when meeting with the coach during the initial coaching sessions. The opportunities to meet with the coach and to assess this *connection* was fundamentally important to *client executives*.

*So I think had the chance to see the coach before really had final connection. I think this is quite important in this type of arrangement … physically after seeing the person I had quite an instant feeling, on whether I liked the person, whether I wanted to work with them on things, what are they like, how did they actually work with people?* CE9

*I think the connection is really important, having been through the course with <coach> I felt very, very connected to him. I did the first 2 days with him and then he sent me up to Sydney to do the third day, just for the experience of another person. I have to say that I didn’t connect at all with them, so it was just, it’s a real style thing, and it’s a real trust
thing, if you’re going to get into a coaching relationship, there’s got to be an element of trust there … I had made up my mind pretty quickly I think. CE2

The connection felt with the coach was reported by participants as the reason for their ultimate selection of coach. While the organisation may have brokered a coaching engagement or recommended a coach for participants, the client executives assessed the relationship and confirmed the coach as someone they wanted to work with based on this sense of connection. In Sztucinski’s (2001, p. 158) phenomenological research, this was described as a “personal chemistry”. For many client executives, the feeling of connection was based on rapport established through some perceived commonality such as gender, personal qualities or identifying with the coach in some way, for example, sharing values. This was an individual process for each client executive as illustrated by the following examples:

You’ve got to have some degree of connection … I think you would begin that by having some form of commonality, for me there was an initial commonality of gender and I was quite specific about that. That’s not to say that I wouldn’t have the same degree of rapport with a male coach, but there’s just an immediate level of understanding, that you have with some of the challenges that you face as a women professionally that you get from a female coach. CE7

The initial meeting was really to see whether there was any spark or any connection, not in sense of, you know, personal relationship spark. There was because he had a sense of humour similar to mine which broke the ice, so we were able to relate to that, other than that there was nothing really intimidating about him. CE4

It starts with what I observed over a few days, and the interactions that I had with that individual. This allowed me to conclude that his values were more closely aligned to mine. CE5

In my study, the selection of a coach was therefore an emotional and intuitive process for client executives rather than a more rational process based on the coach’s level of qualification, skills or other objective selection criteria. This was summed up by one client executive as follows:

It’s a bit like me interviewing a nuclear scientist. I have no idea what it is they do, I wouldn’t know a good one from a bad one when I interviewed them. So unless there was some severe personality clash which would have been picked up after the first meeting, I think any sort of selection criteria beyond that would have been potentially dangerous, rather than anything else. CE8

A key part of the success of the selection process was the recognition by the organisation of the importance of the agency of the client executive in deciding to work with a particular coach and the importance of them feeling a connection, but also catering for very individual decision making in the selection process.
So it’s again there is a level of accountability for you making the selection as to who you actually think you can work best with. We have a panel of people that we would use, that have been be screened and selected and all that sort of thing, but it’s different personalities of people, different people want different things. CE2

I think what was important for me was that there were several coaches there but there was only one that suited me and if it wasn’t him, it was no one. So it was as simple as that. I wouldn’t have been interested in others that were there. Not because they probably, they may have been the greatest coaches but there wasn’t the connection. For me that was important ... It seems to me that coaching is not a generic skill it’s a personal skill, it’s interpersonal and so you can’t assume that “Fred has a problem, we’ll get a coach that will solve it”. It’s not like a plumber and if it got to being like a plumber it would cheapen the profession, so I think some opportunity to establish a connection is really important for me as I’ve said a couple of times, it was just pivotal to me. CE5

Participants reported that following their experience they believed in the importance of changing coaches or walking away from the relationship if there was no connection. For client executives, organisations should provide the opportunity for this to occur easily if required. Another client executive also identified that it was also important to maintain continuity in coaches, once a connection had been established.

I had I think three to choose from and it was quite open that if you meet the first time and it doesn’t work, by all means go and meet with someone else ... if you meet somebody, [and] you go, “I don’t feel comfortable in being able to talk to you”, then don’t have any issue in then going and finding someone else. I think I would have had the same process had I have met with <coach> and gone, “No this is not a right click for me”. CE7

If people are not matched, the trust is a lot harder to build up, and then if that is not building up, it will not be as effective. So it’s not just the person being coached who should be honest if the coaching relationship is not working, but if the coach feels that is not working then they should spell it out as well. I think that is one of the most important factors for the relationship. CE9

I’ve been in a mentoring situation ... and I’ve walked away from that ... And that’s a hard thing to do because sometimes when something is set up organisationally people feel obliged to continue, but it’s important to make it safe for them to walk away, if it’s not working for either party, whether you are the mentee or the mentor or the coach or the coachee ... So if I meet up with Fred and he is supposed to be my coach and I feel no connection with him, there is not a level of trust, or a level of respect, then I think the organisation has to make it OK for them to walk away from that and potentially recover somebody else. Otherwise again, I think it can be a poor investment of time and of money. CE2

If we had to change coaches halfway through, I would have been very disappointed, because you have to then start from scratch, it’s like going to the dentist that you’ve always gone to, you trust them ... So I think changing coaches would be detrimental to the relationship ... I would choose the same coach because it’s a case of it’s a very personal very intimate conversation ... in a room talking one-on-one about real issues that you have in the workplace. CE1
f) **Absolute trust (Creating a relationship of trust)**

All *client executive* participants described the trust that existed between themselves and their *executive coach* as an important characteristic of the relationship. *Client executive* participants in my study reported that trust was assumed from the outset of the coaching engagement. In the way the relationship had been framed to them, it was evident to all *client executives* that they could trust their coach, particularly to maintain confidentiality. During the coaching engagement, trust was not tested in any manner and therefore remained unquestioned by *client executives*. The existence of immediate trust in my study contrasts to notions in the business literature, such as portrayed by Maister et al. (2002), where trust is viewed as something that rarely develops instantly (it needs to grow) and must be earned and deserved. As reported by participants in my study, trust was evident from the very beginning of the relationship with their coach:

*I think it was already there, it was implied that trust, I mean he obviously came highly recommended. It wasn’t a concern for me … I just took it as that we wouldn’t have to talk about that because that was just something that was already on the table as being as a given. That was a condition on entering into the relationship. Had it have been broken it would have caused an issue, but the fact was that I didn’t have to worry about it. If you had to worry about trust it would have ... distracted from achieving the outcomes of the coaching.* CE4

The one *client executive* who did not experience a valuable relationship with the coach, still felt that the coach could be trusted. This suggests that, regardless of the nature of the relationship formed between the parties (i.e. positive or negative), the way the coaching engagement was established, framed and created had ensured the existence of trust. As reported by the *client executive* (who had a less than favourable coaching experience):

*Oh high, I mean I had absolute, absolute trust that he would hold everything confidentially and that you know, that he had my best interest at heart. Completely. I didn’t question whether I should or should not trust him ... It was there from the outset and I think it stemmed from a definition of the relationship as it was sold to us, this is personal help, and it is absolutely confidential and won’t be shared beyond the two of you.* CE11


g) **No other agenda (Valuing coach independence and professionalism)**

The independence of the *executive coach* from the organisational system was seen as an essential success factor for *client executives*. The coach was viewed positively as a neutral party, independent of organisational politics and agendas.

*So maintaining that distance from the organisation is important so they are not seen as “in the pocket” of the organisation almost, I think is right up there. It needs to be independent from the organisation.* CES
They’re chalk and cheese because of the trust issue because at the end of the day there are those people, that I wouldn’t say you can’t trust them, but they have other agendas, and outside the organisation there is no other agenda. That’s the real value of it. CE10

The external independence of the executive coach fostered a degree of openness in the coaching relationship at a greater level than was perceived as possible by client executives in relationships with others in their organisation. In my study, openness was encouraged by the careful probing and questioning of the executive coach and occurred to a degree unanticipated by most participants. The result of this opening up was also described as having a positive impact on themselves and their work. As described by participants in my study:

You’re peeling off an awful lot of layers of protection that day-to-day you don’t do, well certainly, you don’t do it in the office. You’ve got to feel confident in the person <coach> who is actually is in the position to actually recognise when you are doing that, and appreciate it and actually be able to facilitate the process and actually ask the right questions to get you to take the next layer of protection off. CE8

There was nothing that I avoided. I guess I opened up more than what I thought I would. CE4

I opened up more than what I was expecting ... and I look back now and think I’m a better manager and a better person for going through that experience ... I put that all down to I guess I was receptive in terms of opening up; it was also down to the skill of the coach in terms of asking the right questions. CE3

Kiel et al. (1996) suggest that organisational norms often call for executives to present themselves as confident and competent and as a result the corporate environment can seem inhospitable to an executive openly acknowledging development needs or limitations. Participants reflected on the relationship between trust in the coaching relationship and their ability to openly share their development needs:

I’m not sure whether I would have opened up as much. When I went to say, “I’m really quite introverted and I think I could be stronger or more confident”, I could say that to <coach>, but think about it, would I want that to be on my personnel file or something like that? ... One of the things about the coaching relationship is it is about trust ... it’s quite a private thing. I walked away sometimes feeling quite drained when I had opened up. I look at some of the different managers I’ve had over the last 12 months (and I’ve had a lot of them) and some of them would see that opening up maybe as a weakness. CE3

I think it’s that exposure of one’s vulnerability that’s always very difficult. CE5

When you’re in a classroom environment you’ll expose yourself to a degree but I think you’ll always have to hold back somewhat because you’re in a room with strangers or you’re in a room with peers. So you don’t give as much of yourself I don’t think. CE7

Opening up was viewed by client executives as an important factor in being challenged and developing through the coaching relationship:
I think it’s been trusting the person to be quite open because the more you can be open about yourself and honest and not sort of keep things, important things aside, it’s easier for the coach to understand what drives you and to be able to delve into behaviours, because a lot of the things that I was looking into, was around behaviours, more so than the mechanical aspects of my performance. CE6

While client executives opened up and shared with the coach matters relating to self, there was little (if any) mutuality in the relationship as reported by participants in my study. Client executives experienced a one-sided relationship with their coach, where the coach shared very little, if any, information about him or herself. Alternatively in my study, executive coaches were seen by participants to maintain an appropriate, professional distance with client executives during their experience of coaching.

It was very one-sided from my perspective … It’s not like other relationships where there is a mutuality around it. You don’t need that in a coach. It’s one-way … For him to succeed he doesn’t have to have a relationship with me. So a relationship is a funny word to use in this context … This wasn’t a matey relationship. It wasn’t like that. It was a coach and so this is not about being mates, it’s not about being equal and sharing each other’s world and <coach> asking, “So how’s your sex life going, these days, what’s happening?” It wasn’t a relationship in that sense where he shared personal stuff. It wasn’t like that, it was a coaching session … I know nothing about him, we didn’t talk about him at all. There was no sharing. So the theory of coaching that I learnt was if you’re the coach you keep your world small. The coachee has a big world and the coach has to get into the world of the coachee and deliberately keep their world small. Now I’m not sure, different people say, “The way you coach is by getting a mutual relationship and sharing” and I think that’s crap … I know nothing about him. CE5

I actually don’t know a huge amount about her <coach>. I know what her background is and what she’s done from a professional sense. I’ve got a sense of who she is, but I don’t know what she does for kicks and giggles … whereas that’s probably the reverse for her, she would probably say she had a fairly good knowledge of me and where I spend my time and what I do for fun. So yes, she’s had to bring some of herself to the table in order to build that rapport and sort of go, “Well this is who I am”, and I guess it’s about her being who she is and me being who I am … I can also see why <coach> would want to keep some degree of distance. You give away too much of yourself and you almost become exposed and so I can see why you would want to retain distance. You know, it’s about the coachee coming in and sharing as opposed to the other way around. CE7

For the one client executive who did not have a positive experience of coaching, the executive coach did not maintain the same distance and boundaries.

I think one of the interesting thing that happened early on in our relationship is that <coach> started telling me little bits about his family and things. He used to ask me questions about mine, but I think I didn’t really reciprocate. So it was interesting in that I felt that he was the consultant that was being paid by <organisation>, this is all about me, it’s not really about him … So he was on a second marriage, second lot of children, was very much focused on his other life, so I think he had probably moved from a space before where he had lived to work and now he was working to live. So, I certainly got that sense of work–life balance that he had actually achieved that and he didn’t actually say it out loud but the implication was that “perhaps you should too”. CE11
Client executives also experienced an interaction with their coach that maintained professional boundaries and was limited to coaching sessions. This is in contrast to the literature in which coaches have reported interacting socially with their clients, for example, having dinner or playing golf (Berman & Bradt, 2006). This distance was valued by client executives in my study as it represented the professional and purposeful nature of coaching with their executive coach.

*My relationship with my coach, I don’t, it’s pretty much confined to the time that I go and see him, so I’m not somebody that would ring him up every minute of the day or if I’m confronted with something, “Oh my god, I’d better ring <coach>” ... I tend to keep the relationship within that formal bounds, I also appreciate that he has other clients as well, so I get an hour of his time at that time, then I have things to go away and do, if I need support then I feel like I can ring him ... it’s not overly friendly or we don’t just meet for a coffee, it’s not that at all, it’s we meet for a purpose and the purpose is that we have discussion and commitments and then I go away and do what I need to do and then come back and report back and we move along on that journey. So it is quite a structured and a formal relationship, I would say.* CE2

*So the contact was not, it was limited to the context of the session which is completely different to other relationships where you see people at dinner or you see people at work, you talk to them on the phone. So it was only face-to-face contact, it wasn’t, there was no email contact, there was no phone contact, there was no exchanging of information. So that was much different ... I thought it was good.* CE4

h) **Someone to talk to (Engaging in confidential conversations)**

The confidentiality of the conversations with the coach was a key success factor for coaching as reported by client executives. In other coaching research, coaches as individuals who kept confidences was also highly valued (Augustijnen et al., 2011; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007; Sztucinski, 2001). In my study, the safety of the coaching environment was particularly valuable for discussing topics of a sensitive nature or when client executives perceived that absolute confidentiality was necessary.

*Oh look, it’s great to be able to actually just lay it all out on the table without sort of having to think of any repercussions or that someone’s going to go and tell someone else.* CE6

*CE10: When I was dealing a lot [with] the people change issues, I needed to talk to someone about that, about specific examples and test my thinking and approaches and get feedback, those were the really concrete examples.* JAT: *What would have happened if you’d had that conversation with someone in the organisation, what would have been different about that?* CE10: *It sounds terrible but within 3 minutes people would be talking about the conversations, and that probably says a little bit about the organisation but equally professional services businesses seem to be like that.*
One client executive illustrated the difficulty of having confidential conversations within the political context of organisations, particularly at senior levels. Another participant described the problems associated with working with an internal coach in terms of confidentiality.

And probably it’s just the fact that you’ve got somebody to talk to ... the more senior you become the more political the environment becomes so you’ve got to be quite careful about choosing your confidants, very, very carefully and then even when your confidants are perhaps peers who are also having the same experience, there’s not a lot they can do about it. CE7

I had an internal person who ... is a qualified coach ... and we had a few <coaching> conversations, but by god, I was very closed up. Because I go, “You know I trust you, you’re a great girl, and you’re taking notes”. Apparently it’s all locked away, but at the end of the day though you work for the organisation ... I actually asked her, “So what stops you from this human trait that we all have, we all sort of mouth off and stuff?” As much as we’d like to think that we don’t, it’s work in reality, and she said, “Oh look I don’t do that, I treat this as confidential”. Whilst I don’t doubt that outwardly that is what she believed, the fact that she would then have conversations with me about other people in the business made me go “mmmm” ... that’s where I believe that having coaches that are external to the organisation can be really valuable. I think a circumstance where you have a coach reporting back to an organisation without the coachee’s knowledge would be disastrous. CE7

Confidentiality in coaching conversations was important for the learning process, enabling client executives through a process of dialogue to be able to explore their thoughts and to work through issues they faced.

It let me explore my thinking with someone that I wouldn’t have been able to do inside the business, so that let me try things and talk about stuff that I couldn’t have done otherwise. I think that helped me deal with issues much better than I would have had otherwise. CE10

Confidentiality also allowed client executives to talk through issues and challenges they were experiencing with others in their organisation, enabling coaching to provide a space for learning about people and interactions without negatively affecting these relationships.

Absolutely completely important, not because you want to bitch about the organisation but you will talk about challenges that you’ve got with your own boss and your peers that you really don’t want to get back because that will impact how people think about you. So without that I think it would be much less effective. I probably wouldn’t do it. CE10

But sometimes a really close relationship might harm the work relationship in some other way. I’ve seen that happen before ... certain people might be much more comfortable to say things outside the environment rather than inside the environment. CE9
i)  **Away from the day-to-day (Being reflective)**

The environment in which coaching occurred was one of the key success factors for client executives. Coaching provided client executives with space from their daily activities in the workplace and also a physical distance from their organisation. Separation from both work and workplace provided a suitable environment for the coaching sessions and associated learning to occur. One client executive suggested that the only time he was able to experience this type of distance in his daily work-life was when he was travelling on an aeroplane. The distance of the coaching environment was described by participants:

> I enjoyed the fact that I was outside of work, it was basically a two-hour window where I just left work, jumped in a taxi for half an hour, an hour in there, and half an hour back. It gave me a chance to clear my head, so I thought it was important that the coaching took place outside the work environment ... It was good to get away from the environment that you were in, a bit of anonymity, just one of a million people in the city that day and just going to an office and no one knew who you were ... You actually sit down and pause and reflect ... maybe that's part of the cab ride ... the break from this environment was creating an environment where you can actually achieve that. I mean sitting and pausing and reflecting is good, but you've got to actually create the environment to be able to do that ... CE4

With the expectations from the business in terms of the work that needs to be done, the only time I find that I have the ability to reflect during the day is on aeroplane flights and I don’t do enough of those in any week to sit down and think about the next meeting and think about the outcomes of the previous day ... You’re just going a hundred miles an hour at work ... it’s only at night when you’re lying in bed and you’re thinking about your day and you think, “I probably could have done that differently, or that was a good thing, now I understand why I did it”. You’re actually removing yourself in the normal hours of the day, you’re taking yourself away from work and you’re doing that during the day and you’re doing that with someone who’s assisting you to reflect on the work that you’re doing. So it’s hugely valuable, it’s like having a bean bag in the corner of your room and sort of going there and meditating for an hour and thinking about the work that you’re doing and there’s actually a lot of value in it. In an organisation such as this where we’ve taken so many people out and we’re each doing so many different roles, you just don’t get the time ... It would be good if your organisation was developed to a point where you could just switch off and you could then reflect and think about your decision making. I think it would solve a lot of problems in most organisations where people are so heavily overworked. CE1

Client executives valued the opportunity in coaching to step back from activities and to have time to think and reflect. Boud et al. (1985) argued that for reflection to occur, people have to draw back from being totally immersed in an experience in order to digest what is happening. Boyatzis (2002) argued that a major problem with self-directed change and learning is that people are already busy and can’t add anything else to their lives. In such cases, he argued, the only way learning can happen as if people can determine what to say “no” to and stop some current activities in their lives to make room for new activities. In my study, coaching provided a mechanism for stopping the day-to-day busy work to enable learning to occur. The coaching
experience was significant for providing both an opportunity and the discipline for client executives to “pause and reflect” (CE4, CE5). In contrast to the coaching space, the majority of client executives described the habitual action and the busy nature of their work lives. Some client executives described time taken to think as a “luxury” (CE8, CE11) as opposed to a normal part of their everyday routine. As reported by participants:

You can always find an excuse that you’re very, very busy to do something like that, which is why I think the coaching can be effective because it forces you to stop and think and unless you pull up yourself and stop and think it doesn’t happen ... I just think it’s human nature that unless you force yourself to do it, you just get on. CE10

It’s that breaking the inertia you just get onto automatic pilot and you do what you do, you get into habits and you do what you do, and you get pushed to do the things that are in the inbox and you do the things that are there, rather than the things that are important or need to be done and so the opportunity to pause and reflect and focus on things that are important give them a little bit of time and I think that’s probably the major benefit that I’ve got out of it. CE5

At certain points I think you need to, just to that pause and reflect. You don’t necessarily always take the time to pause and reflect because you’re just busy for lots of reasons especially when you’re young and you’re looking for different things for money and for that, you’ve got a young family you’ve got lots of different pressures on you, it’s only when you start to maybe get a bit older and maybe get a bit of time where you suddenly, well you’re not, people aren’t relying on you, because your family has grown up or whatever, but it’s I think it’s about to take that time, and if nothing else coaching was just the fact that you had a two-hour break where the focus was on you, nothing else. CE4

But again it’s actually allowing that structured time to step back, the luxury of stepping back and looking at what you’re doing rather than actually being buried in it half the time. CE8

Coaching as space to think for client executives is graphically represented in Figure 4.1. This is a word cloud (http://www.wordle.net) created from the combined client executives’ transcripts. The larger words represent the terms/ideas more frequently used by client executives at interview.
4.4.3. **THE PROCESS OF EXECUTIVE COACHING**

THEME THREE: The process of executive coaching for *client executives* involves confidential, client-focused conversations with an *executive coach* who facilitates engagement in self-awareness, reflection and learning from experience.

*Client executives* described their coach as portraying what can be described as a client- or person-centred approach to coaching (following Carl Rogers, 1961). In this way, *client executives* felt that their coach viewed them as highly important and gave them focus and priority in sessions. *Client executives* described the executive coaching process as characterised by client-focused conversations, with the coach facilitating the learning process for *client executives*, importantly enabling them to reflect and providing the opportunity to learn from experience. Participants also valued the opportunity to have their thinking challenged by another (the *executive coach*).
j) ** Entirely focused on me (Receiving full attention) **

Client executives described their coach as someone who gave them undivided attention and who demonstrated genuine interest in their growth and development. The nature of the one-on-one interaction between coach and executive client was a significant enabling factor in client executives feeling the full attention of their coach.

I think it’s better one-on-one, because I never thought that his recollection of where we’d been in earlier sessions had been lost or we’d have to spend the first half hour recounting. So his ability to remember content and what we achieved and what we discussed was good ... I didn’t feel like I was just a patient in a doctor’s surgery, where they get out your medical records and say, “Oh right, you were here last time about this, that’s what we’re talking about”. CE4

Yes, look, again I think it’s just the opportunity to have one-on-one support, it’s about being able to sit down with someone, they’re focused entirely on you, they’re focused on exactly what the issues that are important to you ... I don’t know how many people that he coaches but he never gets you confused with anybody else, you feel like he sort of knows who you are and knows why you’re there. As I said ... you have that strong relationship ... I find my coach highly accessible, keeps his appointments, very committed, comes in well prepared. You feel like when you walk into the room that he’s ready and waiting for you, whereas when I walk into meetings I always feel like I’ve run from one place to another. I get a sense, maybe it’s just his demeanour, that he comes in focused on you. I feel like I get his undivided attention and that you’re kind of, the most important thing on his agenda, for that hour that you are there. CE2

No, although I must say he was very organised, he always had copies of stuff that he’d discussed with me before and he was able to sit down and have perfect recall of our previous conversation. He wasn’t taping it so he obviously came prepared. Well it’s a demonstration of interest. I think if he didn’t demonstrate interest then we probably wouldn’t have gone very well at all. I think he was genuinely interested so he was able to impart that. CE1

When you talk to a coach you’re talking to the one person about what’s top of mind for you and it’s the biggest issue that you’re talking about in that room and it’s treated as the biggest issue. So it’s a huge difference, I could ring up HR and talk to them about some of the issues I have but they’ve got a thousand people that they’re concerned about and they’re trying to recruit roles and do all these other things, you’re not really going to be top of mind. CE1

k) ** Being treated as an individual (Having a tailored experience) **

Client executives also reported that their coach adapted the coaching experience to suit their particular style, needs and requirements. For participants, coaching was not a “one-size-fits-all” approach. This included aspects such as coaches modifying their approach to suit the individual client executive’s needs and demonstrating flexibility.

I’m assuming from his own experience and his own skill he [coach] was very intuitive. He could size up things pretty quickly and could provide advice in a way that was useful for me. So those are the things that made it work. It didn’t feel artificial, it felt very natural and I took that to be part of his skill plus knowing the sort of person that he was dealing
with and knowing the sort of person he was, that was the style he used for the interaction. I’m not convinced he would use the same style for everyone and I’ve got no reason for that, I just got the impression that he can move to whatever style he needed to ... The ability to, it’s sort of like consulting, treat you as the customer or the client and tailor what they’re doing to you, not a cookie cutter. So I didn’t feel any time that he was doing something because it’s now the third session therefore we have to do this ... If you’re coaching senior executives you’ve got to treat them as individuals, they’re not all the same. CE10

The flexibility of the coach was particularly important for one client executive in responding to their evolving goals for the coaching experience.

I think a reasonable understanding of what the objective is but not to be hell-bent on getting that objective because I think that there are sometimes things come out that aren’t on the radar that necessarily are probably more important than the original objective. So I think to be able to still to develop the person they’re coaching but not necessarily feel that they have to rigidly stick to the original objective, because I don’t think that helps so, to be reasonably flexible, to be flexible with time and not treat it as you know, it’s not a program, it’s a coaching thing. CE4

1) **Coach facilitating the conversation (Being facilitated - to dialogue)**

Client executives described the coach as actively facilitating the learning process. Similarly, in Olsen’s (2005) PhD study the coach was viewed as a facilitator or sounding board rather than a problem solver. Witherspoon and White (1996, p. 125) suggested that the role of the coach is to facilitate (literally “make easy”) for those individuals who are at the top of their field, more than to instruct. As described by client executives,

It’s a luxury to have that with somebody who can effectively facilitate the conversation with yourself, rather than actually telling you what the answer is. It’s a facilitated conversation with yourself. CE8

I felt like my coach was guiding me along the journey and it wasn’t telling me which way to go but just asking me questions and you know, I always come out of those sessions going “oh I didn’t know that” or feeling quite good about myself because I thought of a different way of doing things. CE3

Client executives described a broad range of dialogical practices used by their coach to facilitate coaching sessions. The aspects of communication emphasised between client executives varied somewhat, but overall pointed to the coach as a highly skilled facilitator who utilised methods of inquiry and questioning:

It’s the dialogue and it’s a coach’s capacity through their own psychological awareness to be able to ask the right questions to probe... it’s about sitting back and saying, “So how did you find that, what was the outcome that you achieved?” and letting them do a lot of the talking ... It’s kind of, you’ve got to be prepared to sit back and do that, that listening and that’s exactly what my coach did. So the dialogue and the probing and even
just having the questions, “Do you consider that there may be another way? You’ve interpreted it this way, but perhaps there’s another alternative here?” CE7

For some client executives, their coach’s combination of communicative ability and relationship building skills equipped the coach to tease out information and ideas from them. This is akin to Fisher’s (1981) description of client-centred listening (following Carl Rogers’ 1961 notion of client-centred therapy), whereby listening is viewed as more than method or technique but as part of the essential climate of the relationship. As suggested by participants in my study:

I think that just being comfortable with him and then you know, it wasn’t like a dump of everything that’s going on in your head. The coach had his own process which was to coax out bits of information. We did one exercise where he said, “Look, draw a circle with you in the middle and look at who are your closest contacts. Who are your friends and who influences you?” We did a few exercises like that. Some of the stuff I’d already done but he put it into a context. So I think it was more than his method, he got you comfortable and then almost you almost involuntarily gave up the information without really thinking about it. CE4

Oh I think it starts with a connection, trust, skill of the coach to draw me out, so a combination of all of the above. You don’t have a connection if you don’t trust and if the coach is not skilled if there is an absence of any one of those. There were probably techniques he used that I wasn’t even aware of. I’m sure there were. CE5

So it wasn’t a sort of, “I’m going to teach you what the right answer is”, it was just to say what do I know, there is no right answer its more about the process than it is about the intellectual structure but it is also about her ability to actually get people to relax and actually draw out the analogies and see where the nuggets are that she could work on and which ones she’ll have to leave until a bit later in the process to work on. CE8

So it just bought some clarity and got my thoughts in order. It wasn’t because the coach had any particular technical expertise, it clearly didn’t, but it was the ability to tease and get into my head a bit and force it out of me almost, which was worthwhile and the normal routines of life that you get caught up in, the inertia and the routines means we don’t pause, reflect and think about it enough. CE5

Client executives described aspects of listening that reflected the attitude and listening orientation of their coach. Following Fisher (1981), elements of this listening orientation as described by client executives in my study included acceptance and empathy. Client executives described the powerful questioning from their coach that reflected their coach’s level of acceptance and their non-judgemental attitude. As described,

I think that the difference is the external coach has been trained to ask appropriate questions versus trying to judge, the temptation to judge from an internal, would be too great. And I know I’d be just telling them, “Do this, do that”, if it was me, but, I think that’s the big difference is that there is actually a real technique about the whole coaching process and it’s quite a defined technique too. I’m sure that there is a temptation to jump in and give your own two bob’s worth, but it’s that constant probing and sometimes you can have some thoughts of the coach but it’s not judgemental, he is

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just saying these are what organisations are doing these days, and this is how organisations work, so it’s very generic not specific. That’s where I think the coach has that expertise and experience. CE6

The coach is somebody that you can actually say stupid things and not feel that you’re going to get shot down about. CE8

There was always a feeling of trust and that that was a big thing. To be able to just throw anything out there and not be judged, there was no judgements going on per se. There was some judgement, depending on what you were saying, but it was more around the questioning. So it’s constantly a coaching method that is using a lot of questions rather than personal opinions and so the discomfort is also trying to figure it as you get the questions to you, to be able to then sort through that yourself and reasonably quickly come back with an answer that makes sense. So yes, so they were the sorts of feelings I had. CE6

Similarly, empathy and listening were described by both coaches and clients as critical within internal coaching relationships in a phenomenological study undertaken by Machin (2010). In my research, client executives also described their coach’s empathy and demonstration of empathetic listening:

He worked with me as a person by truly understanding the pressures I was under, the demands he was placing on me, he outlined those demands in their fullest and his expectations of me, upfront. CE12

I think she would make a great interviewer for an investigation on the basis [of] the ability to actually empathise, the ability to see inconsistencies in what people are saying, see gaps in what they are saying. CE8

So yes it is either an ability to use your, whatever framework you’ve got, very well, or to have a fairly really good understanding of it. But that would account for naught if you didn’t have the ability to empathise with people and get them to talk to you. CE8

Yes, I mean she’s a very empathetic individual and listens well, she laid it on the table that “I don’t report back” so there was some ground rules, I’m going “Well, I have no reason to distrust you, on that point”. CE8

Client executives described their coach’s facilitative ability to get them talking in coaching sessions and the coach’s use of techniques such as reflecting back. Fisher (1981) described this technique as the way a helper can put the elements of listening orientation into practice, which involves the listener trying to clarify and reflect back what the other person is saying. Knights (1985) argued that in interactions between people, talking is common, but good listening is far harder to obtain. In my study, client executives reported the coach’s emphasis on listening (as opposed to talking) and reflecting back (with empathy):

The function of, it’s actually the same skills that I use for interviewing. Well it’s about listening. It’s about repetition, it’s about clarification and you know, “I might have misread this, or am I understanding that correctly?” But it’s also then about providing some insight that says, “Yes, I know where you’re going with this” or “You’re not alone in this”. That’s the empathising. Yes, so there’s all that and listening skills. There needs to
be open-ended questions, repetition of what’s going on, eye contact, all of those things that allow somebody to, encourage somebody to talk. CE8

So that’s good, but it’s pretty relaxed and I talk a lot. So he lets me do that too, which is good. CE2

Really it was me doing the talking 75% of the time. So I thought it was great. CE1

It’s essential that you have a person <coach> who knows how to talk to people and knows how to get them to talk … all of those things that encourage somebody to talk. It works well in an Anglo-Saxon environment because we don’t like silence, so we’ll actually start talking. Doesn’t always work in other cultures. CE8

m) **Constantly challenged (Facing learning challenges)**

Coaching as a space for *client executives* to be challenged was valued by them as an important part of the development and learning process. Participants valued the independence of the coach also in this way, for enabling *executive coaches* to challenge and question the *client executive* from a place of objectivity and distance from the organisation. In a similar way, Greenwood and Levin (2007) described the researcher in action research as a coach, a “friendly outsider” whose external perspective is invaluable in reflecting back and providing critique to others in a supportive way. Participants in my study described the value of being challenged by an external party (their coach):

*Because the coach doesn’t really know the players, or may not know the players that well, they can be more independent and maybe even keep challenging you. “Are you sure you are right about this? Or have you thought that?”*, maybe about coming at different angles, *because they are not as close to issues that I’m trying to work through it myself, I may miss what’s going on. I think that’s why having that external person that can step back, look at the facts, remove some of the emotion, and maybe just really probe away. I think that’s quite valuable*. CE6

Fisher (1981) suggested that the helper (such as the coach) who challenges the other person is more likely to be experienced as empathic and accepting. In the experience of *client executives* in my study, challenge was perceived positively in the context of the relationship and was also seen as developing the relationship between themselves and their coach. As described,

*So don’t think that it’s all going to be lovey-dovey and all that. In fact, at first it was, and that’s fair enough for the first session we were just, sort of, getting to know each other. Then 3 or 4 sessions down that’s when you start getting pushed a little bit and we did, we went outside my comfort zone. It’s that uncomfortable feeling but in a positive way because you know you are heading somewhere to towards improving yourself or your relationships within the corporate environment. So it was, discomfort, definitely. But not unexpected … I’d gone in with the expectation, this is not just a social chat, that I’m going to be challenged, and I expected to be challenged … So by being constantly challenged, a bit of delving, making me uncomfortable, I actually think that actually helps with trust because they’re taking you places where you may not be normally talking about and then yes, then you come out of that get an understanding and be guided through that process*. CE6

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It was challenging because I trusted the coach and therefore I was prepared to be open with the coach, probably more open with the coach than I would have been with a superior. So that exposed me probably. So I felt exposed and felt challenged as a result of it. CE5

So someone who is pretty hard, there’s got to be a sort of toughness in there to really force people, not force, but really push people, the whole thing about challenging people. There’s got to be a bit of steel in there in the person. But still have the capability of establishing some level of rapport. CE6

Learning from real situations (Learning in context)

Client executives reported the situated nature of the learning undertaken in their coaching experience. The focus of the coaching was always real situations and therefore relevant to them in the contexts of their work and lives. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that learning should not be viewed as simply the transmission or discovery of abstract and decontextualised knowledge from one individual to another, but a social practice whereby knowledge is co-constructed; suggesting that such learning is situated in a specific context and embedded within a particular social and physical environment. As described by client executive participants,

Me, the starting point was always me. It was always a work situation that was relevant to me, that was coming up, that was in my head at the time. It may have been a strategy I was working up or a presentation I was working on, or a problem I had, or an issue that I had, or an interpersonal issue, whatever was hot at the time. I typically didn’t spend a lot of time beforehand on preparing the subject, there was always a smorgasbord of things on my plate to choose from so it was just a matter of picking one and running with it, one that was more troublesome than the others and that I was chewing over at the time. My advice would be to make it real, don’t make it technical, don’t make it theoretical, so use a real situation, it’s got to be real it’s got to be, live it’s got to be relevant. CE5

It was real. It was specifically related to what I was doing going through my own personal style all that stuff, it was brought to real life. Whereas if you’re in a training course it’s rarely that good, no matter how small the group is. You may take one thing away from maybe two or three courses. That’s about all there is. So I think of all the courses and coaching or whatever that have been done around communication skills or media training there’s probably one or two things that I remember out of doing years of that stuff. I would have got more than that out of the coaching program over a shorter period of time that stuck so because it was tailored, that it related to me, it was very effective, more so [than] a training course delivered by someone because they’re delivering that part of the curriculum. CE10

Learning from action, follow-up and structured reflection (Learning through experience)

Client executives described repeated cycles of experience, reflection and action as part of the learning undertaken in the coaching process. Importantly, participants also detailed how the coaching process and the follow-up with the coach encouraged them to be personally accountable for actions and their development between coaching sessions.
I think the thing with the coaching is that follow-up. So you work through things, you come up with an action plan and – I don’t like to call it homework but it’s sort of like homework – and if you walk out of there and you get bombarded with your normal job it’s still knowing that I’ve got some actions here that I need to somehow integrate into what I’m doing, and then within a few weeks you know that you are going to be back and talking to your coach, so you want to be able to come back with either positive or negative sort of responses on what did happen. So I think that’s where it’s quite different because you know that it’s an ongoing concept, “Well how did you go? What did this circumstance come up and this person? How did you come back to them?” So that was one of things that stood out that ongoing and refining and so on, refining your actions and approach. CE6

In the conversations that I was having, it was very much the case, “You’ve got to put some work in here”. So we’d be sitting there having a conversation and my coach would be doing certain things, you know, she might have been drawing a diagram that was helping her to explain some things and then she would be, “I want you to actually write this down”. There were times when she got quite instructive about, “This is what I want you to go away and do”. Always the conversations always ended, “So what are the things that you take away from today, and what are you going to do when you leave here, what’s the action that you’re going to do, from here?” Then when we would meet again a follow-up in terms of, “So how did that go, what were some of the challenges that you had?” So I think the value in that is, is that it is a constant dialogue about your behaviour and that correlates to performance. CE7

Client executives also described how, in putting actions into practice between sessions, they gained the value of experimentation and practice (and confidence gained from success).

To try different things like that, to try different interactive styles with people, that would be the one thing that really stuck. And recognising that you get good results out of it, so it becomes reinforcing then. If you try it usually does something well, therefore you do it again and you just get better at it. CE10

Participants described the opportunity that coaching sessions provided for them to undertake a process of reflection-on-action (following Schön, 1983). In this way, coaches had prompted client executives to reflect on experiences after they had occurred and had helped participants to analyse their reaction to situations. Client executives reflected on past experiences through the dialogical encounter with their coach:

I know where I’m trying to go. I feel a real benefit to be able to go back after you’ve set a plan and you’ve executed a plan, to be able to go back and report on the plan and have a really positive, I mean that’s a nice sharing experience too, so I find that great. Sometimes it doesn’t go well and you have to go and revisit that, but that’s OK too, but I just feel like, I found it enormously beneficial, so it doesn’t make me feel uncomfortable it makes me feel committed to doing it and then I have some personal accountability for my own development …You go back and the coach says, “Well OK, we talked about this and we talked about this and we talked about this, how did this go, that go or the other thing go?” CE2
Client executives provided examples that suggested that coaching also enabled them to develop the capability to reflect in action (following Schön, 1983). Participants described that they had learned from the coaching experience to reflect on the situation during the experience and take action based on this reflection. This type of reflection was akin to client executives “thinking on their feet”. As described, this client executive discovered that the coaching experience had provided the ability to reflect “in the moment”:

The second is that individuals don’t often pause to reflect and consider how they do what they do. So the opportunity to pause and reflect seems trivial and yet it had the most powerful impact on me, so, because you get caught up in the day-to-day. You get home and you get caught up in the day-to-day, you don’t actually pause and consider how you might be more effective, and so that was the most single most powerful thing, more so than there was some specific techniques that we covered in particular sessions that some of them I still use today, that I found powerful, but it was less about that. It was less about the specific techniques and it was about, for me, than about: “You have a situation, pause, reflect what’s the outcome you’re looking for and think about it a little bit more”. So if there was one pivotal outcome for me it was that. CE5

Apart from valuing the environment and time for reflection during coaching, participants valued the reflective dialogues with their coach. This process enabled them to bring thoughts and experiences to a conscious level. As suggested by Knights (1985), reflection is often most profound when done aloud with the aware attention of another person. The coach provided a structure for reflection and facilitated a dialogue that was contrasted by client executives with reflection they might undertake on their own. Participants suggested that their own reflection would typically focus on an assessment of outcomes (had they been successful or not), but a more powerful reflective process occurred with their coach, channelling them to also reflect on themselves and their behaviour and actions. In this way, client executives reported that their coach was focusing them to reflect on both content and process (following Mezirow, 1990) and for them, most importantly, their own processes.

I think the coaching piece was a bit more structured ... when you’re probably sitting there on your own you think more about the end game sometimes than you do about the journey that you’ve been on and you know, I would think, “Oh was that a good outcome, or was that not a good outcome?” so it’s probably just a more structured reflection than it might be if you just think about, “Was I happy with that, or was I not?” I mean we all reflect, I’ll ring up you know, a friend of mine, might have shared something and say “That went well” or “That didn’t go well”, but I think it is a more structured reflection. CE2

In day-to-day working life you don’t have a chance to do that unless you’re very disciplined and set aside time where you reflect on it yourself, so it provided that intervention that allowed you time in a way that was semi-structured to, as I said, reflect on what you’re doing, and what you’re about to do, how you’d go about doing it. So that was very important and some of that stuff still sits with me so it must have been pretty important. CE10
In describing the reflective process with their coach, *client executives* also provided examples of “critical reflection” (following Mezirow, 1990) and processes of perspective transformation. For one *client executive*, this involved gaining a different perspective on a situation, prompted by the coach. Another participant described the coaching process as akin to a sabbatical or similar experience, providing the opportunity for *client executives* to gain a different perspective on themselves and their lives.

The coach is able to frame it or even if you present an issue on the table as an individual you can try and look at it from all angles but generally you tend to focus on a particular area. The coach will prompt you to position yourself in a different way, so they might say, “What if you had done this?”, “What if you had done that?”, “What if you had looked at it from this point of view?” So it does force you to do that. You are not likely to prompt yourself to look at it from every angle so that reflection component I think is more powerful in that setting. CE1

It was interesting there was an article in The Australian on Friday about a tax partner, who used to be at <organisation> and who is now at <another organisation>, who blames it all on going to Mt. Kilimanjaro, because he had time to stop and think about life. People had been approaching him with job offers and he’s sitting on top of the mountain saying, “Yeah maybe I can do something different”. It was actually that time away that allowed him the ability to get some clarity in his thinking, but also some perspective on life. To some extent the coaching process allows you that, it allows you to get perspective on what you’re doing, perspective on what you’re likely to be able to change, what you’re not likely to be able to change. CE8

**4.4.4. THE EFFECTS/OUTCOMES OF EXECUTIVE COACHING**

**THEME FOUR:** The effects/outcomes of executive coaching for *client executives* includes the development of individual capability and potential by fostering self-awareness, confidence and the capacity for ongoing self-development.

Eleven of the twelve *client executives* stated that coaching was a valuable experience that resulted in positive outcomes. The one *client executive* who did not have a positive experience in coaching expressed not having obtained any resultant benefit from the coaching. This *client executive* described having already constructed a plan for dealing with the particular issues she faced. The coaching experience had not added any additional value to this plan as described by this participant:

I’ve got to say during that time, I changed my role, but I’d already done a lot of planning for my new role anyway ... it was just more questions which helped me add to the information that I’d listed down, but would it have made a lot of difference? I don’t think so ... I didn’t really get the value and the sorts of things we were working through were a one-person job. ... Mind you, just having somebody there means you would probably put more effort and time into that particular thing, but I don’t think the outcomes would have been that much different. CE11
This section reports on the influence of coaching for the remaining eleven *client executives* who had positive experiences. Participants reported a range of areas of influence or impact from their coaching experience. As the coaching experienced by *client executives* was focused on their individual needs for development, the resultant influence of coaching was also a highly individualised and personal experience. As the coaching experience was both individual and tailored for each *client executive*, it is hardly surprising that the diversity in the goals and development focus for coaching were followed with reports of a diverse range of individual outcomes arising from the coaching. This was summed up by one participant as follows:

> So I see it as a very personal experience and I don’t think it can be formulaic or mechanistic. That’s why I say to people going into it [coaching], don’t think that you’re going to come out of it with self-awareness, it might not resonate for some individuals, it might be something completely different. It might be conversation style, it might be personal presentation, who knows what it might be. There might be all sorts of things that emerge. CES

During the analysis of reported outcomes of coaching for the eleven *client executives*, nine outcome themes emerged. These themes were: (1) self-awareness, self-efficacy and self-development, (2) learning and thinking, (3) managing others (including being a better coach), (4) political and organisational savvy, (5) organisation impact, (6) functional aspects of management, (7) communication, (8) career, and (9) other relationships. Details and the resultant coding summary from NVivo are presented in Table 4.5.

The inclusion of totals in Table 4.5 for “references” (the number of times an item was raised by participants) and “sources” (the number of research materials such as interview transcripts that contained that item) reflects the strengths of these messages. It is not intended to portray that an empirico-analytical data analysis approach was undertaken for reported coaching outcomes. As described in Chapter Two, I conducted my research using the interpretive paradigm. The structure presented in Table 4.5 represents one interpretation of the data which emerged during the ongoing and circular process of data analysis between reading data and identifying emerging themes. Regarding the data presentation in Table 4.5, it should also be noted that many researchers would argue that it is also not appropriate in interpretive research to assume that simple frequency is equivalent to importance (Bazeley, 2007), suggesting further that caution should be used when interpreting the numerical columns of Table 4.5. The areas of influence in Table 4.5 and the presentation in themes provide an overview of the diversity and highly individual nature of the reported outcomes of coaching.
Table 4.5 *Client executives’* perspectives on the influence of executive coaching – coding summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Areas of Influence</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness, self-efficacy and self-development</td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Self-confidence and self-efficacy</td>
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<td>Work life balance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Manage stress, health and relaxation</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership identity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Concrete feedback</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Behaviour</td>
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<td>Prioritise self-development</td>
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<td>Authenticity</td>
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<td>Managing others</td>
<td>Better coach</td>
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<td>Situational leadership - adapting or tailoring to individual</td>
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<td>People leadership</td>
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<td>Support for senior women</td>
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<td>Managing up</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Speak up to superiors</td>
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<td>Presentation</td>
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<td>Career</td>
<td>Retention</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Career focus</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Other relationships</td>
<td>Improved relationships (work)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
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Eleven of the twelve client executives reported that coaching had the greatest impact in three areas: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-confidence and self-efficacy, and (3) self-questioning tools and the ability to coach self (and others). The most interesting feature of the reported outcomes of coaching for the participants in my study is that the reported outcomes are both an integral part of the process of coaching and the product of the experience. The process of executive coaching for client executives fostered self-awareness and confidence and importantly transferred to the client executives the capability for ongoing self-questioning, reflection and learning from experience. Client executives reported the combined nature of process and outcomes in coaching. This was summed up by one client executive:

It’s probably in one phrase, self-awareness … not just as an outcome but also as a process, the ability to stop and reflect and think about it and not going to a blind tail spin about it, like, “Oh my god where the hell is this going?” It’s, “Hold on, let’s just think this one through, what are you good at?, where are you confident?” Yes, so it’s not just the output it’s actually the process. CE8

p) Helping me to see myself (Developing self-awareness)

All client executives who had a positive experience of coaching reported that coaching had the greatest influence on their level of self-awareness. In particular, coaching assisted client executives to develop a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, how they were perceived by others and also their individual self-perception and identity. Similarly, Sztucinski’s (2001) research with seven executives also highlighted enhanced self-awareness and self-esteem as important aspects of achievement in the coaching process. As reported by client executives in my study:

Because ultimately, executive coaching is not about improving your financial management, it’s not about improving your cost control or your process efficiency, it’s not about building business cases or making good fiscal decisions, it’s none of that stuff. It is about, who are you? CE7

I came out of it with a much better realisation of my strengths and weaknesses … so I thought it was great. CE1

The journey that that took me on was terrific because it helped me to, I guess, realise that the work-piece is great, but how much do I let it define who I am as an individual and how much of that is a direct reflection of who I am and how I interact with the world? … I’d probably not had a conversation like that before. I don’t say that I’ve particularly mastered that but I’m certainly much more aware of it than I used to be. CE7

The development of awareness around strengths in coaching was particularly impactful for client executives. Linley and Harrington (2006) argued that a focus on strengths in coaching can be very powerful because organisationally, employees are continually encouraged to focus on their weaknesses, which is also often reinforced by HR systems such as performance appraisal
and pay and reward. In my study, coaching focused on the development of an understanding of each individual *client executive’s* strengths, and this awareness manifested in ways that were unique to each individual. For example, an understanding of strengths informed one *client executive’s* choices around career and role and another *client executive’s* area of focus when commencing a new role. This is consistent with the findings of a phenomenological study undertaken by Clifford (2011) where exploring strengths in coaching acted as a catalyst for clients to question and make new meaning about how they viewed themselves in a current situation. As described by *client executives* in my study:

*Oh, hugely less stressed ... part of the cause of that is the coaching process because I’m not trying swim against the current. I’m actually trying to think what I’m good at rather than what I was trying to be good at. I’m thinking, why am I trying to be good at something that I’m not good at and that I don’t actually enjoy, when there’s this stuff over here that I can do, that actually I am good at, I do enjoy and I can make as much money doing that as I can doing this ... There is this idea in organisations that you sort of, you have to go to the next level and be good at it, therefore you should be there. It wasn’t expressly discussed during the coaching process but by me sitting there and being able to say, “Well wait a minute, I don’t need that for my self-esteem. What I need is to be good at what I’m doing, successful in terms of selling work and doing work, not in terms of running teams, trying to do other things”*. CE8

*It wasn’t that the coach said, “Look, when you come into a role, this is what you’ve got to do”. What came out of it was that as a person, I tend to always look at what’s wrong. I’m not fussed about what’s right because that’s fine, I don’t look at the bright side for example, but I never really thought about it and after working through a number of examples of issues that I was having, it became very clear that one of my strengths was – I find I look at something, I look at how to fix it, and so now I’ve come into a role where I have immediately focused on what’s wrong and fixing it, and building a strategy around that.* CE1

For a number of *client executives*, self-awareness was enhanced in the coaching process through the exploration of feedback which had been obtained in a variety of ways, for example through the use of a 360-degree feedback tool such as the Life Styles Inventory™ (LSI), or the coach collating feedback through interviews. For *client executives* who had experienced this feedback process as part of their coaching, the data obtained was “honest” feedback that had helped the *client executives* develop a greater understanding of self and how they were perceived by others in their organisation. As suggested by participants:

*For me it was, I needed some sort of understanding of how I was perceived within the organisation. I was looking to how I improve that perception. Certainly the structure that was provided in the coaching gave me that, so the tools that we used and the LSI process, I did find for me my areas of weakness and probably my strengths.* CE12

*Coaching asks much tougher questions, it engages some structure and some concrete feedback. You know, if you walk away from a meeting going, “I wonder how that went,*
did somebody like that?, do I think they got a lot out of that?” versus a full 360 with someone analysing and discussing it with you and then they say, “Well they think this and that wasn’t just a flash in the pan, that must have happened. Why do you think people think that way? How do you think you impact that reaction? And what could you change? What do you think you really need to? Are you worried about whether they react to you in that way?” CE8

The one client executive who did not find coaching a positive experience had been disappointed that the coaching experience did not provide feedback regarding areas of potential individual development. A commitment to providing feedback was absent within the organisation concerned and the client executive had hoped the coach and the coaching experience would be able to fill this gap.

I would say things like, “If I describe to you how I approach different situations back in the workplace, then are you in a position to make a judgement or call on whether or not you think, you personally think, that this is an OK thing to have done, and how would you have done it differently”? My coach would nod, but really mean “no” … I actually needed somebody to tell me where I needed help and to be straight about it and the coach probably wasn’t in a position to do that. CE11

The self-awareness that had developed in coaching assisted some client executives to better manage their lives and their health. For example, these client executives reported an improved work–life balance and the ability to better manage their health, stress levels and relaxation. One participant explained these life changes as follows:

A lot more relaxed. I mean there’s lots of examples. Now, if it’s going to take me an hour and a half to get to work it will take me an hour and a half to get to work, whatever time it takes, and I just tend to stay in one lane and don’t drive as fast or as aggressively … I’ve changed. I’ve put in a mechanism where I have (at least) minimum weekly contact with three of my best mates who I was struggling to make time for … I’m still focused on work but there’s a balance now … I’m devoted to spending more time at home and making sure that if I’m overseas and away on the weekend I’d at least spend another, take a day off before or after the trip. I probably changed my health practice, you know I’m even sitting on one of those bouncy balls now at work as opposed to a chair … So yes, lots of changes. CE4

The individual nature of the coaching outcomes reported by client executives contrasts with presentations of executive coaching as an intervention focused on the achievement of organisational outcomes including succession planning and talent pool development; retention and morale (Dagley, 2006b; Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006; Sherman & Freas, 2004; Stern, 2004); and effective leadership; team cohesion; and cultural change (Dagley, 2006b; Sherman & Freas, 2004). One client executive did state the opinion that coaching had been offered in the organisation primarily as a “retention ploy” (CE11), but for the majority of participants, the influence of executive coaching was predominantly on self. Any resulting benefit or impact to
their organisation was viewed by client executives as a side-effect of their own particular journey. In a similar vein, Kiel et al. (1996) suggested that in ideally in coaching, development should be perceived from a holistic point of view, with benefits to the organisation accruing through increased effectiveness in any areas of the client’s life. In my study, for example, greater self-awareness and an understanding of strengths contributed to one client executive deciding to stay with an organisation (retention) and to another leaving an organisation (turnover). As reported by these participants:

I think it’s a contributor to just self-awareness and so the coaching reinforces that self-awareness to understand why one does and behaves the way one does from time to time. Whereas my natural reaction might have been to throw in the towel and go somewhere else, heightened self-awareness means that I may not be just as immediately inclined to do that. CE5

Well apart from leaving the firm that I’d been with for 24 years. I wouldn’t put that down entirely to the coaching but it is part of the process of getting to understand what I am good at, why I do things, what makes me tick and what I enjoy. Out of that process I said, “Well I’ve gone through the situation where a good half of my life has been running people, which is a skill I am not very good at”. I don’t want it, I don’t need it, it’s not what I am good at and I don’t need the kudos of being in charge to actually get up in the morning. CE8

q) Backing myself (Increasing self-confidence and self-efficacy)

The experience of being coached and the associated increased self-awareness contributed to client executives feeling more self-confident and reporting increased levels of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy represents individuals’ belief in their own capabilities to be successful and manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1995). As illustrated by participants in my study, coaching increased their general levels of both self-confidence and self-efficacy:

I think behaviour, knowledge, and confidence in your ability to handle future situations differently, that’s sort of what I got out of it. I certainly picked up on a lot of knowledge, I picked up a lot of confidence. CE4

I do really think it comes down to the confidence. It wouldn’t matter what situation I was faced with, I have a level of confidence that I could tackle it. So if I was pulled out of my organisation and I was put into a volunteer fire brigade to manage something, I could draw from the strengths that I have to just tackle it. CE1

Client executives provided examples from their coaching experience that illustrated Bandura’s (1994) concept of “social persuasion”. Bandura asserted that people could be persuaded to believe they have the skills and capabilities to succeed. In this way, client executives described their coach as an individual who provided them with positive verbal encouragement which assisted them to overcome self-doubt. This was consistent with the findings of Hindmarch’s (2008) phenomenological study in which the positive affirmation of coaches had assisted
clients to feel positive, value themselves and deal with self-doubt. In my study, client executives reported that their coach also provided this ongoing support and reassurance during challenging times. As described,

My coach was clearly very experienced, you know, she works with very senior people, in some real blue-chip organisations, who was saying to me, “You’re fantastic and I can’t wait to see the journey that you go on because I think the sky’s the limit for you”, ... What she said was genuine, she wasn’t pissing in my pocket, she wasn’t telling me what she thought I wanted to hear, she was quite genuine in what she said ... It’s been a pretty good confidence booster, I think, because whilst I don’t doubt that I’m confident in what I do, that self-doubt would run pretty close to the edge. CE7

I think with women within this organisation, it’s very male-dominated, it’s a tough game to play and sometimes having that extra support and encouragement from the coach just builds confidence that perhaps gets knocked about at times, when you are constantly the one sort of, female voice in a very male-dominated environment. CE2

Increased confidence and self-efficacy manifested in different and personal ways for each client executive. Examples include the confidence to put forward views and communicate more effectively, trying a new role or changing career direction and taking action. Bandura (1994) termed the successful achievement of tasks “mastery experiences” and contended that this was the most effective way of developing a strong sense of self-efficacy. Bandura also identified that individual responses and emotional reactions to situations played an important role in self-efficacy. These “psychological responses”, including moods, emotional states, physical reactions, and stress levels, could affect how people felt about their abilities in a particular situation. Bandura suggested that people could improve their sense of self-efficacy by learning how to minimise stress and elevate mood when facing difficult or challenging tasks. Client executives were able to provide examples of mastery experiences, when they had successfully achieved a task or goal, as well as examples of coaching that assisted them to overcome psychological responses such as feelings of fear or placing unrealistic expectations on self.

Through the interaction that I had with general managers and executive general managers, I was able to influence them a lot more and that was more about my own confidence, framing a concept in a manner that made sense ... adjusting the message to suit that audience. So, I’ve almost stepped up in terms of the space in which I perform in the organisation. Now I’ve got a level of confidence around, “Yep understand this is a problem, I’ll deal with it, fix it, move on”. CE1

I think having the confidence to actually step up and take action on things. In that case it was a formal complaint. So yes, the coaching gave me sort of the strength and confidence to really take that action. It was all about personal power and about your confidence in your experience. You may feel uncomfortable with certain personality types and the big aggressive type people, or whatever, but you have every right to stand your ground, but do it in a positive way, don’t become emotional. So these are the things we
worked on, it’s all about personal power, how you use your personal power, and understanding that you actually have it and how you use it in a positive way. CE6

I mean the most significant thing for me was that it gave me the confidence to go and try a different job … The thing that I’ve taken away from that experience is a good understanding of what my capability is and what the opportunity for that capability is … I kind of go, “You know what, I’d back myself in the market”, whereas I don’t know that I would have had the confidence to do that before … women are conditioned not to make those sorts of statements because it’s seen as being arrogant or bullish as opposed to just being more confident and capable. CE7

I probably hadn’t been exposed to a high level in the organisation and that fear of interacting or dealing with very senior leadership has probably dissipated and I feel more confident in putting forward my views. CE4

Coaching was important for helping me to see myself, what I look like, how do I do things, how do people see me? … One thing that came out is that I need things to be done perfectly, which is impossible. So, I put a lot of stress on myself … One very, very core achievement that I got from the coaching is that I need to be a bit more balanced, a bit more realistic about the outcome I can achieve on things. CE9

Increased self-awareness and self-efficacy were important for participants in enabling them to develop as genuine and authentic individuals. Similarly, Quick and Macik-Frey (2004) argued that executive coaching has an important role in assisting individuals to be more authentic. Quick and Macik-Frey (p. 67) asserted that in today’s organisations, executives’ roles can become a “mask that traps them into communication and behaviour that comes from neither the heart or the soul”. In this way, communication and behaviour that does not originate in the core of who executives are, and what they believe, lacks personal integrity and fails the test of authenticity. Coaching as a personal journey of integrity and authenticity was summed up by one client executive:

The bit that I lie in bed with at night is my integrity and it is, you know, “Do my words match my actions? Is my behaviour consistent? Do my people always know where they stand? Am I genuine and authentic?”, and if the answer is yes to that, then I would probably back myself to go and work somewhere else if this became unpalatable. So that, just having that, that’s quite empowering. CE7

r) Transferring capability (Coaching self and others)

The participants in my study reported on the transfer of capability that occurred through the experience of being coached. Client executives described that during the experience of being coached, they learned how to coach themselves. Coaching provided participants with the opportunity to “learn about learning” and develop the skills to reflect and learn from their experience. This was something that client executives took forward post-coaching as an ongoing capacity to self-develop.
The questions prompt the person being coached to actually come up with a solution and ultimately as you strike issues in the corporate world, you’re going to be asking yourself questions instead of just reacting; maybe ask a few questions, pointer questions to help work through the best approach and quickly, not too long, so the questions are always of a similar style and eventually what they are teaching you is to question yourself, when you leave there, so that you can continue to almost coach yourself. So that’s where I saw the value of the questions. CE6

I think it's actually transferring capability. If I get to a point where I've spent enough time with a coach going through the same process of actually resolving an issue, my hope is that when I'm faced with a situation like that again, that I may go through a similar thought process to get me to the end ... because I see coaching as potentially capability building if I can apply those skills in another situation. CE2

This capability for coaching self also translated into client executives themselves being better coaches of others. This was also reported in Gegner’s (1997) study of coaching effectiveness. Importantly, in my research, the metaskills of questioning and listening were identified as key elements by client executives.

I think that experience helped me to be a coach as well as being a coachee. I often find myself asking other people coaching open-ended questions ... this is probably the benefit of having being in this coaching relationship with <coach>. CE3

4.5 CONCLUSION

Through the interpretation of the actual experiences of the client executive participants in my study, executive coaching can be reconceptualised as a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon comprising four interactional categories: (1) context, (2) space, (3) process and (4) effects/outcomes. An important feature of executive coaching observed in my study was that it was not experienced as a “one size fits all” phenomenon by the individual client executives. Rather, coaching was situated within the dual contexts or the organisational and personal worlds of client executives; these contexts were as unique and varied as each individual participant.

For the client executives in my study, executive coaching was experienced as an individual journey of self-development, risk-taking and discovery, which was securely contained and facilitated within the unique relationship formed with their executive coach. Client executives viewed their coaches as independent outsiders to the organisational system, promoting an unparalleled level of trust and openness in their dialogue with their coach. Client executives felt connected with a coach who facilitated their learning journey and, importantly, provided a meeting space away from the workplace to think and reflect in a way that their busy, busy executive lives did not normally allow.
Eleven of the twelve client executives experienced coaching positively. These eleven client executives learned about themselves as people, developed confidence and self-efficacy and discovered the importance and value of reflection as the basis of learning from experience. Importantly, the client executives learned another way of learning and, importantly, learning about self. In this way, for these client executives, the process and outcomes of executive coaching were one and the same. This suggests that there is value in conceptualising the executive coaching process and resultant outcomes in an integrated way.

The client executives experienced the limited involvement of their organisation in the coaching engagements and valued this organisational distance. Client executives contrasted the coaching space as an ideal environment for learning with the competitive and judgmental settings of their organisations. The paradox of coaching may well be as follows: whereas organisations may perceive executive coaching as an organisational initiative (because they organise and pay for it), to the client executive, executive coaching is all about me (CE10, CE11) and a highly personal learning experience.
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CHAPTER FIVE: THE EXPERIENCE OF EXECUTIVE COACHES

The degree to which I can create relationships which facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth I have achieved in myself.


5.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the second of two chapters that present the findings of Phase 2 of my research. This chapter details the findings from research undertaken with executive coaches. Chapter Four includes the findings for client executives. In exploring executive coaching with executive coaches, I sought to understand their experiences in relation to the principal question of my research: What is the nature and experience of executive coaching? Specifically, I also sought to understand the secondary question (which is reported on in this chapter): How do executive coaches experience executive coaching?

This chapter incorporates the perspectives of executive coaching as interpreted by executives coaches, acknowledging that for these individuals coaching is both a process that they facilitate (and experience) with client executives and an occupation. This chapter is structured as follows. First, this chapter considers the experiences of executive coaching as a process that is facilitated by executive coaches and seeks to articulate the essence of their experience of coaching client executives. In section 5.2, an overview of the findings is provided, incorporating executive coach individual voices and the use of their own words or “first order constructs” (following Titchen & McIntyre, 1993). In exploring key aspects of their experience of coaching, executive coaches defined coaching, identified its unique characteristics and outlined its purpose, based on their actual experiences. This focus on first order constructs is continued in section 5.3 and includes two detailed executive coach stories as thick, rich descriptions of their experience of executive coaching. Sections 5.4.1, 5.4.2 and 5.4.3 and 5.4.4 present the “second order constructs and themes” (following Titchen & McIntyre, 1993), introducing my interpretations of participant experiences.

1 As detailed in Chapter Two, Phase 2 of my research involved the application of a hermeneutic phenomenological method to explore the executive coaching experiences of my two participant groups: (1) client executives and (2) executive coaches.

2 This reflects two uses of the term executive coaching: (a) as a verb (to facilitate a process of learning and development with clients) and (b) as a noun (to become an executive coach or to conduct a business as an executive coach).
In this chapter, the terms “coach” and “client” are used interchangeably with *executive coach* and *client executive* respectively. The terms “coaching counterpart” or “counterpart”, are also used by some *executive coaches* to refer to *client executives*, this being the label adopted by the Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership (IECL) when training *executive coaches*. “Coaching” is also used at times instead of the longer term “executive coaching”. These simplified terms often appear in participant quotes as they represent the everyday language used by *executive coaches*.

## 5.2 OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

### 5.2.1. ACCESSING EXECUTIVE COACH EXPERIENCES

As detailed in Chapter Two, 12 *executive coaches* shared their experiences and reflections of executive coaching as a professional service that they had provided to a number of *client executives* in various organisations. As outlined in Chapter Two, the *executive coaches* possessed years of coaching experience ranging from 4 to 13 years, with an average of 8.3 years. This compares to an estimated Australian industry average of 6 years (Standards Australia, 2011). The limited length of coaching experience of coaches in my study (and in the coaching industry in general) reflects the recent emergence of executive coaching as a service and an occupation in the last two decades. Beyond time spent coaching, all *executive coaches* in my study had extensive work experience in business and organisations underpinning their coaching capacity, ranging from 16 to 40 years.

To access their experiences, I interviewed *executive coaches* on two occasions. My broad observations are as follows. During (and between) interviews, *executive coaches* reflected deeply on their experiences of coaching others. They shared examples from their coaching practice from the very recent past (even the day of the interview) and also from many earlier years. They shared stories relating to *client executives* they were working with at present and those who they had worked with previously. Between the first and second interviews, *executive coaches* reflected further on their coaching experiences and shared these reflections at the second interview. Participants were able easily to convey details of their coaching engagements, what happened in their coaching sessions, the feelings that were generated for them during the process and also the results and outcomes of coaching for their *client executives*. *Executive coaches* also described their experience of practising coaching as a developing occupation within an emerging industry.

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3 Based on a study undertaken with 228 coaches (Standards Australia, 2011).
My research interviews provided an opportunity for executive coaches to reflect on their practice of coaching, to share reflections about their experiences and to generate deeper understandings of their experience of coaching others. For some executive coaches, the opportunity to reflect on their practice and to think about it more deeply at interview was highly valued. One executive coach made a direct comparison between the reflective nature of coaching questions and the research questions that they were being asked. Executive coaches also reported difficulties as they attempted to explain tacit elements of their practice, which they might not have articulated consciously before. As participants suggested,

Interesting questions you’re asking me … I think some of the questions are like coaching questions and they’re making me reflect, which is actually really good … Definitely taking unconscious competence to conscious competence. EC7

I actually need to get clarity in my own mind … I’m sort of fuzzy. As I’m talking to you I’m thinking it through. EC10

What’s going on for me as I’m answering this question is I am resisting answering it because I feel like everything I’m saying to myself it is just what coaches do and it’s like that’s not that big a deal. EC5

When invited to talk about their experience of coaching client executives, participants defined executive coaching in their own words, identified its unique characteristics, and also detailed the purpose of executive coaching. Specific executive coach responses to these questions are detailed in sections 5.2.2, 5.2.3 and 5.2.4.

5.2.2. Defining Executive Coaching

As with the other participant group in my study, executive coaches were asked to define executive coaching in the first interview. Table 5.1 presents executive coach definitions of executive coaching in response to the question: How would you define executive coaching based on your experience?

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<th>Executive coaches’ definitions of executive coaching</th>
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we’re going to sit here together for an hour every few weeks ... what on earth am I going to do, that’s going to help you solve your problems or achieve whatever it is you want to achieve, if I’m not going to do any of those things?” He says “I don’t know, I haven’t a clue because I came with an expectation of what executive coaching was and you’ve just, you know, cut it all out”. Well I say, “let’s think about it for a minute, what’s left?” They say, “there’s nothing left”. I say, “well there’s something left for you to discover, that is what executive coaching is. But it’s none of those things, so what do you reckon I’m going to do?” The smart ones will then say “probably what you’re bloody well doing now, you’re asking me questions, you’re making me think about it myself”. I say, “yes that’s pretty much it. I come equipped with the questions that perhaps you don’t ask yourself”. So I think if it’s none of those things, it’s helping you discover for yourself what your goals are, well the goals you can work on, what the blockages are, what you need to do, what you don’t need to do, what your solutions are, what your options are ... it works for them as well, particularly the reflective moments. The question, “so what are you going to do about that?” Silence. They get time to think about it.

EC3 It’s a very pragmatic pursuit aimed at bringing people’s potential forward and using whatever works. I don’t think there’s any one way of coaching or any particular model, that’s better than any other. Using a variety of techniques to fit the client.

EC4 So I see elements of training, elements of mentoring, elements of being the champion or sport person and sometimes elements of counselling in that you’re trying to understand them ... so I try and say to them [client executive] that there’s quite often different elements ... but it’s one on one where we define what coaching will mean in this relationship ... once they’re in the room I say, “now we’re going to define what coaching means for you and I. It’s going to be different for every person, but this is about you, so you get to say what kind of coaching you want and what you’re looking for and I’ll tell you if I can, can’t deliver that”.

EC5 It is absolutely the belief that the person you’re coaching has the inner wisdom to solve their own problems or to get over themselves and if I didn’t have that belief I couldn’t be a coach, I’d still be a trainer.

EC6 The essence for me is facilitating somebody’s thinking, expanding their thinking beyond what they would necessarily come up with on their own and through that process (and alongside a structure and a commitment to action) allowing that individual to achieve things in the workplace that they wouldn’t otherwise have achieved. All of that with the organisation as a sponsor. But then I only see the organisation as the sponsor because they pay the bill, you know. I think that you could easily follow that process with somebody actually without necessarily. I know it contradicts what I said earlier about the importance of the sponsor, it’s important but it’s not entirely necessary, it’s not indispensable.

EC7 The end result, essence if you like, is happy human beings ... it’s a partnership between two adults who feel, who are able to communicate honestly with each other. With the intention of, to the coaching counterpart to achieve that which is most important for him or her to achieve through the coaching in the time frame available, or the time frame set. It’s about people working together but obviously with two different roles and you know, there’s lots of things bandied around like “it’s about potential, it’s about this, it’s about that” but it is ... really about looking where somebody wants to go, what’s in the way, helping shift that which is in the way, so they can get to where they want to be.

EC8 I think it is supporting somebody to be much more than they thought they could be, much more impactful, effective, positive, happy, whatever ... Courage has got a lot to do with what happens in coaching, clarity, confidence, courage and the fourth one I’m going to say is competence ... five, I have to say, consciousness.

EC9 I think it’s quite a few things, I think it’s a process for the executive, for them to get to know themselves better, understand themselves in a different way. It’s a way of helping them achieve their professional goals and personal goals, actually, both. I think it’s altogether about them growing as a person.

EC10 A focused approach around deepening the relationship with the client so that you can ask the right questions to really understand the core motivators for the individual and by finding those core motivators you can actually unlock unbelievable potential and that for me, that is what the coaching is all about. It’s about getting the relationship to unlock, that does sound a bit textbook but it is more than just that, to really get into the heart of someone so that they find out stuff about themselves they didn’t know was there.
EC11  Coaching is an idea in transition. My experience of coaching leads me to think of it as a privileged association between the coach and a leader ... It’s a privileged relationship. But coaching is about fashioning a journey from one sense of identity to another for that individual. When I mean identity; I mean not the person’s ego identity necessarily but their identity as a manager, their identity as a leader, their identity as a contributor to that organisation. There are many identities that we hold and the person may be fixed in a particular identity and coaching is a way of transitioning them from that identity to a slightly different identity that gives them more capacity, that gives them more freedom. The reason for helping them to shift, to journey from one identity to another is to put them in a place from which they can make wiser choices and decisions that enable them, their organisation, their families, their communities to achieve a common good.

EC12  An executive coach is a personal strategist, independent confidential sounding-board to support and assist and challenge you to achieve things that you wish to achieve that you could achieve by yourself, but you would achieve faster or more powerfully with a coach.

As detailed in Table 5.1, executive coaching was defined by executive coaches in many ways. Executive coaches shared common ideas relating to coaching, but the resultant definitions were very different. These 12 executive coaches are all experienced coaches and are not new to the industry of coaching. As part of their development as coaches, all participants attended the same coach training program at the IECL. Their responses, however, indicate that even with industry experience in coaching (and shared development experiences as coaches), executive coaching was still interpreted very differently by individual executive coaches. This may indicate why organisations (as purchasers) and the marketplace in general are confused or unclear about the nature of executive coaching when, as illustrated in my study, 12 individual coaches offered such varied definitions and approached the task of defining coaching in such different ways.

This diversity is illustrated in Table 5.1 where two coaches defined executive coaching in opposing ways, revealing fundamentally different views on coaching and what is involved. One participant (EC2) outlined that coaching was a unique activity and from the outset of working with a client must be differentiated from other activities such as mentoring, teaching and instructing. In doing so, this executive coach shared with a client his firm view of what coaching is (and is not). This coach (EC2) then illustrated or modelled coaching to a client by asking a series of questions and prompting the client’s thought processes until that client came (through a process of exploration/experience) to understand the coach’s proposed service offering. Another coach (EC4) contended that in her view coaching was a varied and individually tailored practice that could also include a range of other activities such as training, mentoring and counselling. This second executive coach (EC4) defined coaching as a process of determining with each client what coaching would be for them. In this way, for EC4, executive coaching was described not as a fixed activity, but rather as a set of elements (including training) that could be blended together to suit a particular client. This example illustrates
what can be understood as two ends of a coaching practice continuum, one in which an executive coach has a clear and set definition and understanding of coaching which is applied with their clients (a practitioner-driven offering) and the other which a coach defines as a unique process for each and every client (a more client-driven or client-shaped process).

Explanations for the diversity in coaching definitions presented in Table 5.1 can be suggested. It may reflect the difficulty faced by executive coaches in describing what they do as a coach. As suggested, “it’s a hard thing to articulate but that’s how I’ve always done it” (EC4). This suggests that coaches may view many aspects of their coaching practice as tacit and difficult to articulate and communicate to others. Most interestingly, the differences in definitions could also reflect coaching as an emerging practice, a developing activity and an idea in transition (EC11). This is a particularly important finding from my study when popular views of coaching (as described in Chapter One and expanded on in Chapter Three) suggest that coaching is developing towards becoming a profession. It seems unlikely that coaching could exist as a profession (for example with regulation, barriers to entry and a common body of knowledge) without executive coaches sharing (and being able to articulate) a consensus around the concept of executive coaching.

In defining executive coaching, however, participants also highlighted common and agreed aspects. Executive coaches emphasised the relational aspects of coaching as a helping, supportive relationship (EC1, EC2, EC12, EC7, EC11, EC10, EC8), a privileged association (EC11) formed between an independent coach (EC12) and a client. The space for coaching created by executive coaches with their clients was described as confidential and safe (EC1, EC12) and was characterised by a one on one (EC2, EC4) interaction in which both parties could communicate honestly (EC7) with each other. Coaching also provided the space for the client executive to reflect and think (EC2).

The coaching process was defined by executive coaches as utilising a variety of techniques suited to client needs (EC3, EC4) and as challenging and enabling the client to achieve more (development) with the coach than they could do alone (EC12, EC6, EC8). Coaching was portrayed as operating from the assumption that client executives possessed the capacity or inner wisdom to solve their own problems (EC5, EC1, EC2, EC11) and therefore the role of the coach was to ask questions (EC2) that assisted clients to discover and focus on achieving their goals (EC2, EC9, EC12, EC8), expand their thinking (EC6), unlock their potential (EC3, EC10, EC7) and remove blockages (EC2, EC7). Coaching was viewed as having a future orientation with an intention to help the client move forward (EC1, EC3, EC4).
As defined by executive coaches, coaching resulted in individual outcomes associated with developing client executives’ self-awareness, consciousness and personal growth (EC10, EC9, EC8, EC9), supporting them on the journey to a new identity (EC11) and helping them to become happy human beings (EC7, EC8). Coaching was also portrayed by one executive coach as having a broader impact by assisting clients to make wiser choices in the interest of a common good (EC11).

Only one participant emphasised the organisational context of coaching in the definition provided. Executive coaching was defined by this executive coach as an activity sponsored by an organisation who paid the bill, but who was also viewed as dispensable in the coaching engagement (EC6). This is interesting when compared to literature definitions presented in Chapter Three which emphasise the organisational context of executive coaching as a defining characteristic (Kilburg, 1996b) and typify it as a three-cornered contract with the organisation (Standards Australia, 2011). This aspect did not feature prominently in the definitional statements from executive coaches in Table 5.1. It is worth noting a distinction between the coaching process – the practice, and coaching outcomes – particularly benefits to the individual and also potential benefits to the organisation. I argue that my research has placed the organisation as part of the coaching context and a potential recipient of coaching outcomes, but as less influential in the coaching process and experience. For my participants, the organisations saw coaching as a benefit and a worthwhile investment or incentive to shape and retain good employees, but they did not actively engage in the actual process, allowing the process and experience to be a two-way interaction (between the executive coach and the client executive) rather than a three-way (including the organisation) interaction as presented by some writers in the literature.

5.2.3. EXECUTIVE COACHING AS A UNIQUE DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE

Executive coaches were also asked to explain what they thought was unique and special about executive coaching in the first interview. Table 5.2 presents executive coach responses to the question: Based on your experience, what would you say is unique or special about executive coaching?

In essence, executive coaching was interpreted by executive coaches as unique because of three core factors: (1) the safe, independent (of workplace) and confidential nature of the relationship formed between themselves and their clients; (2) the unique learning process grounded in questions, challenge and reflection, and (3) the focus of coaching being entirely on the client (and not themselves).
Table 5.2 Executive coaches’ interpretations of the unique aspects of executive coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Executive coaches’ perspectives on what is unique and special about executive coaching</th>
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<td><strong>EC1</strong></td>
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<td><strong>EC5</strong></td>
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| **EC6** | I think what is unique and special is that an executive coach is someone who knows enough about the workplace, about corporates, about organisations, about the general stuff that
g won’t do that so coaching has a unique offer and the coaching counterpart. al can be caused to move beyond their own hem, so it’s their time to really work outing. Where coaching under unbelievable stress and to feel that they g that person t, because you …

EC7 I think the key thing is that coaches aren’t telling them stuff, it’s a very special relationship. There’s got to be trust, What makes it special is what is created as a container, as the containment between the coach and the coaching counterpart. I think probably the key thing is that you know, we’re asking not telling. What makes it special is that it’s about the coaching counterpart … it isn’t about the coach at all, you stay right out of it, because you just work on the agenda of the coaching counterpart and the organisation.

EC8 I think that what is special is people realising their own personal power and potential and that self-understanding in order to achieve that specialness and when you’re working with people who see that or that they articulate it or they don’t necessarily see it and it comes up in the process. It is very special when they can say, “I am different”. You know, when I remember, I’m just part of the process I’m not all that fantastic at, when I remember to get people to do a testimonial, what comes out is essentially the essence of the value they’ve placed in the distance they’ve travelled and how they used to see themselves and how they see themselves now, that’s just what’s fabulous.

EC9 I think because it’s a confidential relationship, I think it’s because they know that stuff doesn’t go back to the organisation. I think they feel really supported. I think these days there wouldn’t be a person I’m coaching who isn’t under unbelievable stress and to feel that they are supported is huge for them. Also that they have the capacity to grow in that relationship and grow themselves and … without judgement.

EC10 Oh it’s the fact that it’s the reflective space, I always feel it’s away from the office environment, it’s an opportunity which is rare for executives to spend a couple of hours once every however often just being here by themselves, you know, you’re not really thinking about anyone else but yourself, you feel about them, so it’s their time to really work out “gosh who am I, it’s the who am I stuff, what I want and how am I going to do it” and I think that’s quite unique about coaching.

EC11 Well I think, thinking about what the outcomes of coaching are on those levels that I stated, the transactional level, the transpositional level, the transgressional level and the transformational level, that’s what makes coaching unique. I think it’s a level of unique application extends as you move up those scales so coaching is not terribly unique at a transactional level, because it’s almost like “just in time training” … The transpositional type of coaching, coaching’s level of unique contribution at that level goes up because there’s probably no other way at which the individual can be caused to move beyond their own biases other than that persistent contact, you know, over weeks, months, sometimes over a year or more, that persistent, rubbing one’s nose in it, until they get it, is one of the strengths of coaching, and training won’t do that so coaching has a unique offering at the transpositional level. But the transgressional level you could argue that there are programs that could do that, you know, you go and spend a week or two at Harvard maybe ... however coaching can be a catalyst, coaching can light the fire, or it can light the fuse, or it can be the thing that trips at the very end, so it can be helpful there, I don’t know that it has a unique contribution and that level but it certainly is the spark that could really help. Where coaching is completely unique and there is nothing else to offer, I believe is in that transformational coaching space, there’s nothing like coaching and it has the potential to be such a force for good at that level, it relies on the individual being at a particular stage of their adult development ... there’s nothing beyond a dramatic personal experience, perhaps that can actually affect change at that level, you know, the classic, “I’ve had a near death experience” ... or something like that, it’s that kind of dramatic experience at that particular point in an individual’s life that can be a substantial turning point. In a way coaching is like that, coaching is the accident the individual needed to have and it’s helping them through the rehabilitation as a result of that accident, that happy accident of self-knowing, that allows them to move into a different phase of their life that they hitherto had not known existed.

EC12 It’s very individual ... it’s different to mentoring probably means not getting that person’s viewpoint more coming in. I would expect if I had a mentor I would be asking for viewpoints
As detailed in Table 5.2, executive coaches emphasised the importance of the coach as someone who possessed no other agenda (EC1, EC4, EC12, EC9, EC6), except the best interest of individual clients and their desired outcomes. Coaching as a special relationship (EC4, EC7, EC9) was characterised by much-needed support (EC9, EC6), confidentiality (EC9) and a lack of fear and judgement (EC12, EC9).

The coaching relationship provided an immediate space in which a coach would facilitate a process of asking questions (EC3, EC7) and provide challenge (EC3, EC12), operating from a place of objectivity (EC6, EC5, EC1) and distance from the client’s organisation. Coaching also provided reflective space for clients (EC2, EC10) to undertake a journey of self-awareness, personal growth and potential realisation (EC8, EC11, EC4, EC9), transforming themselves and their lives (EC11).

The quotations from the executive coaches highlighted the degree to which coaching was a practice focused entirely on the client as a unique characteristic. Participants emphasised the importance of the coach not having a vested interest in the outcome of the coaching, either on behalf of the client’s organisation (EC1) or for their own interests as the coach (EC5). Participants contrasted this with roles such as mentoring or consulting, whereby the service provider was commonly influenced by the organisation’s needs and agendas. Further, executive coaches argued the importance of coaches putting themselves and their egos aside (EC7, EC5) for successful coaching to occur.

5.2.4. **PURPOSE(S) OF EXECUTIVE COACHING**

Executive coaches were invited to articulate the purpose of executive coaching. I sought to understand how executive coaches interpreted and made meaning of the purpose of coaching based on their actual experiences. Table 5.3 presents the participants’ responses to the question: What would you say is the purpose of executive coaching?
Table 5.3 Executive coaches’ interpretations of the purpose(s) of executive coaching

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<th>Executive coaches’ perspectives on the purpose of executive coaching</th>
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| **EC11** | Well it almost depends on the level at which coaching is sought, if coaching is sought at a level of which it is intended to up-skill the individual, then the purpose of coaching is to improve the behavioural skills of the individual and that’s measurable and achievable, it’s a very transactional sort of engagement. Then the purpose of coaching at another level might be to help the individual to see themselves in a different way, such that they can be more flexible, they can be more engaging and more effective in terms of the outcomes that they achieve, in terms of their business management, so that might be more of a transpositional engagement. So the outcome of coaching in that context is to help them to see things differently. To help them to move from a place from which they can be seen to be more innovative or seen to be more engaging. So that’s the purpose of coaching in that situation. There can be another purpose of coaching though, which is to help that individual to find a new way forward for the organisation or for the business unit, you know, the team might have stalled or might have stuck or their initiatives might not be being progressed so the person wants coaching to find a new way, another way of engaging market or another way of getting results or outcomes, so the purpose of that kind of coaching, I call transgressional, which is how to jump the fences, how to move beyond what the limitations might have been. So the purpose of coaching there is to transgress the existing limitations.
in a way that benefits the individual and the organisation. Another purpose of coaching at a higher level might be called transformational which is really helping the individual to shift their, not only their context, but their view of themselves, their view of their world. That can be subtle but it can be profound, such that the individual can see themselves in new and different ways and see those that are close to them in new and different ways, can actually understand something deeper about themselves and about the world. That transformational understanding might enable that person to see a completely different strategic option for the organisation to say, “well you know, we’re not going to make widgets any more, we’re actually going to go out and we’re going to make trumpets, that’s just the way it’s going to be”, a completely a radical shift, a significant move, you know, a Bill Gates who decides to give up the organisation completely and just go and do charitable works and that comes from a deep felt sense of meaning, a sense of what’s really important not only for yourself but for the world in general, you know. It’s that level of adult development that enables you to engage with the wider world. The purpose of coaching at that level is to help that individual to be a wiser mentor for others and to be a force for common good.

EC12 The purpose of coaching is to give the executive more sort of, more resources I suppose. So I mean individually the purpose is to help the executive get to where they want to get, but putting that in a different mode being the challenge.

Executive coaches characterised their role as providing a catalyst (EC1, EC6), enabling the client executive to be the best they could be (EC6,EC9). Coaching was viewed as influencing the individual client executive by fostering insights, self-awareness, (EC6, EC4, EC5, EC2), consciousness (EC2, EC4, EC8) and increasing personal effectiveness (EC10). Responses focused heavily on personal and intrapersonal areas, suggesting that the executive coaches in my research most closely described the purpose of coaching as being consistent with developmental coaching as outlined in Table 3.2 in Chapter Three.

As detailed in Chapter Three, the term “coach” has etymological origins in the concept of a carriage, and in this sense, the term coaching is about conveying someone from one place to another. This sense of helping to move a client (forward) is very evident in the executive coaches’ descriptions of the purpose of coaching in Table 5.3. Descriptions of the purpose of coaching included helping the client executive: to get to where they want to get (EC12), to find their way to move forward (EC1), to determine what is going forward (EC8), to help them move from a place from which they can be seen to be more innovative or seen to be more engaging (EC11) and to provide private time-out to contemplate before stepping forward (EC8).

Coaching was portrayed by executive coaches as having a positive impact on individual client executives and on the way they impacted on others by becoming a wiser mentor to others (EC11) and being a force for common good (EC11). Coaching consequently resulted in much greater impacts, including more promotion of satisfying productive lives and societies (EC3) and making a better world, one coaching session at a time (EC4). Interestingly, the social impacts and consequences of coaching were featured in participant responses in this section, but did not feature prominently in section 5.4.4 on the coaches’ perceptions of goals and
outcomes of coaching. This probably reflects that the coaches saw coaching as essentially an individual phenomenon; executive coaches experienced the impact of coaching at the level of their client executives (and through them their organisation), rather than as a phenomenon acting at a broader societal level. It might also reflect the inherent difficulty of making any direct connection between executive coaching that occurs at the individual level and broader societal change.

5.3 EXECUTIVE COACHES’ STORIES

In keeping with the phenomenological aspect of my study, thick, rich descriptions of participants’ coaching experiences are here presented as stories. These portray the coaching experience of executive coaches as they practised coaching with their client executives. I have used first order constructs (their own words) as much as possible and have also bolded key words or phrases to reflect important concepts according to my interpretation. Participant names have been changed to maintain anonymity. I have included the stories of two participants, Pat and Chris.

5.3.1. Pat’s Story

To build the relationship with a client, you have to create as much rapport as possible on all levels, to create a sense of comfort, a “fit”. It is being able to look the part and “talk the walk”. If I walk in to a room and I’m dressed to the nines in a suit and cuff links and the person is sitting there in an open necked shirt, then I will adjust as quickly as possible. Without making it obvious, I’ll just take my tie and coat off and comfortably move in to a rapport with the person. I will do anything so they feel a sense of comfort, so they feel, “oh you’re not that much different to me, we can dance together”. And then as we talk, I am demonstrating to them that I understand their world and where they’re coming from, that I listen, that I’m a willing ear, that I care about them and that I can be trusted. If I can’t generate that rapport early on, then it’s a losing game, an uphill battle.

As in all relationships, there’s that honeymoon period where if you feel good with the person and the person feels good with you, things are nice. It’s sort of chummy. You talk about things that are meaningful and it’s wonderful. Then there is a point at which you have to push through and challenge the person. It is when you have to move the blinds out of the way so they begin to see themselves as they truly are and they begin to see what they’re really capable of instead of what they feel they’re up against. I might be sharing with a client some feedback or results from a psychometric test or something similar and the results can be quite startling for people sometimes. They will really open up and often say, “oh my husband’s always told me that” or “yes, when I think about it, that’s the reason why I lost that last job”. It’s like in any intimate relationship. For the client, it is like the first time you share toothbrushes or something private and the coach gets to see it. So I find that challenge in the relationship is really important for the process to work.

In coaching someone, they have also got to be prepared to do the work. I have never walked away from a coaching relationship, but I’ve been forced to test it, to actually say, “are you fair dinkum or aren’t you?” “What are you prepared to do, what action will
you take?”. I can’t think of a single situation where the individual has held their ground and gone, “yes, you’re probably right, this isn’t going to work” or where I’ve stepped away and said, “no I don’t think this is going to work as a coaching relationship”.

Coaching someone is exhilarating. I’m dealing with people who are managing extremely complex environments, who are incredibly intelligent and who are pulling all of that together very, very quickly. I get to immerse myself in somebody else’s experience, somebody else whose decisions matter, to be a participant in their thinking and to in some way help them to shape their thinking in a positive way, to use their strengths, so that there is some good that comes out of it. It’s a privileged position to be in.

But it is not just working with the person in coaching sessions. What sets executive coaching apart from any other forms of coaching is that there are other people in their organisation that have a vested interest in what you are doing with the person and that always produces conflict. So it feels as if you are actually coaching several people at once, because you’re managing expectations, competing interests and managing the outcome.

The ideal person to coach is somebody who is at a transition point in their life, who has a lot of things going on in their business, perhaps in their personal life, perhaps in their level of self-awareness. The times when coaching has been most effective is when my client walks away shaking their head and saying, “I don’t know what happened there, but I feel somehow different and I see the world differently and I can be different”. It’s that real, genuine shift of identity. Clients have said to me, “the value to me has been unequalled. I can’t think of any other experience that I could have in my life where I could have that opportunity to change my perspective, thank you”. So when it is great, it’s a highly meaningful engagement between two human beings who are exploring meaning and the sense of one’s way in the world and how best to proceed. And as a shared experience, that’s the real value of coaching.

5.3.2. **Chris’s Story**

I get a lot of referrals from past clients, you know. People say, “I’m looking for a coach” and someone will say to them, “Here’s Chris, here’s a business card” and so they come to me.

I love coaching people. I love it because I’m a deep sea diver not an ice skater and I think people are fascinating. So I love it because no two sessions are ever the same, no two executives are ever the same. So the experience for me is about clarifying clients’ real values, getting to know them by asking them a whole range of questions and trying to find what their goals are.

When I am working with someone, I am listening and learning all about them. I am asking good questions. I am also joining with them, showing empathy, showing understanding and trying to reflect back to them what I think the situation is. I am also looking at their body language and I’m watching for any changes and sensing their feelings. I can sense when someone has an emotional reaction to something and I acknowledge this and walk with them through this and support them. I think that shows my clients that I really care about them.

I think coaching is very powerful because it’s somewhere where people can be vulnerable. They don’t have to worry about the office politics and putting up a wall to protect themselves like they do in their organisations. It’s my role to build trust and to make them feel that it is a safe, secure and confidential environment. I have to create the environment, both in the physical space and also in the interaction, an environment where they can explore, they can experiment, they can if they want to, try things even
that they think might make them look silly.

The coaching relationship is mutual. My clients have a responsibility to come wanting to be coached and willing to be challenged. They need to be open to learning. They also have a responsibility to treat it as a professional engagement and to turn up. I’m responsible for process and the client is responsible for knowing what they need to work on, being willing to concentrate, commit to do any tasks or things outside of coaching and to do the work. As the coach, I work to build up the relationship to the point where I can challenge people around things they’re not seeing, or not admitting about themselves in a way without judgement and with much less risk for them. So they’ve got an opportunity to make much greater changes in terms of the kind of person they are and the changes they want to make.

I think my clients really value the reflective space of coaching. The more senior people get, they really do value that because they are running pretty hard. They are quite reactive and they really welcome the mirror that I hold up to them. Those clever questions. It’s a really fast way for them to reflect. So they all say they’ve had the opportunity to take a step away from the office and reflect and think. I think that makes it an important space for them.

In executive coaching, unlike other types of coaching, there are multiple stakeholders to manage. They usually want different things but I don’t see the three-way relationship thing as a hindrance at all. Your client knows it’s a three-way relationship and you make them aware of that. You ask them, “how would the organisation view this?” or “what does that mean for us and what we’re trying to achieve?” Same with the organisation. You say to them, “well anything we discuss is completely confidential” and “that person owns the data and it’s up to them to represent or to come back to you with the learning outcomes”. I think it’s perfectly feasible to build in accountability in a way that protects confidentiality and supports what the individual and the organisation is trying to do.

The two stories highlight the shared experience that as executive coaches, both Pat and Chris are passionate about the work they do and the associations they build with their clients. They love their work and find coaching exhilarating. The stories present the positive experience of coaching, highlighting experiences of when coaching goes well. These stories emphasise the role of executive coaches in building a strong rapport and relationship with their clients and the value of the coaching process for fostering critical and creative reflection through questions and inquiry. Both stories also highlight the coach as someone who could “hold up a mirror” or provide challenging feedback to clients to get them to look deeply at themselves and find meaning in behaviour and experiences. The learning environment of coaching is a chance for clients to reflect and think (and be creative beyond their current role and activities) away from the workplace. These stories also illustrate that executive coaches focus on managing the expectations of organisational stakeholders for the benefit of client executives, ensuring that they can freely access the confidential, reflective learning space provided in executive coaching sessions.
5.4 THEMES AND KEY DIMENSIONS – EXECUTIVE COACHES

Executive coaches were asked to convey their understandings and experiences of executive coaching in their interviews and were probed to provide detailed examples and expanded descriptions. Data analysis resulted in four themes and associated key dimensions which illuminate the phenomenon of executive coaching.

The four themes are:

1. Executive coaching is practised within the context of diverse organisational systems and settings and the individual worlds of client executives which must be carefully accommodated by executive coaches.

2. Executive coaching is enacted through an empathic, caring and mutually trusting relationship co-created between an executive coach and a client executive; it involves the provision of time and space outside the organisation for the client executive to reflect and think.


4. Executive coaches experience executive coaching at its best, and most rewarding, when it transforms client executives’ self-awareness and identity and supports their continuing lifelong learning journey.

The four themes and associated key dimensions are detailed in Table 5.4 and are grouped in the following four categories: (1) setting the scene, (2) the immediate space for executive coaching, (3) practices and (4) outcomes for client executives and coach self-evaluation. In labelling the key dimensions, I utilised both first order constructs (participants’ words) and second order constructs (my interpretations), consistent with phenomenological data analysis approaches (following Titchen & McIntyre, 1993). Each theme and key dimension is discussed in turn in the following sections.
Table 5.4 Themes and key dimensions: Executive coaches’ experience of executive coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Key dimensions: First order constructs (Second order constructs)</th>
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| Setting the scene for executive coaching | 1. Executive coaching is practised within the context of diverse organisational systems and settings and the individual worlds of client executives which must be carefully accommodated by executive coaches. | Organisational context:  
   a) Framing coaching  
      (Organisation supporting client readiness)  
   b) Being clear on the boundaries  
      (Managing organisational involvement and client confidentiality)  
   c) Straddling that duality  
      (Balancing organisational interests and client goals)  
   Working with the client executive’s context:  
   d) Helping clients to understand themselves in the context of the entity  
      (Adopting a contextual perspective)  
   e) Supporting clients’ willingness to change  
      (Working with a commitment to personal change) |
| The immediate space for executive coaching | 2. Executive coaching is enacted through an empathic, caring and mutually trusting relationship co-created between an executive coach and a client executive; it involves the provision of time and space outside the organisation for the client executive to reflect and think. | f) Developing a relationship  
   (Co-creating the relationship with the client)  
   g) Being who you are  
   (Being genuinely empathetic and trusting)  
   h) Demonstrating care and concern for that person  
   (Caring for the client)  
   i) Creating a space for clients to reflect and think  
   (Supporting reflection)  
   j) Taking them away from their environment  
   (Taking clients outside the workplace) |
   (Being person-centred and client-directed)  
   l) Leaving self-interest behind  
   (Managing self and being reflexive)  
   m) Not being the expert in them  
   (Facilitating the coaching process)  
   n) Shifting the client from problems to possibilities  
   (Focusing on the positives)  
   o) Asking the question behind the question  
   (Stimulating critical, reflective dialogue)  
   p) Mining the gold from experience  
   (Cultivating experiential learning) |
| Outcomes for client executives and coach self-evaluation | 4. Executive coaches experience executive coaching at its best, and most rewarding, when it transforms client executives’ self-awareness and identity and supports their continuing lifelong learning journey. | Client executives’ outcomes:  
   a) Not just behavioural outcomes  
   (Self-awareness and meaning)  
   r) Shifting their self-perception  
   (Transformative learning)  
   s) A lot happens when the coach is not there  
   (Continuing learning journey) |
Executive coaches’ outcomes:

t) Value for you
   (Coach gathering practice-based evidence)
u) Learning from clients
   (Developing coaching knowledge)
v) Energising, exciting and satisfying
   (Feeling rewarded)

5.4.1. SETTING THE SCENE FOR EXECUTIVE COACHING

THEME ONE: Executive coaching is practised within the context of diverse organisational systems and settings and the individual worlds of client executives which must be carefully accommodated by executive coaches.

In my study, executive coaches revealed how interfacing with the complex environments of organisations created variability, challenge and tensions in their roles as they attempted to balance individual client executive needs and organisational demands and interests. Executive coaches identified three factors in the organisational system that influenced their experiences of executive coaching and the coaching they provided. These organisational factors were (1) the organisation’s framing of coaching with client executives (ideally as a positive intervention directed at enhancing individual potential); (2) managing the various involvement of organisational stakeholders (and protecting the confidentiality of the coaching relationship formed between themselves and client executives); and (3) balancing client executive needs in relation to organisational goals for coaching to be successful. Participants also highlighted two client-related factors that influenced their coaching experience: (1) the importance of executive coaches adopting a contextual perspective, recognising clients as whole persons in the contexts of their work and lives; and (2) the success of coaching being strongly linked to client executives’ desire for change.

a) Framing coaching (Organisation supporting client readiness)

The executive coaches detailed how the framing of coaching by the client’s organisation enabled (or hindered) the success of coaching undertaken with client executives. Similarly, Kretzschmar (2010) outlined that it is good practice for organisations to clarify why coaching is offered and to increase clients’ knowledge of the coaching process in order to increase their readiness for coaching. Ideally, as reported by executive coaches (and also by client executives in Chapter Four), coaching is optimal when promoted positively by the organisation as an individual development opportunity rather than a remedial or problem-focused intervention.

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4 This type of coaching has been termed “remedial coaching” because it is typically arranged by the organisation and is aimed at remedying “problematic attitudes or behaviours that interfere with the coachee’s organisational performance” (Standards Australia, 2011, p. 13).
As illustrated by the executive coaches, coaching that is not positioned effectively by organisations is less likely to be successful.

So the organisational contextual issues are very important, how coaching is framed, how it is set up, how it’s come to be. So it could be there as part of a talent management process, perhaps they’ve been promoted or selected in to the program and there is great kudos to be in the program ... this can make a huge difference to the relationship. If it’s seen to be some sort of punishment “we’re getting this person coaching because we’ve got to fix them” that can be a huge impediment to the relationship. EC11

I had one where it was evident at the end of the first meeting that I just couldn’t work with the woman because it was an appalling set-up internally between her HR Manager and her sponsor as to why she was being put forward for coaching. She absolutely believed that she was the only one right in the executive team and all of the others were out of line and therefore they should be coached, not her. Total resistance to the idea that she needed any support at all. In that case I debriefed with the HR Manager and asked him how this had been positioned for her and he said, “well it wasn’t really”. EC5

b) Being clear on the boundaries (Managing organisational involvement and client confidentiality)

Executive coaches described diversity in organisational practices relating to the involvement of organisational stakeholders in their coaching experiences. They proposed that the differences in the level and type of involvement of organisational stakeholders required them to adapt their approach to suit the demands and context of the particular organisation. As described,

I do everything slightly differently obviously with different engagements because I deal with people whose manager wants no input and ones where there is a reporting back to the manager as well ... I don’t have an ideal. I go with what is with each engagement. EC7

Participants reported on situations in organisations where other organisational stakeholders were not actively involved in the coaching engagement. In the literature, this “strict one-to-one coaching” has been portrayed as beneficial for maintaining the confidentiality of the coaching relationship and providing a safe space for the person being coached (Standards Australia, 2011). Similarly, in Chapter Four, client executives also described the lack of involvement of organisational stakeholders as a positive aspect of their coaching experiences. Interestingly, this contrasts with industry guidelines (Standards Australia, 2011) and other research (Dagley, 2006b; Whyte, 2012) which suggests that the line manager and/or HR have important roles to play in providing support to the person being coached, assessing the impact of coaching in delivering benefits to the business and remaining in close contact with both clients and coaches during the coaching engagement. As illustrated in the following examples, it appears that although this active involvement might be portrayed in the literature as an ideal role for the organisational stakeholders, it was not always realised in the experiences of these executive coaches.
Sometimes it’s not possible to meet the others who have a stake in it. I might be meeting with a senior partner of a law firm and they do not want me to meet with the CEO or they do not have a line manager or anyone equivalent. EC11

The HR Department doesn’t want to know anything, no one is sitting here and saying “and here’s why we want you to coach”. They are putting coaching out there, as “here’s a service, you use it any way you like, here they are, you don’t have to report back” so I have a lot of clients like that … they know that what goes on out there in coaching is out of their control. EC1

In situations where organisational stakeholders were involved, executive coaches described how the effective management of these individuals was most significant for ensuring the confidentiality of the coaching relationship that existed between themselves and their client executives. Participants reported a range of strategies utilised to protect client executive confidentiality, including setting very clear expectations and boundaries with the organisation around the information that would be shared (and not shared) beyond the primary coaching relationship and maintaining an openness and transparency with their clients relating to the occurrence of any organisational contact or conversations.

I basically say that the sponsor is not allowed to contact me … without the coachee knowing … nothing happens behind their back. We have already developed the objectives together in the first three-way meeting, we have discussed exactly what the issues are, so that the coachee hears everything that I hear from the sponsor … I can’t contact the sponsor over the coachee, without the coachee knowing … There’s hardly any circumstances where I would need to phone the sponsor or they would need to phone me. It should be all happening through the coachee. EC8

I’m very clear on the boundaries so then it’s very difficult for that manipulation to happen … I’ve obviously had to learn the importance of that. When you’re 25 or whatever and you’re starting out, then you probably don’t do that as well, you learn, that’s probably the most important thing you can do. EC10

One executive coach shared a graphic example of an organisational stakeholder trying to coerce the coach to share confidential information from the coaching that had been occurring. This executive coach had firmly declined repeated “requests” for information to protect the primary coaching relationship. Coaching industry guidelines (Standards Australia, 2011, p. 110) indicated that a coach sharing information in this way could seriously compromise confidentiality and negatively affect the “privacy, wellbeing and interests” of the person being coached.

It’s unfortunate … when you meet with a very controlling person or someone who is really trying to manipulate you to divulge information about the individual client. I find that very frustrating because I don’t do it … this particular woman last week … I said, “look, you know, I’m not able to discuss that area” and then they just asked the question a different way and then I just repeated the same statement … I guess I am pretty strong in those situations … I think it’s really important to stay calm and really important just to articulate the reasons why. EC10
It was also clear from executive coach responses, however, that ensuring client confidentiality could sometimes be a difficult and complex process. Executive coaches in my study described instances where they had not managed organisational stakeholders well. For example, executive coaches had unintentionally breached confidentiality or had not understood and or delicately managed the political relationships that existed between organisational stakeholders. The following example provided by this executive coach demonstrates the complexities in managing organisational relationships and the careful role that coaches need to play to manage any organisational “interference”, enabling them to focus on what was most important to them, namely helping their client executive.

The Senior Partner, who is my client, has got a different story to tell than the HR Manager who might have suggested me as a coach. So I really have to follow the agenda of the Partner that I’m working with and quite often I have to change the story that I tell the HR Manager, to keep the HR Manager in the loop but without revealing too much. There might be some political corner that the HR Manager is in that he or she isn’t actually aware of that the Senior Partner is telling me about. So I’m getting inside information from both sides that I have to be very careful about how I use. Even if I declare confidentiality, even if I declare to both parties that I keep confidences and I report out based on myself and the coaching counterparts sign off on, it still produces difficulties. That’s a perennial problem. Really it’s about trying to understand the competing motivations of the players as best as I can. I’ve tripped up a few times where I’ve revealed something to one of the stakeholders that perhaps I shouldn’t have or I’ve not revealed something that I should have and in hindsight it turns out to be the vital piece of information that one or the other party should have known about and it creates some difficulties as to the coaching outcomes. EC11

Further, when HR representatives were involved, participants in my study reported less than positive experiences in dealing with them in the coaching process. HR representatives were criticised by executive coaches in my study for a number of reasons including being unable to provide useful information about the business context, preventing executive coaches from accessing senior executives (through a desire to “control” the coaching process) and delaying the processes of coaching. Surprisingly, this contrasts with the positive and value-adding roles that HR practitioners portrayed for themselves in Dagley’s (2006c) research, namely orienting coaches, positioning coaching effectively, ensuring the setting of realistic expectations (regarding outcomes and measurement), recruiting senior leader support, maintaining close contact with all parties, and ensuring a commitment to completing the agreed measurement and reporting processes. For my participants:

HR has never really added any value to the process. In fact every time I ask a question of an HR person about the business or the business context, they haven’t been able to answer me, they can answer it in a “learning and development” context but not in a business context. So I’ve just never had great upside out of dealing with HR people. EC5

Human Resources is generally expected ... to play a kind of process and control role and they’re often gatekeepers to senior executives ... HR are ... controlling, shaping, doing and there is an ongoing tension in organisations ... it just slows it down ... I remember one
organisation that it took something like 6 months before I got in the door ... there was an initial message “<coach> we would like you to come and see the HR and L&D people” so I did. After 2 or 3 weeks they got me an appointment and I spent 2 hours being talked to by them, then another 2 months went by where nothing happened, then I got a call to say nothing was happening and then I got to meet the client on the same day that he was seeing someone else ... Then another 2 months went by and still nothing happened and eventually by the time I got to him we had a really good engagement eventually and the initial presenting issue had gone and we worked on something different ... ideally you would have just gone and coached him. EC3

On the other hand, three executive coaches described a potential (and valuable) role for HR stakeholders in executive coaching. These executive coaches argued that, in working with an organisation, they were often in a position to share their perceptions of the organisation’s culture and of insights gained through the process of coaching client executives. In this way, a coach could be viewed as a “cultural canary”, alerting the organisation to important issues. Generally, however, executive coaches received mixed reactions to their offer of feedback (or were not sought out for this feedback at all) and indicated that HR generally did not seek this type of (valuable) information from them.

Well I get filled with despair by the organisations actually and how stupid they are about how they use coaches. <Organisation X> is absolutely a classic example ... They’ve had me in there for 6 years now. I know them as if it were my own company. I’ve worked in just about every area, at every level, I’ve coached more people than I can begin to tell you, there’s thousands and thousands of hours of coaching with one company. Do you think that anybody in HR has ever said to me ... “<Coach> come and give us the benefit of all that money we’ve paid you, all those hours, all that stuff that you’ve heard, tell me about it”? ... I think actually what <Organisation Y> are saying they’re going to do now is the best way. You select your coaches carefully and you meet them on a regular basis ... and you suck out of them all that good stuff. EC9

Coaching turns out to be much more of an organisational cultural intervention than it’s often purported to be, because through the individual’s eyes you get a sense of the cultural health, the dysfunction of the organisation ... you can actually see how that information could be taken by HR or Learning and Development (or those areas that are generally charged with responsibility over culture) ... to really radically help the organisation change ... So I constantly look for opportunities to leverage that insight, to be able to reveal in some way, certainly to the most senior people in the organisation (if it’s possible) that here is something that you need to do, here is something that you need to look at. EC11

c) Straddling that duality (Balancing organisational interests and client goals)

Executive coaches detailed the importance of simultaneously balancing organisational and client executive goals and interests for coaching when other stakeholders such as line managers and HR representatives were involved. They recognised that both sets of objectives must be carefully managed in coaching assignments for the outcomes to be perceived as successful.
Because the organisation is your client alongside the coaching counterpart, so any work that you are doing you are looking to straddle that duality. Like finding the balance because you are always looking to service both, they’re inextricably linked, that’s my view.

Executive coaches described how they wanted to be successful in the provision of services to organisations, but also more importantly, they wanted to be most successful in supporting the needs of their client executives. This meant that participants in my study attempted to ensure that the overall expectations of the organisation were managed, but gave primacy to the needs of the client. In the literature this has been described as coaches managing dual accountability, primarily to the individual being coached but also to the client’s employer, even if it is only reporting (as a minimum) attendance at sessions and/or an assessment of whether the individual is deriving any benefit (Rotenberg, 2000). In my study, simultaneously meeting client and organisational needs was not always easy, as illustrated in one example that follows, particularly when an executive client’s needs evolved beyond the initial contract.

So it’s about making sure that the coach counterpart and the sponsor are on the same page as to the outcomes that are expected. So, to me that takes care of the organisational piece. Because when I know that the counterpart knows, then we can have the discussion and say, “so we know what the organisation wants ... how are you going to achieve that while still meeting your needs?”

Yes, there was a case where the person headed up a division of the organisation and his role was to manage the operational side ... he was physically located in the west of the city and the head office was actually in the CBD. I was engaged by the Learning and Development Director to “help to smarten up his act, because when he comes into Head Office, he is woeful, you know, he just speaks down to people, he rubs people up the wrong way and he just doesn’t understand how things are done in head office. For goodness sakes, smarten him up, give him some etiquette so he knows his way around”. When I began the coaching with him, I found that the issue for him was that he really was struggling to represent the interests of his team to head office and so I ... got him thinking about himself in a different way and got him to engage in some political skills and begin to apply those skills. The Learning and Development Director came back to me and said, “that’s not we asked you to do at all, we didn’t ask you to have anything to do with this, you’re going way beyond what we asked you to do, you know, you’re expected to commit to a contract, the contract agreement said clearly these were the outcomes and the outcomes look as if they’re completely different and this isn’t helping up with our problem at all”. It really threw a black mark across me for ever coaching in that organisation because I’d upset the Learning and Development Director’s expectation of the outcomes. Yet I felt like I got the best outcome for the client. My primary role is to help the client as much as possible, no matter what else is going on outside and if I achieve that as an outcome I think I’ve been successful. But somehow you’ve got to strike a balance.

Executive coaches described a range of strategies they used in an attempt to manage the balance between client executive goals and organisational objectives in coaching. For example, participants outlined the usefulness of meeting with stakeholders prior to coaching.
commencing to obtain agreement among all parties in terms of the desired outcomes for the coaching. This was described by executive coaches as one way of balancing (and managing) any competing interests from the outset. One executive coach also described how these meetings also provided useful insights into the relationships between their executive client and stakeholders. These meetings were also deemed useful in tricky situations (EC10, EC1) by ensuring that organisational stakeholders communicated a desired (and not hidden) agenda for coaching to the client executive.

Getting everybody to the same table at the same time. It’s not always possible but I might be sitting down with the Learning and Development Director, with the HR Manager and a person’s direct manager and they’re all bitching and moaning and complaining about the person I’m supposed to coach and I’ll take on board that story then I go and meet with the person that’s being coached and I take on his or her story and then I have to sort of finesse all of the stories together to make some sense of it and somehow take the story backwards and forwards between the players. If I can get the players in the one room (and it’s not always possible) ... we all sign up to what the outcomes are, it goes much better and in particular if I can revisit that meeting at the end of the coaching and say, ”well okay what has changed, how did it work for you, you know, what was going on, what have you noticed?”, then that’s the best way in which I can manage the competing interests. EC11

I like to meet the manager and the coaching client and discuss with them (checking with the client first) quite openly what the issues are that we’re going to work on so that there’s a common understanding. Then, I’ll shut up and watch them interact and get a sense of how they are with each other. Often that’s a very important dynamic. EC3

Why it’s always a bit tricky is that often a business will say, “yes that’s fine but we want to input in to the coaching and we’re going to check in with you and we want you to understand that’s happening” ... so if that’s the case, as we embark on a coaching relationship then the line manager may well have input ... My preference is that the counterpart is present for that conversation, often that’s not the case. Anything that they say to me, I will be transparent about with the counterpart so, I’m very clear about that. I’m not going to have a hidden agenda. I don’t work with a hidden agenda and I don’t work with information that the manager is not prepared to give the counterpart. EC10

Fortunately I have rarely had those tricky situations. I’ve had two situations in my coaching career where a [line] manager said, “I’ve got this person and I want you to coach them because...” and it hasn’t gone past the first coaching session because the client didn’t want it and it was the [line] manager that wanted it. What I’ve learnt from that situation is when an organisation does bring me in, I’m very clear that I will be working to the client’s agenda and if there’s something they want out of that person, they need to tell them. But don’t tell me and expect me to try and get it out of them. If you want something for them and they don’t want it, I can’t coach to that either. So I’m clear where there’s a third party involved that really the only person that I’m interested in is the person I’m coaching. EC1
d) **Helping clients to understand themselves in the context of the entity**  
*(Adopting a contextual perspective)*

The executive coaches portrayed the need to work holistically with individual client executives in the context of their work and lives and within the context of their organisation. O’Neill (2000) argued that a systems approach is a core principle in executive coaching, requiring the coach to pay attention to the system and the nested set of spheres in which clients operate.\(^5\)

As illustrated in the following examples provided by executive coaches in my study, regardless of the intended focus of the coaching conversations, inevitably aspects of the client executive’s work, life and relationships with others were present in the dialogue.

The difference is that it’s an individual pursuit and I think that’s the dilemma that organisations have with it, because they feel like they’re spending money on a person rather than the entity and that’s where it becomes difficult for them because people leave, the entity is always there ... What I try to do with coaching, especially with the holistic thing is getting them to understand themselves in the context of the entity. What that relationship is and what leadership means in that context ... So I feel I’m trying to get people to understand themselves in different contexts and how, how they contribute to those contexts. EC4

None of the people you work with work in isolation. If you’re talking about exploring their behaviour, then they will say that they either do (or they don’t) behave like this at home and they will then share that with you. If they’ve done a diagnostic, the vast majority of them will have taken that diagnostic home and will have shared that. Without exploring that (because you think that’s their private life) they will still bring that in ... So there’s always other people in the relationship. EC2

e) **Supporting clients’ willingness to change (Working with a commitment to personal change)**

Executive coaches in my study reported on the need for client executives ideally to enter the coaching relationship with a desire for personal change. In Greif’s (2007) meta-analysis of coaching evaluation research, change readiness was also identified as a key prerequisite of the client. Client commitment to change was an important factor, as identified in Kretzschmar’s (2010) grounded theory study of client readiness for coaching. One executive coach summarised this requirement in my study:

Number one is the person’s willingness to entertain a change in their life or in their environment. Some people are extremely willing and will really fall over backwards, “I’m really interested, a deep interest, I want everything else to change, what can I do?” And there are other people who are simply not willing, either because of their own learning framework or their situation ... it can be an effort to create the opportunity for them to see that there’s a real benefit for them in change. EC11

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\(^5\) These have been described as: (1) smallest sphere – client’s personal challenges, goals, inner obstacles, (2) midsize sphere – relationships with others in organisation, and (3) largest sphere – external contexts, economy and environment (O’Neill, 2000).
As interpreted by coaches in my study, the client executive’s commitment to change was viewed as the key to action, enabling the processes of reflection and learning to bring about results and change.

They need a capacity to reflect and a fundamental interest in change. If they have a very small capacity to reflect and very low self-awareness, well that’s fine, that’s a coaching challenge. But if they are so set on their own way of doing things that they are not open to alternative ways of doing things (even if they can, but they choose not to be) then we just go through the motions of coaching … There was one I was coaching some years ago, really so keen about the coaching, he would say, “this is wonderful, I can tell you a story” and then we do the next session, “it’s wonderful” … then the next session and it was quite clear that he was not going to do anything different. He was very able to talk and be enthusiastic and to meet my requirements in terms of answering questions and being reflective and all the rest of it, but when you looked at what he was actually doing, he was not going to change. He simply wasn’t interested in changing. EC3

5.4.2. THE IMMEDIATE SPACE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

THEME TWO: Executive coaching is enacted through an empathic, caring and mutually trusting relationship co-created between an executive coach and a client executive; it involves the provision of time and space outside the organisation for the client executive to reflect and think.

Five dimensions were identified by executive coaches in my study as fundamental for creating an optimal learning space for executive coaching to occur. First, executive coaches highlighted the importance of co-creating a relationship with their client executive and the role that both parties played in forming this working alliance. Second, participants portrayed the value of being themselves and demonstrating empathy in building a mutually trusting relationship with their client executives. Third, executive coaches demonstrating genuine care for their clients was highlighted as a significant factor in coaching success. Fourth, executive coaches ensuring that coaching sessions provided time for the client executive to reflect and think was also reported as significant. Finally, coaching as providing an opportunity for the client executive to step away from the workplace (and into the learning space of coaching) was also seen as important. Executive coaches described their intent for the creation of the space for coaching:

You know, I’m building the tent for them to have that experience. I’m laying out the sawdust on the ring so that you know they can trample around it, you know, I’m creating the environment, the space so that they can have the experience at the circus and they can walk out of there different to how they would have been otherwise. EC11

It’s an ongoing conversation about what they’re working on, whatever they want to achieve and the idea is to create a space where anything could happen that would be of value to them. EC3

But I always just want to make that the counterpart feels safe, that it’s an open, free space and that there’s an equal energy being given both ways. EC12
In my study, these first three dimensions comprised the essential elements of the relationship formed between the coach and client executive and were deeply interconnected. These dimensions could also be identified as caring dimensions (following Mayeroff, 1971). Mayeroff argued that caring is not an isolated feeling or a momentary relationship, but rather is a process and a way of relating to someone that helps them to grow and actualise themselves. It is a process that involves development, and emerges through mutual trust and a deepening and qualitative transformation of the relationship. In a similar way, in my study, the intertwined combination of these three dimensions (co-created relationship, empathy, and mutual trust and care for the client) created the caring executive coaching relationship.

f) Developing a relationship (Co-creating the relationship with the client)

In the same way that client executives reported in Chapter Four that the connection with their coach was one of the most significant factors in their executive coaching experience, executive coaches also portrayed the (professionally) intimate (EC9) relationship formed between them and their client executive as critical to success. Furthermore, executive coaches portrayed the relationship as not only important, but an integral part of coaching practice. Participants argued that without the formation of such a relationship, effective coaching could not occur:

*It’s totally critical, I mean I don’t know how you can have a good outcome without having a decent relationship … If it’s a one-off, maybe you could get away with it, but in order to get a really decent outcome I don’t know you can, because it’s such an intimate relationship really.* EC9

*It’s everything, because without the relationship piece and them feeling comfortable enough to disclose their private thoughts and having the faith in the process and respecting me to be able to lead them somewhere … without that, we won’t achieve the goals. Anyone can go through the transactional stuff of the “here’s a goal and this is how we’re going to achieve it”, but without the relationship piece around it, it’s just the page that they could pull off the internet.* EC12

*Paramount, yes it’s really important, it’s extremely important, because if you don’t have a relationship I don’t believe you’re really a coach … I think the relationship is where it sits. The coaching takes place within the relationship. The relationship forms within the coaching, so one feeds the other.* EC7

Executive coaches identified the building of an effective working relationship with the client executive as a real and important part of being a “good” coach. They had adopted the position that the establishment of rapport and the relationship with their client executive was a product of who they were as a person and their capability and capacity as a coach, rather than something that was a matter of “fit” or “chemistry” and therefore outside their control or influence. Coaches indicated that, with a willing client executive, they could (consistently) build an effective coaching relationship.
Because I think that one can be used as an excuse <by coaches> … “oh the chemistry didn’t work”. I think that’s just being lazy and not really figuring out … thinking about, well what was it with that individual? … There’s this veneer that gets painted over the surface which is “the chemistry” but I think … it’s about … having a genuine interest in understanding, what’s their business? What’s their challenge? Who are they? … It requires them [client executives] to feel as though they can be open about telling you things, that things are confidential and then for them to be able to see that you’re someone who is going to challenge, question and push them … So you’ve got to be able to build the rapport at that stage … I think chemistry is an unfair label because there’s more to it … it’s not like dating and you meet them in a bar or whatever, it’s not like that. EC2

If a client is coachable I don’t think there’s any reason that there won’t be a fit in terms of coaching, I can’t talk about personality clashes and all that stuff in coaching. I don’t necessarily subscribe to that, I think a highly qualified capable coach should be able to coach almost anybody provided that that person is coachable … I say to people, “it’s not a question of coaching, it’s a question of coachability”, whether the person is in the space in their head and their heart to get any value from coaching. EC3

Because I know I can coach just about anybody, I know I can and I have, you know … In all those years, I’ve only had one time where I knew I couldn’t coach the person. EC9

Executive coaches highlighted how their role in building the relationship was initially focused on quickly establishing rapport with the client executive. This activity involved the coach making the client feel as comfortable as possible.

So my role in developing a relationship is to create as much rapport as possible on all levels so that there’s a sense of comfort, a fit … So that’s the first thing, is to achieve some sense of resonance with the other person, getting the other person feeling comfortable with you and feeling okay with you and feeling that you understand or know or at least have some sense of their world. EC11

I used to try and look for some commonality with myself, but it’s not about me so I leave me out of it. It’s more just about making them feel comfortable. So ensuring that they can see that I understand their situation. EC12

Some coaches highlighted how they portrayed an appropriate professional image as an executive coach by “looking and sounding the part” and how this was important for developing rapport and helping the client to feel comfortable with them.

Well I’m just sort of aware you know, that dress and presentation, all of those things, are important … it was amusing to me when I first started out in coaching because I would find myself, you know, in these huge board rooms, you know, being waited on. The staff will come out with homemade biscuits and coffee and you’d be sitting there you know as if “oh yes, I’ve seen all this before, you know, it’s all so familiar”, so there’s a certain amount of playing the part to win the relationship so to speak. EC11

So simply the impact I make on the person when I first come into their presence, I haven’t even opened my mouth yet. So it’s what you wear, it’s your demeanour, it’s your manner, and then after that it’s what you say … make sure I’m groomed and then in terms of what I wear, it’s for the client … I would know that sort of expectation around what they wear and I’m comfortable wearing that as well, so it’s not incongruent on me to wear an open-necked white linen shirt or cotton shirt with business trousers. EC12
The executive coaches articulated the client executives’ responsibilities in the creation of an effective coaching relationship with their coach. Notably, this included the client executive being a willing and open participant in the coaching process. Similarly, as was reported in Chapter Four by client executives, absence of this openness was reported by executive coaches as the major barrier in the formation of an effective coaching relationship and the subsequent learning process.

"Coaching is about being open to accepting a stranger into your private thoughts." EC12

I think it’s that preparedness and that willingness, “okay I’m willing to dance, I don’t know what the outcome is, but at least I’m going to get on the dance floor, I’m going to see what happens” … that preparedness to step in to the relationship, I think that’s their responsibility. If they’re not even prepared to step in to the relationship, then it’s hard going. They’re not going to get anything out of it. EC1

I think they need to come to me as open-minded and willing and open to working through things, open to discussion. Nothing shuts down a conversation like not speaking, so it requires a lot of contribution from their part and a lot of willingness ... a desire for change, or if not change (because it’s not always about change), a desire to have a productive conversation. EC1

It felt good because she was able to be completely vulnerable in the coaching session and let down her guard and let the tears flow and just sort of let it be. So there was no resistance to learning. She genuinely wanted to be there. In those vulnerable moments there was a lot of opening up and she was able to see things differently. EC5

Executive coaches also detailed that client executives needed to be committed to the coaching process for the relationship to be successful. One executive coach even labelled those clients who presented for coaching, but who were essentially not committed to the process, as uncoachable (EC3). Another coach suggested that these unwilling clients could turn up (EC2) for the coaching process, but the outcomes and success of the coaching would be constrained in comparison to the results of more effective coaching relationships.

"The “uncoachables” (like the “untouchables”). If you could generalise you’d say that the relationship you’re having is no relationship. They’re not interested. To have a relationship with someone means you’ve got to have some level of commitment, but what is missing is commitment. They’re not going to lay anything on the table ... to set up a change. If they’re not going to give or open up to a relationship, then they are not open to being coached. By definition though they’re not coachable. EC3"

I can think of a guy who was incredibly defensive right from day one ... you want them to be talking about things and you want them to be open about their challenges and to have some degree of self-awareness about what’s going on ... he’s scoring pretty low on all of those scales ... But even then you’re still only human, there’s only so much you can do in such situations when they’re being defensive ... and at the end of 10 hours of working together (over a 6-month period) ... he says “I need to go home and look at what this instrument and these constructive styles are telling me and see how they align with my belief in the bible”. So he still had all sorts of defensive mechanisms going on ... So at the end of the 10 hours you think, “that’s been hard work and you still didn’t quite get it right,
but that was about the best you’re going to get with that person.” … There wasn’t a rapport, there wasn’t a good working relationship and he really didn’t want to be there either and so as a result of that, I think you don’t get very good outcomes … Without that working relationship, you can go through the 10 hours, you get paid for the 10 hours and they turn up for the 10 hours, but I think the outcomes are far less than had the working relationship been a much more effective one … if you don’t actually have some joint commitment, something that you’re actually going to be saying, “here’s the reason for us working together and I’m prepared to give it a go and put effort, energy and attention and my heart and soul into making that work” it isn’t going to work, it will have the façade of working, but you’ll achieve far less. EC2

Executive coaches shared cases from their coaching practice where they had known from the outset the client was not willing or ready for coaching. These were the instances where the coaching relationship had not worked. Participants described how they had not (or should not) have worked with these type of clients and how these cases had informed their practice of coaching.

There’s one a client that I just felt it was going to be too hard, so we had the discussion so I think I pushed that one back, I just had the sense that I’d be doing all the work. I’d prefer the client does the work. EC3

I remember somebody who was referred to me by somebody and I met with them … she took no responsibility for anything in her whole life … I shouldn’t ever have taken on that engagement. It was a feeling that I had that I wouldn’t be able to work with her, because she wasn’t ready for it and I think, if I’m to be really honest, it was in the early days and I thought you know, it’s a client and I was really relieved when we stopped working together … I would never do that again … But that comes back to the first meeting which is really assessing whether somebody is ready and wanting to do it. EC7

Executive coaches argued that, for the coaching relationship to be successful, client executives should ideally have a sense of agency around participation in coaching. In the two examples that follow, coaches explained how they endeavoured to make it safe and comfortable for a client not to proceed with coaching if they chose not to do so.

I want them to be not only committed to the process but to be committed to me and I want them to be sure about that. I don’t want them to feel as if they’re making a quick decision and then think later on, “oh gosh I’m not sure that I do want to work with her, I’m not sure I can handle this coaching it does sound pretty threatening”. I just think it’s an ethical thing on my behalf, I like people to feel very comfortable and good about their decision, but I also, I like to give them the feeling that they’re not being pushed into it in any way … I don’t want to work with somebody who, for whatever reason, whether its lack of backbone or something, feel that they have to work with me … I need to make sure that they are really clear that after meeting with me they are, they’ve got the time to pull back if they want, you know, because often I think maybe people don’t want to say if they’re in a meeting with you, “oh look, you know, I don’t want to work with you”. They might feel the organisation’s put it in place and maybe you’re the only name they’ve been given, they might feel a bit intimidated or indebted or there isn’t much room to move or any choice, so I give them the choice. EC8
I’m much, much more confident about that now and if they don’t want to be there, that’s just great, that’s perfectly okay and they don’t need to be there and I’ll give them total permission not to be there. Because I don’t want to waste my time or theirs, I actually had that experience I think it was last year at <organisation>, I was doing a very big coaching program there with a whole bunch of people in their technology area and this woman I just couldn’t get it with her … I just couldn’t get a goal … In about the third session I said to her “I really feel these sessions are not valuable to you, that there’s something blocking us here, what do you think it could be?” and she said to me, “actually <coach> what I haven’t told you is I have a child with a profound disability, I am unable to climb the ladder at the moment and therefore for me coaching is really not appropriate”. I thought, “great”, I said, “just thank you so much for being so honest, let’s call this quits” and we did. EC9

**g) Being who you are (Being genuinely empathic and trusting)**

The existence of trust in the relationship between coach and client was depicted by executive coaches as fundamental to the success of coaching. In developing trust in the coaching relationship, executive coaches gave primacy to the ways in which they presented themselves as a person to the client (demonstrating empathy and authenticity) above the application of any specific strategies, actions or steps. In descriptions by participants, the fostering of trust with their client executive was most importantly a product of the qualities possessed by the coach, who you are being (EC7), rather than a set of activities consciously undertaken in their practice. Trust was described by executive coaches as naturally emerging or evolving based on the client executive’s experience and perception of their coach and the relationship that developed between the parties, rather than something that the executive coach had to make happen.

Trust happens over time ... It wouldn’t matter if I said in the first session, “our meetings will be confidential and I won’t show these notes to anyone”. How do they know? They’ve never met me before. Trust is important but I don’t think you can make it happen. It happens over time and I am going to use that wonderful phrase we learn about trust, it has to be earned in some way. I guess that sometimes we might just pick up the vibes, sometimes you’re with someone and just know that you can trust this person, well you think you know you can trust the person. So it’s important but I think it’s hard to make it happen. EC1

What I’ve realised over time is that being a good coach will develop that relationship so doing all the things like, you know, representing that there’s trust, that you’re genuinely interested and that you’re there for their success. All is naturally going to feed in to a good relationship and then that sort of becomes a virtual circle I suppose ... I used to get a bit hung up on how quickly you could get a good rapport and trust going and its interesting, it’s one of those things that you realise that was such a big question at the start and as you do it more and more you realise that’s become a non-question for you, it’s no longer an issue, and I think it’s for all those reasons that I’ve just said, I think it just naturally happens. I had an example where I was coaching someone who I really feel there wasn’t any rapport at all, not rapport, any connection ... you know, met him at a party I probably wouldn’t have chatted for that long with them, would have both moved on quite fast and yet it’s become an incredibly warm, very lovely relationship through the coaching process. EC6
One of the most significant factors for *executive coaches* in fostering trust with their *client executives* was the importance of demonstrating and communicating empathy. Similarly, Carl Rogers (1961) identified empathic understanding of the clients world (as seen from the inside) as one of the key factors for learning in psychotherapy. Hammond and Collins (1991) also described empathy as a critical factor for adult educators in trust building and the creation of cooperative learning environments. In executive coaching, McCleland (2005) described the importance of the coach really understanding each client (how they think, interact and view the world). In my study, interpersonal skills such as listening, reflection and questioning were also seen as important for demonstrating empathy to *client executives*.

_I think you can develop trust through very sophisticated empathy where you know you’ve earned trust if somebody opens up to you and tells you some really major things, it’s an honour and to do that I think you have to walk really closely with people and show them that you care, you’re communicating that through your listening and through the quality of your reflection or questions and I think that’s how you earn trust by showing that respect and sensitivity and managing that situation so they don’t feel vulnerable or that they’re allowed to feel vulnerable in a very respectful way. I can only think that that’s sort of how you do, but it’s really about sophisticated empathy, you really have to be very closely tuned in to them, so very focused, listening and attention._ EC4

Authenticity was also a key factor reported by *executive coaches* in my study for the development of a trusting coaching relationship. Similarly, in McCleland’s (2005) transcendental phenomenological study, the coach “risking authenticity” from the very outset was seen as important for modelling a trusting relationship with the client. In psychotherapy, Jourard (1971) argued for therapists to role model uncontrived honesty (the “transparent self”). Mayeroff (1971, p. 14) termed this in caring relationships as the need to “ring true” and Carl Rogers (1961) termed this authenticity, “congruence”, the opposite of presenting a façade to the client. Coincidentally, the term “congruence” was also used by an *executive coach* in the example that follows in describing the need to be authentic:

_That slight self-disclosure or letting you see me as a human being as opposed to, you know, a teacher or someone who’s apart from you … that you are congruent, so if you were talking about your beliefs or your values or you know when you stick with something that you actually demonstrate that as well and also I think trust is also about back to being honest and authentic so if something isn’t working that you’re willing to say so. So if somebody has engaged me as a coach and I’ve told them I’m willing to challenge them … if I don’t keep to that then I don’t think there’s a lot of trust there. Mostly I think trust comes from being congruent and doing what you say you’re going to do._ EC7

In my study it was apparent that *executive coaches* considered the trust that existed in the relationship between them and their clients was mutual (within the context of the coaching process). *Executive coaches* identified that the coach also needed to trust the client,
particularly trusting that the *client executive* would be an active and willing participant in the coaching process. Hay (1995, p. 40) argued that the existence a high level of trust “in both directions” was also an essential condition of mentoring relationships. *Executive coaches* showed that they had expectations of their clients, as *client executives* did of their coach. This mutuality of trust was illustrated by one *executive coach*:

> Trust is contextual, to trust someone in coaching is to trust that they will answer the questions explicitly or do their best to answer the questions and to be reflective and to do their homework, that’s the level of trust I need from someone. I trust them to follow the process and to take me seriously, from their point of view they need to trust me to the extent that I will ask them appropriate questions, that I won’t attempt to manipulate them and that I’ll be showing my integrity, that’s the kind of trust. EC3

*Executive coaches* depicted moments when trust in their coaching relationships had been tested. For example, in the next section⁶ there is an example describing a situation when the coach felt unable to trust a *client executive* based on a lack of perceived honesty. In the following examples, trust was questioned by coaches when *client executives* had not followed through on the previously made commitments, prepared effectively for coaching sessions or had been able to attend a previously scheduled session.

> Obviously trust gets tested, trust will be tested if the person comes in to a coaching session and they haven’t done what they said they were going to do, so they realise that perhaps I can’t trust them. Then I can, in a sense, raise the tension a little bit and say, “oh you did say that you were going to do that?” and to represent the fact that this is a trusting relationship and you have to trust me but I have to trust you. EC11

> I think that it’s a double-edged sword actually; I think there can be too much trust … Coaching a young man who has so much trust in the belief that as a coach that I can help him, he actually doesn’t come to the sessions prepared. He doesn’t come with a goal for the session and it’s almost a naive trust that it will be okay because I’ll just start talking and I will pick up on the themes and it will all just work out okay. I don’t think there’s enough self-responsibility. EC5

Examples were also provided of trust being tested in the relationship based on the actions of the coach with regard to credibility and reliability.

> You know, if I’m late to a session and the person is waiting, that’s a sign of trust or lack of trust, or if, as happened yesterday, I missed the session altogether because my damn Blackberry still thinks it’s daylight saving time … You know there has to be quite a bit of trust built up in a relationship for that to happen. I’m confident that in this case that’s all right. But those are signs, they’re markers of trust, so all these subtle things that happen I think are evidence of trust building in the relationship. EC11

> It is that you do come across as credible, that you do, you know, the reliability part … you make agreements and you keep them, so you’re seen to do what you say you’re going to do. EC7

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⁶ See next section “Caring for the client” for the specific example.
h) **Demonstrating care and concern for that person (Caring for the client)**

Executive coaches highlighted the importance of possessing a sense of care for their client as a key factor in the relationship between themselves and their client executives. Discussing psychotherapeutic relationships, Carl Rogers (1961, p. 283) indicated that being “warm, caring for the client” was one of the essential conditions for learning. Titchen (2004) termed this type of support as “graceful care”. In a research study with executive coaches, a personal sense of caring was described as coaches as “wanting the best” for their clients (McCleland, 2005). Mayeroff (1971) defined caring as helping another person to grow and actualise themselves.

Caring was portrayed by executive coaches in my study as follows:

> Caring, as in the sense of caring that you get good results according to what it is you’ve set out to do. EC6

> There’s that personal connection too, that human-to-human connection, that care and concern for that person, so that you really do have the energy and commitment to really work with them, even though some sessions are really tough and other ones flow very well. EC8

> So there’s something about being genuine I think and being authentic and actually caring about the other person. EC7

In describing care for their client, two executive coaches made a direct reference to the coach possessing “unconditional positive regard” for the client, a term popularised by Carl Rogers (1961) in psychotherapy. The use of this term by executive coaches in my study also illustrates the influence of psychotherapy practice and research on executive coaching, as some coaches had adopted the use of this term (consciously or unconsciously). As described in my study,

> I suppose that notion of unconditional positive regard for the other person, so really I think you’ve got to have that for the relationship to serve the coaching process … I suppose it means somewhere between like and respect ... it’s respecting who that individual is in that space that you are in with them, in the context of what it is they’re looking to work on. EC6

> Absolute regard for the person, positive regard for the person who’s sitting in front of you. EC7

The importance of the coach possessing unconditional positive regard for the client was also found in Mackenzie’s (2007) phenomenological research as one of the key conditions for effective coaching. Brady (2012) also suggests that if a coach accepts clients for who they were, then it starts a process of clients accepting themselves in a similar way. With the theoretical construct of unconditional positive regard, it is assumed that the coach cares for the client without any conditions of worth attached to that care. However, there was a strong example provided in my study by one executive coach who for the first time had been really tested by a client executive who the coach felt was not being honest. The coach became
unwilling to work with the client any longer. In this way, when things went wrong for the executive coach, the “unconditional” care for the client became “conditional” on the client behaving (or not behaving) in a certain way:

This individual that I’ve been coaching ... she appeared very engaged and wanting to be coached and was initially very enthusiastic ... the first couple of sessions were very, very positive and full of intent of different things that needed to happen and things that were going to be tried. Then it all started to creep in. I noticed there were lots of inconsistencies in stuff that she was saying ... I’ve never had this before, so I actually found myself in an unusual situation where I really didn’t (and don’t frankly), trust this person and that’s getting in the way ... I’ve hit a situation where this person’s crossing my values ... I haven’t done this before, but I’ve called it and said, “no we’re not having another session until you action what needs to be done here” ... I’m not able to be as effective as I normally am because what’s creeping in is judgement. What I normally work hard at doing is suspending that and I think that’s really important. But what I’m finding I’m doing, it’s like the little voice in my head won’t shut up, so it’s just judgement, judgement, judgement ... because this boundary has been crossed for me around values (and that I feel that she’s lying to me) then I just don’t want to coach her anymore ... I see my role as helping enable that person to get what they want ... So if they’re not being transparent about that and they’re not actually talking about real things that are happening in a consistent manner, then I feel like my time is wasted ... One of the points in the conversation that I had with her, was around “look you know, I’m feeling like you’re saying things that you want me to hear and that’s a waste of my time and your time” ... I’ve spoken about that in terms of the rhetoric ... where the coach is judging people and that’s affecting the relationship, but this is the first time I’ve experienced it. EC10

i) Creating a space for clients to reflect and think (Supporting reflection)

Provision of the space to reflect and think within executive coaching was an important dimension reported by client executives in Chapter Four. It was also emphasised as a significant factor by executive coaches.

It’s about creating a space for the conversation so they can think through things; think through the issues that they’re dealing with ... a place where they can feel safe, secure, interested, and engaged, creative ... where they can bring their best into the conversation. EC1

I would say 99% of my coaching participants have said to me that one of the best things they’ve got out of coaching is the opportunity to reflect, because it’s the only opportunity they ever get. EC9

As reported by executive coaches, coaching provided an important space for the clients to think about themselves. Argyris (1991) argued that in modern organisations, executives often react defensively (demonstrate “defensive reasoning”), preferring to focus on problems in systems and processes rather than learning about themselves. As depicted by participants in my study, coaching appears to provide a space where client executives can undertake “difficult” work on the self.
So when the client is in coaching with me and his mobile phone is switched off, there aren’t any interruptions and he hasn’t got his own stuff gathered around him to distract him. I think, especially when you’re really getting into ... stuff that is deeply embedded and that’s causing you problems ... it can fall into the “too hard” box and then it’s quite easy to be distracted by something else. EC10

Executive coaches also reported that the reflective space of coaching provided the opportunity for clients to move from being reactive (which characterised their day jobs) to a more proactive orientation.

I reckon that’s a reflection of level because certainly the more senior people get, they do value that, because they’re running pretty hard. They are quite reactive and they really welcome ... the mirror ... to have it held up to them. Those clever questions, checking questions ... it’s a really fast way for them to reflect, I think, coaching. So they say ... they’ve had the opportunity to take a step out and reflect on what they’ve done and, you know, it’s that space for them. EC4

I think it is at the most basic level, the value of having an hour of space and time away from your office environment to be able to think non-reactively, is invaluable and I think you could be a pretty poor coach and still achieve quite good results from just that. EC6

A classic example was a guy that had been off for a week crook and we had a pre-arranged meeting at 10.00 am on the day that he was due back ... he came along and said, “I knew that the hour spent with you would have saved me 4 hours of chasing my tail because it was time to pause, reflect and get really clear on what is it that I have to focus on today, because I could focus on two thousand things” ... it’s the only place he gets that. EC12

Executive coaches reported that the time to reflect and think was valued by client executives because it also helped them emotionally, to feel better (EC1).

Generally the comments are, “that’s great I’ve been able to think that through” or the other value is “I feel so much better now, I feel I can get through this”. Yes, people feel like they’ve progressed ... They’re making progress forward in some way, either in a feeling or taking action. One of my clients today ... said “God I feel so much better, that’s so good” ... She was pointing to something on the page ... a question that she’s going to reflect more on and said, “that is fantastic, I hadn’t thought of that, thank you”. So the value is in them feeling like they’ve progressed. EC1

Executive coaches outlined the value for their clients of being able to reflect with another (their coach). It was reported that clients achieved greater levels of understanding and meaning through the process of talking aloud and interacting with their executive coach. Participants described how this reflection was more powerful than what could be achieved alone.

Some people aren’t so good at reflecting on their own, where some people are really good at just taking a couple of hours out sitting under a tree, you know, going inside, inside themselves. Others respond very well to working with another person, because that is human nature, having someone else ask the questions where they might not ask the
challenging questions themselves, or might not see the situation without their own filters. So to have someone else who’s not in their head, outside, can help them to reflect and ask the questions they might not be able to ask themselves. EC1

They might feel a bit stupid talking to themselves, plus I guess they could sit in the corner and talk to themselves and see where that goes, but I think they would still be a bit inhibited. They would feel inhibited and that and maybe it won’t come out as passionately as it needs to, and even they could do that and they could get clarity from that but they won’t get the devil’s advocate piece. EC12

For others, the whole reflection is just someone to bounce stuff off. This guy I’m thinking of, you know, such a stereotypical massive extravert that it’s almost like I just might as well just sit there the whole time, he just talks and he says “thanks” and goes at the end you know. It’s like he just needs to talk through everything that’s happening probably with a load of his own options decide which ones, decides which one he is going to work on or two and he’ll say, “that was great, thanks” and off he goes. EC10

Well because what I’ve seen over the time of my coaching is that, absolutely people get clarity around their thoughts when they verbalise them, I’m sure there’s some psychology label for that … this is what a client said to me the other day: “as soon as I verbalise it, it seems that I detach from it and I can look at it more critically and so that’s how I can get clarity”. So while you sit there in your office in your corner office in the corner building, running through your mind on how you’re going achieve all your objectives, until you verbalise them to someone who is independent and not judgemental, which means you can freely verbalise everything, then you won’t get the clarity, to me you won’t get as clear a pathway as you would with a coach, so that’s the main thing. EC12

j) Taking them out of their environment (Taking clients outside the workplace)

Executive coaching as away from the day to day was reported by client executives as an important success factor for coaching in Chapter Four. It was also emphasised as a significant factor by executive coaches for enabling clients to move into a suitable learning space outside of their workplace. Emphasis was placed by executive coaches on the importance of geographical and physical distance from the organisation in the practice of coaching. One executive coach described the value of taking clients into a completely different environment to their workplace during coaching, such as taking them outside an office space into a park. Another coach described the value of a client leaving the office (to come to the coach’s work premises) as a way of signalling to clients a shift away from their normal daily routine into the learning space of coaching.

Sometimes the best way for us to get real traction and value out of what we were working on was outside … sometimes we would not meet in my office, we would go down and we would walk around the park while we were talking … it allowed us to focus on the issue and the issues that he was grappling with, rather than him having to look at me across the desk and so it was an even more contemplative space there … I’ve done that with people when, you know, they’re not as good at sitting down in one spot or we’re dealing with some really dicey stuff. EC8

That space to take clients out of their environment, so they always come to the office that I coach in … my strong preference is not to coach people in their own office. At times I have
to; prefer not to. So this space starts from the moment they leave their office and are travelling to the coaching environment ... I can’t know this, but they switch their phones off on the way so to start actually focusing on what it is that they’re coming for. EC10

Another executive coach provided an example of the importance of considering the impact of the physical setting on coaching practice. This also meant that in the context of coaching sessions, the coach physically sat next to clients (and never across the table from them). For the coach, this represented a deliberate shift away from what clients typically experienced in a workplace setting, where meetings occurred between participants across a table.

The other thing I’ll do is I’ll never sit across the table from somebody, it’s always at 90° angle. I’ve had funny situations where people have come in and take a chair that’s opposite (like they would do at work) so I’ll sit closer to them and they’ll move then I’ll sit close and they’ll move. I can allow that twice before I have to say, “look I do really need to sit ... like this yes ... because I do lots of drawing and writing and I expect that from time to time you would as well and it’s much easier to work that way”. EC8

5.4.3. THE PROCESS OF EXECUTIVE COACHING


Executive coaches in my study depicted the process of coaching as a person-centred practice that was directed by the needs of the individual client executive. An important part of the process of coaching for coaches was their ability to manage themselves and to demonstrative reflexive awareness by adjusting their responses at moments when they felt tempted to shift the attention from the client to themselves. The executive coaching process, as interpreted by participants in my study, also involved supporting client executives to focus on the positives and their strengths and for the coach to facilitate a series of critically reflective dialogues and activities that prompt learning from experience.

- Executive coaches depicted a predominantly person-centred (following Carl Rogers, 1961) and client-directed approach (following Duncan et al., 2004) to their practice of executive coaching, characterised by the need to adapt coaching to suit the needs of the particular client executive. The coaches avoided a “one-size-fits-all” or an “ideal” approach to executive coaching, but outlined how their practice was determined by the needs of each coaching engagement and each individual client executive. Following common factors research in psychotherapy (Hubble et al., 1999), a client-directed approach suggests (in a similar way) that therapists should not
make assumptions about client problems or solutions (or apply invariant methodologies or prescriptions), but rather take direction from clients to ensure success (Duncan et al., 2004). In my study, one executive coach provided a poignant example of working with the needs of a particular client executive in a unique way, by assisting that client with overall presentation and professional image. As indicated,

I don’t have an ideal. I go with what is with each engagement. I’m working with someone at the moment which has been quite a different thing, it’s a very senior woman at <Organisation>, but she’s very young ... she’s got a global position ... the brief was that she was really great, technically ... but she wasn’t very confident in her communication. She has to present to senior groups of people ... it was all around interpersonal stuff and being able to communicate clearly and be confident ... The other part of the brief was her image, the way she looked ... Her boss said she doesn’t look the part of the role that she’s in. She’s quite overweight and, you know, it turned out she didn’t know where to find clothes that were professional in her size ... I’ve been working with her with an image consultant as well which has just been fun and I’ve put her onto my personal trainer and so now she’s got her whole wardrobe, she’s had the haircut ... I can’t wait to see her on Friday, she was getting makeup lessons and I told her she had to come with the “whole shebang”. EC7

For the executive coaches in my study, it was important to have a mindset towards their clients that focused on seeing each client executive as a unique person. Coaches illustrated the importance of focusing on client executives as equals and as human beings (EC1), not as individuals who held a particular position, seniority or status.

It’s equal, when you say executives, people say “do you coach SES or CEOs or who do you coach?” and I say “I coach human beings”. Or the other thing in Canberra, “do you coach private sector or public sector” ... I coach human beings. When I’m with them I see a human being. I don’t care whether they’re a CEO or whether they’re not a CEO ... that’s why I love the coaching because I now coach people that in another life if they’d been my bosses, I would have found them difficult people to work with and I’m sitting here thinking, “I couldn’t work with this guy if he was my boss, I’d be panicking right now”. But because I see them as equal human beings, I love it ... Equal means in status. They’re not my boss, I’m not their boss even you could say that I’m a coach and they’re the client, so there’s a power relationship there, I don’t even think that. Yes, they’re paying my bill and I still think we’re in an equal position ... I don’t think that they’re more senior to me or I’m more senior to them. I’m particularly careful about that when I am coaching someone who if we worked together they probably would be working for me ... junior staff I still think of them as an equal. EC1

I try and see everyone that walks in that door as a person first and professional second and I try and look at what’s unique about them ... that’s what I try and tune in to when you talk about the relationship, that’s who I try and see ... who is this person? ... What is different about this person the accountant? And that person the accountant? And what does this person bring to it? That kind of stuff. EC4

I have this belief that human beings actually want to be seen as they are ... there’s a big longing to be seen for who you are and that if you actually can sit in that space with someone and let them be who they are, by being who you are, then it’s a really great gift. EC7
A client-directed approach to coaching practice typified in responses from executive coaches in my study also included the perspective that the coaching agenda should always be appropriately directed by the client, not the coach. In psychotherapy, a client-directed approach in which the client’s role is privileged (above that of the therapist) in the change process suggests that therapists should take direction from clients, follow their lead and organise therapy around the resources, perceptions, experiences and ideas of the client (Duncan et al., 2004). In this way, the client is seen to make therapy work (as the director of the change process), not the therapist (Duncan et al., 2004). Mayeroff (1971) described this as allowing the direction of the client to guide what the practitioner does, helping the practitioner to determine how to respond to the client and what is relevant to a response.

Coaching as a “client directed intervention” was also reported in McCleland’s (2005) study with executive coaches. In my study, coaches used a range of analogies to illustrate the primacy of their client, including the need in coaching for the executive coach to remain invisible (EC3), to be in the passenger seat (EC8) or to stay right out of it (EC7) in relation to setting the agenda for the client executive.

Well it’s got to be client-centred … the whole point of coaching is to land it with the client, but coaches, often particularly when you’re starting, are so concerned about it going well, you take control, therefore undermining the potential … It’s an odd relationship because you’ve got to be to some extent invisible, you’ve got to remain in the interests of the client which sometimes means letting go of yourself in the interests of the client but not entirely. I mean you’ve got to keep your values and dignity, integrity in place, so you’ve got to hold that very, very solid, to hold the space and that’s where your ground is as a coach to be very, very much there, but not be there at the same time. Be so much there that you’re not there. EC3

I often do say … it’s really like driving a car and having a rear vision mirror and having your lights on high beam and I’m sitting in the passenger seat with you … I think that idea that you’re in the driver’s seat as a coachee … very important to remember as a coach that you’re never in the driver’s seat. EC8

It’s about the coaching counterpart … what they want, yes, that’s totally what makes it different. Like when we’re running <coach training> courses, the thing that people find hardest … when they’re just being introduced to coaching is keeping themselves out of it, like when they’re doing their practice. So that’s another thing that makes it special is that it isn’t about the coach at all, you stay right out of it, because you just work on the agenda of the coaching counterpart and the organisation. EC7

Executive coaches in my study also described how client executives determined the focus or goals for their coaching experience, consistent with concepts of self-directed learning (following Knowles, 1975), critical self-directed learning (following Hammond & Collins, 1991) and humanistic approaches to coaching (Stober, 2006). Knowles (1975) defined a self-directed learning approach as essentially one in which learners take the initiative (with or without the help of others) to diagnose learning needs, to formulate learning goals and to implement
learning strategies. Executive coaches described variations in practice where client executives either presented with goals for coaching or were commonly assisted by coaches to define, refine and develop their coaching goals over time. For example, executive coaches related instances of client executives presenting with clarity around their desired goals for coaching:

Well it will start with what the expected outcome is, so the individual will sit down and say “look the reason why I’ve asked for a coach is … you know I’m looking to transition to the next level of leadership, I just want some help to help me step up to that, I don’t know what that is, what that looks like, can you help me?” So right, okay, it might start with, or it might start with “you know I’ve been told that I’m intimidating people, I’ve been told that I push my ideas too hard, I’ve put one or two people offside, that troubles me because I see my career ahead and I don’t want to be like that, if I’m like that I want to be able to change it, what can you do to help me to change that?”. Sometimes people it will start off with the organisation has actually made, “look you know, we want this person to have coaching, because…. we definitely want the person’s expertise, we want the person to stay on board, but some people can’t stand living with this person, you know, can you help us?” “You know, this is what’s happened, this person has actually been charged with bullying, this person has been criticised for not being on board with the other partners” or, you know, reasons like that. So in a behavioural context sometimes there are some very real outcomes that are expected, we expect that the person will change their behaviour between this 360 degree feedback and the next 360 degree feedback. We want to see evidence that that person has changed, so it generally starts off in the very first session or the very first meeting with some clear outcome about what the person wants to achieve. Sometimes it starts off with very vague outcomes which have to be discovered, but the most successful are those where there’s some sense of clarity around what the outcome is. EC11

However, assisting client executives to clarify their goals for the coaching experience and for their learning was frequently an important part of the coaching process for executive coaches. In McCleland’s (2005) study, the executive coach was reported as always collaborating with the executive during the goal-setting process. Stelter (2009) suggested that it may be beneficial for coaches not to focus on defining a goal at the beginning of a coaching session, but rather to allow narratives to unfold. In my study, coaches described a range of situations where they had assisted the client executive gain clarity around the areas of focus for coaching.

It is such a common one, clarifying things is just an automatic thing to me now. Sometimes it might take a couple of sessions to get to the point where we realise that that’s the real goal that we’re working on here. So I’m not sort of trying to settle on “the goal” in the first session, I’ll just settle on a rough sort of area that we’re working on. EC12

I suppose an example that springs to mind is with the Talent Pool when they’ve got their Personal Development Plan and they’ve met with their manager before to clarify what it is that they’re working on, should be working on and they come into the first session and they’ve got their three things and they’ve all got similar three things and you realise that it’s not necessarily that true in terms of what it is that they really want to be working on. Therefore it’s through that clarifying you realise that it’s either a part of that, or it’s more of that, or it’s not that at all really, yes, and then that’s great because you get to what it is that they truly do need to work on. EC6
For some executive coaches in my study, the coaching sessions themselves became an ongoing dialogue around what the client executive really wanted to achieve from the coaching experience. In this way, the process of setting goals was an integrated and evolving part of the coaching process, rather than something that occurred up-front and before the coaching sessions commenced. It was clear from executive coach descriptions that, unlike neatly presented descriptions of coaching processes that might appear in the coaching literature or in marketing material, the process of gaining clarity around coaching goals was not necessarily straightforward, nor something that was evident prior to coaching commencing. Importantly, as coaching progressed, coaches reported that client executives opened up more and more and a deeper understanding of goals typically emerged:

*I think sometimes there’s a lot of unintended outcomes in coaching, I think. People, they come in with a surface goal, but we all know as coaches once you start peeling away the layers there’s something much deeper, much more important that they’re really working on.*

EC4

*The guy, it’s funny he’d set all these goals and then pretty much by the third session he reckons he’d achieved them all. So I just explored and asked him “what’s your validation for that and describe some of the behaviours”. That gave me a few chinks in the armour to sort of dive into, to sort of open up some more for him to realise that perhaps not, so we ended up resetting some goals and then we were off and running. So we mustn’t have set goals correctly in the first place.*

EC12

In descriptions of coaching sessions, executive coaches in my study also detailed how the responsibility for the determination of the session agenda and focus also rested with client executives:

*I always ask them, “what’s going to be the best use of your time today?” My question’s usually that or something very close to that: “how is this session going to be helpful to you?”*

EC1

*I’ll have the word “today” written down with a big question mark beside it. So I will typically start off by saying, “it’s really important for us to review what we talked about last time and the things you were going to take, what’s happened over the last couple of weeks?” Then, “that isn’t necessarily everything that we’re going to talk about today. What is it that you want to achieve today? What is it that you want to achieve, what’s really important for you today to focus on?” … When I was coaching Tim from <organisation>, Tim would always say “<Coach> is going to ask me, what it is that I want to achieve from this session today, so before I walk in I need to know the answer to that”, so they start thinking about it before they’re already here.*

EC2

1) **Leaving self-interest behind (Managing self and being reflexive)**

Executive coaches reported on self-management aspects that were important for enabling them to focus on their client executive (and not themselves) and for signalling to the client that the coaching was about them (and not the coach). Importantly, this involved three
components: (1) the coach managing self as a person, for example, suspending judgement of clients and managing emotions and ego; (2) managing presence and attention during coaching sessions; and (3) ensuring a limited amount of self-disclosure. Eraut (1994) argued that practitioners need to possess the “control knowledge” that is essential for controlling their behaviour. In providing examples of not managing themselves effectively, executive coaches distinguished how judgements that they made about clients had interfered with their ability to form or build effective working relationships with client executives. One coach described failing to manage judgements about a new and potential client effectively. Another participant had discovered that self-management also included suspending judgement about a client’s progress. Another coach described not managing emotions and moods effectively.

It’s a terrible thing to say ... I really didn’t like her and I thought, “I’m going to push you really hard you know, because you’re a spoilt so and so” and all my judgement came out and fortunately she didn’t select me. EC9

It’s a fine balance I think, between enabling that person to come up with good options, good ideas, good things that they work on and helping them by challenging without judging what they come up with. Because I find that in the past I might be thinking, you know, “is that it?”, “oh come on”, but you know in their context in terms of the shift for them it’s actually huge. You know it’s a fine line and I’m sure I don’t always get it right you know, but I’m trying to. EC10

Yes, my mood, I remember explicitly one case in the UK where I was jetlagged, I’d just had a couple of things at our course I was running that went haywire. I was very pressured for time and was getting hammered from a course participant about something that had gone wrong and I rushed down to do my “meet and greet” with a coaching counterpart and it went completely haywire. She accused me of being aggressive. I don’t think I was, but I think what I was missing was the sensitivity to be appropriate to that. Because I think on reflection that control was very important to her and I had inadvertently taken control or endeavoured to take control, triggering defensiveness and then aggression and that never really recovered. EC3

Possession of humility and demonstration of minimal “ego” were also viewed as important aspects of self-management by executive coaches. Mayeroff (1971) argued that humility is an essential characteristic of caring; the mindset that there is always something to learn about the other (and self). Further, ego takes the practitioner away from caring for the individual and becoming more concerned about self than the growth of the other (Mayeroff, 1971). In a study of high achievers in business and sport, the importance of the coach possessing low ego was identified by coachees as an important factor (Jones & Spooner, 2006). As described by one executive coach in my study,

Yes, don’t want to be too carried away with your own abilities, in other words don’t be up yourself ... I can’t see how you could develop a relationship with someone if you’re aloof ... in coaching it doesn’t work ... Yes, I see some coaches being on a bit of a power trip with their role as a coach. I don’t get that, because you’re not a CEO, you’re just someone there who helps someone on a journey. EC12
Being fully present and attentive in the coaching sessions was another important aspect of self-management conveyed by executive coaches. Heron (2001) described being present as “giving free attention”. In this way, Heron (2001, p. 129) presented a process of the practitioner being “here and now within the other” instead of “being now with the other”. Findings from Kimblin’s (2009) phenomenological study with nine coaches suggest that coaches need to manage their “inner game” and change the focus of attention to prepare themselves effectively for coaching. Ensuring this type of presence was portrayed by executive coaches:

Probably just that conscious thought, even if consciously saying to myself before a meeting, “now leave yourself behind” … it’s more about a little bit of mental talk … It’s a switch. It’s just bringing in to the consciousness, and it’s just a way of switching off from where I’ve been and coming in to this new place. EC1

I typically put myself in a state where I am absolutely grounded, I’m already doing my belly breathing, really, really, really neutral and conscious presence. I clear myself of all agendas, no matter what’s happened in the coaching engagement the previous session, I have it in my notebook, but I don’t expect to pick up where I left off. That’s the feelings part you know, … things that I do consciously, very manual things like setting up the room, pouring a glass of water beforehand. I always go in to the room before they get there, so I’m always in the room waiting for them, rather than leave them waiting for me. I always energetically own the space; I stand in each corner of the room and expand my energy to fill up the room. Which I think enhances a sense of presence and calmness. EC5

Two executive coaches explained that signalling their presence to the client required the demonstration of skills including listening, but importantly, the ongoing noticing and reading of the client as a person and attending and responding reflexively in the moment.

God it’s probably all become so unconscious now. Well obviously listening has to be one because you’re asking them about them and learning all about them and asking good questions. Finding the right question is important. Joining with them, showing empathy, showing understanding or trying to reflect back to them what you think the situation is and looking for the body language, for when they affirm yes or no … it’s a dirty word but a lot of it’s intuition. You have an intuitive sense, well I do, because it’s part of my makeup and I think I can read people quite well, because I’m sensitive to others, I’m sensitised to that, whereas other people with a different make up don’t. It’s obviously why I’ve chosen this profession as well but I do have an ability to read people and it’s just that heightened awareness around body language and around feelings, you can see when someone has an emotional reaction to something, so you can walk with them through that, rather than just bounce off it or ignore it or not see it, you’re constantly monitoring that person for all of those things. EC4

It sounds very basic, but just you know the concept of being fully present when I’m coaching I think is the biggest and the most important responsibility that I have. So it being clear that I am present and being able to notice what’s happening in the person, so that’s not just about what they’re saying, it’s the way they’re saying it. It’s the language they’re using, it’s what’s happening, physically for them, that gives you clues as to what’s going on and I think how you respond to that and something that I do (which I would hope most
Executive coaches clarified the importance of managing self-disclosure in their practice. They considered that a limited amount of self-disclosure was suitable in the interests of empathy and rapport, but this should be kept to a minimum to keep the focus on the client. In a similar way, client executives also reported in Chapter Four that their coach had disclosed very little to them. For executive coaches in my study, managing self-disclosure also helped the coach to signal that the coaching was about the client, not the executive coach.

They don’t need to know who I am to do that, my job is to make that space, not to let them know about everything in my life. EC1

I don’t know that I actually do it all that often but just one time … we talked about how counselling can help with that sort of thing and I think I probably said, “look, you know, I remember years ago when I was going through a particularly challenging time around some things I couldn’t get clear on and found it really helpful”. So just to let people know that you’re human too or yes, that sort of thing … If something is relevant that you’ve experienced, I find that it can actually help build rapport but then you don’t go into having a conversation about it … you need to be careful with it … it can be really easy for coaches to go into a default status having a conversation and get out of coaching, so it needs to be done sparingly and appropriately and with mindfulness. EC7

The executive coaches recounted a series of strategies that they had developed over time to help manage themselves in their practice, including being aware and being a good witness (EC5) to their feelings and reactions to clients, and also managing how they thought about clients and the world. Importantly, reflexive awareness and reflexivity of their own state enabled executive coaches to respond appropriately in the moment:

I’ve had experiences where I’ve experienced heavy transference … so at any particular time if you look at your clients, “oh isn’t that funny that they’ve all got the same issue” … there’s transference, that is, where we go in there looking for an issue … the thing is, most of the issues in coaching that most people have are the ones that I’m particularly interested in and they are the ones that I’ll find. So if I sense that’s happening, then I will set out deliberately to not find those issues, I mean if I do find them I find them but I’ll be conscious of not looking too hard … I’m also being aware of what my issues are and asking myself in the moment when I’m coaching, “how much is this about me and how much is this about the client?”, “Is it really the client’s issue?” If the answer is “yes”, then that’s OK, or if the answer is “no”, “what is really going on here?” And then … I might check to see whether or not that issue really is a live one or whether or not it’s one I’ve created. I might say something to the client like, “Okay we’ll talk about your self-esteem, I wonder if there’s other issues at the moment? Let’s leave that for a bit, what other things are going well for you at the moment?” Which will open it up for discussion, if the client goes back and brings it back, yes, that’s OK. EC3
You know, even the other day I was working with someone and I remember asking her a question and in that moment asking myself, “now who did I have that question for?” so that stayed with me, yes. Which makes me realise that I must have been ... going in that moment to what I wanted to know rather than what needed to be communicated, but I noticed it in the moment. So yes, that’s definitely dangerous. EC7

m) Not being the expert in them (Facilitating the coaching process)

All executive coaches identified that an important part of executive coaching was not positioning themselves as an expert with the answers or solutions to the issues raised by the client executive. This involved the coach possessing an awareness or mindset (EC2, EC7) that client executives were the best people to come up with their answers as the “expert” in their own life, not the coach. Kline (1999, p. 138) suggested that a danger with coaching is the “perceived need for the coach, to appear brilliant, to be seen to have all the answers”, which can result in the coach not listening long enough and summarising and directing too early in the process., Kline (1999) argued alternatively that coaches should believe that the brilliant person is the client. As described by executive coaches in my study:

The biggest thing for me ... is to be comfortable that I don’t have to know the answer. That’s not my role, my role isn’t to come up with answers, even when someone will say ... “come on you’re going to have to tell me what it is I’ve got to do here, that’s why I’m paying you this money” ... when you’ve got a senior executive or managing director or somebody saying, you know, “I expect you <coach> to give me the answer to that” ... I don’t have to know the answer ... that to me was just a fundamental shift to become a coach, that mindset. EC2

Because you’re never the expert ... I say that to myself anyway, I’m not an expert. I’m here to help to find ways to help you learn your way into a better future, that’s what I do. So I’m here to help look for processes that are going to empower you to do that or engage you, but I’m not here to give advice because, “hey, my life’s the same as yours, probably”. EC4

Executive coaches described their role as a facilitator of the coaching process. In this way, they viewed their expertise as located in the practice of coaching and they used this expertise to assist client executives to find their own solutions. As suggested by one executive coach, “your expertise is in the process, I guess, rather than in the content” (EC3). Perception of the coach as an expert in process and the client as an expert in the content of their experience was identified by Stober (2006) as an important characteristic of humanistic approaches to coaching. According to Heron (2001), this is also consistent with a general shift in educational reform from telling people (by talking at them) to encouraging them to find out for themselves. As described by executive coaches, the role of the coach was seen to be creating the space for learning to occur and facilitating the process of learning for the client executive:
Building the reflective space around them and putting the onus on the client to develop their own approaches, being an agent of change, not trying to come up with the clever ideas for them. EC3

I do think my counselling background helps me hugely with cases like that, I really do, because I’m used to sitting with not knowing and people in difficulty and I don’t try to find the solution and they’re always looking for the solution and I’ll often point that out, you know. But you have to, I think in coaching be able to give them structure and the framework without the solution and I think that’s quite tricky. EC9

Oh you ask people stuff instead of telling them. It is like day and night, it’s a complete difference and exactly the same when you’re standing in front of a group facilitating ... the idea of standing in front of a group and yakking at them is really dull. But you just yak at them a little tiny bit and then they get it, then you just start turning questions around and you facilitate, you coach and you draw out their experiences and options. EC2

Well consultants will, I mean other forms of consultancy will generally bring to the table some kind of package or even professional expertise that can help people. The expertise that I bring is in asking questions and shining the light into different areas, or to expand the world of the client into a more positive direction. EC3

Executive coaches portrayed how, as their practice had developed over time, they had learned increasingly to trust the facilitative nature of the coaching process and the value of client executives’ agency in determining their own solutions. Armstrong (2012, p. 40) referred to this in coaching as “trusting the dialogue to do its work”. Two executive coaches interpreted this as follows, with one coach providing a detailed example of how shifting the focus of coaching practice from providing direction in the form of instruction (training) to tapping into the inner wisdom (EC5) of the client executive had been a powerful experience and had constituted a shift as a coach.

Well I suppose it means all of the things that we’re taught to be a good coach, getting yourself out of the way, trusting that facilitating that person’s thinking for them to come up with the strategies, the outcomes, the results they’re looking to get, that just trusting that process will get the best results. Even though some time there might be moments where you feel like you’re wading through mud or you feel like “god it’s just sounding so off track”, it’s, you know, just trust the process. That’s something that I find more and more in coaching, is that I less and less get that feeling of “oh God, this is not moving fast enough, or it’s not going anywhere”, and I get that less and less and just trust that having the process and structures in place will enable you to get the best results from them. EC6

There was a really interesting phase that I went through, not long after I did some coach training actually, where I was coaching a man who had a very enigmatic, charismatic, incredibly powerful boss and he wanted this introverted, analytical, reflective wonderful employee to be more like him. It was a really tough brief, a really tough brief. I’d been for years and years training people how to ask questions, you know, “what does a hypothetical question look like?”, “What does an open or a closed question look like?”, “What does a leading question look like?” ... You think about how you teach somebody to ask questions, which is really madness in a way, because everybody knows how to ask questions, it’s just their ego and their thinking that stops them from asking because they figure they’ve already got all the answers. So I thought, “okay, I’m going to really experiment here ... and I said to my client, “it sounds to me like, you’ve got some information missing in this situation, what would you need to know?” And he gave me all the things he needed to
know and I said to him, “how would you ask the questions that would enable you to know that?” and he came up with the most brilliant questions. All the things I would have taught him if I had have had my old paradigm on. I was just blown away and in that moment it just confirmed for me that I could begin to trust that people have got the answers. The coaching counterpart had the answers (and the wisdom) and I could let go of any judgement or belief systems that I had around me being smarter or more aware of communication than they were. I was almost moved to tears, it was so powerful in that moment. EC5

Executive coaches articulated how it was important for them in their practice to remain very clear that the onus of responsibility for correcting a situation lay with the client executive, not with them. This involved conscious responses from executive coaches that served to remind themselves of their role, of maintaining appropriate boundaries and managing their feelings and anxiety around not offering answers or solutions to client executives. O’Neill (2000) described this as the need for coaches to increase their tolerance for reactivity; dealing with their own anxiety and impulse to come forward in the moment (a response that ultimately interferes with helping the client). One executive coach provided an example of the need for this reflexive awareness and reflexivity:

The one thing, that’s the one I was talking about, is I think that when I know I’ve moved in to “oh I should be fixing them”, to pull myself back out of myself and remind myself that I’m not there to fix. I know how to do that, I just have to remind myself ... there are a couple of clients where I almost feel like I’m there because I could be fixing it and that’s a dangerous place for a coach to be. Particularly if they start thinking that I’m there to fix (and I let them think that), I’m in big trouble. They’re in big trouble too; it’s not going to help either of us ... A client called me up yesterday to tell me something had happened, something hadn’t gone so well for them and they just wanted to let me know how it went. I know they just wanted to talk and let me listen, but I couldn’t help thinking, “I’ve failed this person” or “why has this happened?”. “We had such a good coaching session 2 weeks ago, how come what we talked about didn’t work in this meeting and how has he come out of this meeting not feeling so good and things aren’t going as well as he’d hoped they would?” So I started getting tense and anxious and thinking, “oh no I’m not doing the right thing, a good coach means that things go well for people”... This example was one where I was starting to think “oh, he’s calling me up, something didn’t go well. I guess I’ve got to try and rectify and fix this”. That was how I was feeling at the time. When I voiced that concern to them and said “I would so just like to be able to fix this for you, I feel quite helpless” and they said “just listening, I just wanted to let you know what’s going on” so they weren’t putting it on me and saying, “okay, you’re my coach you better fix this”, so that helps. But at the time yesterday, on the phone, I was really quite anxious ... In summary it pulls me off centre when I start thinking, “oh God I’m the coach, I’m the one responsible, I have to take this load, I have to fix it” and I’m in flow when I’m just there for them and I get out of the way, yes. EC1

Executive coaches described their negative experiences of being coached by someone who moved into the space of “the expert”. These experiences had become key lessons for their own coaching practice.
I wouldn’t do it in the way that she <coach> does it, because it becomes a litany of “hey let me tell you about me” … “look I’m giving you advice, this is my story, this is what happened to me, this is what you need to do”. That doesn’t work, that’s very jarring for people, so that’s one thing that I don’t do. EC4

I hate the coach who knows all of my problems and will answer them all, they’ll give me a list of what I need to do, that’s a definite no-no, for me that’s not, for me that’s not coaching … I’ve experienced that a number of times and the coach, he likes to finish the sentence for you, that’s a big no-no. EC10

Executive coaches suggested that the process of coaching did not always flow for them if they moved too far into the role of expert and that coaching sessions became challenging when they had allowed this to occur:

The difficult ones <sessions> are the ones where I know I’ve moved into … I think I’m responsible for fixing this and my brain is saying, “you’re not responsible”, but I’m still thinking, “oh my God, this is difficult, this is really hard, I don’t know how to fix this” and I know I’m not supposed to. They’re the ones that don’ t flow so well. EC1

However, executive coaches also utilised a diversity of approaches in their practice, at times moving into the space of sharing advice (or offering an expert opinion) when it was appropriate and helpful for their client executive. As outlined in Appendix D, the provision of advice by coaches is controversial. In my study, advice giving was seen as appropriate by executive coaches when used as a method of empathic enquiry. Executive coaches in my study described relevant moments of advice giving or direction (as empathic enquiry):

I think where I have done it is to empathise. If you can say to someone, “look you know, I have been in your position … when somebody, a boss has wanted me to do this” or “I’ve been asked to do that and I can tell you at that moment I felt X, is that how you felt? Is that what you’re experiencing?” … EC4

Sometimes I fall into the trap of telling and not guiding and I’ve had some experiences where all the people around me are sick or dying … so I’ve got a few clients at the moment who are a little bit worried about the financial downturn and at some point in the conversation we have the “well is this going to be death?”. I think that’s an example of having other things going on in my life where I put things in perspective, occasionally it helps me to say, “you know, life’s not that bad” … and they go, “yes that’s right, life’s actually not that bad, I do still have a house over my head”, so that might be guiding a bit and not truly coaching but that would be an example where I might just go for it and say, “hey, yes, we’ve got nothing to worry about”. EC1

I’ve had a couple of clients ask me about my situation. I had one last week say, “well how did you get through that?” or “what’s been your experience?” and rather than say “oh it’s got nothing to do with me” they actually really wanted to hear my experience so I told them. I said, “that’s just me and that happened to me because of the way my life unfolded”. So I’ll give them the answer but I’ll always say, “But I’ve got very specific situations that make that work for me, so you might not have that” … I’m probably more comfortable passing on other clients’ experience than at passing on mine … I might say, “you know, a couple of clients have tried this, it seemed to work for them, they are in a situation a little bit similar to yours, this is how they did it, so this worked for them”, so I’ll
pass that on, but also say it was just their experience and their situation. I think people like to hear that too because I don’t know, people often like to hear good ideas from other people. EC1

One executive coach found that in the practice of coaching, coaches drew on a wide range of approaches that sometimes worked (and sometimes did not) and moved along a spectrum of facilitating to offering advice and recommendations, depending on the situation. In the following quote the coach describes the process of coaching as unique to each client executive (and each coach), and undertaken very much in the moment, as a dance (EC11).

That’s a difficult area because I found myself moving backwards and forwards between being the prompter of a decision or being the promoter of a decision. I know coaching as a framework speaks about the difference between coaching and mentoring. Mentoring is about providing expertise in the assistance and the coaching is about helping and enabling the individual to think for themselves. But the reality is that you’re sliding up and down that scale in my experience, there have been times when I’ve seen a solution for the individual, or what I believe to be a solution, I’ve presented that as a potential solution and then the individual has worked with that and it has turned out to in fact to have been the best decision for them. That’s where I see myself acting as a promoter. I’ve seen myself do the same thing and the solution that I thought or what I promoted has turned out to be exactly the wrong thing and not really appropriate for the individual and where I’ve really had to step back from that and realise that I’m putting my own agenda forward or there’s something that I’ve seen that I think I can jump to a conclusion and I have to be very, very cautious with that. Just recently I’ve been working with a partner in a professional services firm and his issue was around wanting to be more courageous in terms of taking on projects and committing capital and making more decisions, we’d sort of gone the psychometric tests for him and showed that he did have a tendency to be much more prudent than perhaps he needed to be, he was much more adverse in this environment. He needed to be able to take on some risks, so you know, we had discussions around that and I found myself prompting him and in prompting him suggesting things for him to think about, putting frameworks in front of him that I specifically wanted him to engage with and I found myself being the lead in that coaching relationship to such a degree that it almost felt like a training program. We got to the end of, I think it was about fourth or fifth session or something, and then I actually didn’t hear from him for a while and I realised that I’d actually been over-promoting and I thought I’d probably blown this relationship you know, because I’ve actually been taking too much of a lead. I really had a great deal of angst about that but I contacted him again just recently and he’s fine, he’s okay and we’ve re-started the coaching relationship. So there was something in that, that he either didn’t sense or felt what was beneficial but I’ve felt guilty of in terms of my role as a coach, I’ve become acutely sensitive to my role as a promoter or a prompter and how I actually deal with that, you’re fighting with it all the time. How much do I push? How much do I sit back? It’s a dance and there’s no one outcome or one solution or one way of doing it for any given individual in any given context. EC11
Executive coaches argued that an important part of the process of coaching client executives was to help them focus on the positive aspects of the situations they faced. Executive coaches described how the practice of coaching involved shifting the client’s focus towards the exploration of possibilities, opportunities and their own potential. For the executive coaches in my study, this involved helping client executives to recognise and build on their strengths in the service of achieving their goals.

*It’s very much a strengths space … they look at what their strengths are to move them forward and to move them out from where they are.* EC10

Commonly, a focus on strengths was reported by executive coaches as an effective strategy for actively shifting the client’s concentration on problems to the identification of (multiple) options and solutions. It has been argued that, because of the emphasis given to construction of solutions versus problem analysis, coaching is a “solution focused” process (Grant, 2006a; Greene & Grant, 2003). In my study, assisting client executives to shift focus from problem to possibility was reported by executive coaches as a fundamental aspect of their practice of coaching.

They <client executive> emailed me and told me their situation which was they didn’t think they were in control of making decisions in their life. Life was just happening to them … there was just something about her that I knew I could move, so I asked her to tell me her achievements in her life and work. So I’d heard that she’d moved through a few things, she’d done quite a lot I said, “tell me about them, tell me about the achievements and why they were important” and so on. In fact, she told me one fantastic story after another about how she’d done so well with her life and I was scribbling down notes and I handed her a whole page of strengths. She told me her achievements and I gave her a list of strengths. Then … I took her to the strengths, “where do you want to be in 10 years’ time, 5 years’ time?” and she was in such a good mood she said, “you know what I’ve always wanted to do?” and that’s where she opened up. I listened to a whole lot of things that she’d always wanted to do and she said, “I reckon I can do them”. So we went into action planning and that’s where she wanted to be, even though she’d emailed me with a problem that she wasn’t in control of her career. This is what I find happens in my sessions, the problem goes away. We didn’t actually deal with the problem … because when she started talking and getting excited she went straight to the future and actually we didn’t have to talk about the fact that she hadn’t taken control of her life, because she realised she was taking control. So I find sometimes we sidestep the problems completely by taking on that type of approach. And it happened again today with another person, a similar thing not quite the same. I do it a different way according to the person you know. I really have a bit of sense of where I can go. They came in with a problem, we got to the problem in the last 5 minutes and they knew what to do with it, because of the conversation that we’d had before, which was a bit similar, yes. They were in a place where they said, “I know what to do with my problem now”. EC1

*It is all about steering away from problems, reframing problems in terms of the possibilities and just constantly flipping (not devaluing, but reframing) the way that problems are*
presented. Always asking the question, “in order to survive, you know, when the situation’s impossible, what do we do first?” So just constantly looking for little cracks in what appear to be impenetrable barriers. By what Tony Grant calls “sceptical optimism” we are optimistic the client will be successful but we’re sceptical that what the client is doing now is going to be the one answer that’s going to get them a solution. So I constantly probe around at any one solution. I’ll say, “yes, that’s one way of doing it and there’s probably a better way too. What’s another way, another option?” EC3

One executive coach expressed how adopting a strengths approach in coaching practice (drawn from an interest in positive psychology) had highlighted the value in coaching for shifting the client from pessimism to optimism. It was suggested by this executive coach that the shift in state or mood (EC1) enabled client executives to think more clearly and find solutions to their problems.

There’s been a pattern over the last 3 or 4 years, with my style of coaching, going in and shifting people out of that space of “upsetness”. Using whatever coaching question I might have to get them in a better mood. I’m very conscious of it, I want them to be in a good mood, not because I want them to be happy, but I know that people think better when they’re in a better space. So the vivid ones are the ones where I’ve managed to shift them away from the doom and gloom, because that’s where clients can be. Get them in a better space and then when we address the problem they brought in. Most of the time they say “<Coach>, that problem’s not so big any more, I know what to do with it”. EC1

Executive coaches also highlighted moments in which a strengths orientation included focusing on a successful area of a client’s life (such as outside of work) and helping them to identify how they could use those strengths in the workplace.

I think after the second or third session when Catherine came into the room I’d start giving her a kiss on the cheek instead of shaking her hand. Because it just felt like the right thing to do in the moment, it wasn’t sort of premeditated, it just felt there was a connection that allowed me to do that. How I sat with her, I sat very close on the same side of the table but not leaning on the table so we were always in very close proximity to each other. We used her son as an anchor point for a lot of “aha!” moments, so if she was dealing with someone at work that didn’t know what they were doing, I’d ask her how she dealt with it and then I’d ask her, “and if Thomas doesn’t know what he’s doing, how do you deal with him?” and so using her son as an anchor-point quite regularly throughout the process helped just to personalise it a bit it got her out of her work armour, her professional armour into a family place, which softened her a bit. EC5

Last week when I was working with somebody it was the first time that I’d raised it, he had told me that he’d shared his 360 degree feedback results with his wife and I remember catching the name and I just wrote it on my piece of paper. Then he was talking about how he is with his own team members, he is, he described, I said, “what happened, what are the characteristics of your behaviour in the office when you’re working?”. He’s on the dealing floor and he said, “professional, direct” you know, all of those classic things, he said, “oh but it’s not like that, I take my team out every Wednesday night and every Friday night, we go and have a few beers” and I said, “so it’s not like that, so what is it like, how would you describe, what are the characteristics of your behaviour?” and he said, “open, I probably do more listening than talking and a lot more relaxed” so I said, “okay”. I said, “you mentioned
In my study of coaching, executive coaches portrayed their strengths-based orientation as grounded in the holding of hope for the clients and their potential and ability to find their own answer/s (when given sufficient time to do so). In similar way, Saleebey (2009) argued that the central dynamic of the strengths perspective in social work practice is hope and possibility. Consistent with Saleebey’s descriptions of the application of a strengths approach in social work, executive coaches articulated that in coaching practice, a focus on strengths (and solutions) was not a method, but rather a way of viewing the world (and their client) which always emphasised the potential of the client executive. Martin Buber (in a dialogue with Carl Rogers in 1957) described this focus on potential as “confirmation of the client”, which was labelled by Carl Rogers (1958, p. 14) as the process of “confirming the other”. Carl Rogers (1961, p. 55) argued that a therapist needs to accept the client as not fixed or finished, but rather engaged in a “process of becoming” (in which the role of the therapist was to confirm the client’s potentialities). As described in my study,

You know it sounds a bit of a cliché but it’s all about the potential. The person did know the answer, they did know what was getting in the way. Maybe consciously they knew that, but they just weren’t admitting it. Or, maybe they didn’t actually know at that moment in time. So often when you ask someone a question and they say, “I don’t know”, I believe that that very instant in life, they don’t know the answer. But if I give them a nanosecond more, they might know the answer. It may be that we actually need to give them a week more, but sometimes someone will say, you know, “I don’t know what I should do, but let me think about it, I could do this”. So where the potential is, the solution, the answer, the awareness or whatever it is, it’s there and you tap it, so that they then consciously know that they know. EC2

Well I think all coaches should be working from the solution-focused approach in whatever form they might be, but I think that also great coaches find the more approaches you can draw on the better coach you’ll be … solution-focused coaching is not a method actually, it’s to me a methodology, a philosophy on life … really underneath the solution-focused approach are very deeply held values around human potential. EC3
o) **Asking the question behind the question (Stimulating critical, reflective dialogue)**

For all my **executive coaches**, the core of their coaching was asking the **client executive** questions that fostered talking, thinking and, importantly, critical reflection by the **client executive**. In McCleland’s (2005) study, coaches wanted to move beyond the process of simple inquiry to asking “good (reframing) questions”, which they described as the “art” of coaching. Similarly, in my study, **executive coaches** reported that they viewed the asking of quality questions as a key part of the practice and art of being a good coach:

*It’s based on questioning as opposed to telling instructional approaches, which actually underlie quite a lot of coaching as well, but coaching more typically has got to be directed towards asking questions ... If you taped a coaching session of mine ... most of what I would be doing would be asking questions ... and maybe bringing into the room models, examples from other coaching engagements or experiences. But, fundamentally I ask questions, which is what coaching is about.** EC3

*When it goes well, I’m focused enough to just be in the moment to ask the question that gets their thinking going and they are responding to that. So regardless of the personality of the person, you know some coaches talk about, “oh I’ve got talkers and I’ve got people who don’t talk”, well I think that’s the quality of the questions and the quality of the coach.** EC12

*I think, you know, it just reminds you again how exquisite your questioning needs to be, getting to the nub.** EC8

*I find it’s all about the questions, it’s all about the when and how the questions are asked which, you know, provokes a very deep reflective space, so my intention is always to get someone in to a reflective place you know ... I have a belief that that has to happen at a deep level because they’re not doing you know, transactional, that’s not what I’m doing so I am really trying to get them to look at “what did I do, what was my part in this?”** EC10

*The courage to ask difficult questions ... do it from a place of respect, so the way they question and the way they reflect back comes from a place of deep respect ... They put their heart and soul in to it, questions that come from heart and soul are much better questions than someone who’s just doing their job and ticking off a checklist.** EC1

**Executive coaches** identified the value of questions for fostering reflection that aimed to remove assumptions and gain deeper levels of meaning or realisation. Armstrong (2012) argued that this is the purpose of coaching dialogue, that is, the use of questions that encourage new frameworks of understanding (learning) around the coachee’s experience. These have been referred to by Kline (1999) as “incisive questions”. Using powerful questions to help clients achieve deeper levels of meaning was highlighted by **executive coaches**:

*Lots of clarifying, asking the question behind the question, enabling them to understand what it will mean once they achieve what it is they’re looking to achieve. Questions that will get them to articulate that, which can be very powerful in terms of realising that actually they don’t want it, or that what they want is something really very, very important to them.** EC6
There’s one question that I always ask which I found to be really crucial and that question is “what brings you joy?” and that has been a key to so many coaching assignments, actually, that question. EC9

Executive coaches also provided examples of deep reflection with their clients that involved the “critical reflection of assumptions” (following Mezirow, 1998). In these instances, the premises upon which a client executive had defined a problem were critiqued. In a similar way, Titchen (2004) described the essential feature of critique (involving a collaborative critical reflection on an experience and situation) as an powerful aspect of the facilitative process and important for the development of refined understandings and new knowledge. In the first example that follows from my study, the executive coach enabled the client to challenge her premise that a newly appointed manager must appear to know what she was doing and not expose any weakness to her team. In the second example, the client reached a point of realising and challenging the premise that their direct reports were not as important as others and therefore could be treated differently. Mezirow (1998) argued that significant personal and social transformations result from this kind of reflection. Mezirow’s (1990) concept of perspective transformation has considerable relevance to quality executive coaching. In the words of my executive coaches:

Now being challenged to actually be honest with herself, which we don’t always do if we’re left to do it under our own devices. So I challenged her through questions obviously and reframing too. I mean she got really honest about the fact that part of her felt guilty for being in that managerial position ... she didn’t have the skills ... she didn’t know how to suddenly be telling them stuff that was needed, she didn’t know how to be a manager basically and she wasn’t given that sort of support to go from being part of the team to actually managing that team. So she got quite clear on her feelings and her thoughts and her top left hand quadrant integral model, her stuff around the role. It was being reflected in her behaviour. So through getting clear on what was happening internally for her ... and then actually starting to declare it out loud, she started being more transparent with her team and actually owning up to her vulnerabilities with the team. It did help ... in the coaching is where she actually felt safe to open up about what was really going on for her and on more than just how the behaviour was manifesting. EC7

I think they’ve got to have the confidence that they can be very open, so they’re able to say what needs to be said. They may say things to you that they would probably never share with anybody else, maybe not even their loved one. Because there’s no consequence other than that’s going to help us work on what it is that we need to work on. So I think they need to be prepared to, they’ve got to be open to share, they’ve got to be open to be challenged by what they hear themselves say. The thing that comes to mind with that was there was a guy, his LSI for his peers was all constructive, no defensive behaviours, his LSI

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7 At the core of transformative learning is the process of perspective transformation, which Mezirow (1990) suggested occurs in response to an externally imposed “disorienting dilemma”, such as a major life event. These anomalies or dilemmas can trigger critical reflection and perspective transformation.

8 The Life Styles Inventory™ (LSI) is a 360-degree feedback questionnaire developed by the Human Synergistics organisation. It describes constructive, passive/defensive and aggressive/defensive behaviours. It provides for self-description (LSI 1) and feedback from others (LSI 2). See Glossary for more details.
from his boss, all constructive and his LSI from his direct reports all red, no constructive, red, red, red aggressive behaviour … I said to him, you know, “let me just put my hand over that direct reports” and I said, “what I know of you in the environments I’ve seen of you is reflected in these constructive behaviours”, and I said, “and I’ve mixed with you socially, you know, for dinner after those and I see exactly the same. If it hadn’t been there and done qualitative interviews with your direct reports I would never have believed that result”. So I then said, “so why do you choose to behave like that with them?” and he sat back, because that was whack, that was a four by two across the head. He said, “no one has ever asked me before, why I choose to behave like that”. So this is the part where I’ve mentioned before, they’ve got to be open to hear what they then say, so we then explored that, so what’s that about, why do you choose that? And after about 35 minutes or so he said, “they’re just not as important”, and he then looked at me and said, “I said that didn’t I?”. I said “Yes you did”, so then we explored what that was about. So I think they’ve got to be open to whatever is going to come and sometimes it will surprise them, what they say, but I think that’s really key for them. EC2

Executive coaches described the importance of challenge or raising tension (EC7) in the process of fostering critical reflection with client executives. O’Neill (2000, p. 13) contended that the challenge provided by coaches involves having the “backbone” to share their position with their client, whether popular or not. Cavanagh (2006, p. 320) described this as the coach “afflicting the comfortable”, helping the client move out of stable mindsets and behaviours to create new insights, understandings and actions. In my study, executive coaches provided examples of challenging their client:

What do I do? I think I raise tension is probably what I do, I just consistently. I’ve had one client say to me, “oh you’ve got that look” and I say, “what look is that?” and she says, “you’re going to get me to do something really hard, I know”. EC7

I often say to people, “look, if it were easy, if it weren’t challenging, you’d do it yourself, so expect that it will be challenging, but it won’t be anything you can’t do and it won’t be challenging in the sense that it will be like an exam, it will be just challenging mentally as we have, you know, discussions around the issues that you’re coping with” … when you have one-on-one coaching you’re absolutely reminded what it’s like for your coach counterparts when you’re coaching them … it’s challenging, it really sits you back on your haunches and it’s terribly important and very good, very valuable. Usually it just gives you so much thinking time afterwards that you didn’t have before, so much to think about. EC8

Where he (in a sense) gave me more and more permission to challenge him and to explore with him each of the problems that he presented, you know, difficult relationships in the business or strategic issues that he faced and I could travel with him and actually go much deeper with him than perhaps I would have otherwise had permission to do. At one stage in the process about halfway through where he was dealing with the difficulty of managing these different time zones and I put a question to him, I said “<client>, supposing you took away the geography, how would you manage the business?”. He said, “what do you mean the geography?”. I said, “If there was no geography, how would you manage it?” and he immediately came up with the solution to it: “oh well I’d have a three-tiered system, I’d have these people meeting here and these ones here and they’d be looking the business, this way, that way” – and instantly he saw how he’d conduct the business. EC11
An important aspect of the reflective dialogue in coaching identified by *executive coaches* was the existence of moments of silence. Coaches reported that it was during silence that some of the most powerful moments in coaching occurred for their *client executives*. Buber and colleagues (1947) believed that shared silence was an important aspect of dialogue. Genuine dialogue, they argued, is more than the exchange of words. Genuine dialogue also takes place in silence (whereas much conversation is really monologue). The importance of the *reverent* (EC11) silence in coaching was described by one *executive coach* in the following example. This quotation also emphasises the importance of reflection as the key to breakthroughs for the *client executive*.

But actually the most powerful moments in coaching have been where it’s come to the end of a series of dialogue or there might have been a question or there might have been just some proposition that had been put and the person sits back and you can see their eyes going inward and you can see them tracking across country in their own mind and you just hold the silence and let them come back into the room when they’re ready. There’s something profound about that silence, there’s something almost reverent about that silence, something that’s discovered in that silence. It’s like going into a kind of whirl spring. If you were patient, if you could sit back and you hold that silence, that’s when the person comes back with the most profound insights. And I’ve had the experience where at the end of a coaching session I almost feel as if nothing’s happened, because it’s just been these series of kind of stop-start, you know, the person just stopping. Obviously they’re reflecting but nothing’s coming out and you’re like, “right, okay, that’s the end of the session then and how was that?” “Yes, interesting”. “Oh okay, I don’t know if I did my job there”. The person comes back in to the next session and says, “I’ve had the most incredible things that have happened to me since we last met, you know, this happened, that happened, I’ve been thinking about this, I’ve gone away and read that, I’ve spoken to this person and it never would have happened unless I’d had a chance to think about those things”. So reflection is a deep place in the coaching relationship, it is like whirl spring, it is in the centre of the room, it’s right there, and there are times when is caused to bring your coaching counterpart to the edge of the whirl to look down in to it and there are times when the person willingly climbs out of the whirl or falls or gets pushed, for whatever reason, spends some time in that whirl spring and they come up with the most wonderful discoveries. EC11

*Executive coaches* also indicated that when critically reflective dialogue worked well with the client in the process of coaching, it seemed as if something powerful had emerged between them in the context of the dialogue. Armstrong (2012, p. 33) referred to this as the “knowledge between” that emerges because the coach has adopted the role of coach-custodian (of the dialogic space) versus the roles of coach-expert (coach imposes “outsider knowledge” or advice). Cavanagh (2006) described this as the shared reflective space in his dynamic model of the coaching conversation, with knowledge an emergent property of the conversation process between coach and client. Further, Cavanagh argued that when coaches

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9 The difference in dialogue, Armstrong argued (2012), is that the coach-expert is curious about the situation/world faced by the client executive and the coach-custodian is curious about the person (as a meaning-maker of the situation and experience).
are truly engaged in the conversation, this emergent knowledge has the character of insight (an “aha!” experience) rather than an overlay of the coach’s pre-existing models on the client’s situation.\(^\text{10}\) As depicted by executive coaches in my study,

*It’s particularly marked by the “aha!” moment; it’s where whatever has gone on in the dialogue doesn’t necessarily have had to have come from me but something that has perhaps emerged between us and the individual’s caused to look at that and you can see the connection is being made, it’s like bolt of lightning, you know – the eyes roll up to ceiling as he goes “eurekal!”. Suddenly they’ve, there’s something that they’ve got and it’s where their thinking has had to go cross-country and they’ve discovered something on that journey that they wouldn’t otherwise have discovered and quite often it’s something that I hadn’t anticipated they’d discover either. I may have laid out a path for them, I may have had some anticipation about what discovery they might make but it turns out to be a surprise both to me and to them. That’s a wonderful moment, there’s a – that discovery is like, you know, like tripping over a nugget of gold that just happens to be sitting in the middle of the road, you know, it’s extraordinary.* EC11

*What makes it special is what is created as a container, as the containment between the coach and the coaching counterpart … I think probably the key thing is that, you know, we’re asking not telling.* EC7

A key role for critical reflection in the coaching space as reported by executive coaches was focused on exploring gaps between clients’ espoused theory and their theory-in-use (following Argyris & Schon, 1974). The process of critically reflecting on theories-in-use is also known as “double-loop learning” (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Interestingly, Finger and Asun (2001) argued that the role of the adult educator in double-loop learning is to be a mentor or coach (not “just” a facilitator) and to assist individuals to critically reflect on their theories-in-use. An example from my study involves an executive coach challenging a client in a coaching session to reflect on the inconsistencies between rationale (the client’s espoused theory) for the loss of temper and what was actually happening for the client in the situations (theory-in-use).

*When you verbalise to me … I’ll also challenge you on some of your stuff and the challenge is based (not on my beliefs or where I come from) the challenge is about seeing any disconnects in their argument or in what they’re saying. So I’ll say an example could be they might say, “I blow my stack when I’ve let it build up during the day” and then two sentences later they might say, “these people in the meetings just wind me up in the meeting” and I’ll say, “so okay, but I did hear you say earlier that you, it builds up during the day, so how does that fit with you saying that it’s the people in the meeting that causes you to blow up?” So I’m just trying to form some logic, just get a little bit of reflection, a mirror, the coach mirroring things back. So a comment might seem really out there to me and I’ll just say, “look, that seems a bit out there to me let me just repeat what you said, is that something that you believe in or what?”*. EC12

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\(^{10}\) In describing coaching as a complex adaptive system, Cavanagh (2006) suggested that the outcome of the coaching engagement emerges in the complex interaction of the coach and client together. In this way, the solution is viewed as radically co-created by client and coach.
One executive coach reported using a list of questions to foster client executives’ critical reflection between the process of meeting the client for the first time and the coaching sessions commencing. A key finding in a small study conducted by Whyte (2010b) was that supporting the reflective process was one of the most important aspects of coaches’ emails to clients, suggesting that coaches could use emails even more effectively in their practice. In my study, one executive coach believed it was important to start this reflective process as soon as possible using email.

I’ve actually compiled this list of questions, that they actually have to get to reflect on away on their own and I ask them to respond to them; they’re just simple ones and I don’t want pages. I just want a point to respond to before I next see them. You know, the first of those questions is actually “what one, two or three things, if they were to change, would have the most positive impact on your life and work?”. Then, “what would that mean for you if that happened and what’s prevented you from doing this in the past?”. It’s just about five questions. EC7

p) Mining the gold from experience (Cultivating experiential learning)

In my study, executive coaches described coaching as a process of learning from experience and highlighted the value of client executives’ experience as a key part of the coaching process:

As far as process is concerned it’s very much about gaining permission to go to deeper levels of meaning with the individual, because that’s where the richness is. It’s about mining the deepest vein of experience that the individual has, being able to bring that to the surface and make it, turn it into gold. EC11

Then we sit down and have the first session where we actually then start to hone in on “so where do you want to be, where are you at now and what’s the gap?”. Then from there it’s the experiential learning cycle of the experience, the reflection, the analysis, the action. EC12

Through discussion, through picking out themes and following themes that are determined in the early sessions and developing those around actions, just like the cycle of action and reflection. EC3

Executive coaches articulated the importance of planning as a key part of learning from experience, particularly at the outset of coaching sessions. The focus on this part of the process was portrayed by coaches as questioning clients to identify areas from their experience to focus on in coaching.

Yes, what I find is we do plan the things that we’re going to work on and because we come in and review the actions from the previous session ... so it is to an extent predetermined by that process. EC6

I feel like that I drive the session but only in terms of my questioning, so I’ll say to him “what do we want to achieve out of this session? ... what are some areas that we can focus the coaching on?”. Then we’ll put them in order of importance of what we’re going to work on and so that’s when I’ll start the process of “so, tell me about your challenges, what are
the things that are really on your mind at present?”. That just gets the whole dialogue happening. EC12

Coaches described an important part of the process of learning from experience was for client executives to “do the work”. For coaching to be successful as a process, clients had to take action between coaching sessions:

I think it was David Peterson who’s a US coach, who said, “if you want to be loved, be loveable, if you want to be coached, be coachable”. Yes, that’s the thing … anyone who’s going to get anything out of coaching has got to be prepared to do something to make transitions, it’s as simple as that, it doesn’t matter what they do. EC3

In supporting client executives to put into practice, experiment and take action as an important part of learning from experience in coaching, executive coaches described a wide variety of approaches to spacing the time between coaching sessions. They were committed to ensuring that the process suited the needs and learning styles of particular client executives.

People work differently and what I do notice is the idea of say a number of individual sessions spaced at regular times, I think that’s a load of rubbish basically. Very rarely is that going to work, because people work in cycles, they need longer sessions, shorter sessions, gaps, it’s a much more fluid process. It depends on the client, there isn’t an ideal, you know … So you’ve got to understand people have real lives and that the timing and the spacing of coaching is a much more fluid thing than any of the coaching programs anticipate. That’s one of the weaknesses of coaching programs that anticipate that you all start at one point and you all have sessions and it’s all nice and it comes together at the end. Well, nice idea, in practice it’s much messier than that then and you’ve got to allow it to be, so it doesn’t damage the integrity of the coaching … there’s no issue in terms of that … it’s not a fitness trainer where you’d have these regular sessions because you have to keep it up and if you don’t have your session you’ll go backwards. EC3

It depends on what it is they’re looking to achieve and it depends on what else they’ve got going on in their work lives, so if they travel a lot, or it depends on the opportunities they’ve got to put into practice their “homework” at the end of the session. EC6

It depends on what it is they’re working on, so if you’re really looking at behavioural or transformational change, it doesn’t tend to be very transactional – “I’ve got a goal, take these steps, tick, goal accomplished”. I find that an individual needs that space to just go away and, you know, implement what we’ve been talking about and then come back … sometimes it might be “look, you know, I think we’re in a good spot, you know, let’s leave it for a couple of months and put in a date and then let’s get back together” – that sort of thing. And then, depending again on what it is that I’m working or not, then they will find that space useful just because they want that reflective space to look at what they’re doing. EC10
Executive coaches described a process of facilitating client executives’ learning from experience in a manner that resembled Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (1984). In the following example, the executive coach in my study describes facilitating the client executive through a process of sharing the experience, reflecting on what had occurred, assimilating new understandings and planning for future action:

There was a senior manager in a large company, he was wanting to develop some of his communication skills and so that had already been the goals we’d set, and so out of a prior session we come up with a few actions that we could do before, in between the sessions. So we got together and I just asked him how his, how his fortnight had been? He sort of went straight into the action, you know, how he’d gone with the action. I was just asking him reflective style questions around, I think he said, “I blew up in a meeting with this person” and I said, “so what led to that?” and he described how he’d already had a few, it had been a build-up for him thinking that this person was on the wrong side of him, so he sort of created a few things, whether they were in his mind or not, how that person was behaving and why, and so by me just questioning him around to, you know, “how did that occur, where did that come from?” we’d realised that he had allowed this to build all day to a point where it was so easy to blow his stack. So then I asked him questions like, “so is there anything you can do to avoid, to not have a similar situation in the future?” and we talked about some avoidance methods or some coping methods, “what else do you do?”, then I sort of took him down towards triggers and for him to understand a trigger and to understand when a certain thing occurs that he’s probably going to act in that certain way and how we could actually divert it into a different path and he was pretty impressed with that, so he thought, well that’s something he’d focus on next time, so got that down to specific actions on when he noticed that there was a build-up in his frustration with a situation or a person to actually do something to just to divert that frustration. EC12

However, in describing the frameworks they used in facilitating learning from experience with client executives, executive coaches in my study made explicit reference to coaching session models they had learned as part of their coach training, such as the GROW model, rather than Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (1984) or the field of literature on experience-based learning. This is interesting when it is considered that Cox (2006) appropriately observed that the steps of the GROW model map directly to the four elements of the experiential learning cycle as depicted by Kolb (1984). As highlighted in Chapter Three, this connection between the GROW model and the experiential learning cycle is not widely acknowledged in the literature. It appears that this was not also acknowledged in practice by the executive coaches in my study. An explicit reference to the GROW model as a vague framework (EC7) for the coaching process is provided in the following example:

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11 The cycle proposed by Kolb (1984) shows how experience is translated through reflection into concepts, which in turn are used as guides for active experimentation and the choice of new experiences. The cycle contains four elements and commences with an experience (“concrete experience”) that becomes the basis for reflection and observation by the learner (“reflective observation”). These reflections are then assimilated by the learner into a theory or model (“abstract conceptualisation”) which is used to plan how to test a model theory or plan for a forthcoming experience (“active experimentation”).
It varies, once you’re in the middle of a coaching engagement you’re not really thinking of GROW, you know, once you’ve got that as a vague framework your mind goes to other things. Obviously it’s being self-aware … sometimes I check in and see how we’re going – if there’s been some specific action or we just set the agenda what we want to cover. It might be that I will say, “is there something specific that you want to focus on today?” and also want to check in to see, you know, “how you went with what we talked about last week or last month or whenever it was?”. Sometimes we don’t. Sometimes, somebody walks in and they’ve just got so much that they’ve got to off-load that they off-load all that. That might take 15 minutes, so then I might say, “well, you know, so in light of that, what’s the best thing for us to focus on today?”. EC7

5.4.4. THE OUTCOMES OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

THEME FOUR: Executive coaches experience executive coaching at its best, and most rewarding, when it transforms client executives’ self-awareness and identity and supports their continuing lifelong learning journey.

This section reports on the 12 executive coaches’ interpretations of the impact or influence of executive coaching on the client executives with whom they had worked. In the analysis of their interpretations, seven areas of influence emerged. These were (1) self-awareness, self-efficacy, identity and self-development; (2) learning and thinking; (3) organisation impact and results; (4) career; (5) managing others; (6) communication, and (7) political and organisational savvy. Details and the resultant coding summary from NVivo are presented in Table 5.5.12 The areas of influence of coaching in Table 5.5 and the presentation in themes provide an overview of the diverse nature of the reported outcomes of coaching and the predominant focus on the development of the person (and self) in coaching.

Table 5.5 Executive coaches’ perspectives on the influence of executive coaching for client executives – coding summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Areas of Influence</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness, self-efficacy, identity and self-development</td>
<td>influence - self-awareness</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>influence - the whole person</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>influence - journey of identity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>influence - less stress</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>influence - self-efficacy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>influence - bravery</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>influence - catalyst to change</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>influence - change for self (life-changing)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>influence - confidence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>influence - courage</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12 As also reported in Chapter Four, the inclusion of totals in Table 5.5 for “references” (the number of times an item was raised by participants) and “sources” (the number of research materials such as interview transcripts that contained that item) reflects the strengths of these messages. It is not intended to portray that an empirico-analytical data analysis approach was undertaken for reported coaching outcomes. As described in Chapter Two, I conducted my research using the interpretive paradigm. The structure presented in Table 5.5 represents one interpretation of the data which emerged during the ongoing and circular process of data analysis between reading data and identifying emerging themes.
q) **Not just behavioural outcomes (Self-awareness and meaning)**

Table 5.5 illustrates that the influence of executive coaching as reported by executive coaches in my study for their client executives was predominantly around the development of the individual, including self-awareness, self-efficacy and self-development. This is consistent with the experience of client executives in Chapter Four. Similarly, in research undertaken by Griffiths (2008), life coaching emerged as a process of discovering, applying and integrating self-knowledge, which culminated in the development of self. This is an interesting finding as it would suggest that both executive coaching and life coaching focus on professional development. Much attention has been given in the marketplace to differentiating the practice of executive coaching from life coaching to make it more palatable to organisations and for use in a business context. One participant in my study even suggested that life coaching was self-help stuff, was very fluffy and people didn’t take it seriously (EC3). Outcomes associated with self were described in my study as follows:

It’s how they see themselves and how they go about and conventionalise their jobs and themselves and their organisations, it’s about them rather than the specifics of the job. EC3

The majority of people I’m asked to coach, the coaching is requested for a specific behaviour change, however it very quickly moves to self-belief. So they’re wanting an above the top of the iceberg change from a business perspective, but there’s just too much going on underneath that water at the bottom of the iceberg for that to happen. EC5
Importantly for *executive coaches*, coaching was the most powerful (and most rewarding and interesting for them) when it was focused on the level of meaning-making with *client executives*, rather than simply on skills development or behavioural change. This is significant both when seeking to appreciate the nature of executive coaching and when seeing it as a means of promoting higher-level capability development, particularly the capacity of the executives to learn how to place their professional development in a meta-framework of meaning making.

These arguments link us back to the view of coaching as a learning for life journey that goes far beyond behavioural change and behavioural learning theories. The emphasis on meaning making by *executive coaches* is consistent with Mezirow’s (1990, p. 1) definition of learning as the “process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action”. This suggests that *executive coaches* value coaching most highly when it results in learning of this nature. In McCleland’s (2005) study, the coach’s desire for this type of coaching was viewed as the “desire for developmental clients”, that is, clients who are ready for positive growth. In the following example, the *executive coach* describes seeking coaching work at this richer and deeper level.

> Coaching is expected to be outcomes, focus, performance driven, and then the various stakeholders expect the coaching to deliver on its promise and to demonstrate some behavioural change in the individual. So those sorts of engagements are fairly straightforward in terms of delivering on that remit. But in those individuals where they perhaps hold more senior level positions in the organisations or they’re more influential, it’s not about behavioural outcomes, it’s about what they themselves discover. I suppose I’ve been developing more of those sorts of engagement and fewer of the behavioural engagements. So I’m now finding engagements where the gold is more discoverable if you like, but simply because I tend to be engaging more with those sorts of individuals now. But it’s still entirely possible that I could be, you know, with all the best intentions, meeting with somebody who’s a head of business, who holds a senior position, whose thinking is just not at that level, who’s just not prepared to discover meaning, who just has a completely focused view of what it is that they’re designed to do and that comes as a surprise to me and I realise that I’m not dealing with someone who is at that level. EC11

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13 Mezirow (1990, p. xvi) defined transformative learning as the “process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative understanding of one’s experience”.

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nine female executive coaching clients. Theune concluded that coaching was a transformative learning process because clients were able to act on the new knowledge they gained from first sharing their stories with their coaches, then reflecting upon their experiences, and finally self-analysing those experiences to develop new meaning perspectives. One executive coach in my study described working at a deeper level with client executives:

The goals and then ... the values piece to work out what are that person’s values are and then to map the goals over the values ... to make sure that in moving forward the person is congruent between what they’re trying to achieve and who they are. That’s powerful ... we want people who are not just chasing the corporate goal, they’re chasing a goal that’s congruent with their values ... I know that everyone talks about transformational coaching but I didn’t quite know how to achieve that, apart from being a psychologist. Now I can see a very simple tool to be transformational without being a psychologist. EC12

Executive coaches also described how transformative learning resulted in client executives experiencing a shift in perception and a radically altered understanding of self. This was especially significant in coaching experiences that were focused on the identity of the individual client executive. Similarly, in a phenomenological study with six coaches, Butcher (2012) argued that coaching practice was framed and embedded within a deeper recognition of the coachee’s identity than the existing coaching literature acknowledges. In the two examples that follow from my study, executive coaches provided examples of working at this level of identity with their clients.

But coaching, when done well, is a journey of identity and it’s the capacity of the individual to shift their perception of themselves from one place to another and to see themselves, sometimes for the first time, to look back the path of their own life experience as if from a view from which they see it for the first time and to take something away from that, that’s powerful. EC11

The space in the call was very important, but not space in terms of city but space she was in was an apartment which she described as being a great apartment, one of the best in Chicago, but she had also said that her ideal life was one in a ramshackle house with lots of people, whereas actually it was in this city apartment, sort of very important spatial element to the values with the bigness and the generosity of what she described that would be more reflecting of the initial values listing this apartment more like out of a Vogue magazine I should think ... I want to know where they are, how they are, what are they, and in part of the call I ask, you know, “visually to say where you are when we’re on the phone”. I’d imagine she’d walked across on the other side of the room looking at herself on the phone having a conversation and then describe what she saw, so I knew that that was in her apartment and that she would have a space where she was looking at this kind of vision of herself and to have a discussion with herself which was quite powerful. EC3

A lot happens when the coach is not there (Continuing learning journey)

In my study, executive coaches depicted how the learning process that was undertaken in coaching sessions continued for clients beyond the coaching space. In the learning context,
Knowles (1975) described the ability to continue learning in this way as the utilisation of skills in self-directed inquiry, that is, the ability to learn without being taught. As reported by coaches in my study, the skills of self-directed inquiry were developed by clients in coaching sessions and then were transferred (and used) in the context of their broader work and lives. Mayeroff (1971) suggested that helping another person to grow is about helping that person to come to care for themselves, to better make their own decisions, to be more willing and responsible for them and to be able to discipline themselves to achieve what is important to them. Coaching in this way can be viewed as equipping clients for a continuing learning journey. As outlined by executive coaches:

I often say to people, “look, I’ll explain to you what coaching is about”, and I’ll do this in the rapport meeting. I’m going to use “mental massage” from now on, but I often say to people, “look, I’m like a little bird, I mightn’t look like it, but I sit on people’s shoulders and I do ... three things. I have a quiet whisper in their ear that they can listen to, they can turn around and have a quiet little whisper to me (and nobody’s seeing because I’m invisible) or I can actually peck their ear and say, “hey, excuse me, what did we agree?”. So I’m this little person, I can walk around with them in their work life all the time. That’s essentially what the work we do is in our coaching sessions, it is working out how I’m sitting on their shoulder and what they’re using me for. But it means that essentially the sessions are not just the sessions. The sessions are all work day, every work day, you can use me as that bird, you can think about your coach, you can think about the coaching works, you can think about turning around and saying, “what would <coach> be saying to me? What would <coach> be asking me?” or “what do I need to call or email <coach> about?” or “what are we going to do in our next session?”. I’m the “conscience pricker” if you like. EC8

A lot of coaching happens when you’re not actually there. They’re [client executives] just working on whatever the issues be and reflecting themselves and using the discussions that you’ve had. EC3

t) **Value for you (Coach gathering practice-based evidence)**

Executive coaches knew that coaching worked by asking their clients. This was really important to coaches in my study and involved gathering the practice-based evidence that coaching was successful. Duncan et al. (2004) referred to this activity in a therapeutic relationship as “becoming outcome informed” and suggested that this practice-based evidence offers the best way to understand and improve overall effectiveness. It was important for the coaches in my study to add value to the client executive, and asking for client feedback was viewed as the most valuable way to assess and ensure this.

I don’t ask them about the value of it, I ask them about what value for you, so because it’s one of the things I think often we will measure things like, “how good is the coaching?”. So you know if we think of some of the research we do, “what were your expectations of coaching and now what do you think about it?”. Well, that’s about coaching, that’s not about them. So I think it’s more to do with what value did coaching provide ... “what’s different now for you? Regardless of whether it was coaching or whether it was something
you did in between or whatever it is, what’s different for you?”. And that’s different for different people. EC2

In contrast to gathering practice-based evidence on coaching success directly from individual clients, executive coaches articulated how measuring the (resultant) outcomes from coaching for the organisation was an impossible process. And, while it was important to recognise that there should be a benefit to the organisation for its investment in the coaching, the universal emphasis on the executive as the primary client meant that the benefits were seen as a matter of trust, reported experience, repeat custom and some feedback from client executives, and seeking direct or ongoing feedback from the organisations was not a priority. Further, and most importantly, the organisation’s benefit was not considered to reflect the richness of what occurred in coaching.

I think sometimes there’s a lot of unintended outcomes in coaching. People come in with a surface goal, but we all know as coaches once you start peeling away the layers there’s something much deeper, much more important that they’re really working on. Sometimes people make great changes which they don’t attribute to you anyway, you know, they’re not that reflective and you can tell that there’s been a shift but you know they don’t attribute it to the coaching process at all. So I mean you can write down measures such as you know, ability to manage conflict, and you’re going to measure it by, you know, less conflict in the workplace or something. You tend to dull it down I think for the compliance, but really the richness of what actually happens in the coaching process is not captured. It’s not always completely understood by the client anyway, because you’re working from a completely different perspective to them, because you have in your head the learning models that you’re using and, you know, you’re trying to help them have insights and things and sometimes they have insights, they’re not attributing, they’re not really conscious of what you’re doing or how we got there, because people are so self-involved in the issue at hand, they’re not really looking for that but you are, you’re looking for it, you’re looking for are they learning, are they getting there, do we need to go somewhere else or, you know, what’s the assumption there, do I need to bring that...? You’re doing all of that, so I think quite often the coach can make a better assessment. Because some people also, the responsibility is not entirely with the coach and you’ll get some people who are really receptive to it and you, you know, will do all the work but you’ll get some people who’ll do all the work and still not get it. So you know, it’s very, very difficult I think, to measure what the organisation wants, you know, what is the return on investment, some of it is not measurable. EC4

I can’t measure the change, but I know it happens. So it’s just faith, it’s a leap of faith. EC4

While quantifying outcomes might be of interest to organisations, one executive coach emphasised that it was impossible to demonstrate the impact of coaching at the organisational level. This coach described “constructing” something to satisfy the organisation, highlighting that this was essentially a political process.

I think you know, there are so many variables, to pinpoint it on the coaching intervention in isolation I think is impossible, personally. Even though we may come up with ways that look
good ... I think there's a perception that because it is high end, in terms of investment often, because it's a one-on-one thing, then there's a perception that it's more valuable to the organisation, whereas actually it's all value for the individual. So I think that you kind of need to charge the fees to these organisations for them to buy in to the fact that it's really going to make them money, but the truth is we're working with the individual. EC10

u) **Learning from clients (Developing coaching knowledge)**

Executive coaches also described how their knowledge about coaching was generated from the practice of their coaching and the experiences of working with clients. In this way, the process of working with clients (and reflecting on their experiences) provided an important way for executive coaches to develop their practice.

*Literally every client adds knowledge, every single client that I’ve coached so that’s any number of coaching engagements, yes, every single one just adds to them. EC3*

*I learn so much from people, from their process as well and so I do feel that and I feel challenged all the time, you know, emotionally and intellectually challenged. EC4*

Importantly, coaching knowledge was developed by the coach when things went well (and also did not go well) in coaching sessions and essentially through a process of trial and error. De Haan (2008a, 2008b) termed these incidents that generate learning for the coach “critical moments” in coaching practice. As coaches in this study reached greater levels of experience (and moved through the stages of proficiency), they reported reaching a point of being able to draw on their experience to rely on an intuitive grasp of a situation. In nursing, Benner (1982, p. 405) described this as characteristic of experts who can explain their practice by saying they did something intuitively because it “felt right and looked good”. In the skills acquisition model developed by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005), this could be explained as a movement on behalf of the coach from reliance on abstract principles (such as rules and maxims) to the use of past, concrete experience as paradigms. In this study, participants stated that, with more experience, they no longer needed to focus on the technical skills associated with practice such as relying on coaching frameworks (e.g. the GROW model[^14]) or thinking about the next question they needed to ask the client. As described,

*Yes, you know, I already learn things from my coachees ... you learn from stuff-ups as well. I’ll say, “Oh, I won’t ask that question again, that doesn’t work”, as well as you might ask a great question and you might think, “Oh yes, that’s really helpful”. It’s that experience I guess, the more people you’ve coached the better, I hope the better that you get, the better that I’ve become in that, you know, trusting my intuition, as I develop more, I’m more and more and more comfortable with just going with my gut. I guess that’s very much part of how I coach ... and not worrying about questioning, or what question you’re going to ask. I think, that was a big step change for me in my coaching was when I stopped*

[^14]: See Chapter Three for an explanation of the GROW model.
being concerned about what my next question might be and didn’t even think about it ... I think if you were a fly on the wall (even probably 5 years ago), then you would kind of spot the technique. You would see and feel the GROW model running through the coaching session, whereas you wouldn’t see that now. It’s far more conversational, it’s not a chat, but it’s more fluid, less clunky but still making sure, you’re still asking questions around reality, you’re still coming up with options, you’re still making sure that someone’s actually got energy to go and do something, so it’s still in there, but it’s not a conscious process, it’s just a natural process. EC10

You know, some of this becomes intuitive, it’s either an innate intuitive ability you have or it becomes an unconscious competence that you develop through skill, through doing it over time. EC4

v) **Energising, exciting and satisfying (Feeling rewarded)**

Coaches emphasised the affective aspects of coaching that were evident for them when coaching went well. Coaching was described as a satisfying, positive and energising space for them, characterised by positive emotions and being in “flow” (EC11, EC1).

It is very much like being in flow, it’s like being in sync. EC11

I walked away from that session and just felt like skipping instead of going down the hall ... She [client] felt so much better, so that made me feel better ... it was something that I truly believe she was actually going to go and do and it was going to make a difference. EC2

Satisfaction, feelings... I’m just going to go into theory for a minute here ... I can back this up from my own experience, when you’re in flow you don’t actually feel anything, that’s why flow is not happiness, what comes out of flow is psychological wellbeing ... I actually don’t feel anything. I don’t know if I’m feeling hungry, thirsty, oh if it’s a cold day I feel cold that’s not that great, I might be freezing to death, but I don’t feel happy, sad, when I’m in those moments I actually don’t feel anything but what I do when I come out of it and this is how I felt when I was, when I hopped in the car I was thinking, “yippee I’m going to talk to <client>, what a fantastic meeting, I am thrilled”. But it’s after the event, but when I’m in flow I don’t feel – I don’t feel it, but afterwards, satisfied, energised, I can do a full day of coaching and not feel tired, at the time I don’t know how I’m feeling but I feel satisfied, energised, satisfied, satisfied. EC1

Excitement, anticipation, exploration interest, I think it’s all of those things. EC2

Well I feel energised and I do feel excited, so you know, bit of elation sometimes when it goes really well and I do have that feeling of having worked hard, you know, like I really worked hard for that ... so that sense of satisfaction I suppose, from doing a job, getting it done ... I feel gratitude as well because I learn ... enjoyment. EC4

Exciting and, yes, you just feel like you’re witnessing somebody’s potential, you know, opening up, expanding becoming more, yes, it’s just great. EC6

There is this energy exchange that takes place when somebody has a breakthrough ... it impacts on me as well. Because you feel like “I’m just an instrument”, but you know, it’s great to have been part of having that happen ... I could coach all day and feel energised at the end of the day. That’s not always the case when you’re facilitating. EC7

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15 A state of consciousness called “flow” which psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) revealed made an experience genuinely satisfying.
It feels very active, it feels quite energised. I think that one of the nicest things is when the light goes on or when something happens that is real “a-ha!” for them. The best thing is when you can see people relax and just breathe out. EC8

I’m continually amazed, and delighted and surprised and thrilled at how the coaching and I suppose my part in that, but the coaching gets people to do stuff that they would never do without the coaching ... the courageous things that people do ... never ceases to amaze me. EC8

Oh it’s such a buzz ... It feels exciting, it feels, I hardly know what the feeling is because I’m just so engrossed in helping the person, it’s just a feeling of satisfaction that I’m doing what I really love to do because I really do love to help people with their challenges. EC12

Alternatively, when coaching did not work, coaching was portrayed as a difficult process and “hard work”. For example, executive coaches reported these less than favourable coaching experiences occurring at times when the relationship with their client executive was not effective or when clients were not open or committed to coaching. In these moments, coaching was characterised by a range of emotions for executive coaches including disappointment and frustration (EC2). As described,

So it was a real trudge, I mean in the end he gave me a glowing testimonial, he said, “yes the coaching was very good, it was very helpful” but it was almost accidental I think, I didn’t have a sense that I was able to actually engage. That issue of engagement is the critical one, can you actually, do you get traction with this individual, do you actually, you can act with him sufficiently so that they can get that they’re on a journey and that you’re there to guide them on that journey or you just, you know, just sitting in the cart being pulled by a donkey, you know. I don’t know, it sometimes feels like that. EC11

I think sometimes if the person really doesn’t want to be there, you know, then it’s an uphill struggle and you know, they’ve been told they’ve got to have it or whatever. EC9

There are times where it’s frustrating. So what causes the frustration? ... because they’re not working hard or they don’t seem to be caring as much as me or, you know, is it frustration or is it actual just disappointment that we haven’t, that we’re not getting going? EC2

5.5 CONCLUSION

Through the interpretation of the actual experiences of the executive coach participants in my study, executive coaching can be reconceptualised as a multi-faceted and diverse practice comprising four interactional categories: (1) setting the scene for coaching, (2) creating positive coaching spaces, (3) employing versatile and client-focused practices, and (4) outcomes for clients and coach self-evaluation.

A complex feature of executive coaching is that it is not practised as a “one-size-fits-all approach”, but rather it is tailored by executive coaches to suit the needs of individual client executives. Further, coaching is situated within different contexts or worlds that must be
accommodated by executive coaches: the diverse organisational context and setting and the unique and individual world of each client executive. As portrayed by participants in my study, no two client executives are the same (in terms of their needs and goals for coaching), nor are any two coaching engagements (in terms of the approach taken and how coaching is practised by an executive coach), reflecting a rich diversity in coaching practice.

For the executive coaches in my study, the co-creation of a caring and mutually trusting relationship with their client executives was a fundamental requirement for successful executive coaching to occur. In building this relationship, coaches displayed authenticity and empathy as key factors for building the trust that was necessary for willing clients to be truly open and to maximise the benefits of their coaching experience. In their daily practice, coaches focus on the creation of this learning and meaning-making space for their clients, providing a unique (and highly desirable) space for them to reflect, think and learn beyond their workplace.

Executive coaches viewed coaching as a predominantly “person-centred” and “client-directed” practice. The role of the coach, as a facilitator of the learning and meaning-making process, focused on the clients’ needs and on helping them to access and pursue their potential, both within the timeframe of the coaching engagement as well as afterwards as their own coach. This is in keeping with the coaches’ recognition of clients as experts in their own lives and managing themselves (as coaching practitioners) reflexively to ensure they stayed in the passenger seat (EC8) to maximise clients’ learning from coaching.

As can be seen from my study, the practice of executive coaching is consistent with a broader agenda of general reform in education, characterised by a move from too much imparting of information by the teacher to the facilitation of self-directed learning and problem solving in students (Heron, 1989). In this way, teaching (and coaching) are not about imparting and doing things to the student (or client) but about the facilitation of self-directed learning. In my study, this importantly involved the coach facilitating clients’ learning from experience and engaging clients in critically reflective (and ultimately creative) coaching dialogues.

As articulated by the executive coaches in my study, coaching at its most basic can be a skills development process. Coaching is most exciting (and successful) when it becomes a journey of meaning-making and identity (self-)development for the client executive. The richest opportunity for benefiting from executive coaching exists when organisations allow coaching to be utilised in such a way that it is most powerful and empowering. This means that organisational stakeholders need to let go of a focus on specific skills, objectives and the measuring of outcomes, and let coaching be all that it can be for the individual, that is, when it
becomes really transformative for the individual client executive. This is when executive coaching becomes a “transformational practice”. It is also when coaching is at its most satisfying and rewarding for the executive coach as practitioner.
CHAPTER SIX: AN INTERPRETATION OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

Father Sanchez: This way of consciously relating, in which everyone attempts to bring out the best in others rather than to have power over them, is a posture the entire human race will eventually adopt. Think of how everyone’s energy level... will increase at that point.


Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world.


6.1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout this thesis I have argued that developing a deeper and richer understanding of the emerging human phenomenon of executive coaching requires research utilising the interpretive research paradigm. Interpretive research can powerfully and contextually recognise and illuminate human phenomena including such interactive processes as executive coaching. This final chapter summarises the key findings and implications of my interpretive research into executive coaching.

This chapter is structured in three sections: Section A, B and C.

In Section A I map the key findings from my research, including the findings from Phase 1 (presented in Chapter Three) and Phase 2 (presented in Chapters Four and Five). These findings are informed by the perspectives or horizons of others (including those reported in the literature and those of my research participants, client executives and executive coaches) and by my own knowledge and the perspective transformations that have comprised my research journey.

In Section B I draw together all these perspectives to produce my emergent three-part model of executive coaching that illuminates the human issues, challenges, agency and relationship aspects of this interpretation of coaching, as opposed to the tasks, processes and behavioural management dimensions inherent in other theories or models of executive coaching.

In Section C I discuss the limitations and strengths of my research and implications for the coaching industry, education and training, research and practice and also for organisations.
SECTION A: SUMMARY OF INTERPRETATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES ARISING FROM MY RESEARCH STUDIES

6.2 CONTEXT OF MY RESEARCH FINDINGS

As outlined throughout this thesis, the primary goal of my research was to illuminate the phenomenon of executive coaching. Undertaking this research was a challenge as executive coaching is not fully formed (either as a concept or a practice, occupation or industry) and at best can only be described as an emerging phenomenon. There is no common or widely understood notion of executive coaching, or agreement around the range, delivery and quality of services. Research into executive coaching as an emerging practice was especially difficult as coaching is characterised by a lack of agreement around foundational elements such as common principles, practices and models and an established knowledge base of research and literature.

In undertaking my research I therefore employed two methods of accessing the field of executive coaching. The first point of entry of my research was through exploration of the executive coaching literature, which is also emerging. As illustrated in Chapter Three, the scope, diversity and focus of attention in the literature is not that of a widely and well established area or discipline. While the literature provided illumination of executive coaching from the perspectives of authors, it is not challenged against an established frame of reference.

My second point of entry to the field was through the experiences of the client executives and executive coaches who volunteered to participate in my study. As discussed in the section that outlines the limitations of my research (see later in this chapter), my participants may have volunteered as they had a positive experience of executive coaching. Thus this part of my research occurred through the eyes of my participants, who experienced their own individual coaching programs, deemed executive coaching to be positive (largely) and were also willing to talk about their experiences. A key argument presented here is that I was looking at the potential of executive coaching in my research. I was clearly not attempting or achieving a widespread examination of the scope of the reality of executive coaching as it is currently experienced and practised.

In illuminating this phenomenon, I made recommendations and provided insights with an understanding that executive coaching will continue to pursue a drive towards professionalisation. My vision and interpretation of executive coaching was not about optimising the marketability of the commercial product or service of executive coaching, nor
did I attempt to prescribe a uniform approach to this product or the emerging practices of executive coaching practitioners. Rather, in my research I sought to shape aspirations and to create a vision for executive coaching as a future professional practice that could best serve the interests of clients, organisations and society.

6.3 KEY FINDINGS FROM MY INTERPRETATION OF THE EXECUTIVE COACHING LITERATURE

In Phase 1 of my research I constructed text sets relevant to my research questions from the executive coaching literature and utilised three main hermeneutic strategies (fusion of horizons, the hermeneutic circle and a dialogue of questions and answers) to interpret these texts. The findings from my interpretation of the executive coaching literature were presented in Chapter Three. My key interpretations are summarised as follows:

a. Many definitions and conceptualisations of executive coaching are present in the literature1 but these are inadequate for encapsulating the nature of the phenomenon and describing the richness and complexities of executive coaching experience and practice.

b. The further development and professionalisation of the emerging industry of executive coaching requires a common understanding and agreed definition of executive coaching practice.

c. Executive coaching has multiple aims and purposes which can evolve during the coaching experience and vary between individual clients and organisations.

d. The current published knowledge base of executive coaching is dominated by psychological theories and approaches even though it widely recognised that executive coaching is informed by multiple disciplines.

e. Executive coaching research is a developing field of inquiry which has been conducted predominantly using the empirico-analytical paradigm and has primarily focused on measuring the outcomes or effectiveness of executive coaching.

f. There is a wide variety of executive coaching process and practice models in the literature, along with various descriptions (or prescriptions) of “best practice”, but these prescriptions typically present a generic picture rather than recognising the need

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1 A detailed hermeneutic interpretation of the definitions and conceptualisations of executive coaching presented in the literature is provided in Appendix D.
to accommodate the various needs and requirements of clients and the complexities of executive coaching practice.

g. Interpretive research and particularly phenomenological studies of the experience of coaching (as detailed in my constructed text set)\(^2\) provide an emerging and complementary source of insights into the phenomenon and practice of executive coaching.

The study conducted in Phase 1 of my research resulted in my perspective or horizon of executive coaching changing in a number of ways. Although I had appreciated the influence of psychological research in its identification and measurement of the developmental and behavioural changes of the individual through the coaching process, during this study I came to recognise more fully the range of psychological theory and approaches applied to executive coaching practice.\(^3\) This study enabled me to appreciate the psychological origins and history of a range of terms,\(^4\) such as “solution-focused”, “strengths-based”\(^5\) and “evidence-based”, that are used commonly and unquestioningly (and perhaps unknowingly) in the marketplace to describe and label executive coaching practice and thereby locate it strongly in this frame of reference. It also helped me to recognise the dominance of psychological theory and perspectives presented in the executive coaching literature, compared with the potential value that could be obtained from other disciplinary areas\(^6\) in the emerging knowledge base and strategies of executive coaching.

In particular, I gained a greater appreciation of the relevance of the work of psychologist Carl Rogers (1902-1987) and the value of humanistic and person-centred theory to executive coaching. Most significantly, I recognised that Carl Rogers’ (1958, 1961) work is given (surprisingly) much less attention in the literature in favour of other psychological theory and approaches (particularly, behaviourist theories). During this study, I also arrived at a position of agreement with Stober (2006) that person-centred perspectives provide a number of foundational characteristics for executive coaching.\(^7\) Most significantly, in the pursuit of person-centred coaching there is an emphasis on the importance of the successful formation

\(^2\) My phenomenological text set is presented in Tables H1, H2, H3 and H4 in Appendix H.

\(^3\) These were classified in my study as follows: psychodynamic, developmental (adult), cognitive behavioural, behavioural, solution-focused, positive psychology and strengths-based, person-centred and humanistic, narrative and integrative coaching approaches.

\(^4\) A detailed hermeneutic interpretation of the psychological theories and approaches relevant to executive coaching is provided in Appendix F.

\(^5\) In coaching, the term “strengths-based” is commonly drawn from the field of positive psychology, not social work (where it is also used). See Appendix F for details.

\(^6\) As detailed later in this chapter, these include adult learning theory and phenomenological studies of the experience of executive coaching.

\(^7\) In explaining a potential contradiction in my argument, while I generally challenge the dominance of psychological theory (in favour of other disciplinary areas) in the executive coaching literature, I also argue there is value in giving one psychological theory (person-centred theory and in particular the work of Carl Rogers) more prominence.
of a collaborative relationship in ensuring coaching effectiveness (Joseph, 2010). In this pursuit, the coach’s role is to provide an optimal climate in the relationship (empathy, positive regard, congruence), enabling the client to access self-growth (Stober, 2006). Further, the coach adopts a position of non-interference and respects clients’ self-determination (Joseph, 2010) to choose their own values and goals (Hedman, 2010). Person-centred perspectives in coaching also suitably position the coach as a “non-expert” (Joseph, 2006, 2010) facilitator, rather than a subject matter expert (Stober, 2006).

A feature that became evident in interpreting the literature was the opportunity to question the emphasis placed on the science-based psychological assessments in descriptions of executive coaching. As outlined in Chapter Three, these tests commonly form the basis of the initial client assessment phase of the coaching process as portrayed in the literature.8 While I do not advocate the removal of science and tests from executive coaching practice,9 I propose that executive coaches should not over-privilege science-based testing at the expense of other (dialogical) means of exploring clients’ needs in coaching. Emphasising psychological assessments implies that empirical diagnostic decisions are the primary way of determining the focus of executive coaching for individuals and that coaching is the automatic follow-on prescription aimed at “curing” or “fixing” the client’s issues or dysfunctionality. In executive coaching, I argue that this positions the coach (rather than the client) as the expert and fails to recognise the clients’ innate capacity for growth and their own unique potential (following Stober, 2006).

Another issue that arose from my interpretation of the literature related to the centrality of goals and goal setting in psychological approaches to executive coaching. I argue that prioritising goal-setting in executive coaching processes has a number of problems. It suggests that the processes in coaching are linear, with goals set at the outset (and achieved at the end) of the coaching engagement. This approach fails to adequately recognise that in coaching, goals can often be evolving, changing or developed throughout, and even arise as outcomes of a coaching process. The focus on goals incorrectly implies that the sole purpose of coaching is goal attainment (Lawrence & Whyte, 2013b) and reflects the domination of rationality in organisations (Bachkirova & Cox, 2007), where leadership development and learning are frequently described in simplistic and narrow ways (as set goals and performance achievement), rather than as the holistic development of the person. I argue that there is a need to recognise that the type of individual learning development that occurs through executive coaching is often more qualitative in nature and is not always easily established as

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8 See Table 3.5 in Chapter Three.
9 For example, assessments that focus on gathering 360 degree feedback can be a useful as a means of enhancing self-awareness as illustrated by client executives in Phase 2 of my research.
goals that can be measured or evaluated. While I am not advocating the removal of a focus on goals in the process of executive coaching, I suggest that there is value in recognising that goals may in fact be intangible and reflect the individual and personal learning needs of the person being coached. For this individual and personal learning process, an important factor arising from my research is the need for individual clients to have agency in determining the goals/focus of their executive coaching experience, suggesting that organisation-mandated goals are likely to be less effective. Overall, the findings of my research in Phase 2 (see later) suggest that there is an opportunity for executive coaches to focus more on the coaching relationship that is formed with their clients and the reflection and learning that occurs within the conversation, rather than on the mechanics of goal setting and goal pursuit.

Another theme across the literature was the wide availability of coaching strategies, including process and practice models characterised by easy, popular acronyms and constructed rationales that were not deeply informed by literature around learning theory. An important consideration here is that coaching is inherently a learning process and “another approach to learning” (J. Rogers, 2007, p. 174). Here, I argue that adult learning theory (or theories)\(^\text{10}\) is highly relevant to coaching even though it is given little attention in favour of psychological perspectives in the executive coaching literature. Adult learning theories are useful for coaching practice as they emphasise the self-determination, self-actualisation and self-transformation of the learner (Gray, 2006). According to adult learning theory the person being coached is viewed less as a client or patient and more as a problem-solving individual, which is a highly suitable perspective in executive coaching. During this study, I came to a position of agreement with Cox et al. (2010, 2014) that there are three key adult learning theories that underpin the very nature of coaching, including: (1) andragogy, the theory of adult learning introduced by Malcolm Knowles (1980)\(^\text{11}\); (2) experiential learning as proposed by David Kolb (1984)\(^\text{12}\) and (3) the transformative learning theory of Jack Mezirow (1990).\(^\text{13}\) Further, I argue that executive coaching misses a valuable opportunity to build the knowledge base of the emerging profession of coaching (and to provide a suitable rationale for coaching strategies and approaches) by not drawing comprehensively on the theoretical and research substance from the related field of education. Similarly, my argument for the use of experiential education as a framework for the emerging practice of executive coaching is

\(^{10}\) It is acknowledged that there are various theories of adult learning. The use of the term “adult learning theory” implies one unified theory and this is debatable (Gray, 2006).

\(^{11}\) A model of assumptions about how adults learn developed by Malcolm Knowles (1980).

\(^{12}\) Experiential learning is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 22).

\(^{13}\) Transformative learning is defined as “the process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative understanding of one’s experience” (Mezirow, 1990, p. xvi).
reflected in the following insight from Kemp (2008, p. 220) who, interestingly, is a psychologist:

*In the virtual absence of any empirical support for the efficacy of most existing models of coaching, reconceptualising coaching as an adult learning process provides both utility and transferability of a solid efficacy based framework, derived from an extensive body of existing related knowledge, to the practice of coaching. Intriguingly, it is by returning to the root theories, methods and processes that have underpinned the emergence and development of coaching as a unique discipline within human learning and development that we may better position ourselves to more fully understand its many idiosyncrasies moving forward.*

In illustrating the value of learning theory and the field of experiential education to executive coaching, my findings also suggest that *executive coaches* need to challenge not only the dominance of psychology and unquestioned application of psychological perspectives to coaching, but also the proposition that executive coaching is simply a sub-discipline of psychology, i.e. coaching psychology. In making this argument, I do not suggest that aspects of psychology are not useful to coaching practice (indeed, they are). Rather, I support Lowman’s (2005) view that coaching does not have to be “owned” by the profession of psychology, even if some psychologists have taken up coaching as their primary professional activity. In this way, psychologists can be viewed as simply joining “the ranks of those from many different disciplines, or lack of any professional discipline, in conducting such [coaching] work” (Lowman, 2005, p. 92).

When I examined the phenomenological studies of the experience of being coached in the literature as detailed in a constructed text set (herein referred to as my “phenomenological text set”), the psychological theory and approaches applied to executive coaching were noticeably distinct from the emphasis placed on the importance of lived experience in phenomenological studies. Several points of difference are important here. Phenomenological studies come from a different frame of reference in terms of what knowledge is, valuing multiple constructed and contextualising perspectives of truth (see Chapter Two). They are also based more on the experience of being coached, and thus recognise that coaching is unique (and tailored) to each individual client.

Further, the studies presented in my phenomenological text set emphasise the importance of the executive coaching relationship, particularly the existence of trust, safety and confidentiality as essential qualities. While the importance of the relationship as a vehicle for

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14 My phenomenological text set is presented in Tables H1, H2, H3 and H4 in Appendix H.
change has been acknowledged in psychology (especially common factors research),\(^{15}\) phenomenological studies of the coaching experience, for example that of Sztucinski (2001), indicate that the relationship is deeper than that typically described in the literature, and that it exists as a strong bond between both parties. Even though the application of psychological research to executive coaching suggests that the relationship is important, phenomenological studies provide a means of understanding more deeply the aspects and characteristics of the relationship that make it so. Phenomenological studies of the experience of executive coaching also recognise that the effects and outcomes of coaching for clients are individual and multi-dimensional (for example, impacting on both work and personal life) and occur most significantly in the domain of self-awareness.

Through the interpretation of my phenomenological text set, my emerging horizon was further extended to reach a fuller understanding of the significance of the relationship that is built in executive coaching for both the client and the executive coach. I also came to appreciate that beyond the processes and techniques that coaches learn in short training courses, and beyond the emphasis on psychological testing, there are elements of the practice that are unique to individuals; this practice knowledge needs to be both learned from wise practitioners and tested through ongoing research to turn individual practice wisdom and the art of executive coaching into a contribution to the knowledge base and practice of executive coaching.

### 6.4 KEY FINDINGS FROM MY INTERPRETATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF CLIENT EXECUTIVES AND EXECUTIVE COACHES

Phase 2 of my research involved a hermeneutic phenomenological study of the executive coaching experiences of two sets of participants: (1) *client executives* and (2) *executive coaches*. A précis of the themes arising from this study for both sets of participants is presented Table 6.1. These represent my key interpretations from the study in Phase 2. The more detailed table containing both themes and key dimensions is presented in Appendix J.

In accessing the experiences of my two participant groups in Phase 2, four interactional categories of themes emerged. These were context, space, process and effects/outcomes, reflecting four main elements of the experience of executive coaching. These categories were helpful in illuminating that executive coaching involved more than just a process that resulted in outcomes. It was also situated in an individual, personal and organisational context for each

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\(^{15}\) See Chapter Three for an explanation of the common factors in psychotherapy and the application to executive coaching research.
participant and occurred within a unique and fundamentally important executive coaching relationship space.

Table 6.1 Themes of the experience of executive coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Client executives' themes</th>
<th>Executive coaches' themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The context of executive coaching</td>
<td>1. Executive coaching is situated within an organisational system and setting and a personal context that influences the success of executive coaching for individual client executives.</td>
<td>1. Executive coaching is practised within the context of diverse organisational systems and settings and the individual worlds of client executives which must be carefully accommodated by executive coaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The space for executive coaching</td>
<td>2. Executive coaching is conducted within a relationship of trust and connection with an executive coach; it involves the creation of a safe meeting space that is enabled by the outsider status of the executive coach and time away for reflection by the client executive.</td>
<td>2. Executive coaching is enacted through an empathic, caring and mutually trusting relationship co-created between an executive coach and a client executive; it involves the provision of time and space outside the organisation for the client executive to reflect and think with another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The effects/outcomes of executive coaching</td>
<td>4. The effects/outcomes of executive coaching for client executives include the development of individual capability and potential by fostering self-awareness and the capacity for ongoing self-development.</td>
<td>4. Executive coaches experience executive coaching at its best, and most rewarding, when it transforms client executives' self-awareness and identity and supports their continuing lifelong learning journey.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most surprising aspect of the findings of my study in Phase 2 was the emphasis placed by both participant groups on the importance of the relationship space that is co-created for

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16 The term critical here refers to challenging the status quo and finding ways to move forward. It reflects examples of deep reflection, with client executives critically reflecting on their assumptions (following Mezirow, 1998). It also reflects the relevance of the metaphor of critical companionship (Titchen, 2004) to executive coaching, with the executive coach facilitating a collaborative, critical reflection on an experience and situation with the client executive as means of developing refined understandings and new knowledge.
executive coaching to occur. In interpreting the general executive coaching literature in Phase 1, it was evident that establishing a relationship had been identified by some authors as one stage in the overall process of a coaching engagement.\(^\text{17}\) In these process descriptions, the building of the relationship was presented as one task or step that needed to be undertaken and completed. In contrast, the studies in my phenomenological text set helped me to further appreciate the relationship as an essential, integral aspect of executive coaching and as a deeper, richer and more complex interaction than simple process descriptions could accommodate. Therefore, in Phase 2 of my research my horizon was further extended to interpret the space of executive coaching as central to the phenomenon of executive coaching, as an enabler that is co-created between both parties and the emerging container in which the processes of executive coaching occurs.

My horizon also evolved during Phase 2, through my own experience with the application of hermeneutic phenomenology in exploring experiences of my participant groups, to fully appreciate the value of this chosen research approach for deepening my understanding of executive coaching. Hermeneutic phenomenology enabled me, consistent with research activities identified by van Manen (1997),\(^\text{18}\) to investigate the experience of executive coaching as it was lived by my participants (as opposed to how it had been conceptualised in the literature), to reflect on the essential themes or essence of the phenomenon and to describe executive coaching through the “art” of writing (and re-writing) about it (particularly in reporting my findings in Chapters Four and Five). Accessing the experiences of both participant groups in their situations was a powerful way of viewing the phenomenon of executive coaching from various perspectives in one research project and was important for my contribution to new knowledge in the Australian context. The findings from Phase 2 were also important for the development of my model of executive coaching presented in the following section.

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\(^\text{17}\) See Table 3.5 in Chapter Three for a summary of literature which describes the stages in executive coaching engagements.

\(^\text{18}\) See Chapter Two for details.
SECTION B: MY EMERGENT THREE-PART MODEL OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

My research focused on answering the following question: What is the nature and experience of executive coaching? In answering this primary research question, the following secondary research questions were also explored:

1. What is executive coaching?
   a) How is executive coaching emerging as a concept?
   c) How is executive coaching emerging as a practice?

2. How do client executives and executive coaches experience executive coaching?

In answering these research questions, my emergent model of executive coaching was produced. This model is presented in three parts and contains my interpretations (the products) of this research, which have focused on illuminating the emerging phenomenon of executive coaching. I have termed my model “emergent” for two reasons. First, it came into being during this research. I acknowledge that I am presenting this model as my horizon and interpretation of executive coaching at this point in time as a critically appraised product of a rigorous research project. However, I anticipate that my model will continue to evolve as my interpretations and horizons are extended in post-doctoral research. I also recognise that the “pursuit of true knowledge” about a phenomenon in interpretive research is never complete, exact or final, and that researchers need to be open to other perspectives and interpretations (Macklin, 2010). Second, the use of the term “emergent” in reference to my model refers to the positive growth space that emerges between executive coach and client, which my research has illuminated as the central element of the phenomenon of executive coaching. This second aspect is described in more detail as my model is explicated in the following sections.
6.5 MODEL PART 1: RECONCEPTUALISING EXECUTIVE COACHING

6.5.1. THE MULTIPLE CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

The first part of my model reflects my answer to the research questions: What is executive coaching (and how is it emerging as a concept)? As indicated earlier, my position is that executive coaching is an industry attempting to enter the world of professionalism\(^{19}\) and, within that frame of reference, I identified through this research that the term *executive coaching* could be seen to exist at different levels and layers of engagement and in different contextual arenas. Executive coaching can therefore be viewed as a multi-layered and multi-focused construct. From my research I identified that the term executive coaching can refer to all of the following:

a. an *occupation* focused on the coaching of executives by independent coaches or by employees of executive coaching companies that deliver the commodity of coaching to paying clients (typically companies and their employees).

b. a *human resource development* process or means of fostering the performance and career development of employees both for their individual advancement and for enhancement of their contribution to their employing company/organisation.

c. an *emerging field of practice* wherein practitioners from a wide range of disciplinary areas have entered the field and are providing services to their clients and also participating in programs and opportunities for their professional development.

d. a *process* whereby an individual *client executive* works with an *executive coach* to achieve for the *client executive* the capacity for enhanced work-related capabilities and the capacity for self-reflection and empowerment to become a lifelong self-coach.

e. an *emerging profession* where the process of professionalisation of this occupational group is in its relative infancy and a number of developments and decisions involving the executive coaching community of practice (COP)\(^{20}\) could be particularly advantageous for the advancement of this process.

\(^{19}\) The term “professionalism” is used here to describe the conduct of a profession as a whole (Roe-Shaw, 2004).

\(^{20}\) Following Lave and Wenger (1991), who proposed that practitioners learn from each other in a process of sharing information and experiences with others in a community of practice (COP) (see Glossary). The term is used here to refer to the entire community of executive coaches; at present, however, it would be difficult to identify a single practice community. Rather, multiple communities exist and this is problematic in terms of professionalisation of the industry. However, for the readability of this thesis I refer to the practice community in executive coaching.
f. a **field of study** in its relative infancy that is informed by the knowledge and practices of multiple disciplines, but has predominant interest from a limited range of disciplines (particularly psychology), and has much to learn from other established fields of study and practice.

g. an **emergent relationship space for (self-)reflection** that is co-created between *client executives* and *executive coaches* and which is central to an **experiential learning** journey undertaken by *client executives* and facilitated by *executive coaches*; it is reflection and learning about self in a coaching relationship with another, and this is what makes the experience more powerful than reflection alone.\(^{21}\)

These diverse conceptualisations of executive coaching are displayed in Figure 6.1. This diagram illustrates that executive coaching can be thought of and understood in many different ways as represented by each of the circles (a to g). Figure 6.1 represents one product of my research, providing a meta-interpretation of the various ways in which executive coaching can be construed. From Figure 6.1 it is evident that the majority of these conceptualisations of executive coaching (a, b, c, e and f) could have been readily identified from an examination of the literature and were derived from my interpretation of the literature as conducted in Phase 1 of my research.\(^{22}\)

It is apparent that I could have focused my studies on research questions and strategies pertaining to any one of these items (a, b, c, e and f) presented in Figure 6.1 and this would have resulted in a very different research project. Instead, my two major interpretations of executive coaching are represented in Figure 6.1 by items (d) and (g). One interpretation (item d) that will be extended in post-doctoral research is that one of the greatest benefits of executive coaching is that it develops clients’ capability and the potential to become their self-coach. This finding represents important new knowledge that I am contributing to the field. As portrayed by participants in the hermeneutic phenomenological study conducted in Phase 2 of my research, executive coaching helps clients to develop this responsibility and capability to become a (self-)coach through not only adopting the coaching techniques and strategies modelled by their coach, but also (more importantly) developing the (critical) self-reflective, self-management and self-directed learning capabilities necessary to continue their lifelong journey of learning from experience. Thus, one of the key outcomes of executive coaching is

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\(^{21}\) This conceptualisation of executive coaching represents the key argument arising from my research. This argument is further expanded in the presentation of my emergent three-part model of executive coaching in sections 6.5.1, 6.6 and 6.7.

\(^{22}\) See Chapter Three.
for clients to learn how to undertake this sustainable, self-development process themselves, akin to what Argyris (1991, p. 109) described as “learning how to learn”.

The second major interpretation (g) is the key thesis (argument) that I present as a result of my research and in response to my primary research question: What is the nature and experience of executive coaching? As the primary finding of my research, item g is presented as the central element of Figure 6.1 and suggests that within all the various conceptualisations of executive coaching, my particular focus is on the experiential learning process of coaching, with particular illumination of the emergent relationship space in which this occurs. I argue that executive coaching (at its best) involves the co-creation of a coaching relationship space between client executives and executive coaches for (self-)reflection and experiential learning by a client executive that is facilitated by an executive coach. For the client executive, executive coaching involves reflection and learning about self in a relationship with another (the executive coach) that is far more powerful than what can be achieved alone. My research illuminates coaching as occurring within a space that is a special form of a professional and developmental relationship. It is important to recognise, in the wider discussion of coaching as an emerging profession, that I am emphasising coaching as a service wherein a client executive and an executive coach relate to achieve coaching purposes and goals. The space for executive coaching is not a personal or sustained connection or interaction in the form of an ongoing relationship. Rather, it is about relating and developing a connection that facilitates the client executive’s development and growth, and it draws on the strengths of this special way of interacting (showing trust, independence, confidentiality, care, etc.), making possible the most profound and effective outcomes of coaching. This argument and my model of executive coaching are further expanded in the sections that follow. The coaching relationship space is considered in detail in section 6.7.
Figure 6.1 The multiple conceptualisations of executive coaching
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6.5.2. **Defining Executive Coaching**

The purpose of this research was to explore the nature and experience of executive coaching. My journey towards an understanding of the nature of executive coaching led me to the realisation that executive coaching as a concept is neither stable nor widely agreed upon. Instead, it is an idea that is manifested and enacted in many different ways. At this point in my thesis, my task to produce a definition of executive coaching is made difficult by this lack of stability and agreement. My first answer to the question is to look in a minimalist way at the essence of executive coaching as an idea and a process, in pursuit of some level of focus and agreement. To this end, executive coaching can be viewed as follows:

**Executive coaching is a process in which a client executive is supported by an executive coach to enhance their work-related capabilities.**

However, a key goal of my research was to examine, more broadly and with greater vision, the potential for executive coaching, its future possible pathways and the experiences of participants engaged in coaching. To this end, I now step beyond the stable and more agreed minimal picture of executive coaching to generate a vision, arising from my research, which aims to set a future path for executive coaching. This leads to a more elaborate and visionary interpretation of executive coaching, not just as a process with a work-related goal or outcome but as something greater, more personally enriching and enduring. I contend that executive coaching should ideally be thought of as a co-created relationship space in which an executive coach engages a client executive in facilitated, critical reflection and experiential learning, resulting in transformation of the client executive’s personal as well as work-related capabilities. Further, this interpretation has a future orientation which sees client executives becoming their own (self-)coach beyond the timeframe of the coaching engagement. Thus executive coaching can be thought of as follows:

**Executive coaching is a co-created relationship space between a client executive and an executive coach for (self-)reflection and experiential learning by a client executive which is facilitated by an executive coach. It involves critical reflection and learning about self in a relationship with another (the executive coach) which makes the experience more powerful for client executives than what can be achieved alone. As well as enhancing the work-related capabilities of the client executive, executive coaching is a process whereby an individual client executive is supported by an executive coach to transform his or her capacity for self-reflection and is empowered to become a lifelong (self-)coach.**
6.6 MODEL PART 2: REVISIONING THE PRACTICE AND EXPERIENCE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

6.6.1. THE PRACTICE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

As identified earlier in this chapter, researching the emerging practice of executive coaching has been a challenging endeavour. At present there is no unified community of practice following a shared path in the practice or development of executive coaching. Rather, as identified in Chapters One and Three, there is a wide variety of potential communities such as professional member bodies, former professional associations and disciplinary areas to which executive coaching practitioners belong and which differ markedly in terms of their knowledge assumptions, philosophies and practices of executive coaching. These differences are compounded by a range of factors, including the various ways in which executive coaches are currently trained and educated and also including the influence of industry leaders who may (or may not) be promoting similar or consistent messages. Overall, this diversity potentially adds to the richness of executive coaching practice but is problematic in terms of the professionalisation of the emerging industry.

In attempting to answer the following questions: What is executive coaching (and how is it emerging as a practice)?, I have identified through my research that these questions cannot be addressed in the context of executive coaching at is currently exists. As shown in Chapter Three and earlier in this chapter, the literature depicts various models and frameworks that have been applied to executive coaching practice. My research has illustrated that executive coaching practice models and approaches are as diverse as the backgrounds of the practitioners who utilise them. The literature also reflects a dominance of psychological theories and approaches, even though the actual number of psychologists practising as executive coaches represents a minority of the coaching workforce. In this emerging area of practice, it is impossible currently to identify a common or agreed body of knowledge, models and frameworks that can be associated with executive coaching. Executive coaching can therefore be viewed not as a cohesive field of practice but rather as a suite of diverse practices, approaches and products.

As the practice of executive coaching is emerging, the literature can only answer the question, how do some executive coaches practise executive coaching (or propose that it be practised)? In responding to these questions, I provided four examples of effective or “best practice” models of executive coaching (Dagley, 2010a; Joo, 2005; Kilburg, 2001; Stober & Grant,

23 As illustrated in studies undertaken by Grant and Zackon (2004) and Liljenstrand and Nebeker (2008) (see Chapter Three for details).
24 See Table 3.6 in Chapter Three for details.
in Chapter Three and concluded that they generally have a number of limitations, particularly when it is acknowledged that executive coaching is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach. “Best practice” models focus on identifying the best of what currently exists (and is known) and do not focus on the most ideal practice experience, outcomes or process for the client, “nor (on) the best practice that can be imagined or created” (Higgs & Titchen, 2008, p. 13). A focus on current practice is particularly problematic in an emerging field such as executive coaching, where the practice and its underpinning theory and evidence are not necessarily understood or highly developed. Most importantly, I argue that “best practice” models (commonly developed from the literature) need application in practice situations, to be further developed, critiqued and enhanced by executive coaches through processes of reflecting upon and learning from their practice. Further, models also need to be shared (and accepted) by the broader executive coaching community before they can be established as potential guiding practice frameworks.

The diversity in executive coaching practice is further evident in the various topics and content in existing coach training and education programs. Executive coaching courses are also as diverse as the organisations that provide coach training and education in Australia. In exploring alternative questions, including “How do some coach education and training organisations propose that executive coaching should be practised?” and “What frameworks do they teach people to use in their practice?” I examined two course outlines as a means of understanding the different horizons of the organisations that had developed them. The outlines are provided in Appendix I and represent how the two organisations, (1) the Coaching Psychology Unit at the University of Sydney and (2) the Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership (IECL), advise and recommend how executive coaches could (and should) practise. Even if we discount the fact that first of these organisations is a higher education provider and the second a commercial course provider, the differences in their frameworks and horizons are evident. The University of Sydney illustrates a strong theoretical basis in psychology (the practice of “coaching psychology”), whereas the IECL promotes the experiential development of the tools, skills, relationship-building and practitioner qualities required by executive coaches. Because executive coaching is an emerging field and executive coaches practise coaching in very different ways, it is virtually impossible to describe a unified view of coaching practice. By comparison, in more established fields such as Eastern and Western medicine, for example, it is possible to describe in a more universal manner the practices of these fields and also their respective differences.

In responding to the challenges identified above, by accessing the coaches’ experiences in Phase 2 of my study, my research provides insights into how the executive coaches in my study
practised and how they perceived that executive coaching can be practised. In that way, I represent how the participants in my research (in their particular settings) experienced (and practised) executive coaching.

6.6.2. THE EXPERIENCE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

The second and third parts of my model are concerned with the following question from my research: “How do client executives and executive coaches experience executive coaching?” From the findings of my research conducted in Phase 2, the key (desirable) dimensions of experiencing executive coaching are presented in Figure 6.2. These dimensions are contained within four interactional categories (represented by four concentric circles), namely context, effects/outcomes, process and relationship space. Context reflects the organisational and individual worlds that influence and shape the executive coaching experiences of client executives and which executive coaches acknowledge, interface with (and manage) as part of the practice of executive coaching. Effects/outcomes represent the capabilities, self-awareness, potential realisations and transformations that occur for client executives as a result of their participation in executive coaching (and which may also indirectly benefit their employing organisations). Process includes the versatile, tailored and client-focused practices that are facilitated by executive coaches in (and between) executive coaching sessions and which support meaning-making, reflection and learning from experience for client executives. Relationship space describes the independent (safe), caring and mutually trusting relationship that emerges and is co-created between client executives and executive coaches and within which (self-)reflection and learning occur for client executives.

In Figure 6.2, the key dimensions as reported by client executives and executive coaches are included towards the left- and right-hand sides of the diagram respectively. Selected dimensions that were common to both groups are placed across the centre horizontal line of the diagram to show they were identified as important by both sets of participants. In the context category (outer circle), organisational factors are located towards the top half of the diagram and individual factors at the bottom. This part (Part 2) of my model includes a focus on drawing these key dimensions together in a framework that includes experiential learning as the foundation for the process (and practice) of executive coaching. The next part (Part 3) of my model focuses on the emerging relationship space as the central element of the experience and phenomenon of executive coaching.

25 As outlined earlier, the dimensions and associated themes of executive coaching are also presented in table format in Appendix J.
Figure 6.2 Key dimensions of executive coaching in action

*Executive coach reported client outcomes
a) **Context**

Executive coaching is situated and practised within varied and unique organisational and individual contexts. From my research I argue that executive coaching is optimal when the *client executive’s* organisation supports client readiness by framing executive coaching as a positive intervention and when organisational stakeholders respect the boundaries and confidentiality of the primary coaching relationship formed between the *executive coach* and the *client executive*. This limited organisational interference enables the two parties to work together freely, with minimal constraints, opening up the possibilities for the development of the *client executive’s* potential and maximising the opportunity for learning. The *executive coach* works to manage any involvement from organisational stakeholders (when necessary) and to balance the interests of the organisation (which funds the coaching engagement), but gives primacy to the *client executive’s* needs and goals. From my research, I argue that executive coaching works best when the organisation is not actively involved in the overall process of coaching and simply assumes the role of establishing and funding this learning opportunity for the employee (the executive coaching client).

For *client executives*, the freedom and agency to determine their goals and focus for coaching ensures that learning is not only relevant to them professionally, but is also (most importantly for them) personally significant. In executive coaching, *executive coaches* work with individual *client executives’* contexts, helping them to explore and understand themselves both within the landscape of their organisation as well as (inevitably) the broader context of their lives. Part of the context for *client executives* is their readiness (willingness, motivation and commitment) to participate in coaching. This notion is similar to the strong motivation that adults have when they choose to learn something that is meaningful and time-relevant for them (see Knowles et al., 1998, principles of andragogy).

b) **Effects/outcomes**

The findings from my research illustrate that executive coaching results in a diverse range of individual outcomes for *client executives*. The benefits to the organisation of executive coaching are more indirect and consequential. The most significant benefits gained from executive coaching for *client executives* relate to increased levels of self-awareness, self-confidence and self-efficacy, which manifest outwardly in different and personal ways for each *client executive* in enhanced work-related abilities and enriched capability for self-coaching. My research indicates that executive coaching is most powerful when it is focused on meaning-making with *client executives*, rather than simply on skills development or behavioural change. When coaching results in a deep alteration of *client executives’* beliefs, principles, and feelings, executive coaching resembles transformative learning (Mezirow,
As such, executive coaching can be viewed as most desirable when it is a transformative learning journey of “being” and “becoming” for clients (as opposed to focusing only on the “knowing” and “doing” aspects of their present roles and current situations). Further, when executive coaching is optimal it results in a transfer of capability (as indicated earlier in this chapter), with the client executive developing the ongoing ability to coach self and others. In this way, the learning process undertaken in coaching sessions continues beyond the coaching experience as a continuing learning (for life) journey.

While the purpose of executive coaching is ideally focused on potential realisation and transformation for individual client executives, it has concurrent effects for executive coaches. Executive coaches are committed to providing value to the client executive and gathering the practice-based evidence from their clients to confirm that this occurs. When executive coaching goes well, executive coaches feel rewarded (and energised, excited and satisfied) by the experience. They also (hopefully) follow their own processes in the pursuit of reflection and learning from their coaching practice.

c) **Process**

My research identified that the process of executive coaching is unique and tailored to each client executive. Building on my interpretations of participants’ experiences (not their actual words), executive coaching is predominantly person-centred (C. R. Rogers, 1961) and client-directed (Duncan et al., 2004) and is characterised by the need for executive coaches to adapt coaching to suit the needs and (often evolving) agenda of the client. The findings of my study therefore illustrate that the process of coaching is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Executive coaches collaborate with clients to help them determine the focus of their coaching (learning) experience, consistent with concepts of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975), critical self-directed learning (Hammond & Collins, 1991) and humanistic approaches to coaching (Stober, 2006).

To maximise clients’ learning experience and outcomes, executive coaches manage themselves (their judgements, emotions and ego, presence and self-disclosure) and respond reflexively, ensuring that client executives receive their full attention and focus in coaching sessions. As facilitators of the coaching process, executive coaches appropriately view their expertise as located in the process and practice of coaching, not as experts in their clients’ lives. In this way, executive coaching also reflects the general movement in education away from telling people towards assisting them to find out for themselves (Heron, 2001).

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26 Higgs and Titchen (2008) framed professional practice as “doing, knowing, being and becoming”. I propose that this is also a useful framework in the context of my research for viewing the outcomes of executive coaching for client executives.
Coaches use a wide variety of dialogical practices (such as inquiry, questioning, listening and reflecting back) in the facilitation of coaching sessions, where *client executives* are helped to focus on the positive aspects of the situations they face and to recognise and build on their strengths and capabilities. During the processes of executive coaching, *client executives* value being challenged in their learning by an external party (their *executive coach*) who possesses both objectivity and distance from their organisation. Challenge is experienced as supportive and relationship-enhancing and is similar to the notion that helpers (including coaches) who challenge others are more likely to be experienced as empathic and accepting (Fisher, 1981).

My research illustrates that executive coaching is a learning process with an emphasis on facilitating learning from experience. This also occurs when executive coaching is optimal, that is, when it is focused on learning and reflection. Experiential learning values the entry experiences of learners, and in executive coaching, *client executives* bring their real situations, their “here-and-now experiences” (see Kolb & Fry, 1975) to the process. However, as also illustrated in my study, experience alone is not the key to learning (Boud et al., 1985), as an experience might be memorable for an individual who, however, may not necessarily learn or change. Reflection is the vital element in any form of learning (Boud et al., 1985), and in executive coaching (as experiential learning) reflection is integral, enabling meaning to be derived from experience and learning enhanced. Further, throughout the coaching process, *executive coaches* continue to facilitate learning from new experiences between coaching sessions by inviting *client executives* to share their experiences, reflect and assimilate new understandings and plan for future action. As outlined earlier, it is this capability to undertake this process of learning (from experience) for themselves that characterises the transfer of the lifelong capability to self-coach to *client executives*. 
6.7 MODEL PART 3: REINVENTING EXECUTIVE COACHING AS RE-EMERGENT COACHING SPACES

The third part of my model presents my argument that the coaching relationship space for executive coaching is at the core of the executive coaching experience. This is illustrated in Figure 6.2 and is presented as the central element of the diagram.

d) **Coaching relationship space**

Based on the findings of my research, the optimal coaching relationship space for executive coaching is an independent, safe, caring and mutually trusting relationship that is co-created between the *client executive* and the *executive coach*. Such a coaching space is paramount for learning and development and provides an opportunity for time away from the workplace for *client executives* to reflect and think with another (their *executive coach*). The coaching relationship space is the aspect of executive coaching that draws together all the other components of the experience. My interpretation is that the *executive coach* and the *client executive* both re-emerge *reshaped* from this *relationship* and *reflection* space. The coaching space itself is also dynamic; it emerges (and re-emerges) between the *client executive* and the *executive coach* at each encounter (coaching session). Executive coaching as re-emergent coaching space(s) is depicted in Figure 6.3.

As experienced by my participants, without a positive and value-creating space (relationship), executive coaching cannot be successful. For *client executives*, emergence of this space depends on their feeling a sense of connection with their coach. It is on the basis of this connection that clients exercise their agency in the selection and confirmation of their particular coach. From my research, I argue that assessing and forming the initial connection with a coach is an emotional and intuitive process for *client executives* and frequently occurs in moments when they first meet, observe or experience their coach in action. In these moments with a potential coach, clients search for some form of perceived commonality with the coach in relation to themselves (e.g., gender, personal quality, values). Similarly, in these early moments, *executive coaches* work to create a space for executive coaching with the client by establishing rapport and assisting the client to feel comfortable with them as quickly as possible. In this way, *executive coaches* view their ability to co-create a relationship with a *client executive* and to create the space for executive coaching to occur as an essential part of their ability as a (good) coach.
The coaching relationship space is co-created between the *executive coach* and the *client executive*.

This space is paramount for learning and it is this aspect of executive coaching that draws all the other components of the experience together.

The *client executive* and the *executive coach* both re-emerge *reshaped* from this *relationship* and *reflection space*. 
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The findings of my research demonstrate that trust is an essential characteristic of the executive coaching relationship space and is integral to the process of learning in executive coaching. If the nature of the coaching relationship is framed appropriately and positively at the outset (as supportive, confidential, and independent from the organisation), client executives unquestioningly trust their executive coach. This notion of trust in (positive) executive coaching experiences for client executives is far more immediate than might be commonly anticipated in other working or business relationships (see e.g. Maister et al., 2002). The independence of the executive coach from the client’s organisation, along with the associated neutrality and confidentiality, provides the safety that fosters trust and ultimately supports deep learning in the executive coaching space by enabling client executives to be truly open, honest, and vulnerable with their coach. In particular, client executives value the confidential and trusted conversations in executive coaching when compared with the political and competitive contexts of their organisations where private, safe and open dialogues are typically not possible. While client executives generally open up more fully to their coach about themselves, this occurs in a professional context; the findings of my research portray executive coaching as professional and purposeful relationships and conversations with executive coaches who maintain appropriate boundaries and distance from their clients. In this way, executive coaching is focused almost exclusively on clients and their worlds, not those of the executive coach.

In fostering trust in the relationship with clients, executive coaches demonstrate qualities of empathy and authenticity which are consistent with premises in the contexts of learning and education where these qualities are also viewed as essential (Hammond & Collins, 1991; C. R. Rogers, 1961). The findings of my research suggest that these qualities of being possessed by executive coaches are more significant in establishing trust with their client executives than anything they might be doing. Further, my findings indicate that trust emerges in the space of the relationship and evolves naturally, rather than being something that must be actioned or made to happen. The existence of trust is mutual in the coaching relationship: coaches also trust the client to be willing, open and committed to “do the (hard) work” on the self that is required in executive coaching. The relationship and the associated learning for clients is enhanced by executive coaches through the demonstration of a sense of caring for their client executive. This condition is consistent with views of care in helping relationships which focus on helping another person to develop, grow and actualise (Mayeroff, 1971; C. R. Rogers, 1961; Titchen, 2004).

Maister et al. (2002) proposed that in the role of a trusted advisor working with clients, trust grows over time and requires “work” and “effort” to make it happen.
The executive coaching relationship space is also characterised by separation of client executives from their daily work activities and workplaces. This is most significant in providing space for reflection and learning which is away from the “busy work” that characterises the worlds of client executives. Perceiving oneself as “off-the-job” can be an important prerequisite for reflection to occur (Boud, 2006). The findings of my research suggest that the reflective space of executive coaching contrasts markedly with the environments of client executives’ organisations as places of habitual action with few opportunities for individuals to step back from activities and take time to reflect and think. The space for executive coaching also involves reflection with another (the executive coach) and this is what makes the reflection in executive coaching more powerful for client executives than reflection alone. This is consistent with the notion that reflection is not just an individual activity, and engaging in the process with another person can change the meanings individuals draw from their experience (Boud et al., 1993).

e) Useful metaphors

There are two metaphors that are useful points of comparison here for the emerging relationship space of executive coaching. First, Titchen’s (2001) metaphor of a critical companion describes an experienced practitioner accompanying a less experienced practitioner on the personal experiential learning journey. This model is highly relevant to executive coaching and consistent with the findings of my research, even though the metaphor focuses on developing expertise in patient-centred healthcare and was developed in the context of nursing. In particular, there are parallels in the role of the critical companion with that of the executive coach as the facilitator of experiential learning, and in the nature of relationship in which the two parties come together for the purpose of learning (then mutually part at the end of the experience). Titchen described the use of situations of high challenge and high support (combined with trust) to facilitate experiential learning journeys with others, which are also characteristics of executive coaching identified in my research. Importantly, in Titchen’s model of the critical companion and in my executive coaching research, the relationship between the two key participants sits at the heart or centre of the framework. The executive coach is concerned with addressing the client executive’s lived experience of practice within the organisation and also of learning (following Titchen, 2001). Further, the metaphor of the critical companion emphasises the need for reflective (and focused) conversations away from the clinical area (or the workplace, as is the case in executive coaching) to support learning. It was also during my review of the model of the critical companion that I came to appreciate that the process of executive coaching could be viewed as phenomenological; hence another reason for my chosen research approach.
One key difference when compared to the critical companion is that the executive coach is not acting as a more experienced professional in the client executive’s field of employment. However, the coach does possess more experience in one aspect, the ability to facilitate (with others) the processes of reflection and learning from experience. In both the model of the critical companion and my executive coaching model, the capability to facilitate the learning of others is transferred during the interactive process. My study also highlights that the goal for this growth or self-development is to extend the ongoing capacity to facilitate lifelong self-learning after the purchased coaching engagement is concluded. As indicated earlier in this chapter, this finding from my research presents a useful focus for future executive coaching research.

Second, Armstrong’s (2007) application of the metaphor of the goddess Hestia (who represented the centre of the city and home in Greek mythology) to executive coaching is also useful for describing the relationship space that emerges between client executive and executive coach. Based on findings from the IECL’s research into coaching effectiveness (Armstrong & Melser, 2006; Armstrong et al., 2007), Armstrong proposed a number of connections between the archetype Hestia (representing hearth, centring and a sanctuary for self-focus) and the executive coaching relationship space. Most significantly, in Armstrong’s use of the Hestia metaphor and my executive coaching model, the relationship created between both parties is as important as the structure or ritual of executive coaching (the process). The archetype Hestia is represented by a round central stone (place of fire and hearth of the home) and provides a place (as in executive coaching) for clients away from their busy workplaces to bask in the warmth (relationships) and come back to themselves (reflect) in order to be questioned and challenged (by a coach) towards fulfilling their aspirations and potential (Armstrong, 2007). As in the case of the hearth, the executive coaching relationship provides a warm, safe sanctuary for clients, a contrast to the frenetic pace of their organisations (a “Hermes-saturated world”). In both the Hestia metaphor and my model of executive coaching, the independence of the coach creates safety for open and confidential conversations and supports a relationship of trust and intimacy with a client, which is an essential condition for learning and for providing an environment in which the client can be challenged and change.

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28 Armstrong (2007) draws on connections between the nature of modern organisations and the Greek god, Hermes.
6.8 MY EMERGENT THREE-PART MODEL: CREATING SPACES FOR REINVENTION THROUGH EXECUTIVE COACHING

My emergent three-part model of executive coaching is drawn together and presented diagrammatically in Figure 6.4. It represents my contribution to the field of executive coaching and is my end-point horizon following the conduct of this research.

SECTION C: LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS OF MY RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INDUSTRY, EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

6.9 LIMITATIONS OF MY RESEARCH

There were six broad areas of intentional delimitation in my research. First, my focus was on executive coaching undertaken in the commercial (for-profit) context in large metropolitan areas in Australia. In making this decision I recognised the impact of the work context on client executives and also the intention of their coaching and the coaching strategies adopted. I excluded coaching in not-for-profit organisations in order to concentrate on the essence of the coaching process and the immediate context of the client executive rather than the broader context of the industry sector. It would be valuable in future to address related research questions in other sectors of the Australian economy. Further research in a wider range of Australian settings and comparison with coaching in different countries is warranted to consider the robustness of my research findings in different cultures, contexts and settings.

Second, my research was conducted methodologically in the interpretive research paradigm. As outlined in Chapter Three, phenomenological studies of the experience of executive coaching have been undertaken overseas and provided useful comparison points. My project enabled me to fill an important gap in the existing research base in terms of the conduct of an Australian based, phenomenological study of the experience of executive coaching and to also demonstrate the usefulness of deep, rich descriptions for understanding the phenomenon.
Figure 6.4 My emergent three-part model: Creating spaces for reinvention through executive coaching

Part 1: Reconceptualising executive coaching

Executive coaching is a co-created relationship space between a client executive and an executive coach for (self-)reflection and experiential learning by a client executive which is facilitated by an executive coach. It involves critical reflection and learning about self in a relationship with another (the executive coach) which makes the experience more powerful for client executives than what can be achieved alone. As well as enhancing the work-related capabilities of the client executive, executive coaching is a process whereby an individual client executive is supported by an executive coach to transform his or her capacity for self-reflection and is empowered to become a lifelong (self-)coach.

Part 3: Reinventing executive coaching as re-emergent coaching spaces

The coaching relationship space is co-created between the executive coach and the client executive. This space is paramount for learning and it is this aspect of executive coaching that draws all the other components of the experience together.

The client executive and the executive coach both re-emerge reshaped from this relationship and reflection space.
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Third, my research deliberately focused on client executives and executive coaches as the key parties in the executive coaching relationship. I deliberately did not include organisational stakeholders including organisation brokers (HR representatives) or other stakeholders (line managers) as participants since my focus was on the “in the room” interaction of the client executive and the executive coach. As such, my research did not examine the roles of the more peripheral participants in the coaching process. There is value in future research exploring the roles and experiences of organisational stakeholders. One of the key questions to emerge from my research relates to the role organisational stakeholders can play (and potentially should undertake) in supporting executive coaching.

Fourth, in designing my participant selection strategy I sought willing participants who made an informed decision to engage in my study. In achieving this intent I am conscious of a degree of self-selection of enthusiastic client executives and successful executive coaches in my research. In reporting their experiences, both groups (apart from one client executive) described the process and outcomes as positive. Although my critical appraisal of this finding was that this client positivity is not peculiar (as reported in Chapter Three), in my research some aspects of coaching (such as strategies for dealing with conflict or traumas in the coaching relationship) could not be explored in depth from the perspective of the client executives, nor were the executive coaches able to speak more from their extensive experience about less successful coaching engagements. In general, the experiences of my participants contributed constructively to my research in the exploration of the positive potential of coaching as opposed the broad reality (“warts and all”) of coaching across a range of coaching experiences. While my research provides some understanding of what coaches have learned or considered in their coaching training and experience, my empirical research in Phase 2 examined predominantly “good” coaching practices. Future interpretive research could explore instances of coaching that is not experienced positively, and when the relationship between coach and client is ineffective. This would help to provide insight into what more is required to develop the executive coach community of practice.

Fifth, it is important to note that my research did not focus on the question of how the executive coaching community is pursuing its journey towards professionalisation. This is an important topic for this occupational group and my research makes an incidental contribution to examining the scene, progress and consequence of practising in an emerging profession.

Finally, I did not examine variations in the experience and capabilities of my executive coach participants as my primary focus. In future research it would be desirable to examine the
coaching practices of *executive coaches* across the expertise-capability spectrum\(^{29}\) and to examine the experiences of clients who had less than positive coaching experiences or preference to participate. This broader spectrum would set the benchmark for improvement of coaching across the emerging industry.

### 6.10 RESEARCH STRENGTHS

As outlined in Chapter Two, demonstrating rigour in my research involved ensuring congruence or fit between my research question(s), my selected research paradigm (interpretive), my research approaches (philosophical hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology) and the phenomenon of executive coaching. Most importantly, I focused on respecting and honouring the multiple constructed realities of my participants and authors in the executive coaching field through selection of the philosophies and practices of the interpretive paradigm. This is represented in my research by representing authentically the interpretations of the horizons of others (the authors in the literature and the voices of my research participants) as well as my own. I also ensured methodological congruence by matching the writing of my research to my chosen research approaches. In Chapters Four and Five, for example, I included thick, rich descriptions of participants’ experiences in the form of stories, using a phenomenological writing style suitable for reporting the findings of my study conducted in Phase 2.

Another important feature for ensuring rigour in my research design involved accessing the phenomenon of executive coaching using two different (and aligned) research approaches and utilising multiple data sources. My unique research design (including the combination of a philosophical hermeneutic and hermeneutic phenomenological study in one executive coaching research project) enabled me to examine my research questions in two research phases and from a number of different perspectives, each contributing to my evolving horizon or interpretation. In Phase 1, I interpreted the constructed text sets that were developed from various literature searches; in Phase 2, I interpreted the transcripts and recordings of interviews held with my research participants, field notes and my research logs. My research design was focused on enabling me to “crystallise” (following Richardson & St Pierre, 2005) an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of executive coaching. I believe that the selection and use of two research approaches was fundamental in this research, resulting in a deeper and richer interpretation than would have been possible with the conduct of one study alone.

\(^{29}\) For example, across the five-stages from novice to expert (following Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). Peterson (2011, p. 85) applied the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model to executive coaching and suggested that “good coaches are at level 3 (competent) and great coaches are at level 5 (expert)”.

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To ensure credibility in my research, I adopted the reflexive strategies of hermeneutics, particularly the ongoing process of detailing and reviewing my pre-understandings during the course of my research as my horizons evolved and changed. This was especially important as, during the conduct of my research, I was both a practising executive coach and researcher. My training and experience as a coach had several advantages for the conduct of interviews in Phase 2. As a practising coach I was experienced at building rapport and trust and putting individuals at ease. My experience as a coach had also developed my natural curiosity and skills in asking questions and the ability to listen attentively. I also readily understood the terms and jargon used by executive coaches and did not need to ask repeatedly for explanations. Overall, during my research, I perceived substantial commonality between the facilitative role of the coach and that of the interpretive researcher. However, while being an “insider” in the coaching industry was convenient in the data gathering and analysis processes, I was acutely aware that this could be a problem in my research if I was not careful about making “taken for granted” assumptions about what my participants were saying. Reflexive processes, which included documenting my pre-understandings at the start of the research and then constantly reflecting on them in my research logs, were important for ensuring that I remained constantly aware of my role and emerging perspectives of executive coaching as a researcher. Further, to support my role as a researcher, I decided not to interview my own coaching clients. Unlike other coach-researchers such as Marlatt (2012), I felt that an existing coaching relationship might in some way prejudice what my clients shared with me at interview and how I responded to them (e.g., the temptation to step into role of coach instead of researcher), and hence chose not to include them in my study.

Another aspect of ensuring credibility involved conducting and documenting my research adequately and transparently enough to enable readers to make a judgement about the transferability of my findings to their own situations (Higgs, 2009; Mays & Pope, 2000). In reporting my research, I have provided detailed accounts of its conduct, context and findings to enable readers to make this assessment. However, in considering the transferability of my findings it should be noted that what executive coaches actually do might be quite different from what executive coaches ought to do. Research can contribute to knowledge of the former, and it can provide evidence to substantiate or disclaim the existence-in-action of a

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30 Through accessing pre-understandings, researchers enter the hermeneutic circle and remain oriented to the phenomenon (Fleming et al., 2003). The use of reflexive researcher logs is also essential for becoming deeply emerged in the hermeneutic circle through recording the researcher’s changing horizons (1996).
31 Marlatt (2012) included himself as a subject in his phenomenological research and also interviewed his own coaching clients.
32 In interpretive research, transferability or “internal” generalisability (J. A. Maxwell, 2005) contrasts with research undertaken using the empirico-analytical paradigm, where findings are typically produced that are generalisable to a wider population.
single, unified executive coaching profession. This research has demonstrated that at this time coaching is far from achieving the characteristics and rigour of a profession, but should be thought of as an emerging profession. But I also argue that research cannot (and should not) dict\textit{ate} what \textit{executive coaches} ought to do. For example, in Chapter Three I outlined the problems associated with the unquestioned use of “how to” guides in relation to implementing an individually tailored, situated and socially constructed practice of executive coaching. From research such as my study, executive coaches, educators, trainers and others must decide what resonates for them – and that decision must be made quite independently of my unique findings. In other words, findings from research such as mine function like a road map, illustrating where things are in relation to each other. The driver must decide where to go and which route to take (Goldberg Wood & Tully, 2006). The similarities and commonalities between the experiences reported by \textit{client executives} and \textit{executive coaches} (as illustrated in Table 6.1) suggest that the findings of my research may be transferable to a broader population of executive coaching clients, \textit{executive coaches} and contexts. However, as outlined, this is a task for readers to determine.

6.11 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COACHING INDUSTRY AND PROFESSIONALISATION

While my research did not specifically explore questions associated with the emergence of the executive coaching industry or professionalisation, there are a number of recommendations that I can make here arising from my research findings.

I argue that the field of executive coaching should continue to draw on established professional fields in the development of a composite knowledge base for coaching. One of the arguments presented in the literature is that there is a need for further coaching research (particularly empirico-analytical research), as the foundation of a unique knowledge base for executive coaching practice and as a precursor to professionalisation. However, I propose that this is not the only (or most suitable) way of viewing the development of a knowledge base for an emerging (and eclectic) practice such as executive coaching. I argue that in building a knowledge base, coaching (like many other professions) can continue to draw from a variety of established academic disciplines and related fields and merge them in a way that is uniquely applied to coaching practice. By not doing so, as identified throughout this thesis, executive coaching is missing a valuable opportunity to access deep, rich knowledge bases that can inform coaching practice. It is the unique collection of knowledges relevant to executive
coaching that can enrich, inform and be drawn from coaching practice, that matters, not a knowledge that no other field overlaps.

Drawing from other academic disciplines to develop a knowledge base is not peculiar to executive coaching; it has characterised the development and history of other emergent professions. For example, the original proponents of occupational therapy (OT) in the USA in the early 1900s drew on medical and basic science models to develop the first educational programs and standards for OT (Paterson, 2003). This was followed by an educational transformation in the 1960s and 1970s which re-emphasised knowledge drawn from the humanities and, most recently, a focus on occupational science in OT (Paterson, 2003). An interesting parallel with executive coaching is that the original founders of OT also came from a wide array of disciplines, including psychiatry, psychobiology, architecture and education (Paterson, 2003). Further, this example from the history of OT illustrates the opportunity for executive coaching to further explore the rich case studies of other emergent professions for experiences that have the potential to inform challenges faced by the developing field.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, the findings of my research illustrate that executive coaching is not yet an established practice. Executive coaching is currently practised by practitioners from a wide range of disciplines who utilise a suite of diverse practices, approaches and products. I suggest that in the context of the emerging practice of executive coaching, the development of common practice models and frameworks at present may be of little value. In a marketplace where models and approaches to executive coaching still represent proprietary knowledge and competitive advantage and where executive coaching is used in many different environments and is approached in diverse ways, executive coaches (and their organisations) are likely to continue to adapt and modify frameworks for coaching practice to continue to differentiate themselves in the marketplace.

Alternatively, I argue that the coaching industry should focus on a program of ongoing collaborative work across the executive coaching practice community, aimed at challenging and developing executive coaching practices. In the sense of executive coaching becoming a robust professional practice, there is a need for the sharing and debate of current practices and the exploration of what could be involved in a shared practice of executive coaching. It is not necessary to create uniformity in executive coaching practice. Rather, it is possible to respect differences in strategy, process, principles of engagement and modes of executive coaching practice.

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33 OT is a client-centred health profession concerned with promoting health and wellbeing through occupation (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2014).
On the other hand, I argue that it is also essential that there is agreement on some of the core foundations of executive coaching. On the basis of the findings of my research, I propose that there is need for a definition of the practice of executive coaching, and that a code of practice and ethics is a foundational area. To achieve this, there is a need for ongoing organisation of the executive coaching practice community and a focus on the developmental stages and activities involved in pursuing the standards, characteristic attributes and status of a profession.

However, there is also the opportunity for the executive coaching community to consider the question of professionalisation and whether coaching actually should become a profession. If executive coaching is deemed to be an industry then it has a key role selling products, in contrast to a profession which has the primary focus of providing a service to society. This represents a significant difference, as the intentional role and expectations held by society of an industry differ markedly from those of a profession. For example, unlike in an industry, the disinterested provision of services to society (same service to all, regardless of background) is a core part of being a profession. If executive coaching is to remain an industry then there is an opportunity to focus on the delivery of a quality product through self-regulation and standard setting. If executive coaching is to be profession, then the focus should shift to how executive coaches can meet the expectations of society as the focus moves from the commercial interaction to executive coaching serving the greater good. This research has left me with the following question: Is there any point becoming a profession if executive coaching is emerging to be the former (industry) and not the latter (profession)? I recommend ongoing research into the practice, effects and professionalisation of the emerging profession of executive coaching as a means of exploring these issues in more detail.

6.12 IMPLICATIONS FOR EXECUTIVE COACH EDUCATION AND TRAINING

I recommend that the education and training of executive coaches incorporates the perspectives and interpretations of executive coaching arising from my research. Overall, my research points to the value and need for educational programs dealing with the development of executive coaches, not just attendance at short training courses. As detailed in Chapter One, most executive coaches have attended a short training course in coaching and typically have a university degree from a former profession. There is a significant difference between the

34 See Chapter One for details on coach education and training in Australia. Also see Table 2.7 in Chapter Two for details of the qualifications held by the executive coach participants in my study.
depth of knowledge and broader education achieved during a 3-year university program and the knowledge and skills gained from short courses. Attendance at a university program in executive coaching would extend and deepen the knowledge base of executive coaches and provide a greater theoretical base for executive coaching practice. It is interesting to note that in a study conducted in Australia by Dagley (2010b), “exceptional coaches” identified that they had engaged in an extended period of training (usually a number of years), a significant period of supervised practice and an education component drawing on a range of disciplines. Most significantly, if executive coaching is to continue to move towards professionalisation, university-based education should be a significant area of focus as most professions are based on three (or more) years of this type of pre-service study (Ewing & Smith, 2008) and society frequently expects a degree level qualification for most professionals.

University programs in executive coaching should be based on a curriculum that is grounded in multiple disciplines and knowledge sources, reflecting the rich diversity in coaching practice. Most significantly, on the basis of the findings of my research, I propose that educational curricula must recognise adult learning theory and experiential learning as fundamental to the practice of coaching and that executive coaches must also understand the importance of these concepts to their practice. My principal recommendation is for organisations that develop coaches (both educational institutions and training organisations) to have greater focus on adult education concepts and theory and experiential learning practices in their curricula and in their processes of preparing executive coaches for practice. Further, critically reflecting on the dominance of psychological perspectives in the executive coaching literature (when compared to the findings of my research), I also recommend the value of executive coach education being conducted within faculties of education or multi-disciplinary institutes in the university sector in Australia. This would provide more balance in executive coach education, where the provision of higher education qualifications in Australia is currently dominated by psychology schools and departments.

On the basis of the findings of my research I consider it important that university programs develop executive coaches’ abilities to understand and use processes of reflection, both in

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35 Coaches were nominated as “exceptional” by the HR representatives who had brokered their services.
36 Further support for my argument can also be found in the findings of Goode’s (2007) study of 20 “best practice” executive coaches in the US, in which coaches described having developed (via informal methods) familiarity with one or more adult education concepts (critical reflection, self-directed learning and experiential learning). However, it demonstrated that the coaches’ knowledge and depth of understanding of these adult learning concepts varied significantly and they applied these theories in their practice in substantially different ways (Goode, 2007). Similarly, Peterson (2011) also reported that few coaches identified possessing knowledge of how people learn as a key quality of a good or effective coach, although this is the most important characteristic.
37 As I argued in Chapter One, the location of executive coach education within psychology schools and departments is a potential explanation for the dominance of psychological theories and perspectives in executive coaching research and literature.
their executive coaching practice with clients and in adopting a reflective and critical stance towards their knowledge and activities. In the context of professionalisation, it is fundamentally important to recognise that executive coaches are not just consumers of “ready-made” knowledge in the form of research (as assumed by the scientist-practitioner model). Instead, I advocate that executive coaches have an active role in the development of the emerging profession by generating knowledge through reflecting on practice and sharing their experiences with others (following Abrandt Dahlgren et al., 2004). In this way, the conscious act of reflection becomes an important tool for the ongoing professional development of executive coaches and the emerging practice and profession of executive coaching (following Abrandt Dahlgren et al., 2004). In university programs, this critical and reflective stance should also be encouraged in the context of critiquing and challenging the epistemological assumptions of current theories and approaches and their relevance to executive coaching practice. A number of authors (Mintzberg, 2004; Raelin, 2007; Roglio & Light, 2009; Sinclair, 2007a, 2007b) have argued for a re-visioning of leadership and executive education that promotes the processes of critical reflection and critical thinking and which gives primacy to learning from experience, practice and the development of reflective practice, I too argue for the same values in executive coach education.

In my illumination of the centrality and importance of the coaching relationship space that emerges between coach and client in executive coaching, my research also has other implications for the education and training of executive coaches. Most importantly, my findings indicate the value of the development of executive coaches’ “most needed” capabilities in two main areas: (1) forming and enhancing the relationship space that emerges between themselves and their client; (2) possessing the dialogical and communicative abilities necessary to deepen and extend reflection and learning. My research findings imply that there is an opportunity for education, training and the ongoing professional development of coaches to place less emphasis on the development of skills in the application of methods, approaches and models in favour of a focus on creating the essential climate of the coaching relationship and fostering processes of reflection and learning.

Further, findings from my research also reinforce the importance of ongoing self- and personal development for executive coaches in addition to a focus on the development of coaching skills and capabilities. In my hermeneutic phenomenological study conducted in Phase 2, participants emphasised the importance of a range of personal qualities possessed by executive coaches in the space and process of executive coaching. These included (but were not limited to) empathy, authenticity, care, trust, self-management and non-judgement. These qualities are most appropriately associated with “being” versus “doing” (following Higgs &
In a similar way, mentoring has been described as operating at two levels: as a matter of technique, what “one does”, and also as “something that is more about the way one is” (Lippi & Cherry, 2011, p. 46). In the context of the training, education and development of executive coaches, there is an opportunity to focus not only on what coaches need to know (and do) to obtain useful outcomes, but also on how they might need to “be” to enable transformation to happen at the deepest levels with their clients.

6.13 IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

In providing recommendations for future research in executive coaching, I propose there is value in the conduct of further research in the areas identified in Part 1 of my model as presented in Figure 6.1. Each of these multiple conceptualisations of executive coaching provides a potential (and valuable) area for future exploration through research and inquiry. As outlined earlier, from the findings of my research there is also value in further research in the application of a wide range of theories (and in particular learning theory) to executive coaching. While it was not the intent of my thesis to explore the application of specific theories to executive coaching practice, by interpreting the executive coaching literature and also directly accessing the experiences of participants (and highlighting the differences between the two) I have been able to point to this area of possible investigation. Further, I argue that exploring a diverse range of research questions, using a variety of research approaches conducted in different research paradigms (particularly the interpretive paradigm) is fundamentally important for the further development of executive coaching.

As outlined in Chapter Three, the majority of executive coaching research has focused on measuring the outcomes of executive coaching for the individual and also at the organisational level, for example by (controversially) estimating the financial return on investment (ROI). There is an implicit assumption in this type of research that the processes and outcomes of executive coaching are separate and discrete aspects that can be investigated in isolation. The findings of my research suggest that there is also value in conceptualising the processes and outcomes of executive coaching in an integrated way. My study in Phase 2 highlighted that the processes of reflection and learning in executive coaching were also key outcomes for client executives. In a context where coaching evaluation has frequently proved to be difficult and problematic, I argue that this more integrated view of coaching might liberate the way coaches, organisations and researchers evaluate and investigate coaching by viewing executive coaching more appropriately as an individual learning and development strategy.
One of the most significant contributions of my research is that it illustrates that phenomenological studies exploring the experience of executive coaching provide a rich source of information and insights into the phenomenon. However, surprisingly little attention has been given to phenomenological studies in the executive coaching published research and knowledge base, and they are infrequently cited in literature reviews. For example, in a recently published literature review of executive coaching research, Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) made no reference to any of the phenomenological studies identified in my phenomenological text set. Similarly, another recent publication dedicated to providing a “comprehensive review of the field” also made no mention of any of these phenomenological studies (Grant et al., 2010). Further Grant’s (2011c) popular bibliography of the coaching literature mentions only five38 of the 11 studies included in my phenomenological text set that were completed at the time of publication of Grant’s bibliography. This appears to be a significant oversight and a missed opportunity in terms of understanding executive coaching more deeply and providing valuable insights for coaching practice.

There are a number of potential reasons why phenomenological studies in executive coaching may not feature in literature reviews of the field. As outlined in Chapter Three, the literature is dominated by psychological perspectives, reflecting active publication by psychologists.39 Coaching psychologists may rely on established psychological databases when undertaking literature searches. For example, PsychInfo reveals only a limited numbers of phenomenological studies in search results.40 Also, as outlined in Chapter Two, the bibliography of the executive coaching literature produced by Grant (2009, 2011c) (a coaching psychologist) was developed from a search of three databases.41 In my research I found it necessary to extend my search to a larger number of multi-subject databases (see Chapter Two for full details). As executive coaching is informed from diverse disciplines, limiting the scope of any literature search to single databases is problematic. Further, for psychologists and coaching psychologists who favour empirico-analytical paradigm research and gold standard randomised controlled trials (RCTs), phenomenological studies may not be identified as valid “scientific research” and could have been overlooked in the development of literature reviews.

However, the limited attention given to phenomenological research into executive coaching may be best explained by the limited number of publications that have emerged from these

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39 In Chapter Three I argued that psychologists are publishing more (than other disciplines) in the area of coaching. This view was supported by research undertaken by Stern and Stout-Rostron (2013).
40 A search of the database PsychInfo for the terms “executive coaching” and “phenomenology” in January 2014 revealed 8 results. These results included only two of the studies included in my phenomenological text set, Galuk (2009) and Kress (2008).
41 PsychInfo, Dissertation Abstracts International (DAI), and Business Source Premier.
studies. For example, nine\(^{42}\) of the 11 studies in my phenomenological text set were produced as PhD or other higher degree research projects, with limited (if any) published papers arising from this work. Hill (2010, p. 37) made a similar observation, suggesting that the bulk of research findings from postgraduate theses in executive coaching “remain unpublished despite the passage of some years”. I propose that the publication of journal papers from postgraduate projects is a key mechanism for the communication and sharing of this research with a wide audience and fundamental to the dissemination of new knowledge. Importantly for an emerging practice such as executive coaching, publication of research findings enables this type of information to be incorporated into the executive coaching discourse and also provides a basis for further knowledge evolution. Increased attention to the publication of findings arising from postgraduate executive coaching research is an important opportunity for interpretive paradigm researchers (in particular) and a strategy that might assist in addressing the current imbalance in the literature (as outlined in Chapter Three), which currently favours empirico-analytical research and psychological perspectives. The further publication of the findings of my research is considered a critical post-doctoral endeavour.

Overall, my research demonstrates that there is need to value the knowledge gained from research into practice, particularly for a new and emerging field such as executive coaching. As I argued in Chapter Three, there is a need in executive coaching to challenge the dominance of what Eisner (1988, p. 16) referred to in education as the “language of science” and what Salkovskis (2002, p. 4) referred to in psychotherapy as the “unthinking application of scientism”. In particular, I argue for a broader view of evidence (and knowledge) in executive coaching research, practice and literature than is evident with the promotion of evidence-based approaches, evidence-based coaching (EBC) and the scientist-practitioner model.

I also argue that there is much to learn for the emerging field of executive coaching from the problems associated with the adoption of a narrow view of evidence and the scientist-practitioner model in psychotherapy. For example, Goldfried and Wolfe (1996) argued that since the introduction of the model of scientist-practitioner, psychotherapy has struggled to foster the synergy between therapy research and practice. They warned that psychotherapy outcome researchers may have indeed “overreacted and moved the field in the wrong direction ... away from the day-to-day context of clinical practice” (p. 1007). I argue that there is a real opportunity for executive coaching (considering the influence of psychology on coaching research and practice at present) to be mindful, in a context of pressures towards professionalisation and a desire to establish credibility in an ever-expanding marketplace, that

\(^{42}\) Brodrick, 2010; Chapman, 2006; Clayton, 2011; Galuk, 2009; Kress, 2008; Marlatt, 2012; McCleland, 2005; Meneghetti, 2008; Sztucinski, 2001.
coaching does not follow the same path and unquestioningly adopt science-based models from psychotherapy. In particular, executive coaching should not unquestioningly follow proponents who suggest that the only way for the coaching industry to “flourish and grow” is through being a “scientific enterprise” (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007b, p. 251). It is important in executive coaching that the “value of looking at coaching research in terms of both outcome and process [and I would argue contexts and spaces], from the perspectives of all stakeholders and using methodologies that generate both breadth and depth of understanding” (Lane, 2010, p. 258) is recognised. It is also critical for coaching to acknowledge that empirico-analytical research, using approaches such as RCTs to evaluate outcomes, represent only one area of interest and one method for conducting research into executive coaching. Coaching needs to ensure that outcome data (while important and useful) is not accorded paramount importance over other types of evidence, knowledge and research strategies. Overall, as my study has demonstrated, there is considerable value in the application of interpretive research methods and research within (and through) practice in executive coaching.

There is also an opportunity for executive coaching to explore the application of other suitable models of developing expertise, recognising the challenges inherent in the adoption of the model of the scientist-practitioner and also the need for practitioners to reflect upon practice as an essential condition for shaping a future profession of executive coaching. For example, Schön’s (1983, 1987) reflective practitioner and Abrandt Dahlgren et al.’s (2004) revised model of the reflective practitioner are useful for application to executive coaching as they are based on the epistemological assumption that reflection on practice results in practice-generated knowledge. In the context of executive coaching, it is critical that executive coaches acknowledge the importance of learning from experience and value the knowledge gained from reflecting on practice. While learning and reflection are fundamental to the process of executive coaching with clients, they are also important for the practice development of executive coaches and the development of the emerging industry, practice and profession.

6.14 IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS

For organisations and brokers of coaching services it is worth noting a distinction between the four interactional categories (context, effects/outcomes, process and relationship space) as the main elements of executive coaching, as illuminated by my research. My research has identified the organisation as part of the coaching context and as a potential recipient of coaching outcomes, but as less influential in the process of executive coaching and (suitably) excluded from the coaching relationship space. In my study in Phase 2, participants reported
that while organisations viewed coaching as a benefit and a worthwhile investment or as an incentive to shape and retain good employees, they did not actively engage in the actual process, allowing the experience to be a two-way (between the executive coach and the client executive) rather than a three-way (including the organisation) interaction as presented in the literature. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the relationship that exists between the executive coach and the client executive is at the core of the executive coaching experience and paramount for learning. My findings suggest that the focus of organisations is best served by supporting this primary relationship, focusing on preparing clients for the experience of being coached and then “stepping aside” and allowing coach and client to work together.

There is also an opportunity for organisations to understand and respect the importance of the coaching relationship space that is co-created between client executives and executive coaches for the success of the executive coaching experience. From the findings of my research, executive coaching can be interpreted as an individualised and tailored experience for client executives, which suggests that in organisations one general coaching intervention is unlikely to be effective for all employees in all situations. I argue that the qualities of variability and flexibility in executive coaching programs are highly desirable and that the usual HR policies, which focus on trying to enforce control, conformity and standardisation across organisations (Hosie et al., 2012), are in conflict with the findings of my study. An insight from my research with participants suggests that HR should focus on supporting individual clients’ needs in participating in coaching programs. In particular, by appreciating the importance of the coaching relationship space, HR can also support clients in changing coaches in instances when, for example, the coaching relationship is not working.

Another area of interest for organisations relates to the selection of coaches and the potential impact of this on the relationship with a particular client. In my research, the most important factors for client executives in selection of their coach related to their agency in confirming their coach, based on a sense of connection during an initial meeting, session or some other interaction. This is in contrast with studies in the literature43 which suggest there is an active role to be played by other parties in terms of identifying and selecting a suitable relationship between coach and client. My findings suggest that even if organisations and HR practitioners insist on implementing “rigorous selection processes” to shortlist executive coaches, such as

43 For example, Joo (2005) indicated that the active selection and matching of coaches to clients is critical for coaching effectiveness. Wycherley and Cox (2008) advocated “objective” selection of coaches by the organisation and were overtly critical of coach selection decisions made on “chemistry” and an initial rapport as (the most common method). Gray et al. surveyed 201 clients and developed a 5-dimension model for executive coach selection including the coach’s: (1) ability to develop critical thinking and action, (2) ability to develop core management skills and direction, (3) ability to forge the coaching partnership, (4) personal profile, and (5) experience and qualifications.
validation by experts and assessment centres (Cox et al., 2014), the client will ultimately (and necessarily) need to make the final selection.

The findings of my research also emphasise the value of the executive coaching space in providing “time-out” for client executives to reflect and learn from their experiences. Participants in my research valued executive coaching for providing client executives with the space to “pause and reflect”, something which was not generally possible in the contexts of their busy working lives and employing organisations. From my research I argue that organisations should acknowledge and value executive coaching for providing what Jourard (1971) termed “check-out“ (private) places. In a similar way, Bennis (2003) challenged organisations to make the time for individuals to develop the self-knowledge essential for leadership through individual and collective reflection about life experiences. Overall, the findings of my research suggest that coaching is potentially filling a space for reflection that is missing in organisations.

Another implication for organisations arising from my research relates to the common preoccupation with performance rather than not learning in workplaces and how this relates to establishing the purpose and focus of executive coaching for individual clients. While setting (potentially) measurable performance-related goals and objectives for executive coaching clients might be appealing to organisations, this can be problematic if it results in the learning outcomes from executive coaching being defined in narrow ways. During my study in Phase 2, I reached a point of agreement with Druckman and Bjork (1992) that reframing the desired outcomes of executive coaching to a focus on learning (rather than simply aspects of performance improvement or enhancement) is highly desirable. I also argue, on the basis of the findings from my research, that this focus importantly involves clients’ learning about themselves, as executive coaching has the capacity to support clients to develop their potential and capability and the sustainable long-term ability to coach self and others.

Further, my research suggests that organisations can embrace executive coaching as a transformative experience that provides opportunity for “development of the person”, rather than simply developing employees and their current work-related capabilities. This requires organisations to challenge existing preconceptions and assumptions about the responsibility of workplaces in providing “personal development” and to recognise the value of integrated

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44 Bennis (2003) argued that leaders are able to express themselves freely. The key to full self-expression according to Bennis was to understand one’ self and the work, and the key to understanding was learning – from one’s life and experience.
45 This recognises that the term “personal development” may be unpalatable in organisations where the term may have been used historically to label the development needs of problem or difficult employees or where it has been viewed as the responsibility of employees to undertake this type of development outside the workplace. Based on the findings of my research, I therefore prefer to use the term “development of the person”.

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and holistic learning approaches such as executive coaching. In doing so, organisations should acknowledge that maintaining a separation between the personal and the professional in coaching is unrealistic, ultimately impossible and also undesirable (Armstrong, 2007; Cavanagh & Grant, 2004; A. Maxwell, 2009). Bennis (2003, p. 182) argued that the “one true mission” of all organisations is to provide ways for individuals to grow and develop and to release the full use of their potential. My research identifies sponsoring executive coaching as one means of supporting this important endeavour.

6.15 CONCLUSION

Executive coaching is an emerging and developing phenomenon. As demonstrated in my research, the literature describes executive coaching in practical ways (and terms), which speaks to an action orientation and a marketplace that desires results. Jackson (2008) referred to this as a “culture of pragmatism” and I argue that this focus has resulted in a concentration in research and literature on measuring the benefits and outcomes of executive coaching and on the portrayal of a wide variety of largely prescriptive processes, models and approaches. In contrast, my research has highlighted the centrality and value of the relationship space that emerges between client executives and executive coaches and the fluid, dynamic and transformational nature of the learning process which results in clients and coaches emerging reshaped from the experience.

The problem with existing portrayals of executive coaching, I argue, is that they espouse values of certainty and repeatability and “best practice” in executive coaching, rather than the individual, personal and tailored experiences and practices that have been illuminated by my research findings. They also do not acknowledge the potential for the development of lifelong self-coaching capabilities through executive coaching, capabilities that extend into the future beyond the immediate needs, skills and requirements of clients (and their organisational contexts). Most importantly, issues of practice, professional development and professionalisation are obscured. I argue that these are significant matters for further attention, exploration and debate among the executive coaching community.

Contrary to popular discourse, executive coaching is not a science and it may never be established as a profession, despite current moves to take coaching in both these directions. Put together with a good deal of craft, a certain amount of art (and some science), executive coaching has the potential to be a practice, but it is still emerging as such. At present, executive coaching remains deeply embedded in a suite and range of practices and is grounded in the real worlds of the executive coaches and clients who experience and...
participate in it. I argue that there is a real opportunity for this to be celebrated (not deprecated) as executive coaching continues to evolve. This was the primary goal of my research into the nature and experience of executive coaching, which illuminates the lived executive coaching experiences of 12 client executives and 12 executive coaches and demonstrates the value of interpretive paradigm research and phenomenological approaches for exploring practice(s). Throughout this thesis I have argued that, as coaching continues to emerge, we need to respect that there is knowledge beyond science (and scientific research) for informing a growing knowledge base in the field of coaching, providing evidence for practice and defining quality “professional” executive coaching services.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Email invitations

Appendix B: Interview guides

Appendix C: Consent forms and information sheets

Appendix D: Hermeneutic interpretation of executive coaching definitions and conceptualisations

Appendix E: Outcome studies in executive coaching

Appendix F: Hermeneutic interpretation of psychological theories and approaches relevant to executive coaching

Appendix G: Models of effective or “best practice” executive coaching

Appendix H: Phenomenological studies of the experience of executive coaching

Appendix I: Examples of course outlines from executive coach education and training programs

Appendix J: Themes and key dimensions of the experience of executive coaching
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APPENDIX A: EMAIL INVITATIONS

Client executives

Research Invitation: Executive Coaching in Australia

This email is to invite you to participate in an Australian study which is focused on exploring the nature and experience of executive coaching in Australia being conducted by the Education for Practice (EFP) Institute at Charles Sturt University by Julie-Anne Tooth as a PhD study. Your contact details were provided confidentially by the Institute of Executive Coaching and will not be shared with anyone else.

If you wish to take part in this study please let me know by email. Your involvement in this study is entirely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. You will be asked for your permission for the interview to be digitally recorded to assist in the analysis of data. All information you provide will be strictly confidential and you will not be identified at any time. The interview will be conducted at your offices or at another suitable location at a time that suits you. If you decide to contribute, I will be pleased to provide you with a summary of the key findings at the completion of this study.

This study is seeking volunteers who have participated in executive coaching or who have sponsored or engaged executive coaching for others in their organisation. The research aims to inform the knowledge base on executive coaching in Australia and provide valuable information for use in the successful delivery of executive coaching to individuals and within organisations.

This study involves an interview which will take approximately 60 minutes. You may also be invited to attend further subsequent interviews.

A detailed Information Sheet is attached to this email for your information.

If you agree to participate in this study, please email Julie-Anne Tooth at julieanne.tooth@gmail.com Please provide your contact phone number so you can be contacted to discuss the study in more detail and arrange a suitable time for interview. Prior to the interview you will be provided with a Consent Form to sign.

If you have any questions or would like to know more about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me on 0417457045 or julieanne.tooth@gmail.com

Thanks
Julie-Anne Tooth
Executive coaches

Research Invitation: Executive Coaching in Australia

This email is to invite you to participate in a study which is aimed at exploring the nature and experience of executive coaching in Australia. This research is being conducted by the Education for Practice Institute (EFPI) at Charles Sturt University and Julie-Anne Tooth as a PhD study. Your contact details were provided confidentially by the Institute of Executive Coaching and will not be shared with anyone else.

This stage of the study is seeking participation from executive coaches in an interview about your experience as coach. The research aims to inform the knowledge base on executive coaching in Australia and provide valuable information for use in the successful delivery of executive coaching to individuals and organisations.

This study involves an interview which will take approximately 60 minutes. You may also be invited to attend further subsequent interviews.

Your involvement in this study is entirely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. You will be asked for your permission for the interview to be digitally recorded to assist in the analysis of data. All information you provide will be strictly confidential and you will not be identified at any time. The interview will be conducted at your offices or at another suitable location at a time that suits you. Interviews will be scheduled in November, December 2008 and into 2009 (if required to accommodate breaks over the Xmas period).

A detailed Information Sheet is attached to this email for your information.

If you wish to take part in this study please let me know by email at julieanne.tooth@gmail.com

If you have any questions or would like to know more about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me on 0417457045 or julieanne.tooth@gmail.com

Thanks
Julie-Anne Tooth
## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDES

### Client executives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview 1 – Nature</th>
<th>Interview 2 – Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td><strong>Relationship</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What has been your experience of executive coaching?</td>
<td>I am interested in how the relationship between you &amp; the coach developed. Can you tell me about your experience of this? How was trust viewed? Developed in the relationship? Example?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td><strong>Coach expertise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did coaching come about for you &amp; what was the reason you participated in executive coaching?</td>
<td>If you were define the ideal Coach for you what knowledge, skills &amp; experience would they have possessed? How does this compare to your experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process</strong></td>
<td><strong>Process</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to understand what was involved in the overall process of executive coaching. What stood out for you as the key steps or stages &amp; how appropriate were they for you?</td>
<td>In the first interview we talked about the sorts of things you discussed in your coaching sessions. Where there any areas or subjects you chose not to discuss with your coach? Some of the participants in Interview 1 said that coaching provided them an opportunity to “pause &amp; reflect”. How does this compare to your experience of coaching? Examples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience of executive coaching</strong></td>
<td><strong>Outcomes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to understand your experience of executive coaching. What was it like to be coached? I would like to understand what happened in your coaching sessions. Can you describe a typical session to me &amp; what it was like?</td>
<td>Since the time you first commenced coaching, have you seen a change in your behaviour &amp; performance over time? What did you learn from your coaching experience? We have discussed what influence coaching has had on you as individual. Has there been a corresponding influence upon your organisation? Can you give me an example?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Success Factors</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tell me what could have been better or different about your coaching experience? Can you give me an example?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now that you have had experience with executive coaching, what advice would you have for: a person about to be coached, their coach &amp; the organisation?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value</strong></td>
<td><strong>Organisation’s role</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What value has coaching been to you? What did it do?</td>
<td>One of the things we talked about in interview 1 was how your coaching engagement was established &amp; paid for by the organisation. In the context of this arrangement, who do you see as the client in executive coaching? Do you think the coaching experience was value for money? What would you view of value of be if it was free?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition &amp; purpose of executive coaching</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you define executive coaching based on your experience? What would you say its purpose is? What would you say was unique &amp; special about it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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## Executive coaches

### Interview 1 – Nature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>History</th>
<th>Specifically I am interested in your coaching of executives one on one. Can you describe your experience as a coach?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>How does coaching typically come about for you? How does it arise?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>I would like to understand what is involved in the overall process of executive coaching for you. What stands out to you as the key steps or stages &amp; in your experience &amp; how appropriate have they been for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of executive coaching</td>
<td>I would like to understand your experience of executive coaching. What is it like to coach an executive? Can you describe a typical coaching session to me &amp; what it was like? If executive coaching is ideal, what would it be like? How does that compare to your experience? What could be different about your experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success Factors</td>
<td>What advice would you have for: a person about to be coached, yourself as a coach &amp; the organisation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>What value has coaching been to those you have coached? Their organisations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition &amp; purpose of executive coaching</td>
<td>How would you define executive coaching based on your experience? What would you say its purpose is? What would you say was unique &amp; special about it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Interview 2 – Experience

| Relationship | I am interested in how the relationship between you & the coachee developed? How was trust developed in the relationship? Example? |
| Process | One of the things that some of the executive participants said about coaching was that it provided them an opportunity to “pause & reflect”. How does this compare to your experience of coaching executives? Examples? Why do you think this is significant to them? |
| Coach expertise | I am interested in what lessons about coaching that you have taken away from the following people: *Coach that you consider to be a role model. *Coach that has coached you. *Leading thinker, author that you admire. *Coach trainer. From all the things you have talked about here, what specific things have you taken back to your coaching practice? What do you know or do now based on the influence of these people? |
| Outcomes | How have you assessed the outcomes or influence of your coaching of executives in your experience? How do you go about this? How useful has this been? How do your executive clients describe their learning? We have discussed what influence coaching has had on your clients as individuals. Has there been a corresponding influence upon the organisation? |
| Organisation’s role | One of the things executives talked about was how the coaching was established & paid for by the organisation. In the context of this arrangement, who do you see as the client in executive coaching? How do you manage this relationship? Do you think the coaching experience for your clients was value for money? What would your view of value of be if it was free? |
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORMS AND INFORMATION SHEETS

The nature and experience of executive coaching in Australia

INFORMATION SHEET FOR Participants

Project Directors:
Professor Joy Higgs, email jhiggs@csu.edu.au
Dr Hilary Armstrong, email hilarya@iecl.com
Ms Julie-Anne Tooth, email julieanne.tooth@gmail.com

This study explores nature and experience of executive coaching in Australia. Executive coaching aims to improve the quality of individual’s work and personal life and, thereby to also improve organisational effectiveness.

If you agree to participate in this study, one of the researchers will invite you to participate in an interview which will take approximately 60 minutes. You may also be invited to attend further subsequent interviews. You will be asked for your permission for the interview to be digitally recorded to assist in the analysis of data. Your participation is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time and you will not be subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment. All information you provide will be confidential and will be stored securely.

The project will be written up as a PhD study, and excerpts may appear in journal articles or other academic documents. No identifying details will be used in the writing up of this study. Pseudonyms will be used to protect participant’s anonymity.

Participation in this research is not intended and is unlikely to cause you any harm or distress. If you do feel distressed by the interview(s), a confidential Counsellor/Psychologist will be made available to you. Please contact Dr Hilary Armstrong on 02 8270 0600.

If you wish to have more information about this study, please contact:
• Ms Julie-Anne Tooth, email julieanne.tooth@gmail.com or phone: 0417 457 045.

NOTE: Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive Officer:

The Executive Officer
Ethics in Human Research Committee
Academic Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
Private Mail Bag 29
Bathurst NSW 2795
Tel: (02) 6338 4628
Fax: (02) 6338 4194

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.
The nature and experience of executive coaching in Australia

CONSENT FORM FOR Participants

Project Directors:
Professor Joy Higgs, email jhiggs@csu.edu.au
Dr Hilary Armstrong, email hilarya@iecl.com
Ms Julie-Anne Tooth, email julieanne.tooth@gmail.com

I, .............................................voluntarily agree to participate in the study of the nature of executive coaching, being conducted by Professor Joy Higgs, Dr Hilary Armstrong and Ms Julie-Anne Tooth.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation in the research at any time, and that if I do I will not be subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment.

The purpose of the research has been explained to me. I have read and understood the written information sheet given to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers.

I understand by agreeing to participate, I will be required to participate in an interview. I may also be invited to participate in further interview(s), but no more than four interviews. I give my permission for the digital recording of interview(s) and for recordings to be transcribed for use in this study. I understand that I may request to view a copy of the transcript(s) of my interview(s) if I wish.

I understand that any information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about me are confidential and that neither my name nor any other identifying information will be used or published without my written permission.

Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee has approved this study. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Executive Officer
Ethics in Human Research Committee
Academic Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
Private Mail Bag 29
Bathurst NSW 2795
Phone: (02) 6338 4628
Fax: (02) 6338 4194

Name (Printed): ..........................................................
Signature: ..........................................................
Date: ..........................................................

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Appendix D: Hermeneutic Interpretation of Executive Coaching Definitions and Conceptualisations

Chapter Three outlines the four main ways in which executive coaching has been defined and conceptualised in the literature. These are defining executive coaching by: (1) using broad or general descriptive terms, (2) comparing it to other types of coaching, (3) comparing it to other (employee) development activities, and (4) emphasising the system and organisational context in which it occurs. This appendix contains a detailed analysis of the literature comparing executive coaching to other developmental activities. This is one of the most popular ways that executive coaching has been defined and conceptualised. Comparisons between executive coaching and these activities (consulting, training, mentoring and therapy/counselling) are considered in turn. The problems with each are identified.

a) Definitions that differentiate between executive coaching and consulting

The role of the executive coach is often differentiated from that of a consultant based on expertise and advice provision. In contrast to consultants, typically experts who provide guidance and advice on organizational issues, coaches are more frequently involved in individual relationships (Sperry, 1993) and do not offer advice (J. Rogers, 2012). Consultants very often set the agenda for the relationship based on the specialised expertise they bring to an engagement. In comparison, the role of the coach is to help clients to articulate goals and to achieve a desired outcome (McKelley & Rochlen, 2007). This is supported by a popular view that the coach does not need to be an expert in the domain in which the executive is employed and consequently does not tell the executive how to perform tasks (as a consultant might do) (Evers et al., 2006).

However, attempting to differentiate the role of the coach from that of a consultant on the basis of the provision of advice is controversial. Cavanagh (2006) argued that coaching approaches that emphasise the coach as merely a facilitator (with a purely objective stance) are too simplistic for describing what occurs in coaching practice, favouring a position that coaching is a dynamic and co-created conversation and that solutions to clients problems emerge from the interaction between coach and client. In Cavanagh’s view, coaches often give advice and “tell”. Further, Kline (1999) suggested that giving insight and direction to the client in coaching is not inappropriate and is sometimes exactly what is needed. Campbell (2001) suggested that coaches do give advice to clients and suggest strategies to help them solve their problems, change their lives and feel better. Marlatt (2012) suggested that coaches can experience performance anxiety when they move to a telling or advising mode, depriving the
client of a learning opportunity. Armstrong (2012) suggested that giving advice and direction is not wrong, but should be minimised or even absent from coaching practice as coaches should focus on their role as a “coach-custodian” versus “coach-expert”.

b) **Definitions that differentiate between executive coaching and training**

One of the prominent ways of differentiating executive coaching from training is through portrayals of coaching as a more ongoing and person (or learner) centred process. It has been argued that coaching involves an ongoing (and spaced) process over a period of time, and that makes it different from most seminars and workshops, which are frequently one-off events (Tobias, 1996; Witherspoon & White, 1996). In this way, executive coaching is portrayed as continuous learning, where the coach offers support, encouragement and feedback as the executive tries new approaches and practises new behaviours (Tobias, 1996). Coaching is individually tailored to the person and more personalised than other forms of organised learning (such as workshops and seminars), recognising that each person has a unique knowledge base, learning pace and learning style and that executives progress at their own pace (Witherspoon & White, 1996). In executive coaching, it is proposed, concepts are personalised and can easily be applied (Tobias, 1996). Coaching and training use some of the same techniques (questioning, listening and feedback), but coaching goes one step further and involves a process of person-centred development which is more holistic and necessarily subjective (Lawton-Smith & Cox, 2007). While both coaching and training focus on changing what people do (and how they think), training is characterised by having relatively predetermined answers, often within an objective frame of reference; coaching, in contrast, creates emergent solutions that have a primarily subjective value (Lawton-Smith & Cox, 2007).

Similarly, Grant (2001) suggested that training is a more rigid and externally determined process than coaching, as the training agenda is predetermined by the trainer (and not the learner).

However, differentiating coaching as a more developed type of learning process than training is also problematic. Hamlin et al. (2008) contended that this argument is flawed as it is based on a narrow view of training that does not acknowledge the innovative learning activities which characterise contemporary HRD practice, including work-based learning, learner-centred learning, workplace learning and action learning. Hamlin et al. (2008) argued that these latter approaches are examples of participative and non-directive learning, where learners base their development on real-time experiences at work (and through work) and as such is very similar to the type of learning that occurs in executive coaching.
c) **Definitions that differentiate between executive coaching and mentoring**

Coaching has also been differentiated from mentoring, predominantly based on sector and business knowledge and experience. The role of a coach is differentiated from that of a mentor, who is defined as a senior and more experienced executive who helps a younger, less experienced employee become proficient (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Traditionally, it has been suggested that the mentor brings career and business knowledge to the mentoring relationship, unlike the coach who brings an independent perspective (Boniwell, 2007).

However, when considering the similarities and differences between coaching and mentoring, it appears that the literature emphasises more of what is the same (not different) between the two activities. Passmore (2007b) and Cox (2003) both rejected the traditional view of the mentor, suggesting that both coach and mentor need career and business knowledge to enhance credibility, ensure value and ensure they can comprehend the situations they encounter. Jenny Rogers (2012) proposed that when coaching principles apply (and the mentor is not the older, wiser person passing on advice), mentoring and coaching are synonyms for the same process. Similarly, Clutterbuck (2008) reasoned that both coaching and mentoring could be directive (or non-directive), draw on the helper’s experience, be of long (or short) duration, involve giving advice, work with goals set by (or for) the learner, deal with significant transitions the learner wishes to make and address broad personal growth ambitions. In Clutterbuck’s view, the only difference between the two activities is that coaching addresses performance in an aspect of the person’s work or life, whereas mentoring is more often associated with broader, holistic development and with career progress. Similarly, Passmore (2007b) indicated that the only difference between coaching and mentoring is related to their objectives. In coaching the objective is skills and performance development and in mentoring the focus is longer-term career development. In practice, however, there can also be an overlap, with career discussions being a focus of executive coaching (for example, Abbott, 2006; Winum, 2005). In examining the differences between coaching and mentoring on seven dimensions (formality, length of contract, outcome focus, level of business knowledge required by coach, training of coach, client and coach supervision/support), Passmore (2007b) concluded that coaching and mentoring are actually far more blurred in practice than is suggested in the literature.

d) **Definitions that differentiate between executive coaching and therapy/counselling**

The most attention has been paid to defining executive coaching by differentiating it from psychotherapy (therapy) and counselling. Counselling has been described as focusing on root causes of emotional distress and assisting executives to deal with them (Feldman & Lankau,
Therapy is focused on the trained mental health professional providing a treatment, remedy or cure to an underlying “deep-seated” problem (Davison & Gasiorowski, 2006). In contrast, executive coaching is geared to individuals who are primarily healthy and do not have acute mental health issues (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004). Further, Campbell (2001) outlined that coaches are advised not to work with resistant, damaged, dependent or addicted people, and those who are not ready for change. Rather, executive coaching has been defined as having a strength-building orientation, focused on constructing solutions rather than analysing problems (Armstrong & Melser, 2006; Grant & Cavanagh, 2004). Executive coaching is often viewed as a method to help high-functioning people perform even better (Biswas-Diener, 2009; Davison & Gasiorowski, 2006). It is also argued that coaching is action-oriented, focusing on the client’s present and future experiences, unlike counselling and psychotherapy which are concerned with past experiences and their contribution to the presenting issue (Campbell, 2001; Hart et al., 2001; Kemp, 2005). Moreover, therapy is conducted face-to-face and executive coaching may be undertaken in other ways such as by telephone (Hart et al., 2001; Richard, 1999). It is understood that coaches generally make more extensive use of technology (online assessments, email, teleconferencing) in the delivery of services than therapists (Biswas-Diener, 2009; Hart et al., 2001). In therapy, the patient often pays, but in coaching, in most cases, the employer pays (Richard, 1999). This may explain why in research undertaken by Jopling (2007) and Hart et al. (2001), the majority of coaches placed more emphasis on the need for formal, clear and explicit contracts for services than did therapists. Stern (2004) argued that in a traditional counselling or personal [life] coaching relationship, less emphasis is placed on the organisation system in which the client works than in executive coaching. This suggests that unlike psychotherapy (in which the goal is exclusively personal effectiveness) the goal of executive coaching is for the business to become more successful through the increased effectiveness of individuals (Kiel et al., 1996). It has also been suggested that coaching is predefined in length and short-term in nature and does not allow time for a developing a “therapeutic alliance” (as in psychotherapy) and should be termed a “developmental partnership” (Judge & Cowell, 1997; Levinson, 1996). The coaching relationship is also viewed as more balanced and egalitarian than a therapeutic counselling relationship (Jopling, 2007).

However, there is also considerable diversity in views about the differences between executive coaching and counselling. The literature suggests that there are more similarities than differences between the two activities (Campbell, 2001; Kemp, 2005). Bachkirova and Cox (2005) contended that coaches do not always deal in a positive spectrum of development (in contrast to counselling) and cannot avoid dealing with problems and “blocks” to development.
with their clients. Tobias (1996) outlined that although coaching may be perceived by clients as less threatening (presenting a subtle implication that it is more about fine-tuning than about wrenching change), the change produced by coaching may indeed be significant (Tobias, 1996). Other authors have proposed that therapy and coaching have many commonalities when particular therapies are utilised, such as Adlerian therapy (Davison & Gasiorowski, 2006) and solution-focused therapy (Zeus & Skiffington, 2002), as these approaches view clients from an optimistic, holistic perspective and build on their strengths. Some authors (Bachkirova & Cox, 2005; Buckley, 2007) have argued that attempting to define the coaching client as a “healthy client” is impossible, as mental health is not a distinct “have or have not” and the definition of mental health is still an area of academic debate. It is also problematic to view therapy as a predominantly past-oriented activity; a number of counselling approaches are very much present-centred (Bachkirova & Cox, 2005; Spinelli, 2008). There is also an increased interest in research on conducting therapy using email, telephone, internet chat and video conferencing, suggesting that not only coaches use technology (McKelley & Rochlen, 2007). Further, in research undertaken by Griffiths and Campbell (2008), extensive similarities were found between life coaching and counselling, with both having similar processes of listening, questioning, providing a non-judgemental relationship and uncovering deepening levels of awareness. Interestingly, it could also be argued that these processes also equally apply to executive coaching.

Comparisons between definitions of coaching and therapy are also complicated by a range of other factors. Spinelli (2008) and Bachkirova and Kauffman (2009) argued that both coaching and therapy are characterised by diversity in terms of models and approaches and that this lack of uniformity makes it difficult to talk in terms of a single arena or propose a unified set of similarities and differences. Research by Jopling (2007) indicated that coaching and counselling cannot be distinctly compartmentalised and in practice there are “fuzzy spaces” that are neither pure coaching nor pure counselling. This was also supported in phenomenological research undertaken by Alison Maxwell (2009) with eight coaches, in which it was found that the personal and professional were deeply intertwined in the coaching conversation and attempts to compartmentalise them into counselling or coaching were unrealistic. From this research, Maxwell (2009) suggested that the boundary between coaching and therapy is dynamic and co-created and is a function of the coach’s and client’s willingness to explore the intersection of personal and professional issues. Whybrow and Palmer (2006) argued that the boundary between the coaching and counselling skills of practitioners is not clear, as with the skill sets required between different applied areas of psychology. Bachkirova and Cox (2005) reasoned that debates about definitions of coaching and counselling are political and often
more about marketing than defining true statements. Counsellors and coaches tend to over-emphasise some factors and downplay others in support of their agenda to position themselves in the marketplace. For example, coaches may emphasise the differences to promote their niche in the market (and avoid the stigma often associated with therapy) and counsellors may emphasise similarities to demonstrate that coaching is just another brand name for services they have already been providing for a long period of time (Bachkirova & Cox, 2005). Similarly, some practitioners may see coaching as a helping service offering that can be marketed more palatably than therapy, with less stigma attached (McKelley & Rochlen, 2007).

Overall, the approach of defining coaching by comparing it to other activities seems to achieve very little in terms of identifying the essential characteristics of executive coaching. Rather, it illustrates the wide range of interpretations evident in the literature and the diversity in views.
APPENDIX E: OUTCOME STUDIES IN EXECUTIVE COACHING

Chapter Three reviews the predominance of outcome studies in the executive coaching research base. A selection of outcome studies are illustrated in Table E1.
### Table E1: Outcome studies in executive coaching*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/s</th>
<th>Main findings – coaching outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peterson, 1993</td>
<td>Coaching is effective in enhancing on-the-job behaviour. Coaching resulted in over 1.54 standard deviations of change on training objectives and 0.85 standard deviations of change on overall effectiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivero et al., 1997</td>
<td>Coaching increased productivity by 88.0% when compared to managerial training alone (22.4%).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gegner, 1997</td>
<td>Positive client performance changes: coaching others (37%), influence on personal life (100%) and learning about self (100%).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall et al., 1999</td>
<td>4 types of client protean learning: (1) performance, (2) attitude perspective change, (3) adaptability and (4) identity change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Anderson, 2001</td>
<td>ROI = 529%. 77% clients indicated coaching had a very significant/significant impact on 9 business measures. Highest rated benefits: productivity (60%) and employee satisfaction (53%).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGovern et al., 2001</td>
<td>ROI = 5.45 times the initial investment. Top tangible business impacts: productivity (53%); quality (48%); organizational strength (48%). Top intangible: improved relationships with reports (77%); improved relationships with stakeholders (71%); improved teamwork (67%).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kampa-Kokesch, 2001</td>
<td>Coaching enhanced transformational leadership as measured by the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5x (Short Form) (Bass &amp; Avolio). Clients scored higher on active leadership and lower on passive leadership (compared to other leaders). Most helpful/goals: self-awareness/development; performance outcomes; different perspective; objective person; feedback support; and relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thach, 2002</td>
<td>Coaching and multi-rater feedback increased leadership effectiveness of clients by 55-60% (as rated by 360-degree feedback).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige, 2002</td>
<td>Varying personal and organisational benefits: development of a self-belief, self-awareness, and confidence; ability to reflect on what was learnt using an adult learning model; a realization of inherent talent; ability to maximize potential.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smither et al., 2003</td>
<td>Clients who received coaching and multi-rater feedback were more likely than others to set specific goals; to share their feedback with raters and solicit ideas for improvement; and to receive improved ratings from direct reports and supervisors 1 year later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasylyshyn, 2003</td>
<td>63% of clients sustained behaviour change (relationships, work-family integration and sustained progress), 48% reported increased self-awareness and understanding and 45% cited that they were more effective leaders (increased optimism, confidence and motivational ability). Over 50% reported a sustainability level of 60-80%, over 33% at the 90-100% level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luthans &amp; Peterson, 2003</td>
<td>360-degree feedback and coaching lead to: improved manager and employee satisfaction, commitment, intentions to turnover, and indirectly, the firm’s performance. Also, increased self-awareness and a positive impact on work attitudes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales, 2003</td>
<td>Key client benefits: (1) internal - self-awareness and confidence, (2) external - leadership and management, assertiveness, understanding difference, stress management and work/life balance). Communication ability was the mediator between internal development and external implementation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 Based on the concept of a protean career i.e. driven by the individual and not the organisation (Hall et al., 1999).
This page has been intentionally left blank.
Laske, 2004  | Positive client behavioural change occurred where a development shift (to a subsequent development level) guaranteed it could be sustained over time. Development level of the coach needed to be above that of the client for the shift to take place.
---|---
M. Anderson, 2004  | ROI = 689%. Top 3 competencies: leadership behavior (82%), building teams (41%) and developing staff (36%). 86% clients rated coaching as ‘very effective’ and 95% reported doing things differently as a result of coaching.
---|---
Sue-Chan & Latham, 2004  | MBA and EMBA student (client) benefits: higher team playing behaviour, significantly higher grades, and higher levels of satisfaction with coaching (versus those who were coached by peers).
---|---
Dunn, 2004  | Client problem solving abilities improved (83%), self-efficacy improved (83%), increased satisfaction with life (79%)
---|---
Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005  | Clients had lower levels of anxiety and stress after coaching (compared to the control group).
---|---
Bougae, 2005  | Coaching was positive and increased client’s self-awareness, improved their interpersonal skills, impacted them personally, impacted their decision making, resulted in improved feedback on their performance, supported them to focus more on relationships and people, resulted in their team/organisation being more effective and resulted in learning.
---|---
Saling, 2005  | The focus of behaviour that participants try to change was affected by training or coaching. In both cases, there is evidence that task-oriented behaviours changed more after training than relationship behaviours.
---|---
Bell, 2005  | Outcomes from coaching and MBTI feedback: (1) different MBTI types had different reactions to executive coaching, (2) the most robust changes were noticed very early - between 1 and 2 months, (3) changes resulting from MBTI feedback were noticed earlier than those from executive coaching.
---|---
O’Neill, 2005  | ROI = 48 times the financial benefit of the cost of the coaching for the individual client.
---|---
Libri & Kemp, 2006  | Cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) enhanced the client’s sales performance, core self-evaluation, and global self-ratings of performance.
---|---
Dagley, 2006b  | Highest rated client benefits: (1) clearer understanding of own style, automatic responses and the issues arising from these; (2) communication and engagement skills; (3) ability to cope with stress; (4) a clearer understanding of professional performance; and (5) clearer understanding of organizational issues and how to resolve them.
---|---
Bowles & Picano, 2006  | Increased work satisfaction and a tendency toward greater life satisfaction. Unanticipated negative relationship between client’s goal achievement and company quality productivity (in a 6 month timeframe).
---|---
Orenstein, 2006  | Client was rated (by others) as changing most of the behaviours directly related to stated coaching objectives (15 of the 19 items, 79%); next behaviours indirectly related to objectives (4 of the 11, 36%), and last, behaviours not addressed in coaching.
---|---
Wasylyshyn et al., 2006  | Client benefits: emotional competence (52%), understand impact on others (29%) and more effective career management (19%). Over 70% clients advanced their careers in the company. Sustained learning and behaviour change over an extended period as rated by 100% clients and 95% of managers/HR.
---|---
Evers et al., 2006  | Coached group scored significantly higher (than the control group) on two variables: (1) outcome expectancies to act in a balanced way and (2) self-efficacy beliefs to set one’s own goals.
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<th>Reference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbott et al., 2006</td>
<td>Coaching facilitated expatriate (client) acculturation through: (1) improved performance and (2) increased personal satisfaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parker-Wilkins, 2006</td>
<td>ROI = 689% (based on client estimates of monetary benefits).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones et al., 2006</td>
<td>Increased self-reported managerial flexibility throughout the duration of coaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gyllensten &amp; Palmer, 2006</td>
<td>Coaching helped clients to deal with work related problems that were causing stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sullivan, 2006</td>
<td>Development of leadership competencies, particularly emotional intelligence (interpersonal sensitivity, communication skills, self-awareness, or awareness of others).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Turner, 2006</td>
<td>Client benefits: 1. continuous one-on-one attention, 2. expanded thinking through dialogue with a curious outsider, 3. self-awareness, including blind spots, 4. personal accountability for development, and 5. just-in-time learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowles et al., 2007</td>
<td>Clients benefited more than the non-coached. Middle managers benefited more than executives. All clients demonstrated growth on recruiter-leader competencies, achievement of self-set goals and quality of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feggetter, 2007</td>
<td>Positive impact on leadership behaviours and positive ROI. 40% of those who received coaching were promoted (versus 22% who did not).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burke &amp; Linley, 2007</td>
<td>Coaching increased self-concordance (type of motivation) and commitment (a measure of the amount of motivation) for coached goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finn, 2007</td>
<td>Coaching increased client’s psychological states of self-efficacy, developmental support, positive affect, openness to new behaviours, and developmental planning. Coaching also sustained effects on some of the psychological states, and on team members’ perceptions of their leader’s transformational leadership behaviour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kombarakaran et al., 2008</td>
<td>Client change in 5 areas: (1) people management, (2) relationships with managers, (3) goal setting and prioritisation, (4) engagement and productivity and (5) dialogue and communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewtrell et al., 2008</td>
<td>Client reported outcomes: (1) individual - personal effectiveness/confidence then leadership and management style and career focus and direction, (2) organisation - overall personal development. Coach reported (client) outcomes: (1) individual - increased self-awareness and self-confidence, skills and relationship improvement, greater career motivation and focus, and increased productivity through better performance management, (2) organisation - increased productivity, engagement and satisfaction and the associated greater retention of talent, and lower turnover, reduced absenteeism, and more key staff working to their strengths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Styhre, 2008</td>
<td>Improved client ability to deal with practical day-to-day problems and development as managers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levenson, 2009</td>
<td>Clients achieved behavioural objectives, but difficult to quantify any clear, direct impact on business results. In a small number of cases coaching had a material impact alongside other interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant et al., 2009</td>
<td>Enhanced client goal attainment, increased resilience and workplace well-being and reduced depression and stress. Increased self-confidence and personal insight, management skills and ability to deal with organisational change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perkins, 2009</td>
<td>Improvement in client meeting behaviours (decreased content behaviours and increased process behaviours).</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baron &amp; Morin, 2010</td>
<td>Increased client self-efficacy related to management skills. The higher the number of coaching sessions, the greater the increase in client’s self-efficacy beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whyte, 2010a</td>
<td>Clients were surprised by the extent to which coaching facilitated greater self awareness and insight, resulting in significant outcomes (confidence, resilience and self-awareness).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gray et al., 2011</td>
<td>High impact on personal/therapeutic attributes (managing self-cognition and managing self-emotional), rather than business-oriented competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bozer, 2011</td>
<td>Individual outcomes: increased levels of self-awareness, increased levels of job affective commitment and career satisfaction, improvement in self-reported job performance, improvement in client's job performance as reported by the client's direct supervisor, and improvement in supervisory-rated task performance. Executive coaching group reported significantly greater improvement in career satisfaction (compared with the control group).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crabb, 2011</td>
<td>Coaching developed individual drivers of employee engagement: (1) focusing strengths, (2) managing emotions and (3) aligning purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bozer &amp; Sarros, 2012</td>
<td>High level of client career satisfaction (when compared to control group).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Haan et al., 2012</td>
<td>Client perceptions of coaching outcome were significantly related to their perceptions of the working alliance, client self-efficacy, and to client perceptions of the range of techniques of the coach. The client–coach relationship mediated the impact of self-efficacy and range of techniques on coaching outcomes, suggesting that this relationship is the key factor in determining how clients perceive the outcome of coaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moen &amp; Federici, 2012</td>
<td>Increased client goal setting strategy, leadership self-efficacy and successful causal attributions to strategy (compared to the control group).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swart &amp; Harcup, 2012</td>
<td>Individual benefits: (1) cognitive - self-awareness, confidence, focused approach, flexible mindset, positive attitude, (2) behavioural - managing people, strategic approach, forward planning and delegation and adapting personal communication. Collective benefits: (1) cognitive - increased dedication, positive thinking and proactive attitude, (2) behavioural - project management of client transactions, relationship building in people management and generation of ideas and actions to progress departmental initiatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tooth et al., 2013</td>
<td>Key client benefits predominantly in intrapersonal and interpersonal areas and most importantly self-efficacy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Studies listed in chronological order.*
Chapter Three evaluates the predominance of psychological theory applied to executive coaching in the literature. The key psychological theories and resultant coaching approaches include psychodynamic, developmental (adult), cognitive behavioural, behavioural, solution focused, positive psychology and strengths based, humanistic and person-centred and narrative approaches. It has also proven popular for a number of these to be combined into an integrative approach. This appendix contains a detailed analysis of the literature describing these key psychological theories and approaches applied to executive coaching. A summary of this analysis is also provided in Table 3.4 in Chapter Three.

a) **Psychodynamic**

Psychodynamic approaches to executive coaching draw on psychodynamic theory, heavily influenced by the ideas of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) who focused on the human unconscious. Freud did not make any observations about the application of his ideas to workplaces, but some of his followers (psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein, Wilfred Bion and Donald Winnicott) applied his theory to organisations (Kets de Vries, 2006). In psychodynamic approaches to executive coaching, the client’s unconscious processes (past experience, emotional responses, defensive reactions, underlying and unresolved conflicts and dysfunctional patterns of thinking) are recognised as significantly impacting conscious behaviour and ultimately organisational effectiveness (Kilburg, 2004b). By making the unconscious conscious, that is, making the client more self-aware, psychodynamic approaches to coaching are promoted as assisting executives to exercise conscious choice and make decisions in line with their espoused values and also in the interests of their organisation (Peltier, 2010).

A popular coaching method for working with psychodynamic material is exploring the client’s personal story (Huggler, 2007; Kilburg, 2004b). A personal story is a detailed biography of the client that enables the coach to explore the client’s formative relationships and obtain clues about the kinds of unconscious strategies that the client has developed in the past which may be operating in the present (Lee, 2010). Two classic psychoanalytical theories, object relations theory and conflict theory, are also proposed as valuable in coaching as they focus on how clients form and function inside relationships and how they react to internal psychological conflicts (Kilburg, 2004b). Allcorn (2006) also recommended the psychoanalytic concepts of
transference\(^2\) and counter-transference\(^3\) as useful both in terms of understanding the
dynamics between coach and client and also between client, employees and organisation.

Peltier (2010) argued that whereas psychoanalysis and psychodynamic approaches to therapy
and executive coaching are both based on a central assumption that insight leads to change,
the coach has a greater obligation to facilitate action and observable change than does the
psychoanalyst. Organisations expect to see clear and effective changes in their executives
when they invest in coaching, so the psychodynamically trained coach needs to have an action
orientation (not just a focus on deep analysis) and ensure that introspections and observations
are translated into deliverables by the client for success (Peltier, 2010). Similarly, Axelrod
(2012) proposed that, in comparison to therapy patients, there is more pressure on executives
to have accurate self-awareness (seeing themselves as others do), as there is an assumption in
organisational settings that this will ultimately improve executives’ interactions with others
and subsequently their overall effectiveness.

b) **Developmental (Adult)**

Executive coaching informed by adult development theory is focused on understanding clients’
current behaviour by exploring their patterns of adult psychological growth and development.
Axelrod (2005) suggested that understanding where clients are in terms of adult development
can help coaches to be mindful not only of what their clients are trying to achieve in terms of
leadership, but also of what they need to accomplish more broadly as a people. For example,
Axelrod applied Daniel Levinson’s\(^4\) (1920–1994), characteristics of “midlife transition” to
executive coaching with senior vice presidents (SVPs) and the transition to late midlife with
executive vice presidents (EVPs). The role of the coach in this way is viewed as aligning clients’
leadership role with the specific tasks of their stage of life, challenging executives to grow in
ways that are specific and personal (Axelrod, 2005). Further, Laske (2007) suggested that in
coaching, the developmental readiness of the coach is also paramount. For example, coaches
can only support clients to undertake development shifts to the extent that they themselves
are ahead developmentally (Laske, 2007).

Several authors have promoted the application of Robert Kegan’s constructive-developmental
theory of adult development to executive coaching (Astorino, 2002; Berger, 2006; Berger &
Atkins, 2009). These theories view the development of self as an evolution of meaning-making

\(^2\) Transference refers to the implicit assumptions that individuals make about others based on their past
experiences (Lee, 2010).

\(^3\) Counter-transference refers to the feelings, bodily sensations, thoughts and behaviours that can be unconsciously
evoked in the coach by the client (Lee, 2010).

\(^4\) Levinson divided life into four stages: childhood and adolescence (birth–22), early adulthood (17–45), middle
adulthood (40–65) and late adulthood (60+) (Peltier, 2010).
activity (Astorino, 2002) and are “constructive” (concerned with the way people create their world) and “developmental” (concerned with how that construction changes over time to become more complex and multi-faceted) (Berger, 2006). In coaching informed by Kegan’s subject-object theory, the process of transformation involves moving more and more of what is unseen by clients in the way they understand the world (“subject”) to a place where it can be seen and reflected upon (“object”) (Berger & Atkins, 2009). The focus is therefore on helping clients examine their unquestioned beliefs about the world (by making them explicit), enabling them to open up new possibilities and to deal with greater and greater levels of complexity. Berger and Atkins (2009) used a developmental measure, the Subject-Object Interview (SOI), in a study with 15 managers and executives. Findings demonstrated that the majority of clients experienced the SOI process positively and the use of developmental theory helped coaches to increase empathy, decrease judgement and quickly understand the potential and limits of a coaching engagement. However, Berger (2006) argued that it is sufficient for coaches to understand developmental trajectories in applying developmental principles to coaching and less necessary for them to be able to measure clients’ particular developmental spaces (e.g. by using complex assessments such as the SOI).

c) **Cognitive behavioural**

Cognitive behavioural approaches to executive coaching are informed by principles of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which is a fusion of cognitive therapy and behavioural therapy. While purely cognitive therapy focuses on mental aspects and internal processes, behavioral therapy contributes the consideration of external behaviours. The cognitive behavioural approach draws heavily on the work of cognitive psychologists such as Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis (1913-2007) (Abbott, 2006; Neenan, 2008; Peltier, 2010). Cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) proposes that executives can benefit by changing the way they think, especially when their thinking limits their success (Peltier, 2010). The cognitive therapist (and coach) assists clients to identify errors in their thinking and adopt more useful cognitions (Auerbach, 2006). However, it is recognised in CBC that problems are not created solely by the clients’ thinking (as adverse events do occur), but it is how clients think about those events that increases (or reduces) their difficulties in dealing with them (Neenan, 2008). For example, in accordance with a CBC approach, eliminating the thinking errors that contribute to poor relationships with people (and the associated cognitive distortions that cause upset) can lead to better relationships with others and improved executive performance. Williams et al. (2010) suggested that the main goals of CBC are to assist clients to (1) achieve their realistic

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6. The SOI is an interview procedure that gauges the level of maturity of the self, according to Robert Kegan’s constructive-developmental framework (Astorino, 2002).
goals, (2) facilitate self-awareness of underlying cognitive and emotional barriers to goal attainment, (3) develop more effective thinking and behavioural skills, (4) build internal resources, stability and self-acceptance in order to mobilise them towards their choice of action and (5) enable clients to become their own self-coach. Unlike psychodynamic approaches, CBC focuses on conscious thinking rather than unconscious processes.

One of the most popular cognitive behavioural approaches applied to coaching is based on the work of Albert Ellis (1913-2007), who developed rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT)\(^7\), which emphasises that people become unhappy because of unrealistic or faulty (irrational)\(^8\) beliefs surrounding an activating experience or event (Auerbach, 2006). The focus in therapy (and also in coaching) is on addressing the self-limiting/defeating beliefs triggered by the activating experience, disputing these beliefs, supporting the client to identify different options and to obtain a new and effective outlook. The underlying premise in this approach is that it is beliefs that cause feelings (not events). Further, according to rational emotive behaviour coaching (REBC), clients are happiest when they establish important goals and actively strive to achieve them. A popular framework for REBC is the ABCDE\(^9\) model of emotional management, resilience and performance developed by Albert Ellis (Dryden & Neenan, 2004; Palmer, 2009; Sherin & Caiger, 2004). Palmer’s (2009) variation is the ABCDEF model, with the final element being a focus on future goals and the learning process, enabling clients to become their own “self-coach”. Further, REBC emphasises not only the client’s emotion and beliefs, but also the importance of behaviour, with coaches encouraging their clients to put into practice what they learn through the use of behavioural methods (Dryden & Neenan, 2004).

Another development of CBT, multimodal therapy, has also been applied to executive coaching (Richard, 1999). Multimodal therapy was developed by Arnold Lazarus, who contributed a focus on the seven dimensions of personality, which are known by the acronym, BASIC I.D\(^10\) (Richard, 1999). In multimodal coaching, the BASIC I.D. modalities are assessed and a coaching programme developed that responds to the key concerns arising from each modality to improve the executive’s performance (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008; Richard, 1999). The addition of personality has been promoted as a useful addition to CBC, enabling clients’

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\(^7\) In 1993, Ellis changed the name of rational-emotive therapy (RET) to rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT) because he argued that commentators were neglecting its behavioural elements (Dryden & Neenan, 2004).

\(^8\) The term “irrational” is re-framed in the coaching context to avoid any negative connotation it may evoke for executives as irrational thinkers (Sherin & Caiger, 2004).

\(^9\) The ABCDE model = A (activating event), B (self-limiting/defeating beliefs), C (consequences), D (disputing self-limiting/defeating beliefs) and E (new and effective outlook) (Dryden & Neenan, 2004).

\(^10\) BASIC I.D = derived from the first letters of each modality, namely behaviour, affect, sensations, images, cognitions, interpersonal and drugs/biology (Richard, 1999).
specific needs and personality traits to be given consideration in the coaching process (Richard, 1999).

There has been limited research into the effectiveness of different psychological approaches to coaching, but there is some specific evidence for CBC obtained from research (Whybrow & Palmer, 2006). This may explain its popularity and use among coaching psychologists. For example, research into the efficacy of CBC has demonstrated that it is a useful intervention for dealing with procrastination (Karas & Spada, 2009; Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008) and also potential mental health issues (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008).11 Libri and Kemp (2006) found that a CBC program enhanced an Australian executive’s sales performance, core self-evaluation and global self-ratings of performance.12 Research in other contexts has been promoted as evidence for the potential benefits of the application of CBC. For example, CBC resulted in improved levels of academic performance among university accounting students (Grant, 2001). Increased levels of goal striving, well-being and hope were evident among members of a life coaching population who had undertaken a CBC program (Green et al., 2006). CBC was also found to increase cognitive hardiness and hope (and decrease levels of depression) among high school students (Green et al., 2007).

The cognitive behavioural approach is of particular interest to coaching in Australia as it is the primary perspective informing coach education at the School of Coaching Psychology at the University of Sydney13 (under the direction of Dr Anthony Grant, the Director of the School, coaching psychologist and frequent author in the coaching literature). Abbott (2006) described the Sydney University program as informed by the cognitive behavioural model, with an emphasis on solution-focused coaching and goal-setting theory. In this earliest established coach education program, it is likely that Sydney University’s adoption of CBC (and solution-focused approaches) may have contributed to their popularity among coaches in Australia. In a study of Australian coaches (n=229), 60% indicated that they used cognitive behavioural theory in their coaching practice, 73% used solution-focused theory and 66% used behavioural theory (Standards Australia, 2011). The popularity of cognitive and behavioural approaches was also confirmed in a UK study of coaching psychologists in which 60% or more of respondents cited cognitive, behavioural and solution-focused theory as the most significant approaches informing their practice.

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11 In this case it is argued that the earlier application of CBC may have provided the client with the necessary tools to address procrastination, before the development of a subsequent depression (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008).
12 Libri and Kemp (2006) replicated a study by Grant (2001) which showed that the CBC approach was the most powerful (compared to a single cognitive or a behavioural approach) for increasing university student academic performance and for enhancing self-regulation, self-concept and general mental health.
13 See Chapter One for more information about the context of coach education in Australia.
d) **Behavioural**

Behavioural approaches to executive coaching draw on behaviourism, which gives primacy to observable, measurable human behaviour (Peel, 2005). Notable behaviourists include Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936), John B. Watson (1878-1958) and B. F. Skinner (1904-1990). Peltier (2010) recommended that coaches (and their clients) understand the basic principles of behaviourism, namely reinforcement, punishment, stimulus control, and modelling, to explore and understand the cues and contingencies that maintain individual behaviour. The purpose of a behaviour-based approach to executive coaching is to help clients learn how to change by focusing on their actual behaviours and what they are going to do differently (D. B. Peterson, 2006). Further, coaches can teach clients how to use behavioural methods themselves, enabling them to manage and improve their organisations (Peltier, 2010).

Behavioural approaches are viewed as advantageous in organisational contexts because of their focus on measurement and metrics. Organisations are more likely to invest in coaching if they can be assured of observable positive outcomes (Peltier, 2010). For example, Peterson (1993) studied 370 managers who participated in a behaviourally based coaching program and found that average improvement on individual coaching objectives (as rated by their leader) was 1.56 standard deviation units over time, suggesting that individuals had achieved the equivalent of moving from the 50th to the 93rd percentile of performance. However, it is acknowledged that incorporating behavioural approaches into an integrated approach (e.g., the cognitive behavioural approach) is the most effective use of these techniques in coaching practice (Peel, 2005). Purely behavioural techniques (albeit useful) are considered insufficient for coaching people to deal with the “complex and messy realities of life” (D. B. Peterson, 2006, p. 53).

e) **Solution-focused**

Solution-focused coaching (SFC) has its origins in Milton H. Erickson’s (1901-1980) approach to strategic therapy and brief solution-focused therapy, which was developed by therapists such as Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer at The Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee (Grant, 2010). These therapists discovered that asking their clients questions that focused their attention on building solutions rather than talking about their problems (“solution talk” versus “problem talk”) was an effective methodology for dealing with a range of issues (Cavanagh & Grant, 2010). Drawing on the central premises of solution-focused approaches in therapy, solution-focused coaching is characterised by a number of key principles as detailed in Table F1.
Table F1: Principles of solution-focused coaching (adapted from Cavanagh & Grant, 2010; Grant, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Non-pathological framework</td>
<td>Problems are not viewed as indications of pathology, but rather stem from a limited repertoire of behaviour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Client-based expertise</td>
<td>The client (not the coach) is the expert in his/her own life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Facilitating solution construction</td>
<td>The coach facilitates solutions with clients, rather than focusing on problems.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Focus on client resources</td>
<td>The coach helps clients recognise and utilise existing resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Clear, specific and personalised goals</td>
<td>Stretching (but attainable) goals are defined within a specific timeframe.</td>
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<td>6. Future orientation</td>
<td>The emphasis is on clients’ preferred future than the present or the past.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Strategic</td>
<td>Problems and solutions are constructed by clients, coaching interventions are individually tailored to each client.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Action orientation</td>
<td>The coach expects that positive change will occur and that clients will undertake the work of change outside of the coaching session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Pragmatic focus</td>
<td>The focus is on identifying what is working for the client and amplifying this.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Short time frame</td>
<td>Because the client is already whole, change does not require fixing the client and does not need to be worked on over a long period of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Attractive</td>
<td>The coaching process is designed and conducted in a way that is attractive and engaging for the client.</td>
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Unlike the cognitive behavioural and psychodynamic approaches to coaching, the solution-focused approach adheres to a constructionist philosophy in which problems are not given in reality, but are constructed in the discourse between client and coach and others in their world (Cavanagh & Grant, 2010). The skill of the coach is concentrated on moving from a problem-focused discourse towards one that helps the client to reframe presenting problems as solvable (Grant, 2010). Unlike other therapeutic approaches, the solution-focused approach also views clients as whole, resourceful, and fundamentally able to solve their own problems (Cavanagh & Grant, 2010). Grant (2011b) therefore suggested that solution-focused approaches to coaching are strengths-based as they emphasise clients’ resources and how they can be used in the pursuit of goals and change.

In the solution-focused approach to coaching, the principles of self-directed learning and self-regulation are considered central. Grant and Greene (2003) proposed a simple self-regulation cycle that involves setting a goal, developing an action plan, acting, monitoring, evaluating and then changing what does not work (and doing more of what does). This can be seen in Figure F1. The role of the coach is to facilitate the client’s journey through this cycle, while holding the client’s focus on the goal(s) (Grant, 2010). Being solution-focused requires the coach to remain in the process as a facilitator rather than as the expert who has to deliver solutions (Grant, 2010). This is referred to as “not the expert” position and requires the coach to be comfortable with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the unfolding (and creative process) of coaching (Cavanagh & Grant, 2010). The types of questions utilised by the coach are also an important aspect of the solution-focused approach. Solution-focused coaches emphasise “how
to” questions which are focused on solutions (action and changing behaviour), rather than “telling” (offering advice to the client) or asking “why” questions (that explore problems and causality). This is based on one of the core assumptions of solution-focused approaches in which there is no need to understand the aetiology of a problem in order to be able construct solutions and move towards goal attainment (Grant & O’Connor, 2010). In a study of self-coaching among postgraduate university students, solution-focused questions were found to be more effective than problem-focused questions for building self-efficacy, reducing negative affect, increasing positive affect and supporting the process of goal attainment (Grant & O’Connor, 2010).

**Figure F1: The cycle of self-regulation** (Greene & Grant, 2003, p. 55)

![Figure F1: The cycle of self-regulation](image)

f) **Positive psychology and strengths-based**

Positive psychology coaching (PPC) draws on the theory and research of positive psychology which grew in response to a demand by psychologists for a focus on positive mental health, not mental illness. As such, positive psychology focuses on the conditions and processes that contribute to the optimal functioning or flourishing of individuals, groups and institutions (Kauffman et al., 2010). There are a number of arguments for the application of positive psychology to coaching, but the most prominent is associated with providing a “scientific” basis for coaching practice. For example, Seligman (2007, p. 266) argued that positive psychology can provide coaching with two much needed “backbones”, a scientific evidence-based framework and a defined scope of practice. Similarly, Kauffman (2006, p. 221) contended that positive psychology provides coaching with the “scientific legs” to stand upon.
PPC is therefore portrayed as a scientific approach that assists clients to increase well-being, enhance and apply strengths, improve performance and achieve goals (Kauffman et al., 2010).

A number of authors have described a strengths-based approach to coaching in which a typical organisational focus on “fixing” individual weaknesses is shifted to a focus on harnessing strengths through the coaching relationship. It is recognised in strengths-based coaching that the building up of weaknesses is a misplaced goal which requires enormous energy, in contrast to the more effective focus on building strengths (Kauffman & Scoular, 2004; Linley & Harrington, 2006). Alternatively, strengths coaching identifies and capitalises on clients’ natural capacities, helping them to both identify and build on the resources they already have (Linley & Harrington, 2006), resulting in positive outcomes. For example, in a study with college students, Govindji and Linley (2007) found that strengths knowledge and use were associated with organismic valuing and in turn with wellbeing and vitality. In a PhD study, Fronczak (2005) proposed that positive psychology techniques could enhance the coaching process and assist men develop the resources and resilience to deal with the challenges of midlife. In a phenomenological study with six executive coaches, Toogood (2012) found that coaches were motivated to focus on strengths in coaching, not only because of their belief in the many benefits it would obtain for their clients, but also because of the personal benefits and heightened sense of authenticity that they obtained from the experience.

One of the characteristics of PPC and strengths-based coaching is the use of surveys and instruments that focus on assessment of clients’ strengths, which are then incorporated into the coaching process. This is based on the assumption that realising strengths entails two processes: clients knowing their strengths as well as developing them (Toogood, 2012). In the use of such instruments, examination of a client’s taxonomy of strengths is viewed as useful for assessing how they are (or are not) utilised in the workplace (Kauffman & Scoular, 2004). For example, the Values in Action Institute Inventory of Strengths (VIA Survey) (C. Peterson & Park, 2009; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is an online assessment that classifies 24 character virtues and strengths and identifies clients’ top five “signature strengths”. Coaches can use this information to help clients to determine how they can re-craft their jobs to apply their top five strengths every day at work, increasing their wellbeing and job satisfaction (Kauffman & Scoular, 2004). Another popular instrument in executive coaching is the Gallup

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14 The organismic valuing process (OVP) was developed by Carl Rogers and represents the inner voice that guides individuals in directions that are right and satisfying for them. Hearing this voice is considered crucial for happiness (Burke & Linley, 2007; Govindji & Linley, 2007).

15 The aim of the VIA Survey is to identify the basic elements of personality that are universally thought to be the pathways to “the good life” (fulfilment, satisfaction, flourishing) (VIA Institute).
Organisation’s Clifton Strengths Finder which similarly also identifies clients’ top five (of 34) strengths, such as action, accountability, connectedness, and command.

A related area of positive psychology theory that has been applied to executive coaching is Csíkszentmihalyi’s (1990) study of “flow”. Flow is a subjective state related to intense engagement in an activity where individuals become so absorbed in what they are doing that they experience a loss of self-consciousness to an extent that action and awareness become merged (Wesson & Boniwell, 2007) and they lose track of time (Kauffman & Scoular, 2004). In a state of flow, an individual is fully focused on the task being undertaken and experiences pleasure, happiness and satisfaction as mastery is gained (Wesson, 2010). Kauffman and Scoular (2004) suggest that in executive coaching, clients can focus on changing their working practice or environment to have more flow work experiences. Wesson and Boniwell (2007) also suggest that coaches can enhance seven conditions within the coaching engagement to facilitate flow. In a grounded theory study with 15 clients and 27 coaches, Wesson (2010) proposed that the coaching conversations contained all the characteristic elements of flow. Wesson (2010) also identified the six categories of factors that affected clients’ and coaches’ ability to find flow: relatedness, commitment, facilitation, physical and mental resources, situational factors and continued successful engagement.

g) Humanistic and person-centred

One area where psychological theory appears to be useful to executive coaching is person-centred theory, which can be traced back to the person-centred (or client-centred) approach, originally developed by the psychologist Carl Rogers (1902-1987) (Joseph, 2006). Interestingly, the person-centred approach gets very little attention in the executive coaching literature compared to other psychological theories, although it seems very relevant to coaching practice. For example, Hedman (2010, p. 108) noted that “it should be obvious that Rogerian principles are well suited for any successful executive coaching program”. Stober (2006) argued that the values and assumptions of humanistic perspectives (including the person-centred approach) are foundational characteristics of coaching. However, Joseph (2006) suggested that one reason that Carl Rogers is rarely acknowledged in the context of coaching is because he adopted the term “counselling”. Hedman (2010, p. 101) suggested that it is because Carl Rogers’ work is perceived to be unsuited to the “hard realities of the business world”. However, if these were valid reasons, then it could be expected that a range of other

---

16 http://www.strengthsfinder.com/home.aspx
17 The seven conditions identified are: identifying clear goals, balancing challenge and skill, maintaining goal congruence, placing importance on doing well, having clear and immediate feedback, increasing autonomy and increasing absorption (Wesson & Boniwell, 2007).
psychological approaches would not have been applied to coaching either, and this is clearly not the case (as can be seen Chapter Three).

One of the reasons why the person-centred approach may not have been adopted widely in coaching (at least by some psychologists) as that unlike other therapeutic approaches it is not based on the medical model. Person-centred practice is not concerned with “repairing” or “curing” dysfunctionality and does not adopt the diagnostic stance of the medical model where the therapist (or coach) is the expert (Joseph, 2006, 2010). Rather, in the person-centred approach, it is believed that clients are their own best experts (Joseph, 2010). This translates into a core principle in coaching whereby coaches focus on increasing their clients’ self-awareness as a means of helping them to discover answers for themselves (Campbell, 2001). The person-centred approach does not prescribe what the client needs to do because it is grounded in the assumption that people have a natural actualising tendency towards growth, development and optimal functioning (and, if provided with the appropriate nurturing conditions, will grow to their fullest potential) (Hedman, 2010; Joseph, 2010). Stober (2006) suggested that this belief results in the coach working “with” rather than “on” the client. The coach’s role is therefore that of a facilitator rather than a subject matter expert or more experienced guide (Stober, 2006). This non-expert position might be difficult for some psychologists to adopt, based on their training, backgrounds, professional experience and identity. However, this non-expert stance is recognised as an important characteristic of coaching practice. For example, it was supported in a study of the practices of coaching psychologists (Whybrow & Palmer, 2006), in which 67.9% described themselves as facilitational versus instructional (17.4%).

Joseph (2010) suggested that person-centred coaching is unique compared with other psychological approaches to coaching as it does not adopt the view that some form of directivity is necessary in the coaching session. Rather, person-centred coaching adopts the attitude of “principled” non-directivity, which refers to the therapist’s (or coach’s) non-interference and respect for the self-determination of the client (Joseph, 2010). Applied to coaching practice, this emphasises the prominence of reflective listening in the responses from the coach and the importance of staying with the client’s agenda (Joseph, 2010). It also means that the coach maintains a focus on what Stober (2006) terms “process” directedness as opposed to “content” directedness. In this way, the coach does not direct the client, but rather offers the relational conditions within which the client will direct the session (Joseph, 2010). Specific goals are not imposed on clients; rather they choose their own values and goals (Hedman, 2010). It is suggested that even when the organisation or context requires a coach to focus on specific area with the client in executive coaching, the coach will still favour
process directedness and collaborate with client about which particular actions are most suitable (Stober, 2006).

Person-centred theory consistently emphasises the attitudes of the therapist as well as the quality of the client-therapist relationship as the prime determinants of the outcome of therapy (Hedman, 2010). Person-centred coaching, more than other approaches, emphasises the importance of the successful formation of a collaborative relationship in determining coaching effectiveness (Joseph, 2010). The importance of these relationship factors has also been supported in common factors research in therapy, suggesting that these are responsible for 30% of successful outcome variance with clients (Hubble et al., 1999). Similarly, person-centred coaching is not defined by the use of techniques but by the relationship that develops between coach and client (Joseph, 2010). The therapist’s knowledge of theory and techniques are also considered less important than the non-judgemental acceptance of the client (Hedman, 2010). Through an optimal climate (empathy, positive regard, congruence) in the relationship (and provided by the coach), the client’s capacity for self-growth is accessed (Stober, 2006).

h) Narrative

Narrative approaches to coaching are commonly associated with the work of David Drake (Drake, 2007, 2008, 2010). Narrative coaching draws on narrative psychology and is based on the assumption that the stories that people tell about their lives are of considerable importance in coaching, as there is a strong connection between the ways in which people see themselves, the ways they narrate their daily life, and the ways in which they behave (Drake, 2010). Drake (2010) outlined that narrative coaching works with clients at three levels: (1) drawing on narrative psychology to understand and connect to the narrator, (2) drawing on narrative structure to understand and elicit the material in the narrated stories, and (3) drawing on narrative practices to understand the dynamics of the narrative field of the coaching conversation.

In narrative coaching practice, the focus is not on the coach or coaching methodologies, but on the coaching relationship and the stories told in that space (Drake, 2010). The relationship is viewed as a “trusting container” in which clients are able to fully narrate their experience and work with the resulting material in the service of their goals (Drake, 2008). In “thinking narratively” in a coaching conversation, Drake (2007) also argued that coaches place more emphasis on generating experiences and less on rushing to interpretation, meaning, or action.

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18 Michael Lambert in 1992 proposed four therapeutic factors accounting for improvement in clients: client/extra-therapeutic factors (40%), relationship factors (30%), placebo, hope and expectancy (15%), and the models and techniques utilised by the therapist (15%) (Hubble et al., 1999).
In narrative coaching, coaches are not concerned with the story that the clients tells first, but rather, trust that clients will begin at the level at which they are ready and the critical themes will be forthcoming. Narrative coaching helps clients to (1) become more aware of their own stories, (2) recognise how these stories shape their identity and behaviour at both conscious and unconscious levels, (3) understand that these stories are personally and socially constructed, and (4) author their stories with identities and actions that enable them to embody a new way of being in the world (Drake, 2010).

i) **Other therapeutic techniques**

A range of other therapeutic techniques have also been applied to executive coaching. Passmore (2007a) proposed the application of motivational interviewing (MI) in executive coaching alongside behavioural and cognitive behavioural models. MI was originally developed by therapists working with patients who had drug and alcohol dependencies, and it provides techniques for the coach to use to engage clients when their motivation for change is low, recognising ambivalence as a normal part of the change process (2007a). Foster and Lendl (1996) applied eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) to executive coaching. EMDR was developed by Francine Shapiro in 1987 as a rapid treatment for anxiety and traumatic stress. In four case studies, EMDR was used to desensitise an upsetting event at work and was found to restore or enhance performance (Foster & Lendl, 1996).

j) **Integrative approaches**

A number of problems have been identified with the application of single psychological approaches to executive coaching. Passmore (2007c, p. 68) argued that the problem with transferring single approaches from their therapeutical origins to coaching is that it has left “coaching without a holistic model which the executive coach can use as a guide within the business world”. Single approaches also fail to reflect the eclectic practice that characterises therapy (and coaching) (Passmore, 2007c). Berman and Bradt (2006) argued that coaches need to be “poly-theoretical”, as single theories are insufficient to assist executives in complex situations.

In response to the problems associated with single approaches, some authors have blended a number of these (and other) frameworks together into an integrated coaching approach. For example, Kilburg’s (2000) integrated coaching model is informed by systems and psychodynamic perspectives and Passmore’s (2007c) integrative model for executive coaching is derived from six traditions, namely humanistic, emotional intelligence, psychodynamic, behavioural, cognitive behavioural and cultural perspectives. Further examples of integrated approaches are provided in Table 3.4 in Chapter Three.
Appendix G: Models of Effective or "Best Practice" Executive Coaching

Chapter Three outlines examples of models in the literature that focus on effective or “best practice” executive coaching. In Chapter Three, Table 3.6 contains examples of these models. This appendix contains the diagrammatic versions of these models (where appropriate).

Figure G1: Model of coaching effectiveness (Kilburg, 2001, p. 256)

![Model of Coaching Effectiveness](image)

Figure G2: Conceptual framework for successful executive coaching (Joo, 2005, p. 476)

![Conceptual Framework](image)
Figure G3: Model of exceptional executive coaching (Dagley, 2010a, p. 73)
Appendix H: Phenomenological Studies of the Experience of Executive Coaching

Chapter Three evaluates phenomenological studies of the experience of executive coaching. Eleven key studies were included in my constructed text set presented in Tables H1, H2, H3 and H4.
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research question</td>
<td>How do executives experience the coaching process?</td>
<td>What is it liked to be coached?</td>
<td>How do executive leaders experience executive coaching programs?*</td>
<td>What has the executive coaching experience been like for executive women?</td>
<td>How do executive women in healthcare experience the executive coaching process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>7 executives</td>
<td>6 executives</td>
<td>20 executives</td>
<td>10 female executives</td>
<td>11 female executives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Major findings

**7 essential elements:**
1. Path to achievement
2. Unique to self
3. Ownership
4. Confrontation with self
5. Array of emotion
6. Bond with coach
7. Achievement

**20 executives:**

### 4 themes:
1. Coaching experience
   - The coaches
   - First experience
   - Goal setting and action plans
   - Bouncing off ideas and talking
   - Leadership development strategies
   - Pre-assessment and self-awareness
   - Professional development
   - Involuntary requirement
2. Self-awareness
3. Changed leadership behaviours
4. Opinions about coaching

### 10 female executives:

#### 4 categories, 17 themes:
1. Why coaching
   - Feeling alone and wanting help
   - Motivated by challenge, growth
2. Role of the coach
   - Trusted
   - Professional
   - Guide
   - Strengthens me
3. Insight to action
   - Expects action
   - Tools guide actions
   - Different actions get better results
4. Outcomes
   - Being more effective with people
   - Work-life balance
   - How to work with my boss
   - Gender-based workplace differences and challenges

### 11 female executives:

#### 6 themes:
1. Positive coaching experiences
2. Improved work relationships
3. Forced coaching experiences
4. Reflective awareness of self
5. Coaching as a tool that improved their executive development
6. Relationship with their coach as a key to successful outcomes.
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### Table H2: Phenomenological studies of the experience of executive coaching – client perspective (Europe and South Africa)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>UK and Scandinavia</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants experiences and views of coaching</td>
<td>Exploration of the learning experience</td>
<td>Clinical leader’s experience of coaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>9 clients</td>
<td>13 middle and senior managers</td>
<td>8 clinical leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major findings</td>
<td>4 main themes:</td>
<td>10 themes:</td>
<td>Overarching theme: Coaching as an opportunity for “stepping off the treadmill”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Management of stress</td>
<td>1. The relationship started off as one of dependency and the transference of power</td>
<td>6 categories, 18 themes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Indirect work on stress</td>
<td>2. For coaching to be effective a trusting relationship is vital</td>
<td>1. Out and in the comfort zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Coping with stress</td>
<td>3. Reflection is important for learning and personal growth</td>
<td>• Under the microscope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use coaching for stress in the future</td>
<td>4. Through coaching individuals became more self-aware</td>
<td>• Clarifying purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cause of stress</td>
<td>5. Heightened self-awareness led to an awareness of self in relation to others</td>
<td>• Making sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Coaching relationship</td>
<td>7. Coaching facilitated a learning journey</td>
<td>• Focus on self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Trust</td>
<td>8. Coaching facilitated more self-autonomy</td>
<td>• Focus on development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transparency</td>
<td>9. Co-researchers moved into more complex strategic thinking and acting</td>
<td>• Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Valuable coaching relationship</td>
<td>10. Coaching was worthwhile and a good investment for the company.</td>
<td>4. Creative conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Coaching = investment in staff.</td>
<td>5. Ripple effect</td>
<td>• Managing the process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Coaching skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Talking it out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5. Impacting on self/others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Lynch pinning [sic] the CLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Modelling leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6. I’m OK, you’re OK.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Caring for the carer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Nurses’ guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• World as a better place</td>
</tr>
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</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Research question</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>McCleland, 2005, PhD</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>How do executive coaches experience the executive coaching process?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 executive coaches</td>
<td></td>
<td>20 executive coaches with over 2,500 hours coaching experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major findings</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 universal constituents:</td>
<td></td>
<td>10 essential meanings:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Authentic hope and understanding</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Executive coaches coach leaders on leading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The big exploration</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Executive coaches maintain multiple roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Intense client focus</td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Executive coaching is not therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A valuable affinity</td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Establish boundaries of coaching relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Coaching as art</td>
<td></td>
<td>5. Establish coaching relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Parting with a growing friend.</td>
<td></td>
<td>7. Executive coaches bring interdisciplinary distinctions to coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Executive coach’s experience and background add credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9. Well-rounded coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10. Executive coaching influential</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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**Table H4: Phenomenological studies of the experience of executive coaching – client and executive coach perspective**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Marlatt, 2012, PhD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>What is the nature of relationship within the executive coach-client dyad? How might transformative learning be accomplished through this relationship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>1 executive coach (as coach and client) and 3 clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major findings</td>
<td>6 thematic patterns, 21 themes:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Catalyst for Transformative Learning**
1. Enduring disorientation is at the core of the coachee’s dilemma.
2. Disorienting encounters can remain unknown and inaccessible to the coach.
3. The executive coaching lifeline: The coachee can be immediately receptive to coaching.
4. Coming to terms with disorientation involves surfacing the rational from the emotional ground.

**The Foundation of the Executive Coaching Relationship**
5. Affinity refers to an immediate natural connection.
6. Evolving trust is foundational to the executive coaching relationship.
7. Trust Eroded can compound enduring disorientation and lead the coachee toward self-direction.

**The Nature of the Executive Coaching Relationship**
8. Performance anxiety can deprive the coachee of a learning opportunity.
9. Dialogic openings are ephemeral opportunities to catalyse learning.
10. The free-flowing dialogue (agenda-less agenda) can be effective in catalysing learning.

**The Nature of the Executive Coaching Dialogue**
11. Anticipation of positive outcomes can precondition the coaching relationship for success.
12. Authentic disclosure of emotional impacts can expedite the learning process.
13. Limits of self-disclosure: Familiarity can reduce social distance and coaching effectiveness.

**The Ineffable Influence of the Executive Coaching Relationship**
14. Moving beyond the emotional angst can lead to a growing capacity to deal with adversity.
15. Unexpected impacts of coaching can be emotionally and physically debilitating.
16. Reflective leaps are ineffable shifts in the coachee’s mindset that can occur between conversations.
17. Epiphany emerges: the discussion of life goals can be one outcome.
18. A pragmatic shift from capitulation to self-control can be one outcome.
19. Learning perspective: Learning occurs at a specific moment or over a longer time.

**Transformative Learning and the Executive Coaching Relationship**
20. Inverted relationships with the organization can lead to a different way of being in connection.
21. Future possibility (work-life balance) refers to a step toward the next level of possibility.
APPENDIX I: EXAMPLES OF COURSE OUTLINES FROM EXECUTIVE COACH EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMS

This Appendix contains two example course outlines from existing executive coach education and training programs in Australia. The first includes the units of study offered in the Master of Science in Coaching Psychology at the University of Sydney. The second includes the outline for the coach training and accreditation program conducted by the training organisation, the Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership (IECL), which is accredited with the International Coach Federation (ICF).19

a) **Units of Study offered in the Coaching Psychology Unit (University of Sydney)**

PSYC 4721 - Theories and Techniques of Coaching Psychology

This unit details the fundamental theories and techniques of coaching psychology and evidence-based coaching. Theories and techniques will be evaluated by reference to empirical research and conceptual analysis. An integrated goal-focused approach to coaching draws on a broad base of established Behavioural Science. Within this framework, primary attention will be paid to cognitive-behavioural and solution-focused theories and techniques of behaviour change and self-regulation, and their application to coaching clients. Each weekly seminar has a lecture component and an experiential learning component. The experiential learning component requires students to evaluate each week’s topic in relation to their own personal life experience and to participate in group discussion and coaching practice.

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PSYC 4722 - Fundamentals of Coaching Practice

This unit teaches the Fundamentals of coaching, and lays the foundations for sound contemporary practice. This unit outlines the emergence of contemporary coaching from its roots in the Human Potential Movement, sports coaching, management consulting, clinical and counselling psychology, through to the establishment of the positive psychology movement. Drawing on established approaches students will be trained in the core micro skills of coaching. Core issues relating to mental illness and mental health and ethical professional coaching practice are addressed. Each seminar has a lecture component and an experiential learning component. The experiential learning component requires students to evaluate topics in relation to their own personal life/work experience and to participate in group discussion.

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19 See [http://www.coachfederation.org/programtypes](http://www.coachfederation.org/programtypes)
Practical experience of self-coaching and co-coaching are central aspects of this unit. This unit will be taught in block intensive mode over five days.

PSYC 4723 - Socio-cognitive Issues In Coaching Psychology

The aim of this unit is to give students an understanding of the key areas of psychology that are important to coaching and behaviour change. The focus of the unit is on critical appraisal of theory and the relation of theory to practice and research in coaching. Topics covered in this unit include models of self-regulated behaviour, personality, the relationships between emotion, cognition and behaviour, and the roles of learnt resourcefulness, learned optimism, psychological mindedness, self-reflection and insight in behaviour change. We also look at a variety of models of human development and the importance of taking into account the person’s developmental stage in coaching. Each weekly seminar has a lecture component and an experiential learning component. The experiential learning component requires students to evaluate each week’s topic in relation to their own personal life/work experience and to participate in group discussion. This unit will be taught in block intensive mode over five days.

PSYC 4724 - Coaching Practice

Students will consolidate the theory and skills acquired in previous units through a semester-long co-coaching practicum. Using real-life issues in a supportive and confidential environment, students will coach each other in achieving desired goals. The central learning element in this course is reflection on experience, informed by the models and theories taught across the coaching units. Using the experience gained as both a coach and a client in the course, students will engage in a reflective process that includes live feedback, videotaped sessions and written work. In addition to this reflective practice, students will develop and practice case conceptualisation skills and explore models of supervision.

PSYC 4725 - Assessment and Selection

This unit will introduce students to some of the major assessment instruments used in coaching psychology. This unit focuses both on critical evaluation of assessment instruments and their practical use and interpretation. Assessment instruments include: NEO 4; 16PF5; Myers Briggs Type Inventory; the DISK; Human Synergistics; BarOn EQI; WAIS; MMPI; Self-directed Search; Strong Interest Inventory; Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire.
PSYC 4727 - Positive Organisational Coaching

How can psychology help create “healthy” workplaces? Executive and management coaching have emerged as important factors in the enhancement of performance, engagement and well-being in the workplace. This unit examines key issues in contemporary executive and workplace coaching and equips students with the knowledge and skills to provide world-class executive and management coaching. The emphasis is on critical evaluation of theory and application to practice. Although primarily focused on positive psychology, solution-focused and cognitive-behavioural approaches to coaching in organisations, the application of psychodynamic (e.g. Kilburg) and systems (e.g. O’Neil) approaches to the enhancement of performance and well-being are also considered. The course covers issues in senior executive coaching, coaching middle management, establishing manager-as-coach programs, and the use of positive psychology in the workplace. This unit assumes knowledge of core coaching theories and techniques, unless students have substantial coaching experience, they students should only enrol in this unit once they have completed PSYC 4721 and PSYC 4722.

PSYC 4729 - Groups, Teams and Systems

Coaching always takes place within the context of human systems, be they family, social networks, or workplace organisations. This unit of study considers both the theory and practice of working in human systems. At the theoretical level, students undertaking this unit will consider the major theoretical advances which aid our understanding of groups and complex human systems. These will include systems theory and complexity theory as well as major research findings in group and team dynamics. Students will also consider the practical implications of these theoretical approaches to coaching within organisations. Issues surrounding self-organisation, leadership and control, and the management of change in complex adaptive systems will also be discussed. Students will design and facilitate a small group coaching program.

PSYC 4730 - Applied Positive Psychology

This unit of study teaches the application of positive psychology to coaching in work and personal life contexts. We consider the core principles of positive psychology and how these can be applied in coaching interventions. Topics covered in this unit include; coaching as an applied positive psychology; goals, meaning and well-being; subjective and psychological well-being; happiness; gratitude; the languishing vs. flourishing dichotomy; broaden and build theory; self-concordance; well-being in the workplace; career coaching through the life span;
and the use of positive psychology in health coaching. There is emphasis on both theoretical understanding and personal practice. The experiential learning component requires students to evaluate each week’s topic in relation to their own personal life experience and to participate in group discussion and coaching practice.

PSYC 4731 - Psychology of Peak Performance

The Psychology of Peak Performance draws on theories and models of sport, performance and positive psychology and applies these to use in executive, workplace and personal coaching practice. Topics covered include flow, mental toughness, mental readiness, concentration enhancement strategies and techniques, rehearsal and debrief strategies, thriving under pressure, self-coaching, overcoming setbacks, performance protocols, focusing, and surviving success. In addition the unit covers issues related to high performing teams and groups. Issues of work/life balance are also addressed, particularly in relation to the management of optimal energy levels (avoiding burnout). There is emphasis on both theoretical understanding and personal practice. The experiential learning component requires students to evaluate each week’s topic in relation to their own personal life experience and to participate in group discussion and coaching practice.

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b) **Course outline for the organisational coach accreditation program (IECL)**

Level One - Course Content

The best place to start is at the beginning. Level One coach training teaches you the essential foundational skills of an organisational coach, including the models and structures that make for high performance coaching sessions. At the end of Level One you will:

- understand what organisational coaching is and the context within which it sits
- have learnt and applied foundational models of organisational coaching
- be able to demonstrate the ICF core competencies of a coach
- have established your particular style as an organisational coach and learnt how to develop it
- know about the coaching relationship, in terms of framework, processes and outcomes

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• understand how to frame and use coaching questions
• have practiced coaching and also had the experience of being coached
• have developed your "coaching toolbox" of useful models and skills
• complete a reflective learning task which measures your understanding.

Your Level One Coach Certification course includes:

• preparation work online, from three weeks before commencement
• a three day intensive, experiential workshop
• three follow-on co-coaching sessions, (required for certification)
• other follow-on activities online
• a written Reflective Learning Task
• participation in the Institute of Executive Coaching’s Alumni Professional Development Program
• Alumni Community of Practice (first year membership included in course fee).

Level Two - Course Content

Research shows that in the “helping professions” (including coaching) the relationship that the practitioner develops is key to the success of the intervention. In this program we focus on the importance of the “state” of the coach and the coach’s ability to develop the coaching relationship. At the end of Level Two you will have:

• Developed additional skills in building rapport and trust in the coaching relationship
• Developed and demonstrated empathetic and deep listening, in order to “listen between the lines” and hear more clearly
• Developed and demonstrated mindfulness, enabling greater self-awareness
• Understood the importance of mindfulness in support of better coaching outcomes
• Developed an understanding of how people make sense and how this plays out, to enrich the coaching dialogue
• Expanded understanding of a strengths-based approach to the coaching dialogue
• Learned about powerful questions; what they are and how to use them in your coaching
• New ways to apply strengths-based approaches in the coaching encounter
• Developed strategies for managing stressful stories and situations in coaching to manage multiple perspectives
• A framework to empower your coaching counterparts to move from victim to responsibility
• Practiced coaching, received feedback and experienced being coached.
Level Two teaches you techniques and approaches that will help build stronger and more trusting relationships with your counterparts, and therefore deliver better coaching results. What your Level Two training will add to your coaching repertoire will assist your counterparts to change their old behaviours by being more self-aware, with an expanded perspective and therefore access to deeper insights.

The course comprises:

- Preparation readings online, from three weeks to prior to the workshop,
- A three day intensive workshop including lunches and materials,
- Three follow-on co-coaching sessions (required for certification),
- Additional learning activities online,
- A written Reflective Learning Task (to be written and submitted within a month from date of workshop),
- Participation in the IECL’s Professional Development Network (first year membership included in course fee).

**Level Three - Course Content**

Level Three is aimed at growing coaches that have:

- signature presence
- mindfulness
- a strength-based mindset
- contextual awareness
- reflexive relational ability
- organisational coaching as a professional/vocation

At the end of Level Three you will have developed your organisational coaching artistry and will be equipped to coach in these areas:

- mindfulness and reflexive awareness
- authentic leadership
- developing a signature presence as a leader
- narrative and strength-based coaching approaches
- values-based leadership
- coaching with values
- managing stressful stories and situations
- political savvy with an ethical basis
- personal empowerment

The Level Three Organisational Coach Accreditation course includes:

- Pre-work online, from three weeks prior
- A three day intensive workshop
- A take-home exam to assess learning
- Three follow-on co-coaching sessions are required to gain accreditation,
- Other follow-on activities online
- An Action Learning Project, (due three months after completion of Level Three)
- Ongoing professional development sessions through the Institute’s Alumni Community of Practice (one year membership included in course fee).

Final Accreditation

IECL Accreditation is granted once you successfully complete Levels One, Two and Three.

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APPENDIX J: THEMES AND KEY DIMENSIONS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

Chapters Four and Five present the findings of my hermeneutic phenomenological study conducted in Phase 2 of my research. The findings for both groups of participants: (1) client executives and (2) executive coaches are presented in Table J1. This table is referred to in Chapter Six.
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# Table J1: Combined table - Themes and key dimensions of the experience of executive coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Key dimensions</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Key dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The context of executive coaching</strong></td>
<td>1. Executive coaching is situated within an organisational system and setting and a personal context that influences the success of executive coaching for individual <strong>client executives</strong></td>
<td>Organisational context:</td>
<td>Setting the scene for coaching</td>
<td>1. Executive coaching is practised within the context of diverse organisational systems and settings and the individual worlds of <strong>client executives</strong> which must be carefully accommodated by <strong>executive coaches</strong>.</td>
<td>Organisational context:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>a) <strong>(Not) too senior to need training</strong> (Supporting lifelong learning)</td>
<td>a) <strong>Framing coaching</strong> (Organisation supporting client readiness)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b) <strong>Giving me free rein</strong> (Having minimal organisational constraints)</td>
<td>b) <strong>Being clear on the boundaries</strong> (Managing organisational involvement and client confidentiality)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal context:</td>
<td>c) <strong>Straddling that duality</strong> (Balancing organisational interests and client goals)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c) <strong>Making it) all about me</strong> (Pursuing person(al) development)</td>
<td>Working with the <strong>client executive’s context:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>d) <strong>Wanting to be coached</strong> (Being motivated for coaching)</td>
<td>d) <strong>Helping clients to understand themselves in the context of the entity</strong> (Adopting a contextual perspective)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>e) <strong>Having a connection</strong> (Being matched with the coach)</td>
<td>e) <strong>Supporting clients willingness to change</strong> (Working with a commitment to personal change)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>f) <strong>Absolute trust</strong> (Creating a relationship of trust)</td>
<td>f) <strong>Developing a relationship</strong> (Co-creating the relationship with the client)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>g) <strong>No other agenda</strong> (Valuing coach independence and professionalism)</td>
<td>g) <strong>Being who you are</strong> (Being genuinely empathetic and trusting)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>h) <strong>Someone to talk to</strong> (Engaging in confidential conversations)</td>
<td>h) <strong>Demonstrating care and concern for that person</strong> (Caring for the client)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>i) <strong>Away from the day-to-day</strong> (Being reflective)</td>
<td>i) <strong>Creating a space for clients to reflect and think</strong> (Supporting reflection)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>j) <strong>Taking them away from their environment</strong> (Taking clients outside the workplace)</td>
<td>j) <strong>Taking them away from their environment</strong> (Taking clients outside the workplace)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The space for executive coaching</strong></td>
<td>2. Executive coaching is conducted within a relationship of trust and connection with an <strong>executive coach</strong>; it involves the creation of a safe meeting space that is enabled by the outsider status of the <strong>executive coach</strong> and time away for reflection by the <strong>client executive</strong>.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>e) <strong>Having a connection</strong> (Being matched with the coach)</td>
<td>f) <strong>Developing a relationship</strong> (Co-creating the relationship with the client)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>f) <strong>Absolute trust</strong> (Creating a relationship of trust)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>h) <strong>Demonstrating care and concern for that person</strong> (Caring for the client)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>h) <strong>Someone to talk to</strong> (Engaging in confidential conversations)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>i) <strong>Away from the day-to-day</strong> (Being reflective)</td>
<td>j) <strong>Taking them away from their environment</strong> (Taking clients outside the workplace)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Notes:
- **Client executives** refer to the executives receiving coaching.
- **Executive coaches** refer to the coaches providing the coaching.
- The table presents a summary of themes and key dimensions derived from the experience of executive coaching.
- The themes and key dimensions are categorized into different contexts and spaces relevant to the coaching process.
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### Table J1: Combined table - Themes and key dimensions of the experience of executive coaching (contd.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process of being coached</th>
<th>Client executives</th>
<th>Executive coaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Key dimensions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The process of executive coaching for client executives involves confidential client-focused conversations with an executive coach who facilitates engagement in self-awareness, reflection and learning from experience</td>
<td>j) Entirely focused on me (Receiving full attention)</td>
<td>k) Coaching human beings (Being person-centred and client-directed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>k) Being treated as an individual (Having a tailored experience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>l) Coach facilitating the conversation (Being facilitated – to dialogue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>m) Constantly challenged (Facing learning challenges)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>n) Learning from real situations (Learning in context)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>o) Learning from action, follow-up and structured reflection (Learning through experience)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual effects/outcomes of executive coaching</th>
<th>4. The effects/outcomes of executive coaching for client executives includes the development of individual capability and potential by fostering self-awareness and the capacity for ongoing self-development</th>
<th>4. Executive coaches experience executive coaching at its best, and most rewarding, when it transforms client executives’ self-awareness and identity and supports their continuing lifelong learning journey.</th>
<th>Client executive outcomes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Key dimensions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Key dimensions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p) Helping me to see myself (Developing self-awareness)</td>
<td>q) Not just behavioural outcomes (Self-awareness and meaning)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>q) Backing myself (Increasing self-confidence and self-efficacy)</td>
<td>r) Shifting their self-perception (Transformative learning)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>r) Transferring capability (Coaching self and others)</td>
<td>s) A lot happens when the coach is not there (Continuing learning journey)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Executive coach outcomes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>t) Value for you (Gathering practice based evidence)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>u) Learning from clients (Developing coaching knowledge)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>v) Energising, exciting and satisfying (Feeling rewarded)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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