COACHING THE SELF:

IDENTITY WORK(ING) & THE SELF-EMPLOYED PROFESSIONAL*

A Harnisch Research Grant Final Report

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* This research project constitutes part of a PhD dissertation with the same title, defended in December 2012.

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A. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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B.   ABSTRACT

This project explores the micro-processes of identity construction among a growing class of worker in the US: the self-employed professional. Specifically, the research is grounded in the emerging profession of (personal) coaching. Often compared with management consultants and therapists, coaches focus on action and solutions, working closely with clients to establish and achieve their goals in a range of life areas, offering support, encouragement, and advice along the way (Crockett, 2007; Ozkan, 2008). As a sample of this larger class of worker, the coaching community offers an extremely fertile context in which to study both self-employment and identity issues, due to its rapid rise in popularity and efforts to distinguish itself as a legitimate profession (Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007; Ozkan, 2008).

While efforts have been made to survey the coaching industry in order to paint the "big picture" (see AMA, 2008; ICF 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Sherpa Coaching, 2008), the intent of this research is to examine the diverse experiences of the individuals who perform this work. To this end, the project is qualitative in nature, drawing upon extensive fieldwork carried out between 2007–2011. Data were generated using a variety ethnographic methods—in-depth recorded

interviews, participant observation, informal interactions—as well as secondary archival sources, and analyzed with a critical interpretive lens for themes relating to identity working.

This study speaks directly to practical issues expressed by the ICF (2008), particularly regarding the preparation of and resources available to new coaches, and the long-term sustainability of the profession. The findings suggest that the institutional support offered to individual coaches is uneven, depending on a number of factors—one being the chosen coaching specialization. With respect to creating a professional identity, some of the resources, tools, and practices provided by the professional community can actually be the source of new conflicts, contradictions, and challenges, which in turn produce anxiety and demand more intense identity working efforts from the individual coach. Consequently, what it means to be a self-employed coach and the ability to sustain a coaching business can be experienced quite differently within the profession. That is, some coaches are struggling more than others and would benefit from added assistance from the professional community to develop their coaching practices.

The aim of this research is to contribute generally to the growing body of knowledge about the coaching profession, and more specifically, about issues of identity, careers, and self-employment, as they affect individual coaches. This project is an important mechanism through which the coaches' stories and experiences can be systematically organized, shared, and heard, and thus builds the case for further qualitative research which explores the issues that affect coaches' day-to-day working lives. Ultimately, my hope is that the reported findings will be instrumental in informing and shaping policy and regulation, and in turn, can alert the ICF, training institutions, and key players within the coaching community to possible opportunities, concerns, and areas for future investigation.

C.   RESEARCH PROJECT OVERVIEW

1.   Purpose of the Research & Guiding Research Questions

This research project is derived from a larger qualitative study that constitutes my PhD dissertation work. The comprehensive research study examines the micro-processes of identity construction among self-employed professionals, grounded specifically in the emerging field of personal coaching[1], broadly defined (i.e. business, executive, life, health and wellness, etc.). At this point, it may be helpful to provide some historical background in order to demonstrate how the research questions, which guided this specific project, surfaced and were developed further.

In American society, work is a considerable determinant in shaping one's identity. We are socially programmed, upon being introduced to someone new, to ask "what do you do?" We believe that "who we are" is inextricably linked to "what we do." The assumption, of course, is that the "doing" refers to employment. Ours is a materialistic society, one in which judgments and decisions are made on the basis of economic value. This principle extends to our judgments and decisions about individuals—that is, we evaluate on the basis of activities that carry a monetary exchange value—one's work. It can therefore be argued that one's "worth" as a citizen in a market-driven, capitalistic nation is derived from one's economic contributions, particularly those (i.e. employment income) that enable us to be "good consumers."

Traditionally, the employing organization—through its culture, symbols, norms, and practices—provides the context for member socialization, which contributes to a work identity. In the field of Organization Studies, much work has focused on organizational identity (for an overview, see Hatch & Schultz, 2004). However, the employer/employee dynamic is shifting,

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[1] As a relatively new vocation, I refer to it initially as "personal coaching" to distinguish it from athletic coaching, and may use this term again if there is risk of confusing the two. Mostly, however, it will be shortened to just "coaching" throughout the document.

particularly for white collar, knowledge professionals. And as growing numbers move into contractual work and temporary projects with a variety of clients, self-presentation becomes ever more important as a reflection of the skills and services for hire. Now, however, these individuals do not have the assistance or resources of an organizational employer to help shape, guide, and maintain their professional identity.

It can therefore be argued that the self-employed professional's identity is not tied directly or closely to a single employing organization, but rather, that it reflects a stronger identification with a core profession or an industry (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996; Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003). Viewed in this light, the issue of identity becomes even more salient, as it indicates not only who the self-employed individual is, but importantly, what they do and the services they offer. This notion has been captured in the concept of "self-branding" (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005), where one "markets" the services they offer by creating and projecting a strong, recognizable identity. For instance, by creating a personal logo or a "tag line," and including it on all business cards and letterheads, the goal is to distinguish oneself from other service providers or job seekers.

Given the growing trend of self-employment, particularly among white collar service professionals (Dohm & Shniper, 2007), it is important to understand the issues that affect this class of workers. Identity work, which is largely invisible and uncompensated in the process of service production, has been examined to some degree within either traditional organizational employment or enterpreneurial ventures. With respect to the overall dissertation research, I was driven to explore and understand how this concept operates within the context of a growing class of worker—the self-employed professional.

Drawing upon the existing relevant literature and the specific research context of the coaching profession, this particular project was guided by the following research questions:

- **How is identity work(ing) accomplished among self-employed professionals? How do individuals (i.e. coaches) make sense of this process?**

- **What strategies, tools, resources, and practices are drawn upon in the "doing" (i.e. creating, presenting, maintaining, modifying, etc.) of identity?**

- **What unique identity issues and challenges surface for those individuals who work within an emerging profession, such as coaching?**

With respect to these questions, there are a number of points that should be clarified. First of all, the idea that identity is something that one "does"—that is, actively shapes, performs, changes, and contests—makes certain assumptions about the nature of identity. Second, it needs to be defined, who is considered a self-employed professional? In what ways are they similar to or different from other types of workers? Why are these individuals or this population worth examining? I will address my theoretical standpoint, as well as the existing literature on identity in the section: *Review of the Relevant Literature*; questions regarding who is considered a "self-employed professional" are addressed in the following section.

Using the context of coaching, I sought to explore the above research questions and to understand how one creates, maintains, alters, resists, and performs the identity of a "self-employed professional." The field of coaching offers a particularly interesting and timely research context, since it is undergoing a process of formalization and legitimization (Clegg et al., 2007), as it strives to become recognized as a profession in its own right (Ozkan, 2008). As well, since coaches embody and symbolize the often intangible qualities of the services they market (George, 2008b), there is likely much awareness of self-identity issues among these

actors. Based on these elements, the world of coaching offers potentially fertile ground for the study of identity.

This project takes (what I refer to as) a *critical interpretivist* approach, which is informed by symbolic interactionist (SI) and ethnomethodological (EM) traditions, along with social constructionist and labor process theory concerns. As a theoretical lens, SI is important for understanding the self and how people make sense of their symbolic worlds (Mead, 1934). This approach is therefore conducive for understanding issues of identity, because it connects the individual or "self" with their symbolic social worlds. It recognizes that meaning is both created and interpreted within its interactive, social context, and thus acknowledges that one's identity is an active process, continually being negotiated, constructed, maintained, and contested within the context of interaction with others.

If an SI approach is able to answer "what" questions—with regard to socially constructed meanings—then EM works to address the "how" questions. This perspective looks at how the taken-for-granted happens by focusing specifically on the disruptions to the normal, everyday routines and activities. By examining these interruptions to business-as-usual, an EM orientation allows us to reveal or expose the enormous effort that is required to maintain such an air of effortlessness.

2. <u>Relevance & Intended Contribution to the Coaching Profession</u>

In addition to hopefully contributing to the academic organization studies literature on identity, professions, and new careers, it was crucial, to me as a researcher, that this project carry some practical import and useful consequences for the participants who made this research possible. Therefore, with respect to the coaching profession, through this project I strive to paint

a more nuanced and descriptive picture of what it is like to work as a coach, particularly as a form of self-employment.

To support this objective, I refer to the Executive Summary of the 2008 ICF Global Coaching Survey, in which the researchers identified future opportunities and challenges for the coaching industry and profession. Among the category of "challenges," the report states (ICF, 2008: 16):

> Due to the trend towards newer coaches entering the profession, it is important for them to be fully prepared so that they can be successful in developing their individual practices. In order for the overall perception of the coaching industry to be associated with long-term sustainability, these newer coaches will need to be provided with the necessary tools required for marketing and for building their coaching practices.

Data produced in this research study speak directly to these practical issues expressed by the ICF. The findings would suggest that the ICF does have some basis for these concerns because, as I will later demonstrate, many of the newly minted coaches with whom I spoke are having difficulty finding the tools and support to foster their individual practices. Thus, through this project, I will expose some of the "additional" work—above and beyond actual coaching— for which the coaches are responsible.

In carrying out this research project, I was eager to understand these issues as they are experienced by the individuals who occupy the coaching profession. Undoubtedly, efforts have been made to survey the industry in order to paint the "big picture" (see AMA, 2008; ICF 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Sherpa Coaching, 2008). But while this information is vital for understanding the breadth and scope of the coaching profession, it misses out on the diverse individual experiences that make up the totality. In short, the experience of being a coach is very different depending on who you are, where you live, how you work, and the services you offer. This investigation is an attempt to get at these nuances, and to convey them in all their complexity.

Finally, I believe that having produced a final report based on an academically rigorous and systematic investigation, this affords a degree of legitimacy to the findings. Furthermore, my intention is for the project's insights, implications, and feedback to be brought to the attention of those who are in a position to influence and enact decisions regarding the future direction, goals, and actions of the professional coaching community.

For now, the section that immediately follows helps to contextualize this investigation by describing trends in the labor market and career patterns in the U.S. over the past few decades, as well as the swiftly growing profession of coaching.

D.   CONTEXTUALIZING THE RESEARCH

1.   The Rapid Expansion of Self-Employment in the US

The landscape of the American labor force has changed drastically in the last 30 years. Since the 1980s, there has been tremendous growth in the service sector and a corresponding decline in manufacturing industries. The labor market has consequently shifted from "blue collar" manufacturing and industrial jobs—now outsourced around the globe to be performed by cheaper sources of labor—to increasingly "white collar," "professional," and "knowledge-intensive" service work. As well, the ways in which we organize work and workers have also witnessed dramatic changes; arguably the most dramatic being the rapid expansion of the contingent labor force. This segment consists of workers who are hired by organizations on different terms than regular full time employees, such as part-time, seasonal, temporary, and contractual arrangements.

There are two popular frameworks for understanding the rise of contingent work: the institutional argument and the free agent perspective (Barley & Kunda, 2004). The institutional

argument examines shifts in the labor market and changes in organizational practices to explain the increased demand for temporary workers. For instance, the organizational practice of "downsizing" became popular in the early 1990s as a strategy to reduce labor costs by shedding "unnecessary" middle layers from the organization. As a result of this practice, firms attempted to maintain (or, if extra-ambitious, even increase) productivity levels with fewer employees. There are times, however, when fluctuations in demand require the firm to increase its labor supply. Rather than recruit full time employees, it is more convenient and cost-effective for the firm to hire temporary staff for a terminal period, or just until the completion of a specific project. Firms are thus increasingly making use of contingent labor to fulfill their fluctuating needs.

In contrast to the institutional argument, the free agent viewpoint embraces contingent work as a means for individuals to move freely between jobs, to be in full control of their choice of assignments, and to avoid getting "stuck" in a dead-end job ever again (Barley & Kunda, 2004). Daniel Pink (2001) is credited with borrowing the term *free agent* from professional athletics and popularizing it within a management/career context. In the sports world, notably within professional baseball and basketball leagues, a free agent is an athlete without a contract, and therefore does not currently "belong" to a team. The athlete is considered "on the market" and can "shop around" for a contract. A bidding war may ensue between any number of teams who wants to secure the individual to wear its jersey.

In the context of careers, "free agents" refer to (presumably white collar) workers who are in similar circumstances, in that they are not "owned" by a single employer. Pink (2001) describes them as individuals who float effortlessly between assignments. They are kept challenged by the range of projects they work on, learning new skills with each and adding to

their experience. Crucially, they must be masters at marketing themselves, since they are often competing with other free agents for contract work. Free agency also means an individual can exercise a high degree of control—control over the hours worked, the locations chosen, the assignments taken on. And greater control, Pink (2001) argues, means greater freedom.

Compared with the institutional argument, the free agent perspective promotes an overwhelmingly positive interpretation of contingency work, viewing it as an opportunity to take charge of one's career. Free agency embraces the ideals of self-sufficiency, initiative, empowerment, personal responsibility, and proactiveness, which are associated with the "enterprising self" (du Gay, 1991, 1996)—the embodiment of success within the new economy. It is critical to point out that in the world of free agency, when the term "contingent labor" is used, it is with the assumption that an intentional career choice has been made by the individual to become self-employed.

This can be misleading, however, as the contingent labor force encompasses a variety of employment arrangements, including part-time workers, who are still classified as "wage and salary employees." In other words, these workers are still employed by a firm. Additionally, individuals who find their work through temp agencies may be classed as "contingent" or "temporary" staff by the client firms who provide their assignments.   However, because the agency is responsible for paying taxes and other contributions, they are also classed as "wage and salary employees." In both cases, these workers would *not* be categorized as self-employed under the BLS typology.

At the same time, individuals who are classed as self-employed are not necessarily regarded as part of the contingent labor force; a common example of this is entrepreneurial

individuals who start their own business. If they do arrange work with a client firm, the contract is drawn up under the name of the business, not the individual.

The above examples illustrate how easily terms can become conflated and confused. When we talk of "contingent labor," it is usually from the institutional perspective—that is, from the point of view of the firm which hires and makes use of that labor. Free agents therefore fall into a unique category. Such individuals are self-employed because they are responsible for securing and arranging work assignments directly with the client, and do not rely on employment agencies or other mediating bodies. However, they are also considered contingent labor, since they are hired by clients[2] on a contractual or temporary basis, but do not become the client's "employee."

a) *Who is the Self-Employed Professional?*

Self-employment is increasingly becoming a way of organizing work life. As the fastest growing category of work, self-employment in the United States grew by a staggering two million workers, from 8.3 million in 1995 to more than 10.3 million in 2005 (BLS Reports, cited in Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2008: 75). According the Bureau of Labor Statistics, self-employment is projected to increase another 5.5 percent to reach 12.9 million jobs by 2016, and ageing Baby Boomers are expected to contribute substantially to this growth (Dohm & Shniper, 2007).

Although the management literature on the self-employed is growing, it is a comparatively small body of work. Entrepreneurship is one type of self-employment, and by contrast, the work on this topic is vast and includes numerous dedicated journals. Somewhat confusing is the interchangeable use of the labels "entrepreneur" and "self-employed" to describe

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[2] "Clients" may include both individuals and organizations/firms.

particular kinds of workers. For instance, the term entrepreneur is commonly associated with a certain type of business – implying more about the nature of the business or venture and economic arrangement than the employment situation. Indeed, much of the published research on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs appears in the field of economics, and is therefore defined in economic terms.

Bogenhold (2004) has pointed out the problems of equating entrepreneurship with self-employment, the latter encompassing multitude of different employment circumstances, as discussed at length in the previous section. The two terms can therefore be distinguished as follows: entrepreneurship implies a strong association with a type of business and its growth or development trajectory; self-employment is instead a work arrangement where the individual is responsible for securing work with organizations or generating an income through goods or services produced.

Defining who or what an entrepreneur is exactly has proven to be quite tricky. Mainstream management studies—those adopting economic or psychological perspective—have focused theoretically on identifying entrepreneurial traits or attributes. Much of this literature is devoted to trying to identify who is an entrepreneur, or to come up with a basic definition or theory of entrepreneurship, which is reminiscent of the vast literature on leadership and how a leader can be correctly identified. For instance, some scholars have focused on what makes an entrepreneur 'different' psychologically from the rest of the population (Beugelsdijk & Noorderhaven, 2005). This research may generate statistically amenable identifiers, but there are serious explanatory limits with this type of knowledge. Methodologically, by treating the entrepreneur as a homogenous archetype, research that produces an understanding of the lived experience of being an entrepreneur is quite rare (apart from a few case studies). There have

been many calls for taking a more ethnographic approach to the study of entrepreneurship (Curran & Burrows, 1987; Ogbor, 2000), and a number of scholars have already made efforts to answer that call (for example: Bruni, Gheradi, & Poggio, 2004; Holliday, 1995; Hytti, 2005; Kondo, 1990; Ram, 2000).

So while it may be true that entrepreneurs are self-employed, not all self-employed individuals are considered entrepreneurs. As well, those who are self-employed (or work on a contractual basis) may perform a wide variety of labor: from manual and "blue collar" (i.e. carpenters, plumbers, truck drivers); to personal care, domestic, and "pink collar" (i.e. barbers, manicurists, massage therapists, child care workers); to professional, knowledge, and "white collar" (ex: executive assistants, management consultants, journalists, graphic designers). Hence, it is important to specify that for the purpose of this study, it is the last category of worker which is of primary concern. One motivation for taking this focus is to examine a *growing* class of workers, since white collar professional work is increasingly being organized on contractual terms. Indeed, those who currently belong to the self-employed category were likely considered "wage and salary employees" in the (not-so-distant) past, and are therefore still adjusting to life as a "free agent."

2. <u>The Emerging Profession of Personal Coaching</u>

I chose the field of coaching to explore issues of self-employment and professional self-identity in the context of changing employment relations. According to its website, the International Coach Federation (ICF) is "*the* voice of the global coaching profession" (ICF, 2009a, emphasis added). The ICF regularly produces research reports on the field of coaching, but admits that it is growing so rapidly, it is difficult for statistics to keep pace. For instance, between 1999 and 2009, ICF membership grew by a staggering 700%, from 2,122 to more than

14,000 (ICF, 2008, 2009a). To date, more than 9000 coaches globally have been certified by an ICF-approved coaching program (ICF, 2013). But since neither certification nor ICF membership is required to become a personal coach, the exact number who are practicing is unknown. Environmental complexities, created by increased downsizing, mergers, acquisitions, and outplacement, are cited as a possible cause for the explosion in the demand for and supply of coaching services since the early 1990s (Hudson, 1999).

There are several different types of services under the personal coaching umbrella. Among them are life, health and wellness, business, executive, spiritual, and career coaching. The nature of personal coaching—regardless of specialization—centers on the growth, change, and development of the individual client or "coachee." Unlike its closest cousins, therapy and counseling—which tend to be "problem-focused" and investigate one's past to arrive at a diagnosis—coaching is "solution-oriented", its outlook firmly set on the future to envision where one would like to be (Crockett, 2007; Ozkan, 2008). Commonly, goal setting is used to realize this vision, and concrete action plans are established to meet the client's goals (Grant, 2003; Grant & Cavanagh, 2007) . The coach then accompanies the client on this journey, offering support and encouragement, talking through victories and struggles, together revisiting and modifying the action plan as needed.

In a sense, coaching work is centered largely on developing "the self" (Ozkan, 2008). Normally, the individual client would contact a coach on their own volition, after identifying if not the specific problems, the general life areas they wish to address. Thus, some initial self-analysis and assessment on the part of the individual usually occurs in order to identify the need for coaching.

A great deal of writing has been generated on the coaching profession since the turn of the millennium, most of it published in the popular press. For example, the ICF (2008: 14) reported that in 2007 alone, an impressive 1,614 "clips" on the topic of coaching were gathered worldwide. These coaching clips appeared in such reputable newspaper sources as the *New York Times, Wall Street Journal* (US, Europe, & Asia), *Washington Post, London Financial Times*, and *Globe & Mail.*

The scholarly work on coaching has not been as prolific as popular press material, but has witnessed substantial growth over the last several years (see Stern & Stout-Rostron, 2013). A good deal of that which has been produced is concentrated in the field of Counseling Psychology. For instance, *Coaching* is a peer-reviewed journal that focuses exclusively on academic research and theory about personal coaching. In the management literature, the emphasis has been almost exclusively on executive or business coaching, addressing managerial concerns such as the evaluation of coaching skills and practice (ex: Grant & Cavanagh, 2007), its effect on organizational performance (Agarwal, Angst, & Magni, 2006; MacKie, 2007) and benefits to coached individuals (Jay, 2003; Spence & Grant, 2007). Coaching has also been linked to organizational variables, such as emotional intelligence (Bharwaney, Bar-On, Maree, & Elias, 2007; Blattner & Bacigalupo, 2007; Boyatzis, Druskat, Sala, & Mount, 2006; Bricklin, 2002), as well as its relation to the field of positive psychology (Foster & Lloyd, 2007; Locke, 2002). More recently, budding research interests have included the coach's role, the coaching process, and the coach-client relationship (Passmore, 2007; Spence, Grant, Cavanagh, Grant, & Kemp, 2005).

Some sociologists have labeled personal coaching as "expert service work" (George, 2008b)—a hybrid between professional and low-skilled service work. However, those who

practice coaching would likely argue that it is, indeed, professional service work. There are many obstacles to instituting professionalism in coaching, as would be the case within any blossoming occupation. Although greater numbers of coaches are earning credentials, because the field is for the most part unregulated, there are still wide variations in certification requirements among the plethora of coaching training programs that exist (George, 2008a). The ICF has taken extensive measures to advance the profession by developing a code of ethics and competencies. However, the federation maintains that it can serve the field most effectively by bolstering "professional coaching as a distinct and self-regulating profession" (AMA, 2008: 4).

Establishing credibility among the masses is also a challenge. The 2008 Sherpa Executive Coaching Survey (ICF, 2009b) concluded that despite some recent improvements in public perception, the coaching profession's credibility is still much lower than the perceived value of the coaching process. It is not surprising, then, that high on the list of priorities for the field of personal coaching—its practitioners, researchers and concerned bodies, like ICF—is to carve out a niche that clearly distinguishes it from related areas, like therapy and consulting, defining it as a professional domain in its own right (cited in AMA, 2008: 17).

As an emerging field, coaching thus presents a fascinating background for the study of professional identity. Not only must individuals grapple with legitimizing their services and their identities as coaches, they must also do crucial legitimizing work for the profession as a whole (Clegg et al., 2007)—a burden not likely encountered in the "traditional" professions, such as medicine, psychiatry, and the law.

And although individual coaches represent a wide variety of coaching concentrations—personal, life, spiritual, health and wellness, executive, and career, to name a few—they operate under similar conditions, with regard to the way that their work is organized and how they

perform it. Regardless if they coach full or part-time, or offer their services to individuals or organizations, every self-employed coach is responsible for enlisting and maintaining clients, as well as marketing, pricing, and billing for services rendered.

Hence, coaching philosophies and areas of expertise might be diverse, but most coaches do share in common the identity work of being a self-employed professional. In this respect, such efforts are not unique to coaches; they are applicable to anyone who might fit this category, including: translators; journalists; writers/editors; software engineers; adjunct faculty, management consultants; and financial advisors, to name a few. Coaches are, therefore, just one example of a more general class of worker known as the "self-employed professional."

In the next section, I will review the scholarly literature, both theoretical and empirical, in an effort to locate this study within the vast existing body of knowledge.

E.   REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

1.   Overview of Identity Research in Organization Studies

Identity is something that we are all familiar with, yet it can be difficult to put into words. Inspired by that existential question: *Who am I?*, identity is a fundamental aspect of the human condition. As such, exploring and demystifying identity has been a scholarly pursuit in the humanities and social sciences alike, not the exclusive subject of any one discipline.

Identity can be studied in numerous ways, depending on the assumptions made about its nature. In their recent review of the identity literature in organization studies, Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008: 12) categorize this vast body of work into three dominant theoretical approaches; from within the perspective of organization studies these three lenses are

broadly related to the functionalist, critical, and interpretive paradigms, respectively (see

Alvesson & Deetz, 2006; Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

The first line of investigation (and by far the most prolific) is *social identity*, which looks

at how individuals locate themselves as social and organizational beings. Based largely on the

work of social psychologists, Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1974; 1985; 1975), the two major

theories that inform this body of identity literature are social identity theory (SIT), and, to a

lesser extent, self-categorization theory (SCT). The second orientation is *identity control and*

regulation, and its concern is with how our sense of self is accomplished through the operations

of power and domination. From this perspective, identity is viewed—particularly in an

organizational context—as a powerful form of social control (Karreman & Alvesson, 2004).

Finally, the approach that I will be using in this project is *identity work,* which in short, relates to

how individuals endeavor to construct a sense of self.

Identity work(ing)[3] is defined as "the ongoing mental activity that an individual

undertakes in constructing an understanding of self that is coherent, distinct, and positively

valued" (Alvesson et al., 2008: 15). The process of doing identity work embraces complexity,

ambiguity, and contradiction, is often evoked —and can thus be examined—when the routinized

reproduction of a self-identity in a stable setting is interrupted or disturbed. The process can also

be triggered by feelings uncertainty, anxiety, and self-doubt, as well as through encounters with

others that challenge one's understanding of self (ex. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

In this research vein, ontological assumptions of identity work(ing) are consistent with

the interpretive paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979); identity is thus perceived as a social process

in which humans engage. Through our words, thoughts, actions, and our interaction with others,

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[3] I sometimes write this concept as "identity work(ing)" to show the dynamic, fluid, and processual nature of the phenomenon, and to remind the reader that it can indeed be both a noun (identity work) and verb (identity working).

we actively socially construct our self-identities. In short, we do not "have" identities, we "do"

identities; one way we "do" identity is through story-telling and creating narratives.

2. <u>Studying Identity through Narratives</u>

For this project, I adopted the position that identity is narratively constituted. Simply put,

narratives are stories—or parts thereof (Down, 2008: 9)—for which we have authorship.

Through the act of story-telling, we determine the information which is included in the narrative

and that which is left out; we prioritize the details, foregrounding some, while relegating others

to the backdrop; we set the pacing of the story, the climax, the tone. Narratives help us make

sense of our experiences and create a coherent logic for events in our lives (Somers, 1994).

While it is also known as a "discursive practice" (Collinson, 1992), the term *narrative* implies an

awareness of "the linked and holistic aspects of human speech and action" (Down, 2008: 9), and

so not reduced to words or text alone.

When we construct narratives, it allows us to transform our individual random events and

experiences within temporal and spatial relationships with others, into "episodes" (Somers, 1994:

616). That is, we must be able to "selectively appropriate" the various events and experiences of

life, and then "emplot" them in accordance with specific themes. To emplot is "to create a

plausible and intelligible plot or story line" (Down, 2008: 20). However, we must discriminate

in some way between "the infinite variety of events, experiences, characters, institutional

promises, and social factors that impinge on our lives" (Somers, 1994: 617). Consistency in

narratives is provided by the emploted themes, which also need an "evaluative framework"

shaped by "a set of fundamental principles and values" (Somers, 1994: 617). Somers names four

dimensions to the narrative constitution of identity: *ontological, public, conceptual,* and

metanarratives. These will be used to examine and make sense the narrative data produced in this study, and are discussed further in the section: *Data Production & Analytical Process*.

3.   <u>New Careers: Praise & Critique</u>

Since the early 1990s, the focus in career scholarship has shifted from "traditional" organizational employment and hierarchical promotion trajectories, to the property of "boundarylessness" (Mirvis & Hall, 1996). As the body of literature on new careers continues to expand, "boundaryless" is viewed as a "shorthand descriptive term summarizing the large-scale macro-adaptation of society to its turn-of-the-new-century's economic and technological environment" (Hirsch & Shanley, 1996: 220). It thus acts as an umbrella category that encompasses a variety of employment arrangements and career models—such as portfolio (Handy, 1995), protean (Hall, 1996), and post-corporate (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997). The individuals who subscribe to such career patterns are known alternatively as "free agents" (Pink, 2001), freelancers, individual contractors and the self-employed.

First championed by Charles Handy, he defines "portfolio work" as a "collection of different bits and pieces of work for different clients" (Handy, 1995: 175). More specifically, the portfolio worker is not dependent on any one employer. This work arrangement also implies that the worker must be versatile enough to repackage their skills and knowledge to appeal to a variety of employers, thus securing different projects and assignments (Mallon, 1998). In this sense, the portfolio career could be called a "micro small business" (Brodie & Stanworth, 1997), since the individual is responsible for the marketing, selling, and delivery of their services to a variety of clients, oftentimes across multiple fields. While "traditional" ideas about career may be considered outdated or no longer applicable—i.e. lifetime employment with a single firm— the need to *have a career* and prepare for it carefully are still crucial. The goal now, however, is

to achieve "*employability* security rather than employment security" (Peiperl & Arthur, 2000: 12). These changes can make planning a career in today's labor market quite a complex and daunting process. As a result, individuals are now encouraged to engage in "protean careers" (Hall & Mirvis, 1996) and to become "career self-managers" (King, 2004).

The mainstream management literature on "portfolio," "boundaryless," and other labels for "new careers" has been predominantly positive in tone. Indeed, Handy put it in plain terms: "…sooner or later, thanks to the shaping of the organization we shall all be portfolio people. It is good news" (Handy, 1995: 146). Much of this focus has been on the advantages available to the individual, in terms of flexibility, control, and choice. "Boundaries" are viewed as restrictive to the twin goals of maximizing one's control and choice when it comes to career management.

There are growing concerns, however, that this rosy outlook on "new careers" is too simplistic, too one-dimensional, and only serves the good of the business organization that follows the logic of globalization. Research carried out in the fields of sociology and labor studies, in particular, has provided more nuanced and "balanced" accounts of how those who assume such career trajectories actually experience and manage them. The high-tech and knowledge-intensive sectors have been popular contexts in which to examine how "new careers" play out in practical terms. In *White Collar Sweatshop* (Fraser, 2001), a study of high-tech contingent workers in the Silicon Valley, the concept of "multiple levels of redundancy" is introduced (Fraser, 2001: 136). It refers to the widespread "career defense strategy" of taking on several consulting jobs simultaneously to offset the threats of work loss and income instability. Consequently, the individual actually ends up working much longer hours than a single full-time job, thus running the risk of becoming stressed out, ill, and/or burnt out very quickly.

Investigating the actual effects of the "new careers" movement on those who pursue this path, either by force or by choice—needs to be explored and articulated more thoroughly, particularly in the management and organization studies literature. By "actual effects" I refer to the everyday consequences of "new careers," as voiced by those who are trying to make a living through them. The present study attempts to address this dearth in the literature.

4. <u>Identity Work(ing) & Self-Employment</u>

Studies of identity construction have started appearing in contexts that reflect changing employment relations. For instance, one Canadian study looked at, among other issues, the identity construction of "flexworkers"—defined as employees who telecommute, job share, or have other contemporary work arrangements (Richardson, 2009). In another project, Smith (1998) contends that the work lives of nonstandard workers—which, in addition to the self-employed, includes virtual, contract, and temporary employees—are more likely to be marked by discontinuity. Smith argues that their identities are more likely to be fragmented than their permanent, organizationally-employed counterparts. Among this group of workers, the self-employed, however, have a uniquely difficult challenge, in that they are fully responsible for finding the "raw material" and resources to help shape, maintain, and project a work identity. And since the quality of their skills, knowledge and services is connected to and judged through this identity, there is a great deal – not least their economic livelihood—resting on its public presentation in a marketable and desirable way.

Entrepreneurship is one kind of self-employment where identity has been examined quite extensively. In fact, taking a narrative approach to the study of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial identity is gaining recognition and has already been embraced by a number of scholars (Cohen & Musson, 2000; Down, 2008; Down & Warren, 2008; Fletcher, 2007).

According to Down (2008:9), if we want to understand the narrative processes of self-identity, however, it is not necessary to have a solid and static definition of social roles or categories. In this case, a "self-employed professional" and more specifically, a "coach" do not have to be predefined by the researcher[4], but rather, keeping them ambiguous allows the informants to construct their own definitions through their self-identity narratives.

In the next section, I share the research design details of the current study.

F.   RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

1.   Research Setting & Participants

Unlike many other qualitative studies in the field of management, this research project was not located "in" an organization. Instead, the matter of interest is identity and its construction among a specific population—self-employed professionals. More specifically, the world of coaching provides the particular "setting" or "context" for this project.

My pool of research participants was drawn mainly from a network/alliance of coaches, located geographically in New England. The group's membership is varied, and includes both certified and non-certified coaches providing a range of services—executive, leadership, and career assistance, as well as spiritual, fitness, and relationship guidance. Participants were recruited initially via "convenience" and "self-selection" sampling (see Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2000: 171-6).

Individuals were invited to take part in the study; I have not pressured anyone (at least not knowingly) to get involved. I do believe, however, that my prolonged attachment with the

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[4] Of course, there must be some initial criteria established in order to identify appropriate participants for the study. To be eligible to participate in this project, one had to consider oneself a "coach" or do "coaching work." How they come to understand their self-identity of coach or "self-employed professional" will emerge as this research unfolds.

alliance demonstrated my commitment to learning about the world of coaching, and I attribute their desire to help me out and their expressed curiosity in the project to the fact that I became a familiar and trusted face within their circle. Additionally, members of the coaching alliance introduced me, through their various networks, to other potential participants. Known as "snowball sampling," this is a particularly valuable method of identifying informants, since the word-of-mouth referral is considered a short cut to establishing the researcher's credibility and trustworthiness.

Issues surrounding self-employment seemed to be the main subject of conversation at each alliance meeting I observed. Given this focus, it's not surprising, then, that virtually all members of the alliance were/are self-employed, and this naturally became the main pool for finding research participants. I therefore established one major criterion for participation in the interviews: one must identify oneself as a coach or as doing coaching work. The issue of self-employment (or other work arrangements) would then come up in the course of the conversation.

Although I did not make the self-employment an explicit basis for inclusion in the study, the vast majority of participants indicated they were indeed self-employed, which includes a variety of work arrangements. For instance, one coach is an independent contractor, hired by various organizations to provide coaching services, but is not considered an employee of those organizations. Similarly, another coach might work from a home office, coaching individuals or groups. In both cases, the coach is considered self-employed because they are each responsible for marketing and delivering the coaching services, setting rates and billing clients, as well as preparation of their own income taxes, arranging insurance, and supplying the materials required to perform their work. Even if a coach does hire an accountant to prepare their income taxes, it is ultimately still their responsibility, as a self-employed individual, to ensure the taxes are filed.

It is important to note that the intent of this research was not to compare different employment categories of coaches. I do not deny that different relations of employment (i.e. organizationally employed internal coaches vs. coaches employed by a consultancy vs. self-employed coaches) has the potential to produce very different work experiences. Instead, my concern from the outset was *the issue self-employment among coaches*. And while it may be fruitful to examine coaches' experiences of self-employment against organizational employment, in this particular project, this relationship was looked at *within the same participant*, rather than *between participants*. That is, I was only interested in learning how one's experience of self-employment is understood and made sense of in the context of one's previous experience as an organizational employee.

In the course of my interviews, it was revealed that quite a few informants were only coaching part-time (for various reasons); some had even returned to other organizational employment and were only coaching on an occasional basis. In fact, the coaches' working arrangements became more complicated as the conversations unfolded, demonstrating this matter is not simply captured by an either-or survey item, but is better explored in depth via interview.

To better illustrate who the research participants are, I have included a table of the sample's descriptive statistics in Appendix. In addition to the major "coach" criterion, there were a number of secondary characteristics (such as sex, age, niches, etc.) that I took into consideration when recruiting participants. For the dissertation project, we (my committee and I) determined that 20 participants would be a sufficient sample for this study. I then estimated "desired proportions" for each characteristic, in an effort to reflect the diversity of the coaching profession's population (as indicated by ICF), while also accounting for local demographics and alliance membership. For most characteristics, the actual numbers are close to the desired ones,

but for some, the participants' profiles (ex. coaching full or part-time, years self-employed, etc.) could not be ascertained prior to interview.

To further depict the characteristics of the sample, I have also included a table which identifies the coaching specializations/niches of each interview informant. The table can be found in the Appendix of this report.

2.   Data Production & Analytical Process

In a qualitative, interpretive investigation, the data production, methodology, and analytical process are closely intertwined; this project is no exception. The interpretive research process is fundamentally iterative, in that as the researcher observes, she also deciphers and analyzes. The judgments and interpretations she produces in turn steer her line of inquiry, directing her to further exploration and observation. But while this process is emergent and somewhat messy, it still draws upon theoretical and methodological resources, as well as analytical strategies, always with one eye focused on the guiding research questions. I have therefore combined the topics of data production and analytical process to reflect the nature of this qualitative project. In the next pages, I will explain how my research process took shape.

a)   *Narrative Identity: Theoretical & Methodological Resources*

Following in the footsteps of other organizational scholars (Down, 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009; Down & Warren, 2008), I drew heavily upon the work of Margaret Somers (1994) for my theoretical and methodological resources associated with the study of narrative identity. According to Somers (1994: 617), there are four dimensions to the narrative constitution of identity: ***ontological, public, conceptual,*** and ***metanarratives***. Starting with the perspective of the individual, *ontological narratives* are "the stories that social actors use to

make sense of – indeed, to act in – their lives" (Somers, 1994: 618). In short, they help us to understand *who we are*, which can then guide us on *what to do*. Importantly, Somers informs us that narrative and ontology share a processual relationship in that they are mutually constitutive. Thus, our actions lead to the production of new narratives, which can in turn lead to new actions.

Ontological narratives, however, do not just emerge out of the blue, but must be derived from somewhere. Because they are not self-generating, they rely on and are sustained over time by the *public narratives* exchanged in social and interpersonal interaction. Somers describes public narratives as: "those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions, however local or grand, micro- or macro-stories about American social mobility, the 'freeborn Englishman', the working-class hero" (Somers, 1994: 619). Within the present research context, public narratives might be the various discourse generated by coaching profession, in particular, ICF reports, coaching training literature, and popular press coverage.

The third dimension in the narrative constitution of identity is *metanarratives*. Somers (1994: 619) explains that they are: "'masternarratives' in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history and as social scientists." Metanarratives capture the "epic dramas of our time" as noted in such legendary struggles as "Capitalism vs. Communism" and "the Individual vs. Society."

The last dimension that Somers discusses is *conceptual narrativity*. This is particularly important for what social researchers strive to accomplish—that is, to explain what is observed in the social world, with reference to "social forces" (ex. market conditions, institutional practices, organizational constraints). In this sense, conceptual narrativity is able to connect all of the other dimensions of narrativity to allow us to reflect upon and understand them in a way

that is able to accommodate their relational, spatial, and temporal qualities simultaneously. This is something that static analytical categories—like "actor" and "society"—are unable to capture.

Thus, referring to Somers's theoretical framework, in order to understand how an individual narratively constructs (or "does") identity, the researcher must first be able to recognize and distinguish between the various types of narratives employed (ontological, public, meta- and conceptual), and then relate these narratives to the larger social context (i.e. political, economic, historical, and cultural). I take this issue up again in the *Analytical Tools & Strategies* section below, but first, I will discuss the data production methods that were used for learning about such narratives[5].

b)   *Methods of Data Production*

Participant observation is an important method used in ethnographic studies. As theorized in this study, participant observation recognizes that the researcher cannot be divorced from the research context and is an active agent in shaping the events and interactions that take place. That is, with the research participants, the researcher co-produces the data.

I engaged in rigorous participant observation—which includes attending meetings, events, and informally interacting and conversing with the informants—from 2007 to 2011, and as a result, an abundance of data have been generated for this project. In fact, a great deal of research material was produced even before I began the formal interview phase. From the preliminary data, I began asking questions in order to focus my successive observations in the field; in short, this is an essential part of the analytical process. Due to the exploratory in nature of this project, and my intention for it to be relevant to real-life experiences and issues, I realized that I would have to invest a substantial amount of time initially in the field for this project to

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[5] Again, with the understanding that narratives are not merely text or words, but link such speech with human action and interaction (Down 2008).

take shape. That is, considerable participant observation was required in order to first understand what kinds of issues emerged and how they fit in and compared with extant literature, to then determine which questions were ultimately "worth" investigating. For instance, upon observing several meetings of the coaching alliance, it soon became apparent to me that their focus was not primarily on coaching techniques or dealing with difficult clients or cases. Rather, their conversations centered on *the issues and challenges of self-employment*. It was this observation that provoked questions for me about the contextual conditions of working as a coach, and ultimately became the focal point of my dissertation research and this particular project.

Narrative research assumes that the narrator is an active agent, relying on choice and imagination, in the construction of personal narratives. *Narrative interviews*, sometimes referred to as "story-telling interviews" (Goodson, 2001; Johansson, 2004), allow informants to shape their own responses, without the pressure to accommodate a predetermined structure or list of categories set out by the interviewer (Hytti, 2005: 597). It is important to acknowledge that in shaping one's story, one makes choices about language, as well as what is worth sharing and what is not. And while these choices might be made unconsciously, they are still purposeful. In creating a coherent story, one includes details that will eventually help advance the story from the past to the present, and excludes other information that does not quite "fit" in or does not seem relevant. An identity is most commonly expressed as a coherent, consistent set of qualities that remains somewhat constant through time and context. Given this understanding, identity work(ing) is performed in the creation of such narratives, in order to maintain a sense of cohesiveness (Mishler, 1986), especially when conflicting information and situations threaten to expose gaps in the logic or cracks in the consistency of the story.

The recorded fieldwork interviews were largely unstructured, with mainly open-ended questions, to allow the informants to freely develop their stories. The use of in-depth narrative interviews also gives the informant permission to participate more fully in the research process. By reflexively recounting and reconstructing their experiences for me, they began to articulate their self-identities—a sense-making endeavor not only for the researcher to witness, but the informants themselves. A copy of the Interview Protocol can be found in the report's Appendix.

In the process of conducting the interviews and reviewing the tapes, I was also analyzing the data, listening for commonalities and themes within the conversations with various participants. In earlier interviews, this would give me questions to ask and themes to explore in later interviews. However, as the interviews were drawing to a close, true to the iterative research process, I recognized the need for further fieldwork to assist in my understanding of the informants' narratives. It was at this point in the project that I sought funding for additional fieldwork, the major expense being an intensive coaching training module, held over a 3-day weekend. Including this participant observation activity in the study was extremely valuable in order to understand the "raw material" that the coaches use to create their identity narratives, specifically the "public narratives" of coaching from which they draw. A recurring theme that emerged from the informants was the ways in which the coaching training shaped their ideas about who they would be and how they would work as coaches. It was therefore essential that I witness and experience a coaching workshop firsthand, in order to gain a better contextual appreciation of the coaches' experiences, but crucially, to understand and determine if other interpretations were possible.

In addition to formal narrative interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation, I relied upon extensive investigation of the coaching industry via secondary sources

(ex. analyzing documents and websites, performing internet searches, etc.), so that I could better comprehend the "raw material" that coaches draw upon to create their identity narratives.

c)   *Analytical Tools & Strategies*

The significance of Somers's (1994) work to the present study is its sensitivity to the dynamic nature of identity, recognizing it as temporally, spatially, and relationally bound. As well, it recognizes its historicity, which is crucial in my research, to demonstrate how identity and identity construction in its micro form can be connected to the political, economic, and socio-cultural conditions of the historical moment in which these phenomena and processes are contextualized. For instance, how one "does" the identity of a self-employed professional—and specifically, as a coach—is embedded within and shaped by the larger "social forces" at play (i.e. labor market trends, organizational and institutional practices, and the workings of capitalism and enterprise in the new economy).   However, the microprocesses and micro-practices of identity help, in turn, to constitute, shape, and alter the "structural" conditions that characterize our lives. The narrative constitution of identity, as conceptualized by Somers, is thus able to embrace all these different elements, recognizing their interdependency, yet not privileging or valuing one aspect over another.

When data start being "produced"—either through participant observation or narrative interviews—written notes should be recorded as soon as possible afterwards. For example, during the coaching alliance meetings when I was engaged in participant observing, I discretely took fieldnotes of the conversations and goings-on. Likewise, with the informant's consent, I have recorded interviews with a digital voice recorder. All interviews must be transcribed, as accurate transcripts are essential to compile, store, and retrieve the data in a manageable way.

As stated earlier, analysis takes place within the moment of observation or in the interview interaction. Reviewing my notes and listening to the recordings, I begin identifying several things. First, *within* each interview, I tried to look for the use of ontological and public narratives—that is, how individuals talk about and make sense of who they are (ontological—for example: "I'm different, I've always known I was a different, and I wanted to do my own thing"); and how they draw upon cultural and institutional discourse and knowledge (public) to create a unique sense of self (for example, from the coaching discourse: "As a coach, I believe that the client is the expert, and I am there to just help them get to where they want to be"). I also paid close attention to patterns of talk or themes that surface *between* participants, and try to connect these themes to larger "social forces." For instance, if I recognized a recurring theme about the economic recession and its effect on business or income, this signaled a common structural force. In doing so, I had to go back and forth between interviews, constantly reviewing and comparing, to see if ideas "showed up" in the same way, if they materialized differently, or if they were absent or unimportant.

With regard to Somers's other two dimensions—metanarratives and conceptual narratives—these are broader, macro ideas that emerged from the "micro" work of examining each interview account for ontological and public narratives. My analytical approach is to start with the microscopic view—that is, to first understand how individuals made sense of who they are as coaches and the work they do—and to progressively widen the lens to look at the themes emerging between/among the participants, and ultimately to connect these to the larger structural context. By employing this technique, my goal was to uncover how the individual coach's experience relates to those of other coaches' as well as to the coaching industry as whole, but

without losing any of the fine-grained detail that is captured so well through a longitudinal, qualitative study, such as this.

I relied heavily on both Microsoft Word and Excel, and the qualitative software program, MAX QDA (MAX Qualitative Data Analysis), to assist with managing the data and the data analysis process. MAX QDA is appealing because it's relatively user-friendly and easy to learn—qualities that proved to be elusive with some competing software brands. Since Microsoft Word and Excel are ubiquitous, using these programs permitted me to create new documents based on emerging categories, narratives, and themes that could be easily shared, transmitted, and accessed from virtually any computer. Its basic functions (ex. searching, saving, highlighting, creating folders, etc.) proved to be more than adequate, and in fact, greatly facilitated the analytical and writing process.

3.   Negotiating Access, Consent, & Ethical Issues

I was very fortunate with respect to the issue of identifying a research site and negotiating access. As mentioned previously, I connected with a local network of coaches, in October 2007, and regularly attended their monthly meetings, up until 2012. I became a member of the alliance, so that I could participate in their "business" discussions, which typically occurred prior to the "public" portion of the meetings.

The coaching alliance members were always extremely welcoming. Individually and collectively, they demonstrated a willingness to support me in my research endeavors, and an enthusiasm to include me as a part of their organization. In April 2008, I distributed a notice about my prospective research, in order to gauge interest in participation. The response was very positive; almost all members who received the information expressed willingness to talk with me "whenever I was ready."

For this project, I recognized the principle of negotiated and *processual consent* which has been used in previous qualitative research on coaching (Crawshaw, 2005). This means that securing participant consent and cooperation is an ongoing process, and each person has the right to change their mind about the information they provide, the questions they are willing to answer, and the activities in which they are willing to take part. My aspiration for this particular project (and as a researcher, more generally) was to carry out the investigation in a transparent and respectful manner, recognizing the privacy and dignity of all who are involved.

Based on these principles, as well as my "Research with Human Subjects" training as a requirement of my doctoral program, I drafted a research participant consent form, which was approved by the Isenberg School of Management's IRB (Institutional Review Board). Prior to being interviewed, I asked each informant to carefully read and, if they agreed with the terms, to sign two copies of the form. The interview informant then received one of the original signed copies, and I retained the other original signed copy on file.[6] I have included in the Appendix a blank copy of the document: "Research Participant Consent Form for Recorded Interview."

G. RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. Introduction: Professional Resources for Identity Working

Although virtually anyone can call themselves a coach, due to the lack of regulation and thus barriers to entry, those who decide to pursue coaching training and/or certification undergo a process of indoctrination. To this end, the professional coaching community—that is, the governing bodies (ex: the IAC and ICF), coaching training schools and programs, (ex: IPEC, CoachU, and Coachville), and other coaching-related organizations (ex: Institute of Coaching)—

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[6] The process was modified slightly in the case of two interview informants, who "signed" and returned their consent forms to me via email.

provide entrants with a variety of knowledge, techniques, vocabulary, and other tools for creating a strong professional identity. The common assumption is that by equipping new recruits with such resources, and instructing them about their proper usage and application, these individuals will have earned their place as rightful members of the professional community. In other words, they will have what they need to become "good coaches." What I have found, however, is that these resources are often not enough, at least, to sustain a coaching business.

In the analysis that follows, I delve into the narrative tools, strategies, and resources with which new coaches are supplied, usually through their training programs but also through other materials circulating in the coaching community (i.e. websites, books, articles, presentations, etc.) In order to understand how one constructs a coherent and positively-valued identity as a member of the larger professional community, it is necessary to unpack the kinds of cultural materials available and to examine precisely how they are expected to be deployed. My objective is to examine the role that the coaching profession, as an institutional force, plays in the construction of individual coaches' identities. The primary focus of this analysis is to therefore address the guiding research questions, as stated at the beginning of the report

- **How is identity work(ing) accomplished among self-employed professionals? How do individuals (i.e. coaches) make sense of this process?**

- **What strategies, tools, resources, and practices are drawn upon for "doing" (i.e. creating, presenting, maintaining, modifying, etc.) identity?**

- **What unique identity issues and challenges surface for those individuals who work within an emerging profession, such as coaching?**

With respect to the last question above, I consider how the conditions which characterize a new and growing industry may pose special challenges to create a legitimate, professional identity. Through this analysis, I wish to convey the often unrecognized labor done by individual

members of the coaching community in an effort to enhance and promote the professional

project of coaching. Such obligation to perform identity work for the coaching industry as a

whole adds an extra burden to their own identity working demands as individual professionals.

Before inspecting the various narrative resources and materials offered by the coaching

profession to its new members, I briefly cover the pertinent themes of identity working which

will organize the data analysis that follows.

2.   Making Identity Working Visible: Prominent Analytical Themes

To review, identity work(ing) is defined as "the ongoing mental activity that an

individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self that is coherent, distinct, and

positively valued" (Alvesson et al., 2008: 15). The process of identity working is often

summoned when the normal reproduction of self-identity in a stable setting is *interrupted*,

disturbed, or *challenged*. These interruptions or events may be assessed as relatively positive,

negative, or neutral in nature (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). For instance, by inviting informants to

be interviewed about their coaching work, this could be perceived as a positive opportunity to

engage in identity working.

However, the emphasis of critical studies of identity construction has been on the perhaps

"less-positive" incidents which trigger such efforts. Collinson (2003) contends that *insecurity* is

a major determinant for identity working. That is, events, actions, or conditions which heighten

a sense of insecurity also typically increase self-doubt and anxiety, which in turn means more

energy is channeled into identity work to quell these feelings (Knights & Willmott, 1989).

Insecurity, in broad terms, can take various forms that commonly intersect and overlap. For

example, psychological insecurity may arise when one has doubts about their own identity or

attempts to remedy contradictions between multiple roles. Economically, feelings of insecurity

could be associated with one's income or job prospects. Finally, social insecurity can be triggered when one is challenged by others about their status in society—who they are, what they do, and the like (ex. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

I now turn to the task of presenting the analysis, referring to these analytical tools and themes to address my initial research questions and help make sense of my observations.

3.   Defining & Defending Coaching's Professional Boundaries

In the present investigation into the emerging profession of coaching, it is crucial to examine how institutional forces shape and influence the identity construction of individual coaches. Like organizations and organizational cultures, professions and professional associations employ a similar type of control over individual behavior, appearances, and practices on its members. Through its code of ethics and practices, constitution, credentialing system, and not least, a common language, the "profession" produces rules and norms that are shared by those in the community. If successful, these mechanisms should ultimately weed out those who do not belong, while retaining those who do. It must not be taken for granted, however, that such professional codes, norms, and practices, rely on humans to be activated, and therefore rendered effective. But it is also within these moments that *contradictions, conflicts,* and *challenges* may arise, calling for intense identity working. Consequently, my analysis seeks out these moments of heightened anxiety in order to expose the efforts needed by individual coaches to sustain a professional identity in the face of such difficulties.

Reviewing my data, I was able to identify three focal points through which the coaching community attempts to distinguish itself from other professions: the role of a coach; the coaching philosophy; and the relationship between coach and client. These themes are somewhat arbitrary divisions because they overlap and cover much of the same material. What they do have in

common is that first, the coaches rely on these professional resources in their everyday work; and second, they provide "high-level" or broad distinctions in order to exemplify the differences *between* coaching and other lines of work. Undoubtedly, there are also shades of difference *within* the coaching community, depending on one's training and area of specialization or niche. In essence, these three subject areas are important pieces for understanding the professional project of coaching. I discuss each of these points next.

a)   *The Role of the Coach*

During interviews, I would ask informants about coaching, what they do, how they think about their work, etc. and there was much similarity in what I heard. Most informants were able to give eloquent answers to these questions—after all, when I had approached them to be interviewed for my research, I did indicate these were the primary topics of interest. It is not surprising that most informants were well-prepared to answer such questions and even saw it as an opportunity to "educate" and perhaps enlist a new client. In fact, one participant emailed me to ask for a recording of our conversation so she could review it. As it turned out, she had just been invited to do a live radio interview, and believed several of the replies she had given to me were particularly good examples for clarifying and articulating her thoughts about her work.

Coaches are frequently confronted with the question: "What is coaching?" Being a relatively new service industry, there is not a great deal of cultural knowledge among the general public regarding what it is this profession has to offer, nor how coaching works. During our conversations, it was not uncommon for interviewees to take some time to explain to me what coaching is and how it differs from similar, yet distinct, professions, such as therapy and consulting. One technique for explicating something new (i.e. coaching) is to compare/contrast it with something more familiar (i.e. therapy, consulting, etc.). It therefore seems reasonable that

any thorough training program should clearly delineate coaching's professional boundaries, especially for those who are about to join its community.

At times, efforts to demarcate the professional boundaries between coaching and its closest cousins (ex. therapy, training, consulting, etc.) must be more decisive. That is, coaches are required to answer forthright questions like: "What's the difference between coaching and therapy?" Career coach Liz explained how she makes this distinction:

> ME: Ok, so...ok so I just want to ask then, how...how would you distinguish yourself from being a therapist? How is what you were different—how is what you were doing different from what a therapist does?
>
> LIZ: Well, I think one way, major way which is different is I do not work with people on emotional issues, (ME: Ok.) that require the training certification that a therapist would get. (ME: Ok.) I'm not trained as a therapist, I don't know how to do therapy. (ME: Right, right.) And what I do know is I can certainly tell between a person's need for career coaching, which is what I do, and something that goes much more deeply into their emotions and their well being, as related to their emotions.
>
> ME: Right, right. So, you wanted to distinguish yourself from that.
>
> LIZ: Yeah, I think that...I think it's very important because people who come to you don't distinguish. (ME: Right.) And—because it's an artificial boundary.
>
> ME: Right, right. I mean, so would you still have people that came to see you that were really looking for therapy?
>
> LIZ: Yes, and actually I recommend to anybody who's going to see me that--my first, one of my first questions is: "Have you—Are you seeing a therapist?" (ME: Right.) And if they're not, as graciously as I can, when the moment comes, suggest therapy. Because it usually is a good idea to do both together. (ME: Right.) And I also strongly suggest that they let the therapist know that they're seeing a coach.

Liz makes an astute point in recognizing it is really an "artificial boundary" between coaching and therapy. It may be an uncomplicated matter for the governing boards and professional bodies to make clear and concise distinctions on paper, in the safety of a boardroom or within the confines of a conference workshop. Unfortunately, it doesn't usually happen that way in practice for the coaches who must contend with such challenges on a daily basis. In fact,

much of a coach's time and energy is devoted to performing such identity work, as in the example above, to strengthen the presence and legitimacy of the profession.

b)   The Coaching Philosophy

One's coaching philosophy is the logic behind their practice of coaching. It is the starting assumptions with which they enter the relationship with the client; it shapes their focus, their goals, their approach, and guides them with regard to appropriate actions—what should be done and what should not. In short, one's coaching philosophy provides the framework—conceptual, practical, and moral—for working effectively as a coach.

One of my interviews at the beginning of this research project was with Maureen, a writing and career coach. I asked her to explain the philosophy that provides the foundation for her coaching work and relationships. Maureen put it this way:

> My coaching philosophy...is that people have the answers, their own answers, and
> I work in my coaching relationship with them to help them uncover their
> answers… I like the challenge of working with the person, helping them figure
> out what their skills are and how they apply them, and learn new skills.

This quotation upholds some of what Maureen had earlier described to me as the "co-active coaching" philosophy, the particular coaching school of thought and approach in which she was trained. Clearly, her beliefs about coaching mirror—or have been closely shaped by—what she was taught in her courses towards coaching certification.

As I spent more time in the field, I observed comments like Maureen's above being espoused in meetings, conversations, presentations, and on websites, business cards, and brochures. Consequently, as an observer and student of the coaching world for several years, I now recognize such remarks to be one variety of speech circulating in the coaching profession. In Somers's terms, this is a *public narrative*, provided by the profession and drawn upon by

actors within its community to distinguish coaching from other fields while, at the same time,

uniting and solidifying its place as a legitimate profession, populated by legitimate professionals.

Small business coach Danielle's comments confirm this:

> Yeah, I like that about coaching, about the whole philosophy and method of it, it's a holistic approach. It's more rewarding for me, and I think it's more useful for the client.

Danielle makes an implicit comparison between coaching and some referent, an unnamed

field or profession, as she depicts the coaching philosophy as "more rewarding" and "more

useful." From this subtle utterance, one can catch a glimpse of the ways in which individual

coaches not only put forth efforts to craft a self-identity, but also how they actively engage in

identity work for the coaching profession as a whole.

It is not mandatory, however, that one's coaching philosophy should mimic a particular

script learned during training; there is certainly room for personal creativity and expression.

Thus, one's coaching philosophy can be considered a rhetorical device, offering an opportunity

to attract clients by seasoning it with one's own values, beliefs, and assumptions, which they

bring to their practice. A good illustration of this practice is demonstrated by executive coach

Abigail, who specializes in the Baby Boomer population:

> ME: So, let's see...so how would describe yourself as a coach? (ABIGAIL: Oh wow.) So, so what kind of approach do you take, and what's your coaching philosophy?

> ABIGAIL: Ok, this is good. Well I named some of it, I really believe the answers lie within and we just have to find the tools to get to it. (ME: Ok.) That's a big part of my philosophy. And I really believe that everyone is born smart, with all the tools they need, with everything they need, and that issues get in the way from the time you're a baby, and that we get re-triggered, at different times, depending on how we were raised and you know, and what our childhoods and teen years were like. And so--but I really believe that there's a wholeness inside and that there's divinity inside each person. And again, I wouldn't tell people this who would be turned off by that. (ME: Right.) But that...

> ME: But that's...those are the assumptions that you work with...

ABIGAIL: ...that I work with. And I also feel that as a coach, part of my job is to help people to get out of whatever box they're in, if they're in a box, to see new options and perspectives and possibilities. (ME: Right.) And so I do a lot of work with energy--I'm not talking about hands on reiki or anything. I'm talking about helping them, through breath, through wholeness and awareness. To get to wholeness, to be fully present, and to be authentic. (ME: Right, right.)

c)   *The Coach-Client Relationship*

Studying the coaching philosophy and role of the coach points to the question of the

coach's relationship with the client. Of course, every relationship is as unique as the individuals

who are in it, but certain social norms can exist which dictate the general terms of the

relationship and the role expectations of each party within. The coach-client relationship is no

exception, and it appears to be a factor that differentiates it from other types of professional-

client interactions.

Like the coaching philosophy and role of the coach, there is room for individual coaches

to put their own spin on the relationship with the client. Taken from separate conversations, here

are two different informants' views on the relationship they envision and strive to develop with

clients:

MAUREEN: I think that the client and I together shape the relationship. So, everybody's different, I mean to some extent every relationship I have with the client is different. I mean, there are ethical boundaries even in coaching, but...it's not one size fits all. So that's ok. I mean, I still have good boundaries, but... different people want and need different things. I think that it's kind of all of that stuff, and also...and you assume that your client is creative and resourceful and healthy. Well, I mean maybe they're not, but even if they're not, it's not like they're across the board, not.

JEFF: So that's how really I approach a client coaching relationship, "Ok, what does this person need? What—where do they want to go? What do they want to do?" (ME: Right, right.) "And then, how might we get there?" Now, every client is different I think, as well, so I stay far away from a unitized or unified approach. You mentioned for example authentic, there's—I'd like to think that everything I do has an authenticity to it, certainly from my side, I think it does. Is that person fully achieving his or her

authenticity, I don't know for sure, because that's...I don't think you can know that really. But then I work with folks who just want to get the next job.

For both Maureen and Jeff, there is a common theme in making sure the coaching

relationship caters to the client's particular needs, thereby avoiding a "one size fits all" approach.

So even though Maureen and Jeff may each have certain ideas about human nature (i.e.

creativity, resourcefulness, authenticity, etc.), they recognize, at the same time, the uniqueness of

the individual with whom they are working.

Life coach and personal organizer Dana expressed her work and relationship with clients

using the metaphor of a journey:

> DANA: I think there are infinite ways to support people and I don't know that everything I do is coaching per se, but I'm here in support. Like, one way I hold it is that you know, I hold people's hand for a while, for a stretch of their path that they need a little extra support. Sort of escorting them to the next umm...passage way, or their next level, you know?

Similarly, career coach and trainer Liz also referred to the idea of motion/moving in her

client relationships:

> LIZ: I have a lot of experience and I'm very down to earth, and I'm seriously interested in...in having it be a warm and respectful relationship that helps people move forward, and I'm basing it on experience, and that type of thing.

From these images, one can make inferences about the nature of the client relationship—

for instance, when Dana states she might "hold people's hand" if needed, as she "escorts" them

to where they need to be, she is not saying that she is leading or pushing them. Rather, she is

accompanying them, like a travelling companion, who is sharing in the experience. This

conjures a very different type of rapport from the conventional medical model used in therapy,

where one diagnoses, advises, and imparts knowledge to the other, and the hierarchical power

relations associated with such an arrangement. Liz reinforces the idea of a supportive

environment and more balanced power dynamics when she depicts the relationship as "warm and respectful."

d) *Identity Working through Conflicts*

i. Coaching as "Superior to" Therapy

Discursively positioning the coaching profession as somehow "better than" or "superior to" rather than merely "different from" therapy can be quite tricky, even treacherous—especially for those individuals who are trained as therapists and continue to practice therapy along with their coaching. One particularly memorable case in point occurred while talking with Sascha, a former therapist turned career and life coach:

> ME: Can you talk a little bit more about the differences between therapy and coaching? Or what...what really attracted you to coaching and how you felt, you know, this is really for me?
>
> SASCHA: Well therapy is amazing, and I think it can be amazing for people. And it's accessible for people because of insurance and it's familiar to people. So in no way do I want to put therapy down, (ME: Right.) or the work that therapists do. But it's a role where you diagnose people, and you take on an expert role, and you write treatment plans, and you...you work treating problems. You know, that's kind of the focus and I think some people are changing that in the field. But you're focusing on people's problems and the past, and kind of figuring out where it is--and some therapists do solution-focused therapy and they incorporate coaching, and I know that there's a real mix out there. But still, especially if you're working in a clinic or something like that, you still write out your treatment plan of what you recommend the person to do and diagnose them, and it's part of the medical model. Therapy--I mean, coaching, which just...it kind of flipped it on its head for me, where I didn't have to be the expert. I worked with people and I could REALLY just...I could really listen to the essence of WHO this person is and WHAT do THEY want out their life. And it was just very freeing for me because I didn't have to put in any judgment or I didn't have my own agenda, I could just really be with this person and help this person get to where they want to go, with different coaching techniques. And…so it was freeing, and it was just...it was a better fit for me, and those are the essential things I see as the difference.

Sascha's comparison of coaching and therapy includes many points of difference commonly alluded to by others: the expert role, diagnosis, treatment plans, and lack of judgment

or agenda. Through her comments, she demonstrates that while different coaching schools have their own particular take on theories, techniques, practices, and terminology, there does seem to be an overarching coaching discourse which guides the profession as a whole. Much of this institutional discourse is endorsed by professional governing bodies, such as the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and the International Association of Coaching (IAC), and is generally accepted as the unifying ideology for the "professional" and "legitimate" coaching community.

At the same time, Sascha is very careful to not denigrate or "put therapy down," going so far as to call it "amazing" and referring to some positive aspects of this modality. She also mentions coaching was a "better fit" for her, underlining her career transition as a personal choice, not a rejection of the entire therapy profession. She is keenly aware that, even though she is no longer practicing as a therapist, any negative remark about psychotherapy could reflect poorly on her own career decisions—albeit made by a "past self." Hence, Sascha prefaces her coaching speech with affirmative comments about therapy. Simply put, this instance shows the active doing of identity.

So while it may be helpful for making distinctions between coaching and other professions to establish an understanding of this new line of work, the negative comparison tactic is not as useful or effective when transported from the coaching training manual or workshop, into actual practice. The reality is that many of the individuals becoming coaches have previously been (and sometimes still are) members of these other professional communities. To disregard or dismiss the referent professions, then, may be unwittingly disregarding or dismissing the individuals' knowledge derived from and time spent in these other occupations. This contradiction, between the past and present professional roles, can be a source of discomfort and anxiety, which triggers concentrated identity working to alleviate these feelings (Collinson,

2003). Unfortunately, it is left to the individual to repair any damage done by defining coaching in this way, as they struggle to craft a professional identity which is "coherent, distinct, and positively valued" (Alvesson et al., 2008:15) over time. This was evident in Sascha's case above; she was cognizant that therapy had been set up as a "straw man" next to coaching, and therefore made sure to not fall into this trap which could inadvertently hurt her own professional reputation.

ii.   Balancing Coaching with Multiple Roles

Byrd is a licensed clinician who, when we spoke, had recently become a certified coach. She told me she had decided to expand her career into coaching because it allowed her to have more open, egalitarian interactions with clients, which she has been discouraged from developing in her clinical work. She refers to one case in particular to highlight this point:

> BYRD: I have a client, somebody who I'm working with, is...as a clinician, that I just...I have ethical, professional difficulty with that at times. And I REALLY believe...in a less restrictive...possibilities for my work with people. Now that...so that's the reason. And, I....just want to say I "get" the significance having worked with the people that I've worked with, in NOT disclosing my work with them, with people. (ME: Right.) So, I have no problems having these dual roles, that my work as a clinician is completely bound by the laws and ethics of that field. But I also, for me, wanted to be able to open my range of work up, differently. So they're not by any means...you know, when I'm in one hat, when I'm in one role, those are the confines or opportunities.

> ME: Right, right. That's interesting, I don't think anybody has talked about the therapy model being, you know, so...like such a template or so...you know: "You have to meet x number of times for it to be effective." You know?

> BYRD: Once a week is the standard.

> ME: Right. Without it even, you know, without even taking into account the client's needs? Or comfort level...?

> BYRD: ...or the client's needs, the client's income, the client's insurance, the topic of the material, how their support system is helping them, how they are managing the...material that they're working on. There are so many elements, yeah.

In the course of talking about the "laws and ethics" to which she is "bound" and claims she fully accepts in her role as a clinician, Byrd revealed that these standards and rules have been established not necessarily with the client's (best) interests or even needs in mind. So apart from the ability to interact with her clients on a more comfortable, human level through coaching, Byrd also has more independence and autonomy to determine the best coaching program based on the client's individual needs. Or, perhaps more accurately, each client is free to work together with Byrd to establish the terms of a customized coaching program. She goes on to say:

> BYRD: I'm a licensed clinician and I've been the clinical director of some medium to large size outfits with, you know 120 staff and...volunteers, and working with violent crimes. And, at a certain point I wanted to take my own advice to other people which was to have less violence in my life. And, so...the direction of opening up my work towards a variety of other things included what I could do through coaching...and I don't always want to be working as a clinician. I want to just be working with people without this issue of diagnosis, and the boundaries of clinical practice. And what I mean by that is I want to be able to work with people who are in a variety of locations to me. And whereas in clinical practice, if I see somebody walking on the street, I'm not even supposed to say hello to them. (ME: Right, right.) They're supposed to initiate the hello to me. And conceptually...I have problems with that.

To Byrd, not being permitted to acknowledge a therapy patient on the street or in public (unless they do so first) means, in essence, that she is not allowed to recognize their humanity, to see them as a fellow person. Instead, the clinical approach dictates she must approach them merely as a clinical object, which did not sit well with Byrd. She was therefore happy to learn the coaching ethos allowed her the ideological space to treat her clients in the manner she really wanted—as complicated, emotional beings, and undeniably human.

Byrd has crafted a narrative which reconciles what she views as the shortcomings of therapy (i.e. the overly formal and rigid interaction with patients) with her desire to work with people in a more supportive, friendly, and evenly balanced relationship. Put differently, she discursively positions her decision to become a coach as the solution to this professional

dilemma. At the same time, however, she hints that some issues have not been completely resolved. For instance, she admits: "I have ethical, professional difficulty with that at times," referring to the impersonal treatment of her therapy patients, but then moments later states: "I have no problems having these dual roles," as a coach and a therapist. In both excerpts, she uses the present tense, implying these issues are ongoing. Since Byrd asserts the treatment of people is a fundamental concern to her and a key reason for going into coaching, it seems odd (to me, at least) that she would be quite willing and content to shift back and forth between these two starkly different types of client relationships.

These somewhat contradictory statements are evidence of incongruity between Byrd's two intentions: first, to make a strong case for the lure of the coaching profession (after all, this was the proposed topic of our interview); and second, to project herself as a legitimate professional, performing important and valuable work—including that which she carries out as a therapist. As argued in an earlier section, by framing coaching as a "better" alternative to therapy (here, with regard to client relations), it portrays those who still practice as therapists— such as Byrd—in a less-than-desirable way. Thus, she makes claims which ostensibly contradict earlier ones, in order to sustain a positive professional identity.

While Byrd did not make any such admission, I can only speculate the difficulty that might be experienced when one must switch "hats," especially between two roles having such disparate views of the client. Had I asked directly about this process, Byrd may have been reluctant to express any negativity, since this could be interpreted as an inability to deal with the stresses of juggling multiple work obligations. Thus, the need to be malleable, as one frequently changes between roles, can be a source of great unease. To enact each role properly, there are distinct rules, norms, and rituals that must be remembered and adhered to. And, as other scholars

have argued, as feelings of anxiety increase, one is more likely to channel this nervous energy into identity working, in an attempt to offset any (self-) doubts of an articulate sense of self (Collinson, 2003; Knights & Willmott, 1989).

As a final point, Byrd is also careful to depict the dual roles of coach and therapist as *her choice*, and therefore acknowledges she must deal with the challenges that come along with wearing so many hats. Like other informants, she deploys a popular public narrative by voicing the "new careers" perspective. That is: self-employed professionals should ideally possess a variety of skills and qualifications, in order to offer a wide portfolio of services, thus securing more opportunities for work. Consequently, Byrd is constructing an identity as a conscientious self-employed professional; one who is taking all the right actions and doing everything necessary to be successful.

4. <u>The Coaching Profession's Struggle for Legitimacy</u>

a) *Titles & Labels: A Coach by Any Other Name?*

The various titles that coaches use to introduce or present themselves to others—particularly potential clients, other professionals, and/or prospective referral sources—are important for distinguishing themselves from other types of professionals, as well as for signaling their membership within a specific professional community. In this sense, it can be considered "overt" identity working, because the individual coaches are making conscious choices about how to present themselves to others. While titles or labels are one-dimensional elements and alone do not seem to capture identity as an active, lived experience, they can offer insight into identity working by probing the deeper issues regarding where such labels came from, who is using them, as well as how, when, where, and in what context. Thus, as a linguistic device, labels may be a significant window into the process of identity working, and the active

construction and protection of professional boundaries.   To further support this claim, even as I write my data analysis, I feel obligated to introduce every informant's comments with some indication of their title (i.e. career coach, business coach, etc.), thereby reinforcing the key role of labels in the process of identity creation and recognition.

Depending on the precise wording used, a researcher may elicit very different responses to what might seemingly be the same question. For instance, I would usually ask my informants near the start of the interview: "How long have you been coaching?" and then some time later ask: "What do you call yourself?" For many, use of the title "coach" has been a relatively recent adoption compared with the length of time they have actually been performing coaching activities. In some cases, informants self-identified as doing coaching work, but did not call themselves such. Again, taken alone, labels may be flat, static descriptors unable to get across the active process of "doing identity." But they are enlightening when regarded as social markers, hinting at changes in how people are thinking about who they are, and altering daily practices to reflect this.

For example, career coach Jeff told me that he started coaching in 1997, which was "more in the role of an internal mentor/coach" within the consulting company he was working for at the time. Our conversation continued as follows:

ME: And so how...so is that when you started calling yourself a coach?

JEFF: No, not really. So in terms of full time coaching, where I hung out my shingle, that was in 2003, so it's been six years. In that period from 1997 to 2003 I was alternately working as a management consultant and doing coaching and mentoring. So in terms of calling myself a coach, that started in 2003 when I put a website out and began with my career coaching company.

ME: Ok. Before that time, before 2003 would you refer to yourself as a coach?

JEFF: No, as a consultant. Then, if I needed a one word label for myself, it was 'Organizational Consultant'. That's more than one word *(we laugh)* but close to it.

Another case in point can be appreciated in career coach Abigail's story. She discussed her experiences with coaching, long before knowing conceptually what it was, or that the kind of work she was doing even had a special name:

ABIGAIL: Well, I've been coaching for about 25 years, more or less. Yeah.

ME: Ok, and have you always referred to yourself as a coach?

ABIGAIL: Well, when I was at [Name of Former Organizational Employer], I thought of myself more as a career counselor. I was also the communications director for the office, and I spearheaded the marketing efforts of the office. And I've done a lot of event planning. So it wasn't just that, although I had a full schedule and so...toward the end, I realized that I was a coach, and I started doing some trainings in coaching. I already had a Master's.

ME: Right, right. And so, when you set up your own kind of side thing, in '02, '03? '03, '04?

ABIGAIL: Umm...I didn't...yeah. I'm trying to think, it was about two years before I left, so '03. Yeah.

ME: So, then were you...were you calling yourself a coach? (ABIGAIL: Oh yeah.) Ok.

ABIGAIL: Yeah, I definitely was. And actually it was very interesting because I started to be interesting in coaching way before that, years before that, and I thought: "That's what I'm going to do, when I leave this job." Cuz after 20 years, that's a long time. (ME: Right.) And my colleagues had stayed there all that time too. I had a wonderful, visionary director, who was just wonderful. And every so often she would take trainings and something, and then she would share it with us. We would do an in-house training. (ME: Right.) And so she's the one who had us, gave each of us a book on executive coaching. And the career counselors—the directors we were called, the assistant and associate directors—we all met several times, and discussed the book, and talked about coaching and what it is and what it is isn't. And this was all executive coaching…

ME: Right. And when was this about?

ABIGAIL: This was probably in the early part of this century. Ok, I can't tell you the year, because I don't remember.

ME: No, that's no problem. It's just trying to get a sense of like, a timeline.

ABIGAIL: And, the epiphany for most of us was that's what we're doing.

ME: You recognized in the literature "this is what I'm doing already," right.

ABIGAIL: Yes, and in the discussions. There were some changes, some shifts that were different. And we were always making the distinction that career counseling isn't therapy, and coaching isn't therapy. So we were trying to figure out what the parameters were, what the boundaries were.

The above account demonstrates that sometimes the title or term follows the activity—Abigail and her colleagues had been doing coaching for many years before they had a precise label for it. In fact, they could be referred to as "professional pioneers" since, by struggling to articulate a working definition for coaching and to sketch out its functional boundaries, they were performing some crucial groundwork for the profession long before the formal coaching community, including governing bodies such as the ICF or IAC, were even established.

It is interesting to note, as well, that I during our conversation, I was quite fixated on asking Abigail to name dates for key events in an effort to establish an accurate timeline for the adoption (by Abigail in particular, and the professional community in general) of the label "coach." In reality, however, few people actually think of these modifications to their speech in such terms. Reflecting on this incident now, I was nudging Abigail to give dates to each period of her life, when this was clearly not a natural way for her to think about these experiences. What can be taken away from this conversation is that the doing of identity work is subtle and often imperceptible—and the decisions to change the ways one thinks about, talks about, and presents oneself to the world can be imprecise, gradual, even unconscious.

For some informants, there is a struggle to hit upon the right titles to describe what it is they are doing or the services they have to offer. Unlike organizational employment, where titles, roles, and job descriptions are usually determined for the worker by the Human Resources officer or department, a self-employed person is free to choose—or, as the case may be, create—their own. And nowadays, we are no longer restricted to just one title to express the work that

we do. With this in mind, Rosalyn spoke to me about her difficulty trying to pinpoint the

appellation that best conveys the unique approach to job search and career development she

markets to her clients:

> ME: Umm...so, ok, let me ask. Do you call yourself...what title do you use to refer to the work that you do?
>
> ROSALYN: A creative career consultant.
>
> ME: Ok. Do you say coach, or...do you use consultant...?
>
> ROSALYN: I don't say coach because I don't have like a coaching certificate, and I don't want people to get confused. And so far, nobody has questioned it at all. I guess it's just my own...for my own reason I just feel better not calling myself a coach, because I haven't gone to Coach U or anything like that. But it is coaching, just...
>
> ME: Right, right. The activity is coaching, but what you call yourself is...
>
> ROSALYN: Uh humm.
>
> ME: Yeah....it's funny because...I was speaking to someone who said like 10 years ago, he'd call himself a consultant, but now he calls himself a coach…But I was just wondering, 'cuz a lot of people call themselves different things, or they have a different title which try and...you know, encompass what they're doing.
>
> ROSALYN: I've had a hard time with that actually, really trying to come up with the right title that brands me right, cuz what I really do is help people really think differently about their job search, not just as send a resume, wait for the phone to ring, but really create a brand for yourself. So I thought about having my title be like 'Personal Branding Specialist' or something. But that doesn't really lend itself to the career angle, that could be so many things. So I wanted to people to understand right away that I'm talking about like the job searching part. So...I'm still kind of working on it but it is so important because right away it like... triggers something...

I consider it quite ironic Rosalyn describes her work as helping clients "create a brand"

for themselves, but admits she herself is struggling "to come up with the right title that brands

me right." Understandably, there is even more pressure for her to pinpoint the proper label, since

Rosalyn wishes to embody and thus market the successful career image, which her clients are

seeking assistance to develop for themselves.

As our conversation went on, I wanted to let Rosalyn know that she was not alone in this challenge and, in fact, I had heard similar comments from other members of the coaching alliance. I shared with her one of these stories:

> ME: It kind of boxes you—or not, but it labels you and it....people have expectations, I guess. That was another thing...when I was talking to one of the coaches and he said he was having a real problem trying to pin down what it is and narrow down what it is that would describe him in a like, you know, a "bite-size" bit. Or even a title—not just like a tag line, but like, you know, and he said he was...he struggled with it, because he does a lot, and...but people have their own ideas of what a coach is, a consultant is, you know, a mentor, so... And my suggestion to him was: "Well, who are you trying to get to?" And try to use the language of...of the people—or the language that people are comfortable with, of who you're trying to target...or familiar with. Because if you say something that's totally wacky or out there, people might not know exactly, like...if you say "Shaman" *(Rosalyn laughs),* you know, or whatever it might be. You know: "Is he going to...cleanse me, or like, get rid of ghosts or whatever?" *(Rosalyn laughs).*

Perhaps exaggerating the point with humor, I did attempt to get across to Rosalyn the idea that language is meaningful. And for the male coach I spoke about, using a title like "Shaman" would most likely divide his audience between those who know what he is talking about, and those who do not. He also runs the risk of excluding people who have their own understanding of what a "Shaman" is, and may not be open to having it redefined for them in this particular way.

b)   *Training, Qualifications, & Credentials*

In the most basic terms, a profession is associated with a specialized body of knowledge and/or set of skills, and possessing these is what distinguishes a professional from a non-professional. Training, education, ethical standards, and accreditation are some of the domains that can be controlled and regulated by professional governing bodies and organizations, and are consequently means for identity regulation and control. As well, credentials are considered a marker of legitimacy and may be used by potential clients as a "shortcut" in the process of selecting a qualified professional to provide a needed service. The local coaching alliance of

which I became a member, however, did not place any certification requirements or restrictions for joining. Accordingly, some members had all kinds of coaching qualifications, while others had no formal training, but self-identified as coaches and/or as engaging in coaching work. And because the alliance was my main source for research participants, I had the chance to interview a broad range of certified and non-certified individuals.

For such a new and emerging profession, coaching enjoys a plethora of training schools and programs; there are currently dozens available, some ICF-endorsed, others not. It is little wonder, then, that researching the different training programs, and their respective benefits and drawbacks, can be quite a daunting task. As a result, enrollment decisions are frequently based on word of mouth from trusted others.

Despite the proliferation of training options, there were mixed opinions regarding the necessity and value of certification for coaches. Starting with more thoughts from Liz, below are a few comments that I heard from different informants:

> LIZ: I think that there's certain commonalities [between certification programs]. (ME: Ok.) The school has to be recognized by the International Coach Federation, and then you have to take a test I believe, afterwards. And you pay a lot of money, and you get a certification. (ME: Right, right.) So, I think that there are people who are certified and they grow from it and they're very, very good coaches. I think that like who you said, who are NOT certified, but who are also very good coaches. (ME: Right.) Because I think coaching is a combination of counseling, education, and—well it's a style of counseling—and education, that many people have already been doing under other hats (ME: Yes! Right.) Under other umbrellas. So, it's only part of what I do with people, it's...not the main thing that I do.
>
> ME: Right. And, and has it been an issue with anyone who's sought your services?
>
> LIZ: Never. It's never been an issue. Most people don't even know what coaching is. They call me a career counselor. (ME: Right, right.) They don't even know what it is. It's...it's quite elite at this point, you know? And I...I think that what coach—the heart of coaching's something that I really feel very good about. You know, helping to empower people, helping them to get unstuck. Helping them to develop their potential in a respectful way. That's all...those are all wonderful things. And I don't think the title "coach" owns that process. And so...I, I'm not too swayed by it one way or the other.

(ME: Right.) If someone wants to know if I do career coaching, I'll say: "Uh huh, I do!" Because I do. But if they want to know if I'm a career counselor, I'll say: "Yes, I am." (ME: Right, right.) And if they also just want to say, "Can you want to help me figure out how to get a job?" I'll say: "Yeah." *(we laugh)*

Because Liz works with mostly individuals on career issues, she noted a general lack of awareness about coaching, and hence, little concern about seeing her credentials. They simply wanted to know if she would be able to help them find desired employment, and thus evidence— such as testimonials from clients who have secured work or past employment in an HRM capacity—would be much more persuasive than a certificate from a coaching training program. In this sense, credentials may carry less weight than other forms of legitimacy in an emerging profession, like coaching.

Speaking instead from the perspective of a student of coaching training, Abigail discussed the ever-changing requirements for certification, and how she eventually decided to abandon her program:

ABIGAIL: So, at the second live event, I enrolled in the school...the coaching...the SOC, School of Coaching, it was a graduate program through Coachville.

ME: So you were a graduate of the program?

ABIGAIL: I never finished it. They kept changing what you had to do and I took so many online...telecalls. Dozens and dozens. And every time they changed, it produced a new roll out of what you had to do. And I realized, you know what? Between that and some other things, I really was getting disenchanted with Coachville. I still suggest people go on, because there's some good stuff in there, but I then joined IAC, International Association of Coaches or Coaching. (ME: Ok.) And I'm very slowly heading for certification, I'm not sure I need it, but I'm doing that. (ME: Right, right.) So...

ME: And that was in, you joined that in...?

ABIGAIL: I joined that in...maybe 2002, 2003 I think. (ME: Ok.) And...but I've been coaching ever since. I have a Master's in Human Services Counselling and Administration, which is basically Management. And for years I had an LCSW, and eventually I dropped that because I didn't really need it when I was at [Name of Former Employer], because we didn't go for licensing there. (ME: Right.) So what happened, so

I dropped the LCSW, but I have all this experience. (ME: Yes.) Plus 15 years in human services, and...

ME: And, actually...have you found that being certified is an issue or not?

ABIGAIL: I think it is an issue in terms of certain opportunities that come up where people want certified coaches. And it looks good on your website or your business card. (ME: Right, right.) So I probably will go—I am studying for IAC certification, but I have to have...I have to make two 30-minute tapes. (ME: Oh!) And that's been very daunting for me…Yeah, and taking all those classes. (ME: Right, right.) I always found a pearl, a nugget of new information. But a lot of it, I already knew and I was contributing to the classes. (ME: Right.) Which is fine with me, but...

Abigail does recognize the benefits of obtaining a coaching qualification in terms of possible work opportunities and enhanced legitimacy when marketing one's services (and this point is apparent when she mentions her other non-coaching qualifications in our conversation—a habit in which many of my informants engaged). However, she began to question her reason for pursuing accreditation, especially when she already knew much of the material covered and was, in fact, able to contribute greatly to the discussions. This, coupled with the fact that ever-changing program requirements were depleting more of her time, money, and energy which she would have much rather spent on actual coaching work with clients, finally drove Abigail to withdraw from coaching school.

It is not surprising that Abigail was growing "disenchanted" with her coaching program, but this example does not apply to all professions. Abigail's experience seems symptomatic of a nascent profession, which is still trying to find its feet with regard to qualifications, accreditation, and the like. I believe Abigail's story speaks more to the coaching industry's struggles to professionalize than it does her commitment to—or ability to successfully—becoming qualified. Further, with the recent explosion of coaching training programs and erratic course content and program criteria, one is left to wonder if those behind the certification process are more concerned with *impression management*—that is, creating the appearance of coaching as a

legitimate profession—than with the actual preparation of trainees to carry out high quality coaching work.

c) *Identity Working through Challenges*

i. The Precariousness of Coaching

Even though the coaches may be equipped with ample knowledge about what constitutes professional behavior within their community, and how it can be distinguished other fields, this only accounts for part of the equation. Talking about the expectations of and relationship with the client is fine when you are well-educated and trained in coaching doctrine, as my informants are. But what happens when the prospective clients, who represent one half of the coaching interaction, are not familiar with this emerging profession and its particular beliefs, norms, and practices? These exact issues surfaced in my conversation with Sascha who, at the time of our interview, was still new to the coaching world, having only recently transitioned from therapy to become certified as a life and career coach:

> ME: So...so it's been a shift for you to maybe take on this...this different role, as a coach. When you see clients, or when potential clients approach you, do they understand what coaching is? Do they think it's a form of therapy where you're going to tell them what to do? Or, you know...do people understand what their role is as a client...

> SASCHA: No! For the most part...*(we laugh)*

> ME: Ok! Do you want to speak about that a little bit? (SASCHA: Sure!) ...because I know that, you know...because coaching is new, and you've had to make an adjustment, and you're very well informed about what coaching is, I'm just wondering how potential clients, you know, do they know about it? Do they know what purpose it serves? Do they know what their role is in the relationship?

> SASCHA: That's a good question. And I'm still learning, I mean I'm still a new coach, so...there's so much more learning to do out there. So this is just where I am now. I found--especially, you had a good point about saying that career coaching is something that people can kind of wrap their heads around a little...easier. Life coaching--and probably because the field is not regulated, and it is new, and that there ARE so many different kinds of life coaches, and so many different kinds of approaches, and

especially...And especially having a background as a therapist, it certainly can be confusing. And some therapists also do coaching, so it's... *(laughs)* It gets confusing. So, it has been a challenge to define myself and...and even to people...yeah, like...well, some people do think it's kind of the same thing but I'm just more of like the...I'm just more going to get you, you know...get you in gear! Or kick your butt a little more as a coach, as opposed to a therapist. So, I think most effective thing that I've found is kind of giving people an example of what coaching might be. Or ask them a question: "Well, what are you looking for?" Instead of trying to explain coaching. (ME: Right, right.) So I give them a sense of just what I would ask or who I am, rather than explain away what coaching is.

Rather than try to explain what coaching is and how it works with words, as many coaches attempt to do, Sascha chooses to focus on the potential client, what they want or need, and then try to address those needs through demonstration. This is an interesting strategy, as it is less about telling, and more about showing. Sascha is indeed still "educating the client" about coaching, but it is by employing her coaching skills and relating them directly to issues about which the person is concerned, not just talking hypothetically about what coaching can achieve. Consider the same situation in a different context: if a person is in legal trouble and decides to speak to a lawyer, they will want to know how the lawyer can help them with their specific problem—not necessarily the ins and outs of the legal system.

Sascha admits that trying to decipher between the nuances of coaching and therapy "certainly can be confusing" for the client. Since the coach is the "face" of the profession and has direct, personal contact with potential clients (and general public), the burden falls on them to provide clarity for such issues. Constantly fielding questions about what a coach does as compared to a therapist can be taxing on the individual, but deemed a necessary chore in order to acquire new business. Whether these queries are interpreted as a positive opportunity to explain what one does, or as an affront to one's sense of self, they call for identity working efforts which would not be expected from those working in more established professions.

In a similar vein, while labels and titles can provide common terminology to denote the work that one performs, when used inconsistently, it has the potential to create more confusion than clarity. This is especially true in an emerging field, where a single, universal definition of "coaching" has not been set or accepted. To illustrate this issue, I share thoughts from health and wellness coach Loretta, regarding her decision to leave nursing to follow a different professional path. While doing research for her career change, she encountered much ambiguity and confusion over titles and roles:

> LORETTA: So from there, I started doing research, and I got on the internet—I think this was right around 2000 when I started looking...looking at health coaches. And, and it was everywhere, you know. Everywhere that—it popped up. But what I was really confused about was that there was no consistency. (ME: Right, right.) There was no consistency about who was a health coach—I had been a case manager for an HMO, and case managers were calling themselves ...they were now starting to take up the term "health coach" instead of "case manager." (ME: Right! Because...it was...) But the function—yeah, it was just a reframing of you know what...

> ME: Right, a more friendly term, or something? Right, ok.

> LORETTA: Yeah, I think so. It was more of a buzzword that they were using. And...and then there were people that were doing disease management that now became health coaches. And so it was just this big you know, convoluted kind of mixed-up mess. I couldn't find any...I couldn't find anybody that was...any kind of standards, you know, for it. And I couldn't find any kind of like format for accreditation, for validity. And so, that took me back to...you know, I sort of went back a little bit and started looking at life coaching. (ME: Right, right.) And I don't even know how that came out, I can't remember that exactly. But I started looking at life coaching, and then I realized there were standards for life coaching. There were standards, there was the International Coaching Federation. There was this framework, and so I thought: "Well, why don't I explore doing life coaching, then I can bring the health and wellness piece into that, you know. (ME: Right, right.) And so the next step was to actually start looking at schools that were ICF certified, which I researched—and at the time I think there were—in this country, I think there were about seven. Seven programs that were ICF certified.

Loretta's story is a departure from other informants' narratives, which portray the entry into coaching as more straightforward. Here, Loretta confesses that even when researching the potential programs, she found the information available was a "convoluted kind of mixed-up

mess." This unevenness does not bode well for the profession, since some areas (i.e. life coaching) are more clear cut, while others are ill-defined (i.e. health coaching). As a result, Loretta chose to become trained and certified in life coaching, and then adapt this foundation to accommodate her specialized knowledge in health and wellness. However, she feels the need to justify and explain this route, since it is less conventional than the one most coaches take. From our talk, I sensed because of the confusion she experienced early on, Loretta was left with lingering ambiguity regarding her professional identity, and thus needed to put extra work into creating an element of logic into her career path. In other words, the heighted uncertainty about the legitimacy of her professional choices spurred Loretta to actively engage in identity working, to compensate for these traces of doubt.

Building on this premise, career coach Liz is all too cognizant of the fleeting fashion of titles, and the inherent risk of being nothing more than empty signifiers. She was candid with her views about the "misuse" of labels:

> LIZ: There's a lot of terminology that flies around that's in vogue and I don't take it too seriously. (ME: Right.) Because years ago I was a year career counselor and a trainer, now I'm a facilitator and a coach. (ME: Right, right.) You know, and I've been doing the same thing all this time.
>
> ME: Well, exactly! I mean, the terminology has changed, but maybe what you're doing hasn't really, you know? And, and that's one of the reasons why I ask people about, you know, when did you call yourself a coach, because I'm finding that it is a fairly new term, you know, or area that has a name, even though it's a group of...things, for lack of a better word, a group of functions that one performs, but it's under this umbrella term. Yeah.
>
> LIZ: Yeah, I think so. Actually, I think that there are people who misuse the terms. (ME: Really? Yeah.) Yeah, I think there are people...well maybe I shouldn't say "misuse" the terms. I think there are people who train [others] and that's all they actually do, and there's no coaching and no facilitation that goes on, and I don't think it's terribly effective. I think there's also people who call themselves counselors, and what they basically do is give advice, and I believe there are people who call themselves coaches who do the same thing. (ME: Right.) I think that...the core elements of coaching are pretty basic and they've been around for a very, very long time. And it has to do with knowing how to listen to people, knowing how to ask the right questions in the right way,

knowing how to give feedback, and of course knowing how to...create a situation where the person feels empowered and their potential starts to come out because of that whole process. And I think whether you call yourself a counselor, a therapist, a trainer, or a facilitator, or a coach, that's a process that enters into any type of situation where you're trying to help people move on to a higher step.

Liz introduces another possible source of confusion with which the coaches must contend: the legitimate use of terminology within the profession. However, this issue goes beyond merely labels and titles to touch upon a more significant problem: the fact that practically anyone can join the coaching profession because of its virtually non-existent barriers to entry. Again, we confront issues of legitimacy, and how this impacts the coaches' identity working demands.

ii.   The Coaching Bandwagon: "Buyer Beware!"

Another challenge to legitimacy, and therefore one's professional identity, is the risk of imposters operating under the guise of coaching. Unfortunately, not all recognized the various coaching certification programs or qualifications as a source of protection from this threat. In fact, some informants were more dissenting in their views of coaching credentials than others. Take, for example, career coach Liz, who had a few choice words with regard to the issue of certification:

> LIZ: I think the one thing I'd want to share is that I would strongly suggest: "Buyer Beware!" (ME: Oh, ok!) I think that—and I'm not trying to be negative here, but I have to honestly say that because it's a relatively new concept, there are many people jumping on the bandwagon, whether they're certified or not. And certification doesn't always mean somebody's a good coach.
>
> ME: Mm hmm. Right. I've, I've been interviewing people that...are both. And...you know, it's...those that aren't certified, they said that it hasn't really been an issue for them. You know, it's more about building trust or the relationship with the person that they're with, but...yeah.
>
> LIZ: Yeah. So I'd say to...to beware. And, to interview the person before you hire them. (ME: Right.) You know, that's why I offer a free session. I think that it's appropriate for both parties to decide if it's going to work. So I think that that would be a good part of

it...because there are a lot of people out there who call themselves coaches. Just like there have been people over the years, and still are, who call themselves counselors. (ME: Right, right.)

Liz makes a compelling declaration: certification does not necessitate one is a "good"

coach, just as other informants argued the converse: not having formal coaching training does

not mean one is an unskilled or incompetent coach. I do think it's curious she prefaces her

comments with "I'm not trying to be negative here"; clearly, the prevailing norm within the

coaching community—and my observations attest to this—is to err on the side of positivity. And

judging from the absence of pessimistic or even less-affirmative remarks in my data, this conduct

carried over into the interview setting.

Earlier in our conversation, I had asked Liz to describe her approach to coaching. Other

interviewees interpreted this question as a means of showing how they set themselves apart from

the masses, from the textbook definition of "coach" to make it their own. Upon reviewing the

transcripts, I noticed Liz had again touched upon the "fashion" of coaching, weaving this thread

into how she thought of herself as a coach:

> ME: Ok! *(we laugh)* And what would you say distinguishes you from other coaches? Someone else might describe themselves the same way, but what do you think is different about what you offer?
>
> LIZ: I think there's a couple of things. One is that...coaching is very fashionable right now. (ME: Right, mm hmm.) And I'm really not interested in the fashion. It's pretty down-to-earth practice and by that I mean, I'd say that I'm pretty authentic and real with people. And I think that distinguishes—I hate to say any—I'm not talking about any particular colleagues that I have, but I think the fact that it is very real and I'm basing it on 30 years of working with people and their potential is I don't—I'm not trying to make a big amount of money from people. I'm not trying to...sell them something. I just want to help them move to the next step as expertly as I can. I don't know if that distinguishes me from people, but I think I'm pretty warm and grounded and this is not...a fashion stop of the newest techniques that you can buy online from [name of coaching school]. There's no gimmicks here. I don't do any gimmicks. It's the real thing, you know. (ME: It's...yeah...) I guess that's how I'd say I'm different. I think there's a lot gimmicks out there. I have a lot of experience and I'm very down to earth, and I'm seriously interested in...in having it be a warm and respectful relationship that helps people move forward,

and I'm basing it on experience, and that type of thing. I don't know if that's the right answer!

ME: Yeah! No, that's...it's YOUR answer, it's the right answer. Of course!

In contrast to my earlier discussions, Liz's intent here is less about distinguishing herself from other professionals in different fields (ex. therapy, consulting, etc.), and more to set herself apart from direct peers—that is, other coaches practicing *within* the professional community. At one level, coaches craft their philosophy to highlight what makes them unique, and then market this framework towards prospective clients with whom there might be a "good fit." At another level, Liz is referring to a serious issue rampant within the coaching industry. In plain terms, it is the problem of imposters who, she insinuated, were "…trying to make a big amount of money from people…trying to...sell them something." With negative undertones circulating among the public, it seems pseudo-coaches are already wreaking havoc on the professional image of self-proclaimed "genuine" coaches, such as Liz, and the valuable work they perform. In terms of identity working, this means extra labor is required to dispel these damaging stereotypes and to rebuild the profession's reputation as one that is valid, caring, and trustworthy.

I focus a great deal on Liz in this discussion since she was one of the only informants to raise the issue during our conversations. Indeed, she is cautious to speak in general terms, quick to explain her opinion is not a reflection of a particular colleague or member of the coaching alliance. Rather, she is expressing a what she observes as a widespread trend within the coaching industry, but one that affects her and her coaching practice on a personal level, nonetheless.

But even though Liz was the most outspoken about these concerns, she is clearly not the only one who holds them. Consider this: in 2012, the ICF (2012a) released its Global Coaching

Study with findings from more than 12,000 participants representing 117 countries. According to the Executive Summary, under the category "Key issues facing the industry—Future trends," a staggering 43% of all respondents identified "untrained individuals who call themselves coaches" as the "biggest obstacle for coaching over the next 12 months" (2012b: 13). Apparently, a significant portion of coaches *do* feel the same way as Liz, but there was an obvious reluctance to express such trepidation during interviews. I interpret this as most likely due to the "social desirability" effect—that is, my informants' aspiration to portray the coaching profession in a favorable way. However, I also believe they did so not just from a sense of professional obligation to make the coaching community look good, but also, from a position of self-interest, to craft their own identities as proficient, credible, and authentic, having chosen this career. Hence, to even mention the problem of illegitimate activity—i.e. opportunists and charlatans, eager to "jump on the bandwagon" just to make a quick buck—might tarnish the image of the coaching community as a whole.

5. Coaching & the Issue of Expertise

In contrast to its frequent referent, therapy, the coaching profession has a distinctive stance on the issue of expertise. The widespread coaching rhetoric is a rejection of the expert role; rather, there is the recognition that "the client is the expert." While in my interviews and other conversations, therapy was recurrently talked about as coaching's most closely related occupation and the main supply for new entrants to its profession (at least for the non-business coaching niches), but it is by no means the only vocational conduit. For instance, Hope left academia to work as a coach on diversity and inclusion issues. When we spoke, she revealed to me the differences in expectations between these two professional roles. Sensitive to the fact I

am a graduate student and thus an "insider" of the academic profession, she was candid with her

views, particularly with regard to the topics of "knowledge" and "knowing":

> HOPE: And there's also...what I learned as an academic was always to share your knowledge, you know. Talk about your knowledge, make it clear how much you know. That doesn't work in this space, because...you know, you don't need to get into what you know. You need to hear what they're talking about. So I've had to spend a lot of time to really be intentional about not going to MY default, in how I was trained as an academic, in sharing that knowledge in that way. And that's the speaking TO people, instead of speaking WITH them.
>
> ME: Right, right. Or speaking AT them. Right.
>
> HOPE: YES! Definitely. And, and people don't want to hear about theories. (ME: Right.) You know? And so, I just, and I've...and I've seen that in other coaches, where they talk about theories. And I'm just like, you know: "I get that you know it, wonderful. But what does that mean, you know, for me then?"

At first, Hope found the coaching world's rejection of the "expert" role quite a departure

from her indoctrination and work as a scholar. With time, she was able to adjust her "default"

position from being the knower of theories and ideas, to a listener to her clients' innate wisdom,

but recognizes that other coaches still like to "talk theory."

Similarly, Loretta came to coaching by way of a different route—via nursing. She had

identified the kind of role that she wanted to play in her work, but had found there were limits to

what she could do within the medical field. She explains:

> LORETTA: Well, my training is as a nurse. I have my Master's degree in nursing. (ME: Ok.) … And it was just, I think it—my interest was that it was just really confusing and I wanted to be sort of like a guide, to help guide people to actually be able to listen and hear their own body and be able to make choices that were congruent with who they were as a person. (ME: Right, right.) So, health advocacy—so then I started to do a little bit of research about health advocacy. And I realized that just the term 'advocacy' really meant stepping in place of some--you know, helping someone--in other words, you would be making the, you would be more making the decision....
>
> ME: Speaking on behalf of? Right...
>
> LORETTA: ...on behalf of people, and I didn't want to do that. I wanted people to have their own voice. So that's when my sister mentioned health coaching.

Like Hope's experience in academia, Loretta was able to find escape from the role expectations of her former career as nurse and health advocate to become a holistic health and wellness coach, which was more closely aligned with the kind of function she wanted to perform in her work and for her clients. And like an "academic," a "health advocate" assumes more of an expert standpoint, speaking on behalf of the client with regard to health issues and decisions. Thus, for Loretta, it was a process of searching and trying out a few different avenues before she was able to find the role she had envisioned.

These anecdotes, from both Hope and Loretta, depict positive transitions to a career in coaching, each arguing it was a better personal fit. The informants have managed to craft their *ontological* or personal identity narrative in such a way that the choice to become a coach was logical, smart, and timely. As well, Hope and Loretta both cited the rejection of the "expert role" as an inducement for the switch to coaching. Each woman wanted to break away from that authoritative position within her respective profession (i.e. academia or nursing), and coaching was the means to do so. Other informants have also mentioned discomfort with "being the expert" and welcomed more egalitarian client relationships.

a) *Identity Working through Contradictions*

i. A Professional without Expertise?

Despite its appeal to some individuals as an alternative to the medical model of therapy, the coaching profession's strategy to distance itself from expertise presents its own predicament with regard to its professional status. I observed that the coaches themselves were starting to feel the repercussions of taking this position. The quandary is this: if a coach does not claim to be an expert in *some* arena, can they claim to be a *true* professional? When I attended the intensive

coaching workshop, I received a training workbook. Among the first few pages was the

following description of a coach:

> Coaching is a collaborative effort that is solely based on what the clients [sic] wants and thinks he/she would like to do. Unlike a best friend, coaches are objective and nonjudgmental.
> ~ Coaching Workshop Materials, February 2011

Accepting this as a common definition of coaching, is it adequate that in order to be a

legitimate coach, one is "objective and nonjudgmental," or must one *also* possess particular

skills and/or a specialized body of knowledge to be considered a *professional* (and thus

legitimate) coach? In other words, this particular *public narrative* endorsed by the coaching

community would seem to be at odds with the *public narrative* (i.e. common understanding) of

professionalism. Given this contradiction, how can coaches claim to be professionals, when they

do not meet one of its basic criteria?

 This matter came up in several conversations; Sascha addressed the persistent rejection

of the expert role, reconciling it in this way:

> Well, when I refer to expertise, I mean that the client is the expert of their own life. As a coach, I have expertise in the *process*, the coaching process.

A frequent argument in the coaching discourse which goes hand-in-hand with reversing

the expert role is: "the client has all the answers; the coach is there to help the person uncover

them". Of course, this line of reasoning may be more suitable for certain coaching domains—for

instance, career or life, where the coach relies on the client to share important details about their

personal situation. But what happens when a client is seeking very specialized information or

guidance for questions pertaining to business, marketing, or health matters, to name a few? In

other words, cases where the client does *not* have the necessary knowledge for or solutions to

their current predicament?

So how does this relate to identity? Rejecting the expert role was a strategy elected by the professional community, and designed to distinguish coaching from therapy or even consulting, thereby appealing to individuals who were seeking a less-directive relationship which values the experience, views, and wisdom of both parties—but especially of the client. However, by employing this tactic, coaches may become more vulnerable to challenges from the general public, including prospective clients, with regard to qualifications and hence professionalism. And when more effort must be expended to convince others of one's worthiness as a coaching service provider, this can indeed raise insecurities deep within the individual, creating a vicious cycle of doubt—identity working—doubt, and so on.

There does appear to be growing awareness within the coaching community of the "I'm-not-an-expert-yet-still-a-professional" contradiction, and perhaps a rethinking of this stance. In the course of our chat, Loretta informed me about her biweekly training conference calls, where she discusses subjects of this nature with fellow coaches. In the excerpt that follows, we had just been talking about how Loretta had managed to blend her nursing background with life coaching training to become a health and wellness coach, and the resulting "expert model dilemma" she experienced:

> LORETTA: Yeah, working with people in the health arena, rather than just having people cold...coming off the street, you know...

> ME: Right. Right, so there's established, like a basic, a base of knowledge there, yeah.

> LORETTA: And it was in, actually there were some interesting points to that, 'cuz even in working with this coach trainer that I had that was helping me just...you know, it was really interesting from a philosophical difference, because she kept always asking me: "So why would they need this information about health if your role is not to....as a true coach, you don't have the answers?" You know what I mean? And so they get into these dialogues about...you know.   So, it was always...it was, because it is...the boundaries are blurred, you know? In terms of what coaching does.

ME: Well it's funny because, you know, when...you know, if you're talking about life coaching, and...well this is what I've...I'm just repeating what I've heard so far, but if you're talking about life coaching, so there's some philosophies out there of coaching where the coach is just, you know, is kind of there with the person, but the person is the expert. Especially if you're talking about life, YOU'RE the expert of your life. (LORETTA: Right, right.) But, then there can be..knowledge, you know there—so you can have—like [name of Sales and Marketing Coach]. Did you...you went to his presentation? But his presentation on sales and marketing, so he has...he specializes in a field where he has some knowledge that the people who come to him may not. So then it's like you...you shift between that... "YOU have the answers, but I have some information!" *(laughs).*

LORETTA: Yeah, yeah it becomes the expert model of...yeah. And so we would have these dialogues that if you're using the expert model, then it's not true coaching. So it was always this kind of back-and-forth... (ME: Yeah! Tension...) you know, that we had in terms of you know, whether this was you know, truly coaching or... So, but we agreed to disagree—well, we agreed that it would be a combination of both.   That in some instances you may need to have somebody be that expert to be able to be a resource. You wouldn't be making the decisions, but you would need to have that resource. (ME: Right, right.) So it's a little bit of a difference, but anyway...

Fortunately, Loretta and her trainer were able to agree "it would be a combination of both"; that is, if the act of "true coaching" is about assisting others, sometimes the best way to do so is via subject matter expertise. Sharing knowledge and information with others is a form of helping, not necessarily making decisions for another or advising them about what to do. Talking through these ideas, they together came to the conclusion that being a coach and being an expert are therefore not mutually exclusive.

Jonah, a part-time coach who works almost entirely with lawyers (having been one himself) and a previous coach trainer, also shared some provocative insights with respect to the issue of expertise. He firmly believes that coaching is better described as an approach or a set of skills, rather than as a standalone profession. He had this to say:

JONAH: Well...what I think we're finding, and this probably doesn't answer your question, is that coaching's becoming more and more niche based. (ME: Right.) And someone calling themselves just a "life coach" is happening less and less, and being less and less successful. You know, a lawyer coach, maybe a solopreneur coach, maybe you know a couples coach, a relationship coach, an addictions coach, you know, health

coaches have clearly become its own separate you know profession, where people... So I think we're seeing that more and more, and I think that goes along with a notion that all these people who've worked as trainers, you know, in this certain amount of time, they'll all learn coaching skills if they want to be really good. (ME: Right.) And can anybody learn them? Some people, to some extent. Anybody can improve them. I could improve them, I could improve mine. And anybody can improve where they're at. I don't see it as a clear body of knowledge that can be you know you have it, you don't have it.

ME: It's like an approach or a method, a methodology.

JONAH: And it's largely...and it's largely skill-based, it's largely a matter of what you can...of what you can pull up and having the—developing the instinct to do it.

ME: Right. Yeah, that's....it's interesting. I have you know, from some of my interviews, I've heard people talk about becoming a coach, becoming a life coach, and over time having to specialize because...well first of all, in order to get clients, life coaching is this very nebulous concept that a lot of people...it's starting to—in some circles, it's starting to have a little bit of a cynical you know connotation attached to it, that it's something that's kind of new-agey, air-fairy...

To substantiate his viewpoint, Jonah told me he has witnessed a trend in the last decade, where individuals train and qualify as coaches, but then realize they must either connect their coaching skills to particular body of knowledge, or target their coaching services towards a specific population, or both. He contends that to be viable and legitimate as a professional, the term "coach" should thus be preceded or followed by a modifier, indicating the arena in which the individual does have some level of expertise (i.e. business coach, coach for lawyers, addictions coach, etc.).

6.   <u>Some Concluding Thoughts</u>

The preceding sections considered the various tools and resources offered to new coaches as part of the professional socialization process, referring to accounts from interviewees, as well as my own participant observations in "the field." Although the specifics are unique to the coaching world (i.e. philosophy, terminology, labels, etc.), the broader concerns raised (i.e. establishing professional boundaries, educating the public, struggles for legitimacy, etc.) are ones

symptomatic of a nascent profession. These issues might therefore be studied in different contexts; perhaps within budding industries or those occupations undergoing the process of professionalization, such as massage therapy, truck driving, and personal fitness training.

My goal was to demonstrate how the coaching community's major endeavors to professionalize, like staking a claim in the occupational landscape alongside therapy and consulting, have (albeit inadvertently) produced challenges, contradictions, and conflicts with respect to its members' professional identities. Such problems are exemplified by the discursive framing of coaching as somehow "superior to" competing professions, with which a number of coaches are still involved (ex. therapy), or positioning coaches as non-experts in order to distance them from the authoritative role associated with the classical medical model. These decisions made and replicated by the highest levels of the coaching industry (i.e. training schools, governing bodies, research organizations, etc.) have, in turn, created unforeseen stress, insecurity, and anxiety for its members. Individual coaches become more susceptible to self-doubt, as well as questioning and challenges from others, prompting intensive identity working to reinforce (and at times, repair) a positive and credible professional identity. Table 1 below offers a summary of these key points.

At the same time, the unspoken expectation is that individual coaches will perform crucial identity work for the profession as a whole, without recognition or compensation. Due to coaching's tenuous status as a profession, there is relatively little knowledge among the general public, and thus, efforts to educate potential clients about coaching are necessary. For many of the coaches with whom I spoke, the time and energy devoted to publicizing the profession seldom resulted in new business. At best, they are reckoned as long-term investments which may someday yield a return.

Table 1: Summary of Identity Working Triggers from the Coaching Profession

Trigger → ↓ Factor	CONFLICTS	CHALLENGES	CONTRADICTIONS
Source	• Coaching profession's discursive positioning as "superior to" or "better than" therapy • Need to balance multiple roles to be viably self-employed	• Confusion and little general knowledge about coaching • Emergent, largely unregulated profession increases competition, threat of imposters	• Paradox between public narratives of coaching and professionalism • Coaching profession's outright rejection of the "expert" role
Coach's Dilemma	• What if I am still a practicing therapist? (Byrd) • How do I reconcile my former career as a therapist? (Sascha)	• How should I explain coaching to others when it's not well-defined or clear to me? • How do I distinguish myself as a "legitimate" coach?	• Am I still considered a "professional" coach if I do not claim any expertise?
Identity Working Required	• Reconcile such conflicts by presenting all work (past and current) as professional, skilled, and valuable	• Convey confidence in knowledge and skills to be viewed as "real" coach, but accept that field attracts frauds	• Claim expertise in some field or area to be a "professional" but also stay consistent with coaching rhetoric
Strategies from Data	• Preface remarks to detach oneself from coaching rhetoric (Sascha: "I don't mean to put therapy down…") • Claim filling multiple roles is a choice (Byrd: "I have no problem with these dual roles…")	• Show rather than tell others about coaching, via demo (Sascha) or free session (Liz) • Become certified; join ICF-accredited groups (numerous coaches) • Use testimonials to show credibility (Liz)	• Emphasize other non-coaching credentials, like education, work experience, etc. (Abby) • Reframe coaching as a process, set of skills attached to a specialized body of knowledge (Jonah)

H.   DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

1.   Summary of Key Findings & Intended Contributions

This investigation considered a number of research-orienting questions with respect to identity working among self-employed professionals within the emerging field of coaching. In the *Research Findings*, I explored the various narrative tools, resources, and strategies that are employed by coaches, this project's self-employed professional population of interest. This narrative material, which is used to assist with identity work, is available to individual coaches by the wider professional community, including governing and accreditation bodies (like the ICF), as well as research institutions, training programs, and coaching websites, books, articles, and the like. It should be noted, however, that the greater social conditions (i.e. socio-economic, political, etc.) must also be taken into consideration when analyzing identity work and the deployment of these resources.

Since the "doing" of identity work, in the ethnomethodological sense, is rendered most "visible" in the presence of contradictions, conflicts, and challenges, I sought these out in the data. One of the primary contradictions is the paradox between the coaching community's ongoing efforts to professionalize, and the public claim that the coach is not an expert. Conflicts include the discursive positioning of coaching as, in some ways, "superior to" therapy, as well as the need to balance coaching with other work roles—commonly referred to as a "portfolio career"—which self-employed individuals must frequently assume to generate a decent, stable income. Finally, due to the precariousness of the coaching profession, coaches are constantly confronted with the challenge of explaining what coaching is, vis-à-vis other services and occupations, even as its definition and professional boundaries are evolving and unclear to its own members.

Each of the preceding scenarios can increase feelings of uncertainty and insecurity within the individual coach, thus calling for great identity working efforts. What's more, the individual coach is left with the responsibility of reconciling these disruptions to their identity performance. That is, they must put in extra energy and resources into identity construction, which could be spent on other endeavors—like the *actual* coaching of, and time spent with, paying clients. As a result, this largely uncompensated, unrecognized labor—with respect to crafting and publicizing the profession's identity—must be taken up by its individual members.

This project offers a number of theoretical contributions to the identity and careers literatures. With respect to our knowledge about identity, it follows in the tradition of other ethnomethodological research (Down, 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009; Down & Warren, 2008; Watson, 2008, 2009a, 2009b) that recognizes identity working as a process which unfolds within social interaction, and its analysis therefore relies upon contextual data produced from observation. A key insight from this research is the significance of macro, institutional, and structural conditions in shaping the micro-processes of identity work, most remarkably, the declining economic conditions and political instability at the time that the fieldwork was carried out, and the changing nature of employment relations due to the rise in self-employment.

2. <u>Implications for Studies of Self-Employment</u>

In their 2008 *Academy of Management Annals* chapter, entitled "New Work, Old Assumptions," Ashford, George and Blatt provide a thorough review of the research to date on the "new world of work" and discuss the opportunities and challenges of continuing this line of investigation. The authors close the chapter with these thoughts (2008: 83):

> Much has been written about whether nonstandard work is marginalizing or liberating. The research reviewed above suggests a more complicated reality, whereby even the most 'boundaryless' independent contractors face economic pressures and worry about

future income (Evans, Kunda, & Barley, 2004). It is time for research to focus on how to manage the complexities of personal responsibility for career, how the agency (e.g. the capacity to do otherwise; Giddens, 1984) inherent in 'free agency' is best realized, and how individuals can buffer themselves against the insecurities associated with the new world of work. The latter issue is relevant for nonstandard and standard workers alike.

Through this investigation, my aim was to reveal this "more complicated reality" which scholars before me have, in my opinion, successfully accomplished. More specifically, this project identified the need for additional research into the institutional support, in terms of socio-emotional and career counseling services, financial and material resources, and enterpreneurial skills, that is available to individuals and necessary to make boundaryless and other "new career" types successful (Zeitz, Blau, & Fertig, 2009). By analyzing one particular institution—the professional community of coaching—and the type of assistance offered to its members in order to craft a viable professional identity, I discovered that its intervention often *creates* more anxiety and greater demands for identity working on the part of individual coach. Because of coaching's precarious status as a profession, coaches are expected to perform *not only* individual identity work to establish themselves as legitimate professionals, *but also* professional identity work to establish coaching as a credible service. The latter is necessary due to the historical lack of general knowledge among the public about what coaching is, but increasingly, due to negative images and false information produced by pop culture parodies of this rapidly growing occupation. Thus, far from being a source of support, the coaching industry's professional organizations and bodies—perhaps unintentionally, but nevertheless—add to the everyday work and overall burden of what it means to be a self-employed coach.

I believe that these insights can be generalized beyond the world of coaching to other work contexts that promote the various models of "new careers." That is, since self-employment is growing among white-collar service professionals and this growth is predicted to continue, the

issues identified in this study may characterize the future conditions and expectations for countless workers. Many of the structural and working conditions facing today's self-employed professionals are similar. Coaching, as an emerging profession, arguably places an extra burden on its members with the expectation they will perform identity work for the greater community on top of their own individual identity efforts. However, even within the more "established" professions (i.e. law, medicine, therapy) or service industries (i.e. auto repair, hairdressing, barbering, house decorating) the experience of work, as self-employment increases, is changing. Simply put, these occupations are not immune to the imperative that all workers should be enterprising, self-sufficient, and business-focused.

To illustrate the timeliness and relevance of studying the challenges of self-employment, these very issues were recently addressed in the *New York Times* article (Gottlieb, 2012) "What Brand is Your Therapist?" In the piece, the author, Lori Gottlieb, discusses her recent transition from journalist to therapist, and recounts her struggle to book clients. She later sought out a "branding consultant" and shares the advice she received regarding how to boost her practice (and thus, income). In addition to adopting a catchy brand for herself and marketing her services in a way that appeals to prospective clients looking for short-term solutions, rather than long-term personal change, the consultant advised her to start coaching. Gottlieb "held out" against these pressures for as long as possible since, as she put it: "Branding was the antithesis of what we did [as therapists]." In other words, Gottlieb clung steadfastly to her desire to practice therapy the way she had been trained, respecting its "strict concepts of authenticity, privacy and therapist-patient boundaries." Eventually, after months of tolerating a sporadically-scheduled work diary and not knowing where else to turn, she caved into the consultant's earlier recommendation and started coaching clients in one-off sessions. The change itself was rather

painless, since it did not require further credentials or training, just some modification to her website. Feeling a sense of guilt about possibly "selling out," Gottlieb expresses how she had to grapple with the tension of wanting to practice therapy "the right way," and wanting to earn an income.

Reading about Gottlieb's experience as a therapist, I felt a striking sense of déjà-vu; her story reminded me of numerous ones shared months earlier by my coaching informants. I was surprised to learn that therapy, one of coaching's closest occupational rivals, was undergoing its own sort of identity-crisis. I had presumed that members of a more established profession would enjoy greater clarity and access to better resources, such as general cultural knowledge, which would facilitate the doing of identity. What I hadn't considered were the possible challenges associated with *changing* existing, long-held ideas about the profession and how this might impact individual identity working, because, as the branding consultant put it: "the real issue was that psychotherapy had an image problem." So in addition to the everyday business of being self-employed, Gottlieb confronted her own set of challenges with regard to constructing a professional identity for herself, while contributing to the image overhaul of psychotherapy. She therefore shared more in common with my coach informants than I would have believed.

Reflecting back on my data, the fact that coaching is a new profession may actually provide some advantages to identity working. For one, there may be more creative scope for individual members to construct the profession in a way that is aligned with individual preferences. I had viewed coaching as an interesting context in which to study the lived experience of self-employment, with findings that could be generalized to other occupations where self-employment was growing. However, because of its nascent status as a profession, I believed its identity working demands were unique to coaching, with little application beyond its

community. I am now revising these assumptions; while it is true that each profession may have its own particular set of issues and challenges with identity construction, what they may increasingly share is that, in the context of growing self-employment, individual members are now expected to perform identity working for the profession, perhaps with limited institutional support, along with meeting the other responsibilities of being self-employed.

3.   Implications for the Coaching Profession

The theoretical aspects of this research are most relevant to the bodies of knowledge on identity, careers, and emerging professions. However, it is the last of these three where the contribution is most direct for the coaching literature. It is extremely important to understand the context in which coaches are working, but also, to understand the development of the field as a whole. Ozkan (2008) provided compelling insight into the historical trajectory of the coaching profession in the United States and, in later research, in France. This project is an important continuation of Ozkan's work, but from quite a different perspective. While I agree it is critical to understand where the coaching profession came from and how it developed, as well as where it is heading, in this research I depict the profession through the eyes of those individual who have chosen to pursue a career in coaching and experience their daily working lives as coaches.

Recall the excerpt from the Executive Summary of the ICF's 2008 Global Coaching Survey (ICF, 2008b: 16), which I presented in the opening of this report:

> Due to the trend towards newer coaches entering the profession, it is important for them to be fully prepared so that they can be successful in developing their individual practices. In order for the overall perception of the coaching industry to be associated with long-term sustainability, these newer coaches will need to be provided with the necessary tools required for marketing and for building their coaching practices.

The findings speak directly to these expressed concerns, and the indicate that the ICF has sufficient reason to be worried about such practical issues. Indeed, many of the newly minted coaches with whom I have spoken are having difficulty finding the tools and support to foster their individual practices. However, this is not experienced evenly among all coaches; I learned that different coaching niches may be associated with greater challenges.

To illustrate how this "unevenness" appears in the everyday lives of practicing coaches, I will share a number of examples from the field. While carrying out fieldwork, I discovered that a number of informants who previously called themselves "life coaches" have moved away from that label, and instead are now calling themselves "personal organizing coaches" or "career coaches." They were finding that the title "life coach" was too nebulous and not attached to particular area of life or specialty. Accordingly, they were choosing (or creating) more descriptive titles—ones that would better convey their various specializations and services. As well, life coaching has lately been on the receiving end of mockery and parody, especially in reality TV programs and pop culture, as something "flaky" or "new agey." Since the coaches wanted to dissociate themselves with any connection to such unflattering images, they have therefore had to develop individual strategies to deal with "structural forces" (like the negative press of reality TV), and these efforts have been largely unexamined.

To offer another example, since 2008, the coaching literature has seen a marked increase in studies that examine the "ROI" of coaching, and its impact on desirable outcomes such as performance, commitment, and job satisfaction (see Stern & Stout-Rostron, 2013), answering the ICF's call for more research efforts to support the business case for coaching. Much of this research is conducted within organizational and corporate settings, and the clients occupy leadership positions or the executive suite. While such research is crucial for establishing a solid

base of knowledge about coaching and building greater legitimacy for the profession, there is a proportion of practicing coaches who do not benefit directly from these efforts. As mentioned earlier, those individuals who offer coaching in the more "personal" areas do not benefit in the same way, and these areas risk lagging behind business and executive coaching with regard to building professional legitimacy. To illustrate with an example, a recurring theme in my interviews is that coaches are burdened with "educating the client"—that is, spending a good portion of time and energy explaining what coaching is, due to its relatively new nature. However, the non-business coaches are confronted with this issue much more than their business-related counterparts because the investment that is being made in rigorous scholarly coaching research is targeted predominantly towards certain audiences (ex. executives, leaders, etc.), for specific outcomes (i.e. improving performance, developing leadership skills, managing others, etc.) and/or within particular contexts (ex. businesses, organizations, etc.) Thus, without context-specific research or applicable statistics to cite that bolster and legitimize coaching in the non-business niches, more "work" (often in the form of free demonstrations/coaching sessions, public presentations, etc.) is required by the individuals who market these services. My research has addressed this perceived gap in the literature by attempting to expand our knowledge on the experience of coaching which departs from other studies on coaching in terms of research context, dominant assumptions, and existing ideas about how coaching is done.

What's more, those who specialize in less business-focused areas—such as life, health and wellness, career, and relationship coaching—are more likely to serve individual clients, who must pay for services out of pocket. This factor adds a layer of pressure on the coaches, particularly in terms of income generation and security. As the economic crisis folded in 2009— right in the middle of my fieldwork—many of these informants admitted that, as difficult as it

was to secure new clients, even their current clients were cutting back on what they considered "luxuries." Unfortunately, coaching fell into this category and was often among the first of their expenses to be eliminated.

4. <u>Opportunities for the Future?</u>

In an effort to identify some of the difficulties experienced by individual coaches, I would now like to share comments from Celadora, a former life coach who has shifted her self-employment to life legacy letter writing—sometimes referred to as "ethical wills." She was rather blunt in her opinion of the coaching profession, and was afforded such candidness since she was no longer as directly attached to the community. When we spoke, she identified several shortcomings with her training program, which she came to realize after-the-fact, as she set out to practice as a newly qualified coach. Here is what she had to say:

> CELADORA: ...I found that it was very challenging in terms of marketing what we do as coaches, and...I realized that what they didn't teach us in coaching training was how to start a business. *(laughs)* And, we paid a lot of money for this training, and I thought: "Geez!" (ME: Yeah.) "Why didn't they include how to get a business up and going?" You had to pay extra for that. So I found myself becoming somewhat disillusioned with the whole process and finding it much more challenging than I ever anticipated. (ME: Right.) And, I think a large part of that was that we weren't in a major metropolitan area where...or very umm... avant garde area where, you know, people already knew what this was. A lot of it was educating people about what coaching was. And I was getting kind of discouraged about that. And I was also finding that there were a LOT of coaches in this area already. (ME: Really?) Yeah.

Celadora's comments divulge a number of limitations she experienced in her coaching training program, which she believes left her unprepared for the challenges of setting up a thriving coaching business. First, she points out that not enough people in the region where she was based had been exposed to the idea of personal coaching, and so a large part of Celadora's work as a coach was to do (uncompensated) PR for the budding profession. This was further

complicated by her lack of training in essential business skills, and the tools and resources required to promote her services successfully.

Celadora's account diverges somewhat from those informants who are still actively coaching, as she has been able to step outside that world and reflect on her time within it. Although she acknowledges deficiencies in the skills, knowledge, and training to run a business, unlike others with whom I spoke, Celadora does not necessarily perceive these as *personal* flaws. In fact, she places partial responsibility on the training school (in particular, and perhaps the coaching industry, more generally) for l ill-equipped for this entrepreneurial undertaking, when she states "what they didn't teach us in coaching training was how to start a business." Moreover, Celadora acknowledges that "they" (i.e. the training organization) were aware of these needs, but rather slyly offered them as an expensive supplement to the basic training, after-the-fact. In other words, the training organization seized a money-making opportunity with regard to business training for newly trained coaches, and because of this practice, Celadora grew "somewhat disillusioned with the whole process."

Adding that she found coaching to be "much more challenging than [she] ever anticipated," Celadora implies the training could have been done differently—more specifically, in ways that would better assist and prepare the participants. Her comments suggest the need for: first, greater transparency about what one can expect when starting a coaching business; second, better access to coaching industry data, such as niche growth rates, regional demand, and saturation levels; and third, realistic information about the investment, in terms of both time and money, required to be successful as a self-employed coach. All in all, she provided a rather scathing assessment of the training program, which does not reflect well on the coaching profession and its treatment of new members to the community.

Both the academic and popular literatures on "new careers" tend to emphasize the potential benefits of self-employment, including increased flexibility, autonomy, and discretion over work assignments. My fieldwork produced a number of stories of self-employment that ran counter to the dominant rhetoric—indeed, I was particularly attentive to revealing these alternative interpretations of working for oneself. However, alternative accounts of self-employment, like Celadora's above, were somewhat difficult to come by, and virtually non-existent when coaching was discussed more directly. But rather than perceive this peculiarity as indicative of flawed research design or inadequate interviewing techniques, I consider this to be critical data. From this observation, I deduced two apparent dangers associated with the lack of accurate feedback to the wider coaching community, regarding individual experiences of working as a coach. The first threat is that it perpetuates the message that "everything is rosy" for individual coaches; that is, the current level of support is adequate, and no additional assistance is needed. Unfortunately, this unrealistic, overly-optimistic impression may be used for the recruitment of new members to the profession—a strategy in which bodies like the ICF have been aggressively engaging over the last few years. And consequently, the vicious cycle of struggling coaches→lack of support→more struggling coaches continues.

The current study was purposely designed to challenge existing coaching research assumptions and dominant ideas about the field. By putting forward this empirical evidence, my hope is that some of the inequalities within the coaching profession will be addressed, so that every practicing coach has access to the same level of resources, in terms of research opportunities, marketing efforts, and general support, to establish and sustain successful practices—which is consistent with the IFC's stated objectives for the future (ICF, 2012b).

Finally, with regard to the research issue of identity work, the decision and actions taken by the profession's governing bodies, such as the ICF, indeed have an impact (and until now, one largely undocumented) on individual coaches. For instance, there is currently a debate the role of the coach and whether or not a coach can be considered "expert" in some domain. This is a contentious issue, since the established professions are normally associated with a specialist or expert body of knowledge, but coaching philosophy has previously rejected the expert model, in an attempt to distinguish it from the fields of therapy or management consulting. The ICF are currently in the process of reconsidering this position and trying to broaden the definition of coaching to make space for the provision of specialist knowledge and skills. Such changes will affect those who are coaching in their day to day work; individual coaches may experience confusion as they market their services and define their relationships with clients.

On-the-ground identity work performed by individual coaches is largely invisible and thus neglected by the powerful thought leaders and decision makers within the coaching profession. This project is one mechanism through which these stories can be organized, shared, and heard. Furthermore, because I have carried out this investigation in an academically rigorous and systematic way, supported by a doctoral degree-granting university, and have received recognition by way of funding from the professional coaching community, I believe these factors will afford a degree of legitimacy and much-needed attention to the issues uncovered, and will hopefully lead to some additional support for the coaches who find themselves struggling. Ultimately, I hope that some of these findings will be instrumental in informing and shaping policy and regulation, and in turn, can alert the ICF, training institutions, and key players within the coaching community to possible issues, concerns, and areas for future investigation.

I.   APPENDICES

1.   Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

*Category/Characteristic	Desired Proportions	Actual Informants n = 22	Actual Proportions
SEX			
Male	25%	**6**	*27%*
Female	75%	**16**	*73%*
EMPLOYMENT STATUS			
Self-Employed Only	75%	**18**	*82%*
Other Arrangements^	25%	**4**	*18%*
AGE/STAGE OF WORKING LIFE			
< 35 yrs (Early working life)	20%	**3**	*14%*
35-50 yrs (Mid working life)	20%	**6**	*27%*
> 50 yrs (Late working life)	60%	**13**	*59%*
COACHING EMPLOYMENT			
Full Time	80%	**13**	*59%*
Part Time/Occasional	20%	**9**	*41%*
YEARS SELF-EMPLOYED			
< 3 yrs (Novice)	35%	**5**	*23%*
3 – 8 yrs (Intermediate)	40%	**10**	*45%*
> 8 yrs (Veteran)	25%	**7**	*32%*

TOTAL NUMBER OF INFORMANTS IN EACH COACHING NICHE/SPECIALIZATION*			
Creative (Art , Music, Movement)	**4**	Life	**6**
Baby Boomers	**3**	Marketing & Sales	**3**
Business (Small, General)	**5**	Non-Profit Organizations	**3**
Career	**9**	Organizing & Decluttering	**1**
Diversity & Inclusion	**1**	Relationships (Family, Couples)	**4**
Executives	**4**	Spiritual	**1**
Health & Wellness	**1**	Training (Coaching, General)	**5**
Lawyers	**2**	Women	**3**
Leadership	**3**	Writing	**1**

Participants could indicate they worked in more than one coaching niche/specialization.

2. Coaching Specializations of Interview Informants

Informant	Coaching Specializations																				Other Services				
	Art & Music	Branding	Business	Careers	Celebration	Diversity	EQ (Emotional Intelligence)	Executives	Family	Health & Wellness	Lawyers	Leadership	Life	Marketing	Non-Profits	Performance	Relationships	Sales	Spirituality	Writing	Legacy Letters	Organizing	Résumés	Therapy	Training
Abigail				✔																			✔		✔
Arturo	✔																		✔						
Becky			✔								✔			✔				✔							
Byrd	✔							✔				✔					✔							✔	
Celadora				✔									✔								✔				
Daisy					✔			✔					✔												
Dana													✔									✔			
Danielle		✔	✔											✔											
David								✔				✔				✔									
Hope			✔			✔						✔													
James														✔			✔								
Jeff			✔					✔					✔												
Jonah									✔																✔
Kathy		✔	✔			✔		✔				✔											✔		✔
Liz				✔																			✔		✔
Loretta									✔				✔												
Luke							✔	✔				✔													✔
Mary	✔								✔			✔					✔							✔	
Maureen				✔									✔							✔				✔	
Rosalyn		✔		✔																					
Rose								✔				✔			✔										
Sascha				✔					✔				✔												

3.   <u>**Research Participant Consent Form for Recorded Interview**</u>

<u>R</u>ESEARCH <u>P</u>ARTICIPANT <u>C</u>ONSENT <u>F</u>ORM

Research Topic	Dissertation Research on Personal Coaching
Researcher	Sinéad G. Ruane, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Telephone	413-687-****
Email	sgruane@som.umass.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this research will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to participate without penalty. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with any university. To do so, simply tell the Researcher you wish to stop participation. The Researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent form for your records.

Purpose of the Study

- Is to explore the coaching profession and those who engage in coaching.

Participation in the Study

- If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed by the Researcher regarding your life as a coach and your coaching experiences. You may refrain from answering any of the individual interview questions at any time.

Estimated Time Commitment

- Each interview may take anywhere from 30 to 90 minutes. This is largely dependent on the responses that you, as a participant, wish to provide.

Risks of Being in the Study

- This interview may involve risks that are currently unforeseeable. If you wish to discuss the information above or any other risks you may experience, you may ask questions now, or contact the Researcher (details listed above) at any time in the future.

Confidentiality and Privacy Protections

- The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in any study.

- The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a participant. Throughout the study, the Researcher will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

Contacts and Questions

- If you have any questions about the study please ask them now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation from the study, please contact the Researcher conducting the study. Her name, phone number, and e-mail address are at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or questions in general about the research process, contact **Tony Butterfield**, Chair of the Isenberg School of Management Human Subjects Review Committee, at **413-545-****** or by email: **dabutter@mgmt.umass.edu**.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above form and have sufficient information to make a decision about taking part in this study. I, _____, give my consent voluntarily to participate in this research study . *(Please print name)*

Signature of Participant: _____   **Date:** _____

Signature of Researcher: _____   **Date:** _____

4. Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Revised January 2010

A research study's interview protocol should be closely linked to its primary research questions. I therefore endeavored to establish a strong and clear connection between the kind and flow of questions asked—that is, the topics pursued through interviewing—and the project's research-orienting questions—the areas to which this investigation is intended to contribute.

In particular, for this study, the interview procedure entails:

    a.   Probing questions which can get to matters of work and self-employment

    b.   Using observational data (meetings, presentations, etc.), as "entry points" for asking questions about the business concerns discussed by coaches (i.e. marketing, how to build a business, retaining clients, setting prices, etc.)

The individual interviews will formalize data production, which has already been taking place through participant observation, informal conversations, and interactions, in a more structured setting. The interviews will help to establish informants' personal stories about how they got into the field of coaching, focusing on the following areas:

- Professional and personal background – narrative form
- Some content about coaching and the profession
- Individual understanding of one's identity as coach – what they do

The interviews will be semi-structured in order to steer the conversation to certain topics, but I do intend to shift from asking fairly direct and open questions, to more probing and clarifying questions. Here are some of the types of questions I will use to structure the conversation initially:

1. How long have you been coaching?

2. What kinds of services or areas of coaching do you offer?

3. What is your client profile? (ex. individuals, organizations, groups, etc.)

4. What were you doing (professionally) before you became a coach?

5. What kind of knowledge/skills do you bring to your coaching?

6. Tell me about how you got into coaching.

7. How would you describe yourself as a coach?

8. What is your coaching philosophy?

9. What do you like about being a coach?

10. Are there things you miss/do not enjoy about coaching?

11. What are your future plans for your coaching practice?

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