

**Executive Coaching in Practice:  
A Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis**

**By**

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## CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Susan Lynn Hanley, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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## **Abstract: Executive Coaching in Practice - A Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis**

Executive coaching is a practice used in organisations to facilitate the learning and development of individual leaders and managers or those preparing for leadership roles. It has been identified as among the top five of leadership development practices in organisations. However, executive coaching lacks definitional clarity and there are calls for more contextually relevant research. My study responded by posing the research question ‘what is executive coaching’ and seeking an answer through a working philosophy of phenomenological descriptive analysis, an approach which is consistent with the philosophy of its founder, Edmund Husserl, rather than those popular approaches which solicit accounts of the experiences of individual research subjects. Three coaching conversations facilitated by experienced executive coaches were recorded. These conversations occurred mid-cycle in a sequence of authentic paid coaching conversations. Lifeworld descriptions of these conversations were constructed and three themes identified in each case. The themes were explored in the Husserlian method of zigzagging between the empirical world and use of a reasoning process which identifies phenomenological essences. The themes identified were relationality (between coach and client), teleology and conation, narrative identity, sensemaking, laughter, mindfulness, habit, emotions and values. In respect to identifying essence as that which identifies something as the very kind of thing it is, I was unable to justify laughter and mindfulness as essences of executive coaching, while the other themes were confirmed.

In concluding the study, I employed the practical reasoning of phenomenology in incorporating both reason and ethics in making a judgement of what executive coaching is and ought to be, oriented to the achievement of the highest practical good.

I have found executive coaching to be an integrated learning and development process connected to performance in the workplace. It is enacted in a dialogic relationship of high challenge and high support to which clients bring their whole selves in order to achieve self-identified goals or purposes. It is an experiential, reflexive sensemaking activity that generates personal awareness and insight while supporting behavioural



change in the will to voluntary action that is oriented to the 'good', the best that is available and is ethical at the personal, relational and organizational levels of the workplace and beyond.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

My study is about executive coaching, a practice now widely used in organizations to facilitate the learning and development of individual leaders and managers or those aspiring to leadership roles. The goal of the study is to achieve greater clarity on what executive coaching is through a direct phenomenological description of executive coaching conversations performed by experienced coaches who work with clients in an organisational context. It seeks to answer the research question ‘what is executive coaching?’ Executive coaching has emerged as an adaptive response to the industrialisation of the Western world. Its 19<sup>th</sup> century roots lie in the development of individualised approaches to the support of learning at Oxford University from where it spread to competitive sport and beyond. Although it emerged as a practice associated with the world of work from the 1880’s, it evolved in the late twentieth century into what is now understood as executive coaching, a practice used in organisations, institutions or privately to achieve particular work-related outcomes. In broad terms, executive coaching is a leadership development activity which is a response to the complexity, uncertainty and implicit risk of the high-speed, post-industrial nature of the Western world, and the need for leaders who are able to effectively operate in that environment. Executive coaching is an encompassing term which is inclusive of other forms of coaching specific to workplaces (Ellinger & Kim 2014). This study is concerned with executive coaching as delivered to individual coachees by external coaches. Where the term ‘coaching’ is used in this study, it is inclusive of executive coaching unless otherwise specified.

Over the past half century coaching in general has grown rapidly and somewhat anarchically, without prescribed structure, theory or evidence base, other than it just seemed to work. Now, as executive coaching has emerged as an accepted practice for facilitating learning and change in the workplace, claims are being made upon it, territory is being contested, and a research base is growing with a strong influence from the field of psychology. My research acknowledges the contributions which

psychology makes to the practice of executive coaching. However, my interest returns to the roots of coaching in learning, reflecting my own insights gained as a practising coach and therefore the knowledge claims of my own lived experience. My research is phenomenological and I will be 'zigzagging' as the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl describes it, between the lifeworld of natural sensemaking activities as empirically found in recorded coaching sessions, and the essential structures of meaning making which characterises Husserl's distinctive reasoning process. This form of descriptive phenomenology is founded in answering the question of what a phenomenon is in a rigorous process of experiencing and analysis, and is an appropriate methodology for answering the research question, what is executive coaching? These methodological principles will be fully outlined in those chapters which address research methodology and design. However, what is distinctive in the application of Husserl's methodology is the researcher's first step of engagement with the phenomenon in question in the empirical realm of the lifeworld as directly experienced. My study is specific to executive coaching and while many of the practices of executive coaching may be applicable to other forms of coaching, the focus is on executive coaching. Learning is an outer horizon of this study, the background against which executive coaching appears to me in its 'givenness', the phenomenological principle that all experience is experience of something as perceived (Moran & Cohen 2012).

The aim of this study is to explore the general structure and identify the essence(s) of executive coaching through the researcher's investigation of executive coaching as she engages phenomenologically with the research material she has gathered. This research approach is distinctively different to those contemporary, popular approaches to phenomenology which report on the lived experience of research participants as they describe their experiences to the researcher. For example, Tooth (2014) conducted a doctoral study of coaches' and coachees' experience of executive coaching, and her findings are reflected in the analysis which forms part of the reasoning processes specific to the present study. Phenomenology is not a settled matter, and this study's methodology is grounded in the literature of an active research community which continues to explore and debate the philosophy of its

founder, Edmund Husserl. I will identify themes as identified empirically, describe them in the context of the particular executive coaching conversations I have recorded and then employ what is called an Husserlian eidetic reduction, which will isolate the central, essential features of executive coaching (Moran 2000). It is not the role of the phenomenological researcher to form scientific generalizations (van Manen 1990). Rather, the role is to undertake a composite description through a series of iterations that distil the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell 2013). My descriptions of executive coaching conversations as I encounter them and apply Husserl's rigorous reasoning processes as currently understood is a unique approach in executive coaching research. In this respect, my descriptions will make a significant contribution to a theoretical understanding of what executive coaching is as described in the literature, and from practical insights into how coaching occurs in situ, that is empirically.

## **1.2 Justification of Research Proposal**

There are a number of ways of explaining my selection of the research topic. Three key reasons are indicated below:

1. Executive coaching is a developing industry, splintered into micro fields (or factions) of interests and methods. It is under-researched (Ellinger & Kim 2014) while at the same time ubiquitous across organisations in the Western world, with increasing uptake in Asia and developing countries.
2. Over the past two decades, psychology, including positive psychology, has strongly influenced the research field in coaching generally and in executive coaching. There is little in the coaching research literature that explicitly brings philosophy into the academic discourse of coaching. A direct philosophical approach such as Edmund Husserl's descriptive phenomenology will potentially enrich the communities of practice that reflect the disparate, multidisciplinary interests in executive coaching.

3. Much executive coaching is focused on leadership development. Workplaces need effective leaders who have integrity, well-developed critical thinking skills and the ability to forge effective interpersonal relationships which facilitate team work. The world is changing rapidly, particularly in industrialized communities which are transitioning into post-industrial economies. Nonaka, Hirose and Takeda (2016) suggest that globalization has transformed organizations as they increasingly operate in more complex, uncertain and diverse environments. These conditions demand the development of dynamic capabilities, not just of senior leaders but of those at the middle level of organizations, the managers who seek to harness the insights of employees at all levels. A consequence is that the standards for successful leadership have shifted to much greater reliance on social competencies and the development of relational capabilities that harness the wisdom of all organizational members (Ding, Choi & Aoyama 2018; Makino & Oliver 2019). Impacting more broadly in the corporate and political spheres are a wide range of environmental and social challenges including climate change, increased community demands for accountability on the part of organizations following the 2008 global financial crisis, restructuring of economies to reflect competition in a global marketplace, and the acceleration of technological change, in particular the hyper-complexity of information systems.

Leaders face competing and diverse demands yet developing and supporting competent and effective leadership is a challenge, one which will only grow (Holt, Hall & Gilley 2018). While the demand for effective leadership is growing, there is evidence that confidence in leadership capabilities is low. Chamorro-Premuzic (2019) refers to Gallup data reporting that, all over the world, 75 percent of people quit their jobs because of their direct manager, and that bad leadership is the primary cause of voluntary turnover worldwide. He suggests that overall, for the majority of employees, their experience of leadership is undeniably far from positive.

Executive coaching supports learning and development. It potentially supports leaders to develop an enhanced ability to consider multiple perspectives as they

harness the insights and capabilities of their employees, customers and stakeholders, and align people to the pursuit of common organizational goals. It is important that executive coaching delivers on its promise of developing leaders equipped for these challenges and that organisations and individuals understand what they are buying when they contract an executive coach.

The research topic is an important one. Day and Dragoni (2015) surveyed twenty-five hundred business and human resource in 94 countries and found that leadership development across all levels is a top priority for organizations, with 86 percent reporting it as an urgent or important need. Executive coaching responds to that need.

Despite the growth in coaching research over the past decade, Ellinger and Kim (2014) note that, from a human resource development perspective, executive coaching is criticized as opinion or best practice based and is considered to be atheoretical. A review of executive coaching outcomes by Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) similarly critiques coaching research and in particular calls for more contextually relevant research which reflects the unfolding 'journey' of coaching. My research takes place within the phenomenological tradition and directly accesses coaching conversations as lifeworld phenomena in the work place, identifying emerging themes in that journey. I have been careful to ensure that the research is focussed on executive coaches who are experienced and who have a record of successfully delivering to organisational clients. There have been some studies on what coaching means to the participants, that is to clients and their coaches (Marlatt 2012; Tooth 2014). What these studies have not done is to directly observe what happens in coaching conversations in their organisational context. The most direct and effective way to do this was to arrange for recordings of executive coaching conversations in situ and, through careful listening and review of transcripts, to identify the themes that emerged through my own lived experience of those coaching conversations.

### 1.3 Study Scope

In locating my study in the context of organisations, I first need to clarify some terminology. There are probably as many meanings ascribed to executive coaching and coaching in general as there are coaches and clients and there is no single industry wide definition. As a temporary foothold, I start with the position of Standards Australia (2011) which in the context of organizations describes coaching as a service provided to executives and managers with the purpose of improving skills, performance or work-related personal development. The intent of executive coaching is ultimately to contribute to organizational effectiveness and to this end executive coaching has become one of five top leadership development practices in the world of work (Maltbia, Marsick & Ghosh 2014). Work-based, executive, leadership and organizational coaching are terms which are generally used interchangeably and differences in the practices are likely to be imperceptible. When I refer to coaching, I am referring to executive coaching as encompassing those terms I indicate here. I exclude team coaching, sports/athletic coaching, instructional coaching, peer coaching and manager-as-coach as these forms of coaching are distinctive and deserve study in their own right. In this study, the coach is the external facilitator of the coaching sessions who has been contracted by the organization or individual to provide coaching, the client is the executive, manager or individual aspiring to such a role, the person who is being coached. Where applicable, the sponsor is the organization that has contracted the coaching. Some organizations provide coaching as an internal learning and development capability. This study is focussed on external coaches, those contracted from outside the organization.

As referred to above, I have focussed my study on executive coaching delivered by experienced coaches. Coaching generally is an unregulated industry without barriers to entry, formal licensing requirements or the requirement for formal qualifications. Achieving the status of a profession is an aspiration for coaching, and various member-based organisations for coaches represent efforts to achieve that objective. The International Coach Federation (ICF) is the largest and it refers to coaching as a

profession even though it does not meet the characteristics of one (Abbott 1988; Lane, Stelter & Rostron 2010). For example, in coaching there are no barriers to entry, no requirement for formal qualifications, no shared code of ethics, nor a common research base which underpins practice. As Lane, Stelter and Rostron (2010) suggest, there remains a lack of consensus on what 'professional' coaching is or may be, and what it is that makes an effective and reputable coach, much less on whether coaching should become a profession.

Membership-based coaching associations such as the International Coach Federation and the International Society for Coaching Psychologists advocate for coaching to be defined in such a way that it distinguishes itself from other 'helping' professions, on the one hand, by stripping it of references to therapy, counselling, mentoring, training or teaching or, on the other hand, to align it more closely to counselling, particularly given a strong interest from psychologists and counsellors, where there is strong advocacy for its applicability to coaching practice. As recently as December 2018, there was a call from coaching psychologists to establish a definition of coaching which reflects the interests of coaching psychologists (Passmore, Stopforth & Lai 2018).

Contemporary theories of professional practice suggest that the dynamic environment of contemporary workplaces, is transforming the nature of what professional work is (Fenwick 2012) and that the Weberian model of professions may have been superseded (Harrits 2014). State authorization and market monopolies are no longer an acceptable barrier to participation in multi-disciplinary practices such as coaching where a single body of knowledge is insufficient to sustain a dynamic, responsive and adaptive industry. Edwards (2010) articulates a 'relational turn' to being a professional in contradistinction to being a member of a profession. The relational turn is that which lies between the system and the individual in a set of fluid social relations as practitioners work to accomplish complex tasks. Edwards advocates for boundaries 'where the resources from different practices are brought together to expand interpretations of multifaceted tasks ...' (Edwards 2010, p. 41). Whether driven by a desire to become a profession, or by providing practitioners with a framework



representing what they stand for as coaches in a web of multi-disciplinary practices, what coaching is remains problematic.

#### **1.4 Organisational Context**

An International Coach Federation (ICF) Global Coaching study (2016) estimates that there are approximately 53,000 professional general coach practitioners worldwide, noting here that the International Coach Federation incorrectly describes coaching as a profession. Coaching as a whole was estimated by the study to generate an estimated revenue of \$(US) 2,356 billion. Globally, the majority of clients are sponsored by the organisation for which they work. In Australia, Dagley (2005) compiled a report for the Australian Human Resources Institute which found that organizations spent between \$(Aus)600 and \$45,00 for coaching individual executives, with an average cost of \$12,600 per executive. The average hourly rate was (\$717) with a median of \$488, but large organisations paid an average of \$1,018 per hour, with an average of 11 sessions which range over eight to nine months. In smaller organisations, session duration is around five months and the average session number is eight or nine. Overall, average session length was 90 minutes. In the United States, Coutu and Kauffman (2009) found the median hourly rate of executive coaching to be \$US500, with \$200 at the low end and \$3,500 at the high end. This represents a significant investment for organizations, but there remains a lack of consensus on what the outcomes of executive coaching are or ought to be and how effective it is (Athanasopoulou & Dopson 2018; Williams & Lowman 2018). In a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of workplace coaching, Jones, Woods and Guillaume (2016) suggested that executive coaching is framed around the achievement of individual goals that are consistent with organizational-level goals and objectives. Outcomes sought may be affective, such as improved self-efficacy and wellbeing; cognitive, that is knowledge related; and behavioural or skill-based, such as leadership competencies and technical skills relevant to the role, all of which should contribute to the sponsor's organizational achievements.

The ICF in a 2013 survey (Ciporen 2015) found executive coaching to be provided firstly for leadership development and performance; secondly for increased levels of employee engagement, and thirdly for reduced attrition. Coach Source, a large, respected provider of coaching and consultancy services, conducted a 2012 survey with a response rate of 600 participants which found that leadership development was the top reason for hiring a coach, with 90% of participants including leadership development as one of their responses, thus making leadership development a clear purpose of executive coaching (Underhill et al. 2013). The leadership development priority of coaching locates executive coaching in organizations as part of the human resource development remit (Egan & Hamlin 2014). Purchasers of executive coaching in Australia, according to Dagley (2010), are clear in agreeing that successful executive coaching results in behaviour change, with downstream benefits including personal outcomes such as increased self-esteem, confidence, engagement and motivation. This is consistent with the human resource understanding in the United Kingdom, where success in executive coaching is found in bridging the personal, individual dimension in the service of the organization and performance (Walker-Fraser 2011). With a focus on leadership behaviours, effectiveness should be aligned with the contracted outcomes that have been agreed by client, coach and sponsor at the start of the coaching process. Jones, Wood and Guillaume (2016) suggest that the common features that lead to successful outcomes in executive coaching are goal setting, encouragement of experiential learning and setting of development activities in day-to-day work. Tee, Passmore and Brown (2018) found that behavioural/goal focussed coaching is the favoured approach of the majority coaches generally in Scotland (55.4%), but in the rest of Great Britain it rises to 72.3%.

People become coaches from all works of life (Berglas 2002), but detailed demographic profiling of coaches is scant. The Standards Australia research on Coaching in Organisations (2011) provided some detail, based on a survey of 229 executive coaches. Most coaches held university degrees (91%), of whom 9% had a master's degree in coaching, but the great majority had a certificate in coaching from training providers. Asked about management experience, 85% responded they had experience ranging from CEO to front line leader. They reported that the specific coaching

theories used were informed by adult learning (76%), solutions focused (76%), positive psychology (73%), behavioural theory (66%), cognitive behavioural theory (60%), appreciative enquiry (57%), and systems theory (47%).

Behaviour change can be difficult to achieve and is a complex and demanding task in executive coaching, requiring high levels of motivation and realistic goals on the part of the client, but also deliberate, varied and on-going practice in the workplace as a key to success (Nowack 2017). Purchasers, those who engage executive coaches, also indicate that understanding the business context is an important defining characteristic of the exceptional executive coach (Dagley 2010). Many large organisations make significant investments in human resource development, investments which they need to be able to justify in terms of their outcomes in organizational effectiveness (Saks & Burke-Smalley 2014). In acknowledging this context, Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) suggest that executive coaching not be treated as an individual intervention but as a social process with the active involvement of multiple stakeholders, specifically taking account of how one's behavioural change or leadership skills improvement leads to impacts on others in organisations and beyond. This reflects the importance of understanding and working in accordance with the business context as Dagley (2010) highlights, but also how it can lead to improvements beyond those of the individual client. In the leadership development field, there is a growing acknowledgement of divergent approaches with a focus on developing skills and competencies on the one hand and a whole person developmental focus on self-knowledge and capability as it unfolds over time on the other (Day & Dragoni 2015).

Notwithstanding the emphasis given to behavioural change found in this account, it is important for executive coaches that workplaces be seen, as Garvey Berger (2012) suggested, not just as places that deliver the goods, but as places where people grow. The demands on organizations, leaders and employees are complex and multi-faceted. Executive coaching as a practice needs to be responsive to those complexities. My study recognises this context and will explore the question of what executive coaching is from a phenomenological perspective which describes executive coaching sessions

as they unfold in an organisational context. It addresses a gap in coaching research that acknowledges the tensions in integrating the personal, organisational and social factors that influence how coaching is practised and therefore understood as a phenomenon. Now, in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the time and luxury of thinking and learning in a way which engenders what the ancient Greeks called 'phronesis', or practical wisdom, is more necessary and often more elusive than in ages gone by, given the complexities of the technological age in which we live.

### **1.5 What is Executive Coaching?**

The research problem in this study is that coaching is an unregulated industry and understanding what executive coaching is remains very much in the eye of the beholder. Bachkirova and Kauffman (2009) suggest that a definition of coaching in general needs to achieve universality and uniqueness, but it has remained a challenge to secure such a definition (Bachkirova, Spence & Drake 2017). The fundamental question 'what is coaching' is still being asked, with Bachkirova, Spence and Drake recognising that there are a diversity of viewpoints on whether pinning down an answer to that question is desirable or possible. In respect to executive coaching, it is distinguished by its context, the world of work, and its direct relevance to job performance and the development of the individuals and teams in such a way as to improve their potential and/or capability to contribute to organizational outcomes. This study focusses on individuals. As Tooth (2014) points out, coaching has many different meanings and can range from a general conversation between any two individuals where one is supporting another, to executive coaching which may broadly refer to those services provided to executives and line managers purposely aimed at improving skills and performance at work, or for work related personal development.

That coaching in general, and inclusive of executive coaching, is fundamentally a learning and/or development process is well established (Bachkirova 2011; Bresser & Wilson 2010; Cavanagh & Grant 2010; Cox 2013; Gallwey 2010; Law, Ireland & Hussain 2007; Passmore 2010; Pattison, Kirkham & Hudrea 2012; Silsbee 2008; Sturges 2012; Whitmore 2009). Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007 p. 277) suggest that a

reasonable definition of learning is that it is 'a process that brings together cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences and experiences for acquiring, enhancing, or making changes in one's knowledge, skills, values and worldviews'. The notion of change is pervasive in many definitions of learning. However, Bachkirova (2011) distinguishes between learning and development in coaching in general. She suggests that development means change, but this is in a direction that implies increased capacities for engaging with the external and internal world. Her distinction between learning and development hinges on the characterisation of learning as process and development as the combination of changes that may come as a result. However, Bachkirova suggests also that development can happen without learning. There is a biological process which occurs in the normal maturational growth of a person from infancy to adulthood, extending to the aging process, all of which impacts on what and how we learn (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner 2007). The idea of maturational stages in adult development is complex, but as Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner suggest, the more that is known about the changes adults go through and how they motivate and interact with learning, the more effectively we may be able to structure learning and stimulate development. Clark, Merriam and Sandlin (2011) suggest that, in adulthood, development is the occasion for learning and learning is the vehicle for development.

The general approaches to coaching described above are directly applicable to executive coaching. In respect to executive coaching specifically, from an adult learning perspective, human resource development in organizations has been criticised by some as representing 'a performative philosophy' which commodifies employees compared to the adult learning perspective with its concerns for the development of the whole person within a social context, including broader societal concerns (Watkins & Marsick 2014, p. 43). Brookfield (2009, p.30) suggests that 'there is nothing inherently humanistic or benign about development' as it depends on the way people form its purpose and directions; that is, it is a normative concept to which adult educators bring their own ideals and values. He advocates for a developmental perspective in which it is recognised that personal well-being and identity development are inevitably entwined with the interests of a wider group, where

developmental outcomes are bound up with wise action, compassion and working for the common good. This is particularly relevant to executive coaching and the wider social context in which it occurs.

The constructive-developmental adult development theory of Robert Kegan (1982) has had some traction in executive coaching (Cook-Greuter & Stanojevic-Andre 2012; Garvey Berger 2012). In this theory, our meaning making systems evolve through adulthood in stages of vertical development of increasing complexity. Cook-Greuter (2004) describes this developmental perspective as learning to see the world through new eyes as our interpretations of experience change and our views of reality are transformed in an ongoing play between person and environment. From a learning perspective, Kegan (2000) suggests there are two forms of learning, informative and transformational. Drawing from Mezirow's transformational learning methodology, Kegan describes a gradual process of developmental change in the forms of knowing, that is our habits of mind or more technically, our epistemologies. Kegan's theory has itself evolved to supporting change through what he calls a 'deliberate learning process', one which for Kegan is a practical approach to achieving a goal, but also may help a client transform their personal meaning making system (Bachkirova 2009, p.15). As a psychologist, Kegan's interest is in development. However, development and learning are mutually constitutive. Garvey Berger (2012) suggests that learning and growing are connected but not the same and that we can grow without learning, much as trees grow, although real growth in a person, following Kegan, requires a qualitative shift in our forms of perspective taking. Kegan and Lahey (2009) describe as adaptive the process of acquiring new means of perceiving through taking a learning journey through what is an unfolding process of self-awareness. New learning occurs by changing an existing mindset, expanding ways of knowing which represent a more complex stage of development.

The learning versus development discourses in executive coaching and coaching in general represent fault lines in what coaching is seen to be, either as a practical, goal oriented activity at one end, or a counselling process of 'goal-free' personal development at the other. The first is characterized by Western (2017, p. 43) as the

'Psy/expert' with its aim of changing behaviour using cognitive behavioural psychology focused on the outward self; this is closely aligned to a managerialist discourse with its use of goals and targets and focus on the organisational role held. On the other end is the 'soul-guide' with its focus on the spiritual and ultimately the human search for meaning, authenticity and love, that is the inner self. These are dichotomies which to varying degrees represent competing accounts of what executive coaching is, at the one end with a performative behavioural focus, and at the other with a focus on personal enrichment which may be independent of the workplace context.

## **1.6 Methodology and Method**

Phenomenology is part of a qualitative research paradigm where the goals are to understand, interpret and illuminate a human phenomenon (Tooth 2014). The researcher is the instrument for achieving those goals. Descriptive phenomenology as adopted in this study is a methodology which answers the core question of what is the meaning, structure and essence of a phenomenon as experienced by a person, or what is its very nature (Patton 2015). The essence of something is its lived meaning-structure, the universal features of a phenomenon as experienced by an experiencing subject (Reeder 2010). Descriptive phenomenology in particular demands that the researcher 'brackets' her own presuppositions in order to take an open attitude to the phenomenon (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom 2008). This originates from what I will describe in my methodology chapter as a requirement to apply particular techniques of the epoché and reduction in Husserl's approach to transcendental phenomenology. However, the detachment that this approach invites is balanced by the researcher's access to her own lived experience in the process of making meaning of a phenomenon (Patton 2015). In other words, the researcher's own experiences count. At the same time, it is important for the researcher to achieve the status of neutral investigator with no theory to prove and with a commitment to understanding the world as it unfolds (Patton 2015). This requires that the researcher be aware of and deals with her own personal biases and that she applies a level of reflexivity in analysing and evaluating her own interpretations with self-awareness, self-questioning and self-understanding.

I come to this study as a mature-age student with varied life experience. I have spent much of my life as a learner, if not a student. I have had a very diverse career, from bus conductor to the leader of a large, multi-purpose Vocational and Education Training (VET) College in what was then the largest provider of VET in the southern hemisphere. In this journey I have collected a variety of formal qualifications in both adult learning and business and I never said no to any of the many opportunities presented to me for my personal learning and development journey. My last formal qualification was a Master's degree in organisational coaching which represented my transition into self-employment. The relevance of this trajectory for this study is that learning is not just a means to me, it is a strongly held value.

When I studied for a master's degree in coaching, it was in the academic tradition of psychology as empirical science, which I did not at the time question. The foundation of that degree was that of a solutions-focused coaching in general, in the cognitive behavioural approach to psychology, the director of the course and one of my lecturers being coaching psychology pioneer, Dr. Anthony Grant. This coaching approach was goal oriented, but also rich in psychological theory related to a strengths-based approach to all coaching which is forward looking and focussed on opportunities not problems. As a degree, the course was very concerned about the distinction between therapy and coaching, with extensive work on recognising mental health disorders so as not to cross over the boundaries between the two. Subsequent to completion of this master's program, I developed a strong interest in developmental coaching and completed an intensive training program in the leadership maturity framework for coaching with Dr Susanne Cook-Greuter and Dr Maja Stanovic-Andre, subsequent to which I worked with Maja for a year as a partner in the Sydney-based Institute for Developmental Coaching. I attended workshops on Robert Kegan's developmentally based Immunity to Change program and a workshop with John Whitmore on transpersonal coaching, also developmentally focussed. I include reference to these experiences because it reflects my practice-based appreciation of all coaching from the perspectives of adult learning, cognitive-behavioural coaching/therapy and developmental coaching. I have also studied management and



leadership at post-graduate level and have more than twenty years' experience in leadership roles. This brings together a theoretical understanding of leadership with a pragmatic understanding of being a leader in a complex and rapidly changing environment of increasing competition and diminishing resources.

It was not until I started practising as a coach, specializing in career coaching and executive development, that I realized something was happening in respect to a client's developmental trajectory that was not reflected in what I had been taught. I came to the conclusion that the 'something' was learning. This is what led me into this doctoral study, not in a psychology department, but in that of adult education. It would be disingenuous of me to suggest that learning is something I can bracket out of this study. As a neutral investigator it is not a theory which I seek to prove, but rather I accept as an existential phenomenon, learning is always already there. However, it was an ongoing reflexive activity in this study to ask myself if this was a value that was impacting on the descriptions and interpretations I made in such a way that it compromised my neutrality as an investigator. Learning forms an incontrovertible part of the history of coaching in general, and is assumed in a spectrum of accounts of coaching in the broad literature. It is integrated into the study as reflected in my literature review, and included in the descriptions of the themes that emerge in my research.

It is the openness to describing and interpreting acts of consciousness which attracted me to the choice of phenomenology as a research methodology. My research methodology engages with the phenomenology of Husserl in particular, and some of the philosophical movements that his work has influenced. As van Manen (1990, p. 2) explains, in the 'human sciences', research is not done for its own sake.

Phenomenology is a research method used when there is a prior, abiding interest, in my case the curiosity I felt when my own coaching experience led me to search for its meaning and practice beyond the discourses of psychology. The specific phenomenological practices first developed by Edmund Husserl assist in taking a stance of neutrality and embracing an unprejudiced descriptiveness of 'the things themselves' as they occur in the lived world (Wertz 2011).

In respect to method, I engaged with reputable providers of coaching services locally (Sydney, Australia) asking them to identify their most effective coaches with a request to make audio recordings of formal coaching conversations. The professional and ethical issues in this proposal were significant as the confidentiality of executive coaching conversation normally forms part of the formal agreement to undertake coaching. Coaches and clients are usually clear that, as executive coaching often revolves around employee performance, there can be no sharing of information with the employer in particular without the agreement of the client, even though the organization may be funding the engagement. This is fundamental to establishing a relationship of trust and authenticity between coach and client. The study has been designed to safeguard the confidentiality of the participants and to be unobtrusive.

### **1.7 Structure of Thesis**

My thesis has eight chapters. The first is this introduction. Chapter Two is a literature review, representing in part the traditional path of research project in laying out some of the knowledge claims that have been made. It also represents a phenomenological approach which is generative, descriptive and interpretive, therefore making its starting point the history of coaching and tracing its genesis from a slang term for tutoring at Oxford University in the 1830s to the unresolved problem of what it is in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The lack of an agreed definition of executive coaching is reviewed and its implication for the individual coach is highlighted. An account of coaching practices is provided, including key assumptions and alternative approaches. The importance of the coaching relationship is reviewed followed by an extended review of ethics in coaching. The final part of the literature review addresses the issue of learning and coaching with particular reference to experiential, transformative and dialogic learning.

Chapters Three and Four outline methodology and research design and method respectively. Chapter Three introduces the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl as the philosopher who, at the turn of the twentieth century, developed the foundation of

what today remains as a vibrant research community committed to Husserl and other approaches to phenomenology which evolved from his studies. Chapter Four on research design reaffirms the research question, the purpose of the study and contribution to knowledge. Sampling and data collection approaches are described, and most importantly, the ethics requirements that have been implemented are outlined. I outline my research paradigms and how these have been implemented.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven are the phenomenological descriptions, interpretations and analyses in respect to identifying the essences of each of the descriptions in response to the question 'what is executive coaching'. As outlined in Chapter Four on research design and method, each of these chapters has a general introduction which is followed by a lifeworld description of the three coaching sessions which lead to the themes that have emerged. Three themes were identified for each of the sessions and each of these are explored in depth, exploring what is the 'space of meaning', described by Loidolt (2014) as the actual achievement of phenomenology. This employs Husserl's method of zigzagging between what is the natural world and that of reasoning in the phenomenological sense. Finally, these themes are scrutinised for their validity as essences, that without which an object cannot be thought of as a particular type.

The conclusion to this study brings those essences back to the lifeworld of practical reason in its relationship to the sphere of the ethical and value judgements as mutual entwinement between the rational and the affective.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction to Literature Review**

In the methodology section of this study, I will be describing phenomenological description and introducing Husserl's generative phenomenology which gives an account of how a phenomenon comes to have meaning. That meaning is constructed through layers of history which includes the cultural, intersubjective and processes of becoming. This is the rationale for a literature review that contributes to the issue of how executive coaching has evolved over time and is understood through the lens of contemporary practices. The aim of this study was to arrive at phenomenological description of executive coaching, and to contribute a response to the question of 'what is executive coaching'. Determining just what executive coaching is represents a challenge, with contemporary research not agreed on what a definition should, or could be, although learning or development is a pervasive theme of most coaching. However, what is meant by learning or development is not generally well defined either, also creating a problem in determining what executive coaching actually might be. Executive coaching as a practice is multi-disciplinary and my selection of literature seeks to capture the key discourses which frame how meaning is given to executive coaching, while recognising that coaching has grown organically. Understandings of what coaching is have been largely driven by practitioners rather than independent academic effort.

Also problematic is that generalizations are made which do not distinguish between executive coaching and life coaching, for example. Life coaching is largely about personal issues not generally associated with the workplace (Grant 2005). Stern (2008) provides a consensus definition of executive coaching from the Graduate School Alliance for Executive Coaching which describes it as a development process that builds a leader's or would-be leader's capabilities to achieve professional and organizational goals. It is a partnership where the individuals being coached, the coach and the organization work together to achieved agreed upon goals. Korotov (2017) reflects this approach when he suggests that executive coaching is generally seen as a

leadership development process or simply a relationship which helps coachees to improve their work-related performance and satisfaction.

What is apparent across a very broad review of the literature is that it is executive coaching that is predominantly focussed upon. However, prominent member based organizations including the International Coach Federation and the European Coaching and Mentoring Council do not distinguish executive coaching from other forms of coaching as reflected in their accreditation processes. The British based Association for Coaching requires in its accreditation processes that in addition to the broader suite of requirements for what it describes as personal coaches, the executive coach has a knowledge and understanding of working with organizations and leaders. This is particularly important in respect to the tripartite interests of executive coaching which include those of the coach, coachee and the sponsoring organization.

Finally, academic work is concentrated into those few universities which have an interest in coaching, and research is limited to a relatively small number of voices or interests. These are some of the challenges which shape this literature review.

In line with my phenomenological approach, the approach of this literature review is descriptive and it seeks to capture the prevailing discourses which reflect current knowledge. The selection of the sections in this review reflects wide reading over period of years and a focus on the practices that shaped how executive coaching has become a popular leadership development intervention over the past two decades. This includes consideration of what some of the tensions are in how it is now understood. A history of coaching forms the trajectory for current discourse. I discuss some of the definitions that are used in describing executive coaching practice, and the difficulties of arriving at a definition. The practices in coaching generally are shown to have some commonalities, but there remain challenges to what is seen to be a performative orientation to executive coaching. There is, however, strong support in the literature for the importance of the coaching relationship in all coaching, and in particular the need for a client to trust that the coach has the appropriate expertise and is on her/his side. Ethics in coaching generally is an emerging concern, particularly

given that coaching is an unregulated industry. Ethics considerations play an important part in leadership development in respect to social change and how this impacts on leadership development practices is becoming a critical issue in how executive coaching is understood as a practice. Learning is an enduring feature of coaching in general and relevant approaches form the final part of this review.

I follow the hermeneutical approach to a literature review introduced by Tooth (2014) where there is a focus on interpretation. Patton (2015) suggests that in such a review, interpretation starts with a practical understanding which reflects an everyday participatory experience. Throughout this literature review, I have made decisions on what to include or exclude. A broad research question such as 'what is executive coaching' has the problem of how to contain it. However, it is a question which keeps the issue of what executive coaching is alive and phenomenologically open.

## **2.2 The History of Executive Coaching**

Phenomenology is concerned with the formation of our beliefs and concepts, and how this shapes our experiences, which includes consideration of their historical formation both personally and within a broader community (Lohmar 2014). Hence history can be an important part of answering the question of what is executive coaching. From a community perspective, coaching in general is widely associated with sports training and motivation. However, its history is significantly more complex than what this single metaphor presupposes. Notwithstanding associations with pre-history where hunters and gatherers coached each other in developing the skills they needed to survive, or the Socratic method of pursuing knowledge and truth (Gray, Garvey & Lane 2016), coaching first emerged as a term in use for tutoring in the nineteenth century, in about 1830. At the time, a coach was an object used to transport a king, and it was imbued with prestige (Stec 2012). Coaching was used as a slang word for private tutoring for exam preparation as a response to overcrowding in lectures at Oxford University (Brock 2012; Morrison 2010). Contrary to popular belief the term 'coach' migrated from education to the sport of rowing in about 1860, likely to be after it was introduced as a form of tutoring (Stec 2012).

Possibly the first management text that championed coaching was called *The Civil Service Coach*, written by Stanley Savill in 1881 (Stec 2012). Coaching in Savill's book is 'presented as a distinct but complementary way of developing and learning' (Stec 2012, p. 343). It was written to help middle class individuals prepare for and work successfully in government organizations. An EBSCO search shows that at around the same time (1880s) coaching was migrating to private institutions for teaching voice performance or elocution, music and, learning of foreign languages. By the end of that century, coaching was also well embedded in sport, with a *Journal of Education* (1901) abstract reporting on a Superintendent of Schools recommendation that a coach be employed for every public football team. Coleman Grant published a work called 'Psychology of Coaching' in 1926, which was concerned with athletics training (Gray, Garvey & Lane 2016). Grant (2011) suggests that the first peer-reviewed, coach-related journal article written by Gorby in 1937 appeared in *Factory Management and Maintenance*. This two-page article was on the topic of profit sharing and not coaching *per se*. Its coaching reference was to the reduction of costs which was achieved by older employees assuming the task of coaching others in the importance of avoiding spoiled work (Gorby 1937). Stec (2012) notes that in the management field Hadler and Lindeman (1933) and Seckler-Hudson (1948) compared the industrial manager to a football coach. The *Labor Law Journal* in 1957 promoted a Special Conference on Supervision which featured a panel session on coaching.

Stec (2012) suggests that the scene was set for the uptake of coaching in organizations with Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Y. Symbolizing the concept of participative management, McGregor's 1960 book, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, makes a fundamental distinction between management styles. Theory X is an authoritarian style underpinned by the belief that the human tendency was to avoid work. Theory Y introduced a participative style of management where people would willingly assume self-direction and control to achieve organizational objectives to which they are committed. The underpinning principle of Theory Y is that work is an important chance to satisfy a high-level need for achievement and self-respect. McGregor's

theories specifically underpin an early text on coaching in workplaces by Ferdinand Fournies in 1978.

Using a Proquest Search with the key word 'coaching', it appeared that between November 1976 and 1980 there were 16 journal articles in either *Training* or *Training and Development*, showing lively interest in the concept of workplace coaching. In the 1970s, at least four books were published: *Coaching, Learning and Action* (Lovin & Casstevens 1971); *Coaching for Improved Work Performance* (Fournies 1978); *Coaching: A Management Skill for Improving Individual Performance* (Deegan 1979); and, *A Manager's Guide to Coaching* (Megginson & Boydell 1979). These all dealt with managerial coaching, the responsibility of supervisors for fostering the learning and development of the people for whom they are responsible in the workplace. They mark a seminal point in the diffusion of coaching as a discrete practice in organisations. Lovin and Casstevens (1971, p.2) described their approach to coaching as located in the field of adult learning, suggesting that executives had 'accepted the fact that they must help their people learn'. Drawing from Lovin and Casstevens' annotated bibliography it can be seen that as early as 1967 the term 'executive coaching' was in use in the business world, and articles on improving managerial coaching skills were in press from 1957. Articles referencing 'executive coaching' in the Harvard Business Review date from 1953 (Sampson 1953). By the end of the seventies in the U.K., Megginson and Boydell (1979) had outlined practices for what is understood as managerial coaching, mirroring those of today which include executive coaching. Managerial coaching is defined as 'a process in which a manager, through direct discussion and guided activity, helps a colleague to learn to solve a problem, or to do a task, better than would otherwise have been the case' (Megginson & Boydell 1979, p. 5). Whilst such coaching may be directive as initiated by a manager at one end of a spectrum, at the other end it is non-directive. 'It is the learner who identifies the problem and comes up with the solution (p. 9).' The term 'learner' is adopted as the person who is supervised.

The notion of managerial coaching also began to be popularized when it entered the common language of people management and development literature in parallel with



the introduction of Blanchard's situational management styles. The 'Situational Leadership Model' was developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard late in the 1960s (Parsloe & Leedham 2009) and it was popular over the following decades. It is still in use today with many variations appearing in a Google search. The model was represented as four quadrants comprising styles of leadership that a manager may need to adopt in any given situation, based on task complexity and the maturity of the manager allocated to the task. Coaching was one of those quadrants. A coaching style of supervision of job performance was seen as appropriate when the manager has some competence but requires socio-emotional or relationship support to build self-confidence and capacity (Vecchio 1987).

The intersections of coaching today bring together the sporting-derived and humanistic approach of John Whitmore from the U.K. and Tim Gallwey from the U.S.A. The introduction of executive coaching as an intervention in workplaces using an external facilitator came in the early 1980s (Whitmore 2009). Gallwey had published a book, *The Inner Game of Tennis* in 1974. Gallwey advocated for the importance of the opponent inside one's head rather than the one on the other side of the net. Key to his method was to develop in the individual greater self-awareness and self-responsibility (Parsloe & Leedham 2009). Gallwey and Whitmore were both sporting luminaries whose joint sports related work began to be solicited by organizations wishing to bring the coaching sports metaphor to the development of their leaders. Whitmore's 1992 book *Coaching for Performance* was the first contemporary book published specific to executive coaching in particular and coaching in general, using an external facilitator and in its iterative editions remains a foundation text for contemporary principles of and practices in leadership coaching. Whitmore claims that it was Gallwey who had put his finger on the essence of coaching – 'Coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them' (Whitmore 2009, p. 10). It was Whitmore who introduced the widely known GROW principle to all coaching, that is to set a goal, realistically assess it by using questioning skills to raise awareness of the current situation, identify opportunities for taking action and wrap up by gaining commitment

to action steps, often using a scaling system of 1-10 to rate the level of confidence that action steps will be taken.

It is important to note that both Whitmore and Gallwey were also involved with the Human Potential Movement (HPM), specifically through the Esalen Institute in California, established in 1962 (Brock 2012; Wildflower 2013). This period and the influence of Esalen propelled the self-help movement, based in some measure on the development of humanistic psychology. The prominent thought leaders of the movement were psychologists Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Rollo May. Esalen was a centre of creative ferment that brought together the psychological and spiritual principles of both east and west (Wildflower & Brennan 2011). It was also the ground upon which Werner Erhard's controversial EST (Erhard Seminars Training) program was introduced, later transformed into Landmark Education and bought by Thomas Leonard, a former employee of EST, who went on to form the International Coach Federation in 1995, then focused on life coaching. Leonard also established Coach U, the first training provider for aspiring coaches, of particular relevance to life coaching with its focus on personal development through the life course. The International Coach Federation (ICF) is currently the largest coach membership-based organization in the world. The principles of Erhard and Leonard formed the crucible from which the ICF emerged. However, the Human Potential Movement (HPM) became associated with 'sensationalism, zealotry and poor ethical practice' which led to its decline and the emergence then of personal development programs with a stronger emphasis on self-directed learning (Spence 2007, p.259). Spence describes the humanistic assumption that human beings have strong positive directional tendencies towards Maslow's concept of self-actualization, principles which can be said to have a particular influence on the practice of life coaching but influencing the development of executive coaching. This is affirmed by Stober (2006), for whom 'the humanistic theory of self-actualization is a foundational assumption for coaching with its focus on 'enhancing growth rather than ameliorating dysfunction' (p. 18).

Spence (2007, p. 62) argues that 'psychologists possess expertise in principles related to human motivation and behaviour change and, therefore, are uniquely qualified (and

obligated) to protect the integrity of the emerging field of coaching'. Psychologists have had a long-standing interest in coaching as a form of tutoring or athletics training, as an EBSCO search within the Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection shows. In an EBSCO search a 1967 article appears titled *Coaching: A therapy for people who do not seek help* with no information attached to it. Vandaveer et al., suggest that psychologists have had an interest in coaching since the 1940's. It was not until 1996 when the *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* published a special issue on executive coaching that a strong interest appeared in the psychological literature as represented by this search. Evidence-Based Coaching (EBC) was given impetus in 1999 by the establishment of the Coaching Psychology Unit in the University of Sydney, under the guidance of Dr Anthony Grant. Spence (2007) notes that early indication of EBC can be found through the contributions of psychologists Grant and Skiffington, and Zeus in Australia, Peterson in the United States and Palmer and Whybrow in the United Kingdom. It is a research-based approach to coaching.

Coaching launched into the learning and development field at Oxford University, with impacts that quickly spilled over into sports and provision of tutoring opportunities in a range of disciplines. Its early adoption in the world of work was a natural development, which slowly grew in importance of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is now a flourishing industry, one that is still evolving. With a lack of agreed definitions, ethics or pathways into an accepted profession in the traditional sense, the history of executive coaching continues to evolve. The history of coaching shows that its roots were in education and it was quickly adapted to sport. Coaching emerged in the world of work at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and later in association with the Human Potential Movement. Reflecting its history, there are diverse interests and claims in respect to executive coaching and coaching in general, which adds to a richness and complexity in coming to understand what it is in today's organizations. These claims can be reduced to two competing ideologies, one related to performance improvement and competence development, and the other reflected in the Human Potential Movement's focus on psychologized approaches to self-actualization and personal wellbeing.

### 2.3 Defining Executive Coaching

Coaching in general and executive coaching as they are evolving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century remains in flux as its multiple practitioners and stakeholders seek to define it in a way that is consistent with their own practices, interests and ideologies. Achieving a consensual definition of executive coaching is a challenge on multiple levels, when definitions need to satisfy a variety of goals and functions (Gupta 2015). Gupta suggests that different definitions may be subsumed within the Aristotelian principle that a definition 'gives the essence of a thing'. This literature review does not seek to arrive at any definitional clarity, even were that to be possible, but rather is aimed at gaining an interpretative sense of what executive coaching is understood to be in the literature as an initial step in shaping the study. Discussion and debate over the definition of executive coaching persists (Ennis & Otto 2015). Lack of definitional clarity and consensus is seen as an obstacle to executive coaching developing as a profession at one end, while at the other coaches are told it is important that the individual coach be able to articulate his/her own definition to ensure alignment with the client's needs and intentions (Ciporen 2015; Maltbia, Marsick & Gosh 2014). Similarly, Carey, Phillip and Cummings (2011, p. 53) in respect to executive coaching are quoted by Hagen and Peterson (2014) as noting that 'definitions of coaching vary based on perspective, intended recipients, objectives and setting'.

Schutte and Steyn (2015) analysed 36 definitions of executive coaching from the peer reviewed literature. They derived from these a definition on work-related coaching as 'a one-to-one relationship with the purpose to change behaviour through learning to improve organizational effectiveness by setting goals to achieve the desired results' (p. 9). I have collected 54 non-selective definitions of coaching generally in my review of the broad literature including the popular and the scholarly, and 45 use 'learning and development', or 'learning' or 'development' in their statements on what coaching is. This represents a clear trend with 83 percent seeing coaching in general as intimately engaged with practices that lead to learning and/or development. Representing a human resource development perspective the British Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD 2016, pages not numbered) describes learning as 'a self-

directed, work-based process that leads to increased adaptive potential as might be provided by coaching or mentoring opportunities or being part of an online community or personal learning network, for example'. Development is defined by the CIPD as implying 'a longer-term or broader process—acquiring skills or knowledge by a range of different means such as coaching, formal and informal learning'. Development also may be thought of as biological, that is the changes which occur over the life course in stages which are psychosocial, or as a series of temporal progressions that follow the life course (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner 2007). Vygotsky suggests that development is a process that lags behind learning and thus development needs to be scaffolded to bridge that distance (Jarvis 2010). Learning and development are intertwined processes (Wagner & Lang 2011) and it is unclear what the precise definition of development is in those definitions of coaching, in general or specific to executive coaching, that use the term.

At issue is how a definition of executive coaching distinguishes it from other forms of professional approaches which are thought to be similar, and the performance orientation of practices including mentoring, training and management consulting (Egan & Hamlin 2014). Bachkirova, Cox and Clutterbuck (2010, p. 3) note that many definitions of coaching in general 'are not definitive enough to distinguish coaching from its close neighbours—mentoring, counselling and training—as these other forms of helping all make similar claims'. Hence it is that Bachkirova, Cox and Clutterbuck suggest that creating a unique identity for coaching is an unresolved problem. They include counselling as a practice that overlaps with coaching. Standards Australia (2011) clearly differentiates executive coaching from counselling, suggesting that counselling is a practice of restoring personal health and wellbeing in a therapeutic or psychological way which is distinctively different from executive coaches who typically work with normally functioning individuals.

Training, as opposed to learning, is said by the British Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD 2016) to be 'an instructor-led, content-based intervention designed to lead to skills or behaviour change'. What makes training distinctively different from executive coaching is the principle of self-directed learning which is led

by the client with the coach's support and guidance in a collaborative process. Lawton-Smith and Cox (2007) suggest that there is a continuum rather than a boundary between coaching generally and training, while arguing also for coaching's distinct identity in its person-centred Rogerian approach, differentiated from training by always working to the client's agenda. Standards Australia (2011) found that executive coaches often have subject matter expertise and will offer opinions or suggest courses of action.

For the CIPD (2016) executive coaching and mentoring are both described as 'development techniques based on one-to-one discussions to enhance an individual's skills, knowledge or work performance – often for the current job, but also to support career transitions'. The distinction between them lies in the relationship with the individual, coaching being one where listening and questioning enable learning to come from the client. The mentoring relationship is in support of a more junior or less experienced individual through the sharing of the mentor's greater knowledge and understanding of the work or workplace. Tooth (2014) pointed out that part of the difficulty in differentiating executive coaching from other similar helping modalities is that there is disagreement on how those other modalities should be defined. Ellinger and Kim (2014, p. 130 ) suggest that despite these definitional variations and overlaps with other developmental modalities, executive coaching is nonetheless 'a process or set of behaviours that enables individuals to learn and develop as well as to improve their skills'. As Salter (2014) suggests skilled executive coaches operate in an interdisciplinary way. It is the interdisciplinary evolution and methodological eclecticism of coaching that may contribute to its distinctiveness.

The growth of positive psychology in coaching in general has seen coaching in general defined as approaches that seek to improve short term wellbeing (i.e. hedonic wellbeing) using 'evidence-based approaches from positive psychology and the science of wellbeing such as to enable a person to do this in an ongoing manner after coaching has completed' (Passmore & Oades 2014, p.68). If wellbeing is the singular goal of coaching then the question becomes whether coaching is morphing from a performance orientation to a more generalized state, or whether it is coaching at all

and is more properly understood as counselling. D'Antonio (2018, p. 132) describes pejoratively the 'actual-professional status of coaching as a real *kaleidoscope*'. It is suggested by D'Antonio that even positive psychology may not be up to the task of distinguishing between clients who are well adjusted and those who are not. The positive psychology model with its language of diagnosis and intervention (for example Burke 2017) potentially shifts the focus of coaching away from learning and development as a specific and defining characteristic of coaching. In respect to coaching psychology, Vandaveer et al. (2016, p. 122) suggest that executive coaching psychologists, those who are registered as psychologists, engage in a professional practice which is 'an individualised process of professional development in which a psychologist works with individuals one-on-one, and sometimes in a broader context, to help them enhance their effectiveness in their organizational roles and environments.' Theirs is an approach which is grounded in scientifically established psychological theories, and it is an approach which could be broadly applied to a learning orientation and coaches generally, depending on what is meant by development and effectiveness. Chamorro-Premuzic (2019), a psychologist, is clear that the most successful executive coaching sessions focus on changing leaders' behaviours. Effectiveness in this respect, he suggests, translates into better performance of the leader's team. Chamorro-Premuzic suggests that strengths based executive coaching, a feature of positive psychology approaches, is ineffective and does not change behaviours.

Ciporen (2015) suggested that what is important is that the individual coach can articulate a personal definition which is in alignment with the needs of the individual or an organization seeking coaching. While this highlights the idiosyncratic nature of coaching definitions, the more ethical approach may be for the coach to work out what definition of coaching best describes her/his coaching approach in a way that enables the client to determine whether that approach meets his/her needs.

Bachkirova and Kauffman (2009) argued that it is the responsibility of professional coaches to ensure there is a definition of coaching in general that presents an agreed image to the public. However, they came to the conclusion that the complexities of achieving such definition are insurmountable in present circumstances. This shifts the

responsibility for defining coaching to individual coaches, whether executive, life or any other kind of coach.

I have shown that at the systemic level, there is no unifying definition of executive or general coaching even with the prevalence of learning and development as characteristics. Boundary management, the overlapping of all coaching with other similar modalities, is a significant obstacle in developing a clear definition. It also creates tensions, particularly in respect to the boundaries between coaching and counselling or psychology. While outlining the benefits of a universal definition of coaching, Bachkirova, Spence and Drake (2017, p. 6) note that there are 'pragmatic, postmodern perspectives on coaching' that value complexity and context with a preference for diversity that eschews the application of fixed rules and regulations in the coaching industry. Bachkirova, Spence and Drake also mention that novice coaches, consumers and researchers may benefit from a definition of coaching that is sufficiently explicit but also creates a rich, multidimensional picture of coaching in general. In the absence of a unifying definition it is the responsibility of executive coaches to provide a personal definition of coaching, and to represent themselves ethically in the marketplace. For the purposes of this the literature review, I have not attempted to provide a definition of executive coaching. However, the centrality of learning and development in a range of executive and other coaching definitions suggests that learning is well established as a significant theme in addressing the 'whatness' of coaching. Development is a broad term, and a counselling orientation may be integrated into it where clients and/or purchasers seek wellbeing as a specific outcome or as an emergent benefit of executive coaching generally.

## **2.4 Executive Coaching Practices**

This section provides an overview of the practices and models which represent current know-how in the broad field of executive coaching. Theories and models of coaching have evolved from practice and coaches typically develop their models on the particular training they have received (if any) or the professions with which they identify, either before or after becoming a coach (Gray, Garvey & Lane 2016). Thus



executive coaching practice reflects multiple discourses, the dominant continuing to be around 'performance improvement' (Gray, Garvey & Lane 2016, p. 15), emanating from the goal-oriented approach reflected in the sporting metaphor introduced by Whitmore and Gallwey as discussed in my history of coaching. However, as explained, Whitmore and Gallwey were also influenced by Esalen and the Human Potential Movement with its strong emphasis on self-help and personal development. From the 1990s psychologists have introduced executive coaching into their practices, and over the past decades the influence of psychology has added to the performance improvement discourse but also introduced an alternative discourse which is concerned with what is broadly termed as developmental in facilitating inner growth and wellbeing (Bachkirova 2008).

The account I provide is aimed at locating the conversations I have recorded in the general field of established executive coaching practice that appears in peer-reviewed journal articles and edited texts, although I include other perspectives that reflect a research-oriented knowledge base. The difficulty in establishing what are the common practices of executive coaching in meta-analytic studies lies in the failure of many studies to consistently describe the processes or practices adopted in those studies (Jones, Woods & Guillaume 2016). As part of a research-based approach to establishing what executive coaching practices are effective, Jones, Woods and Guillaume suggest that the potential processes that are common to executive coaching include goal setting, encouragement of experiential learning and the setting of development activities in everyday work activity. It is thought to be important in establishing the effectiveness of executive coaching that the goals of the coaching assignment are clear at the outset and if these need to be re-negotiated in the course of the assignment that this occurs explicitly (Ashley-Timms 2012; Bozer, Sarros & Santora 2014; Dagley 2005; Ennis & Otto 2015; Rekalde, Landeta & Albizu 2015). However, it is not universally accepted that goals are central to the coaching process, executive or general, in such an explicit way (Clutterbuck & Spence 2017; Clutterbuck 2013). Carter et al. (2017) note that a comprehensive understanding of the frameworks that guide the research and practice of executive coaching has still not

been developed, and more research is needed to determine what factors affect coaching effectiveness.

The absence of an empirically developed executive or general coaching model has led to a proliferation of models drawing from diverse disciplines reflected, for example, in solution-focused coaching, cognitive behavioural therapy, psychodynamic theory and systems therapy (Augustijn, Schnitzer & Esbroeck 2011). This reflects the dominance of a behavioural sciences orientation. However, Schutte and Steyn (2015) found in a literature review on the building blocks for executive coaching no single model of coaching seemed to be dominant. Nonetheless, they identified in models of executive coaching common practices around goal-setting, self-reflection, behavioural change, situational analysis, time frame and relational processes. Similarly, Wang (2013) in respect to executive and personal coaching notes that there are diverse styles of coaching and no agreement on the best approach. The requirements for coaching will depend on the particular circumstances of the individuals entering a coaching relationship, the context and how the engagement is framed (Wang 2013).

Maltbia, Marsick and Ghosh (2014) note that executive coaching is a process focused on learning, choice, change and growth. They further highlight the need of goal clarity early in the executive coaching process in order to make explicit the indicators of what represents success from the coaching engagement. Goals do change across the span of coaching and it is important to avoid rigidity. However, goals can provide direction to a coaching engagement, and a sense of purpose. Maltbia, Marsick and Ghosh (2014) suggest that goals provide a pragmatic focal point from which consideration and evaluations of the outcomes can be made. It is important to again note, however, that there are reservations about the pervasiveness of goal setting in coaching generally, particularly where the explicit purpose of coaching is to increase self-awareness or self-insight (Clutterbuck 2013). Clutterbuck provides no indication of the extent to which these purposes are explicit for those entering a coaching agreement, nor how the seeking of self-awareness or self-insight might themselves be expressed as high level goals. Clutterbuck argues for a pragmatic approach to goals which also allows them to be emergent rather than pre-set, avoiding the pinning down of the

learner immediately to a specific goal. Specific goals which are challenging and self-congruent are known to be motivating (Clutterbuck & Spence 2017). However, in environments of complexity and rapid change the authors suggest 'fuzzy' goals (or broad intentions) may more appropriately guide action (p.224). Further, they suggest (p.229) that it is a 'misnomer' to suggest that coaching in general be goal free and note that people live their lives towards the future. In respect to self-awareness and self-insight, these may not be expressed as the client's goals in coaching, but may underpin a general approach to all coaching practice.

Vandaveer et al. (2016) developed a research-based competency model for coaching psychology in general, one which has general application in coaching more broadly. They identify eight competencies which occur sequentially. These include needs assessment, contracting, assessment and data gathering followed by feedback on that data to the client, goal setting and action planning, implementation with discovery and learning from insights along the way, evaluation of progress and finally a termination and transition which includes plans for ongoing learning and development into the future. These stages provide a useful heuristic for a generic and systematic set of processes and practices that characterize coaching in general, although assessment and data gathering may be more informal than is implied in this model. In practice, the dynamics of coaching and the variations that occur in a learning collaboration between two individuals, occur in a variety of contexts which may not follow the sequential steps outlined above.

Barner and Higgins (2007, p 148) suggest that although executive coaches are likely to be eclectic in the methods that they employ, whether or not they are aware of it they tend to reflect at least one of four prevailing coaching models: the clinical model, the behavioural model, the systems model and the social constructionist model. In the clinical model, the coach works with the client to gain personal insights by working 'from the inside out' to encourage self-disclosure and examination. The executive coach's role is as counsellor and therapist (thus raising the issue of whether or not this is coaching). The behavioural model encourages clients to understand the impacts of their behaviours and find ways to constructively adapt their behaviour to workplace

requirements. The role of the executive coach is as advisor and facilitator. This approach raises the issue of whether it is the role of the coach to give advice, or the extent to which a coach provides advice. The International Coach Federation has a strong position that coaches in general do not provide advice, which is reflected in its coach credentialing processes. However, this is contested territory (Ferrar 2004). On the one side there is the view that the coach generally should avoid 'telling' and on the other that the coach has a responsibility to 'point the way' or otherwise risk the client's frustration and demoralization (Ferrar 2004, p. 57). Blakey and Day (2012), following on the implications on executive coaching of the 2008 global financial crisis, advocate for challenging feedback which tackles the client's blind spots. An executive coach needs to perform a delicate balancing act which ensures that the client has ownership of the process and is committed to agreed actions. The systems model views leaders as intricate parts of the workplace systems in which they operate. The executive coach shows how these systems manifest effective and ineffective patterns in the organization and relates these to the client's performance. This also places the coach in an advisory role. The social constructionist model is a narrative approach identifying a client's stories and relating them to the organization's story. Executive coaches help clients to understand their selective framing of experiences and to then create new realities for themselves as participants in those social networks.

There are numerous other models that all coaches may draw from. Humanistic approaches infuse most coaching approaches, drawing from the deep well of Carl Roger's person-centred approach to therapy and learning (Stober 2006; Whybrow & Wildflower 2011). In particular, it is the Rogerian principle that underpins coaching generally as occurring within a trusting, nondirective relationship in which people are equipped to understand and resolve their own problems, with great potential for positive growth (Rogers 1951). Stober (2006) suggests that coaching in general is usually less about general growth and more about finding solutions, developing specific skills, or attaining goals. Developmental models of coaching, however, do support general growth and development (Bachkirova 2008, 2011), thus blurring the line between coaching and counselling. In Bachkirova's model, there is a process of working with the self to achieve increased capacities for dealing with the world, thus

enriching one's life. It can be a difficult and challenging approach to coaching in general or specific to executive coaching if accepted as such, one which requires that the leadership coach have a clear idea about his/her own personal developmental stage and an ethical understanding of the risks of pushing against a client's particular world views and values (Cook-Greuter & Stanojevic-Andre 2012).

Stober and Grant (2006, p. 359) advance the idea of a meta-model that 'highlights the importance of the shared view by coach and client of why coaching is being done, regardless of the particular theoretical perspective'. These organizing themes are complemented by seven key principles that underpin the change process, and therefore learning. These principles are (p. 360): collaboration, accountability, awareness, responsibility, commitment, action and results. The nature of the executive coaching relationship (*collaboration*) is a separate section of this overview. *Accountability* rests with the client to take specific action steps that have been agreed collaboratively to move toward achievement of her/his goals. The executive coach's role is to hold the client accountable for taking those steps. Further, the coach's role is first to raise the client's awareness of the issues, using whatever tools are relevant, for example 360-degree feedback. With this feedback, comes self-awareness. With this awareness *responsibility* arises with the client's accountability for the change that is required. From both awareness and responsibility comes the need for *commitment to action* and follow through in implementing those actions. Stober and Grant (2006) nominate a *results* orientation as the essence of good coaching in general.

There are alternative perspectives to the somewhat linear approaches to the coaching trajectory described above. In advocating for a third generation coaching approach, Stelter (2014, 2017) locates coaching in general and specifically to workplaces within a societal perspective in which coaching supports the client in his/her generation of new knowledge and manages a process of social transformation. Stelter's third generation coaching is less goal-oriented, with a more profound focus on values and identity work. It is a narrative, collaborative approach to coaching with coach and client together making sense of our early 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized world in all its hypercomplexity, Stelter suggests. Learning in this relationship is a transformative

process, states Stelter, drawing from the learning theories of Illeris and Mezirow, one in which a shift in perspective may occur. Arguably, any well designed coaching program will strengthen self-reflection, wellbeing, and perspective taking, and Grant (2017) comments on the anecdotal evidence that this is the case, while noting that there has been very little systematic research into these observations. Stelter's is an approach which represents a positive view of humanity and the person as striving towards becoming fully functioning or self-actualising (Bachkirova & Borrington 2018).

For Cox (2013) coaching generally is a facilitated, dialogic, reflective learning practice, which begins and ends with the client's experience in a reflective process. Cox outlines its processes as a coach starting with a client's experience and stories, paying attention to emotions and feelings. Listening is an important coaching skill and process which enables the client to explore their own stories and interpret their experiences from their own experience and reflective interpretations. It is a complex and multi-layered skill, with the coach giving importance not just to words and intonations, but also paying attention to both mind and body in an at least partly empathetic way which recognizes the client as meaning-giving subject, with the intention of producing new understandings that 'carry the client forward' (Cox 2013, p. 53). Cox discusses reflective processes, phenomenologically and transformatively, as processes of bringing experience to a more objective understanding which overcomes subjective judgement.

As much as these descriptions provide accounts of executive and coaching practices and processes in general, little research has occurred on the common processes which characterize coaching in general. Bachkirova, Sibley and Myers (2015) undertook an on-line survey (Q-methodology) of coaching asking participants to rate an ascribed set of listed processes in a typically imagined coaching session. There were 41 recipients widely sourced from invitations sent to member-based coaching organizations. The results suggest that in a typical session 'coaches see themselves as working to explore and understand the world view and goals of the client more than speeding the process and

holding the client accountable' and that the 'coach tries to help the client to identify new possibilities and to find the resources to do so' (Bachkirova , Sibley & Myers, p. 448). The limitations of this study are the small response rate given the wide sourcing, the inclusion of all coaches, not specifically those engaged in executive coaching, and the use of an imagined coaching session which may or may not reflect what happens in reality. The limited inclusion of elements associated with what Bachkirova, Sibley and Myers describe as the managerial discourse, such as high challenge, is pause for thought in respect to the design of the instrument given that a behaviourally focussed process represents a widely adopted approach to executive coaching.

In this account I have presented the range and diversity of practices and models which characterize executive coaching and coaching in general as applicable to executive coaching. Stelter's (2014) third generation coaching represents a particular view, as does Stober and Grant's (2006) more goal-oriented solutions focus. These are 'live' issues in the broad coaching community. In practice, approaches may merge depending on the purpose for which the coaching is contracted, whether it is directly related to performance or is more focused on personal development. The practice models of executive coaching and the contracting stage where the coach and client make explicit their expectations of what the coaching outcomes will be are reflected in the accounts by Wang (2013), Augustijnen et al. (2011), and Vandaveer et al. (2016). To understand what executive coaching is, it is important to acknowledge that there are well established practice models, with different emphases on process and outcomes. Some of these models are research-based and others more experiential. These models are not wholly discrete but inform and enrich each other, reinforcing the idea that coaching is multi-disciplinary, complex and informed by different theoretical interests and values which reflect an evolving approach to practices.

## 2.5 The Executive Coaching Relationship

People live their lives in relation to others, negotiating new meanings and change in complex interactions through work, play and rest. Coaching in general is a practically focused relationship where learning emerges from a conversation between two people who engage each other in prisms of acceptance, challenge and meaning creation as they make sense of each other (Critchley 2010). Relationship is widely accepted as a highly important process variable that impacts on all coaching (Baron & Morin 2009; Bluckert 2005; Boyce, Jackson & Neal 2010, Critchley 2010; de Haan et al. 2013; Gan & Chong 2015). Tooth's (2014) phenomenological study of executive coaching found that a key theme emerging from interviews was the relationship of trust and connection experienced between coach and client.

Drawing from the broader field of psychological practices that have been introduced into the practice and theory behind coaching, the working relationship established between the coach and the coachee is a key variable similar to its application in therapy (Baron & Morin 2009; de Haan 2008). This relationship in psychology is often referred to as the working alliance. It has been found that a strong working alliance in psychotherapy is a common factor in all psychotherapy treatments and may be more important than differences in psychological treatment modalities (Doran 2016). However, Doran suggests that there are conceptual and methodological issues which compromise the measurement of working alliance and that it may account for as little as 10 percent to the success of therapeutic outcomes. Notwithstanding an abundance of literature that deals with the relationship between therapist and client in the psychotherapeutic field, exploration of the coach-client relationship is a new phase in executive and life coaching research (Grant 2014). Grant refers to the general agreement within the therapeutic community that the working alliance includes 'respect for the client's autonomy, empathy, and understanding and support' (Grant 2014, p. 18).

Baron and Morin (2009) were able to identify only three studies that demonstrated a link between the executive coach—coachee relationship and the effectiveness of



executive coaching. In 2015, Gan and Chong acknowledged the research undertaken by Baron and Morin in establishing the importance of the coaching relationship. Gan and Chong (2015) note de Haan et al's 2011 study that found that for a quality executive coaching relationship, empathic understanding and positive expectations were important. However, Gan and Chong (2015) also note that there is little reliable research that has addressed the characteristics of a quality executive coaching relationship. De Haan et al. (2016) found nine studies that had explored the variables within the executive coaching relationship that impacted on coaching effectiveness. Their own study of 1,895 client-coach pairs found significant support for the importance of the coaching relationship. However, the client (coachee) ratings for the importance of the relationship accounted for the 31 percent of ingredients contributing to coaching effectiveness (CE), compared with the coaches' scores which predicted only 4 percent. De Haan et al. (2016) are careful to highlight that the client and coach have their own unique experience of their coaching relationship, as indicated by the different levels of correlation between their relationship estimates.

The quality of relationship appears to be significant to clients, but the de Haan et al. (2016) study found also that general self-efficacy has a vital role in determining coaching effectiveness (CE). The stronger the self-belief of the client indicates a greater likelihood of goal achievement and the success of the coaching engagement. De Haan et al. note that the strength of the working alliance appears to mediate the impact of self-efficacy on CE. This also makes sense, according to the researchers, in that a poor coach-client relationship is likely to reduce the client's level of confidence in his/her ability to achieve the goals related to coaching. Furthermore, it is suggested that a strong emphasis on goals in the working alliance may partially compensate for low client self-efficacy; that is, the achievement of goals builds self-efficacy. This suggests that a good coach-client relationship and appropriate goal setting are both seminal features of effective executive coaching. It is noteworthy that the task and goal aspects of the working alliance, as rated by the client, were significantly more strongly related to coaching effectiveness than the relationship aspect (de Haan et al. 2016). The findings of Baron and Morin's (2009) study contrast with the research into the therapeutic working alliance, which has been transposed onto the executive

coaching relationship, whereas the results from the de Haan et al (2016) study suggest that in coaching the goal and task aspects may be of greater importance. This also corresponds with Grant's (2014) study finding that, although important, the relationship factor was a less powerful predictor of success than the goal-oriented aspect of the coach-client relationship.

These findings are also in alignment with Gessnitzer and Kauffeld (2015) who found that in coaching generally goal and task aspects are far more predictive of coaching effectiveness than the bond aspects of the relationship. As the Gessnitzer and Kauffeld study suggests (2015, p. 203), 'coachees come to coaching seeking to make changes in their personal or professional lives, and it is the explicit role of the coach to support and facilitate such changes.' Gessnitzer and Kauffeld suggest that in the changing dynamics of coaching, relationship may be 'a tool used to facilitate certain aspects of the change process—being challenging, sceptical, or supportive as the coachee, change, or situation requires' (p. 203). Nonetheless, Gessnitzer and Kauffeld conclude that this research serves as a reminder that there is good evidence for the central importance of a strong working alliance from the perspective of both the client and the coach. They report also that the evidence from this research is that the contribution of tasks and goals is more important than that of bonds (relationship). They suggest that, 'This finding may be an important point that differentiates coaching from therapeutic work, and we suggest that future research explore the coach–coachee relationship in more detail' (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld 2015, p. 204). Similarly, they suggest, the self-efficacy of the client is an active ingredient of coaching effectiveness, notwithstanding that it too is mediated predominantly by task and goal aspects of the relationship.

Kilburg (1997) outlined his characteristics of successful executive coaching relationship and these have longevity in coaching (Bluckert 2005). Kilburg advocates for tenderness, playful challenging, tact, consideration and understanding for the complexities of client's life at work and at home. He speaks of Rogerian principles of non-possessive regard and accurate empathy. Kilberg includes the need to provide assistance in the regulation and direction of attention, and to provide knowledge, skill

and technical assistance on the client's organizational systems. As a psychologist, he refers to psychological factors which influence institutional, managerial and personal lives. For Kilberg, these are all part of a more comprehensive list of characteristics that lead to a successful executive coaching relationship. While Rogerian principles may underpin Kilberg's philosophy, Kilberg takes a broader view, such as providing assistance to the client in framing and reframing issues, events and problems. Cox (2013) suggests that the therapeutic model of empathy is limited in coaching in general as that model is focused on diagnosis and treatment. The skills transposed from therapy to coaching may be useful in the development of working relationship, but there are caveats to that usefulness. Thus, the working relationship in coaching needs to be approached from the broader issues of collaboration and clarity in the tasks to be achieved in a partnership.

What may be important to an executive coaching relationship are the qualities the coach brings in establishing 'credibility, commitment, trust, transparency and rapport' (de Haan & Gannon 2017). De Haan and Gannon suggest that rapport requires that coach and client are each at ease in a way that demonstrates warmth, attentiveness and a positive orientation. The client needs to trust the coach if the relationship is to establish a safe environment where she or he can be open, honest and vulnerable (Boyce, Jackson & Neal 2010). Boyce et al. found in a study on successful executive coaching relationships that trust and rapport were perceived by both client and coach as significant predictors of coaching outcomes while recognizing the importance of collaboration in sharing responsibility for success. Cox (2012) suggests that trust in a coaching relationship emerges from non-cognitive, values-based attachment where caring is demonstrated, there is an assurance of confidentiality, and the need recognized for clients to be open and vulnerable within coaching.

The coaching relationship in general is a crucible that facilitates the broad range of coaching practices, practices that work together in a synergistic dynamic to sustain successful coaching outcomes. The practices in psychology provide some clues about the importance of coaching relationships, but coaching and therapy are different in focus and objectives. A good relationship is not an end in itself for executive coaching,

valued as it is. However, it is important because it engenders trust, and supports a client who is at times vulnerable as he/she explores her own thoughts and feelings in tackling a change process.

## **2.6 Ethics in Executive Coaching**

Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck (2014) recommend that in engaging a coach, buyers need to assess the level of professional ethics demonstrated by the coach. Ethics is described as a branch of philosophy that aims to answer the basic question, 'What should I do?' (Ethics Centre 2016). Gebhardt (2016, p. 216) describes someone who is ethical as a person who considers what is good and performs 'right' actions, thus acting as a compass guiding practitioners and organizations. More broadly, for philosopher and phenomenologist, Emmanuel Levinas, the moral imperative and height of ethics is first philosophy; that is, ethics ought to precede ontology in phenomenological philosophy (Glass 2014). In other words, being does not exist for itself, but for morality, the responsibility of one person for another, for the sake of justice, peaceful co-existence, kindness and love (Cohen 2014). For the most part, the topic of ethics as specific to a code of conduct has occupied much of the relevant space in the coaching literature in general. This review will address this aspect of executive coaching, but then explore what the ethics of coaching are in respect to the practice of coaching itself and the implications for leadership development.

Ethics are a guide to assessing the choices of what people ought to do on the basis of the states of affairs they bring about (Alexander & Moore 2015), that is a consequentialist approach. Hence action is guided by the state of affairs they bring about as intrinsically valuable, what is collectively thought of as 'the good'. Ultimately, that good is relativistic, particularly if a cultural dimension is applied, and any 'good' can be judged by its consequences in terms of how beneficial they are perceived to be, a form of what Alexander and Moore (2016, p. 2) describe as 'satisficing'. At a social level, such ethics focus on the maximization of benefits for society, where an action is judged to be right or wrong on an evaluation of its positive and negative consequences (Iordanou & Williams 2017). Established professions operate within the parameters of

a code of conduct and ethical principles. To behave as a 'professional', is to perform 'according to the highest moral and technical standards' (Carr 2014, p. 5). Further, Carr states (p. 5) that 'what mainly distinguishes professions from other occupations is their inherently ethical nature and status'. Coaching as a profession has yet to emerge. This means that all coaches, including executive coaches, are required to self-monitor and self-regulate their professional conduct according to a personal ethical code (Peltier 2010; Skiffington & Zeus 2003).

Ethics statements in the coaching industry are described as 'patchy' (du Toit 2014, p. 23). As the largest membership based organization worldwide, the International Coach Federation (ICF) has a code of ethics (<https://coachfederation.org/code-of-ethics#>) and an independent review process for the management of complaints. A weakness of the ICF code is that it does not adequately deal with the boundaries between coaching and other helping professions, such as psychology. The code requires that members will have the qualifications, skills and experience appropriate to meet the needs of the client and operate within the limits of their competence. The importance of this issue cannot be over-stated (Peltier 2010). Executive coaching is a paid contractual arrangement. The Global Code of Ethics for Coaches and Mentors (2018, pp.1-8) requires that 'members will use their professional knowledge and experience to understand their clients' and sponsors' expectations and reach agreement on how they plan to meet them,' that they will enter a contract appropriate to the achievement of client's and sponsor's goals, and 'will actively work to promote the client's independence and self-reliance'. They also require that the client's interests come first, but in such a way as to 'not harm the interests of the sponsor', that is the organization contracting the coaching.

The research on ethics in executive coaching is thin, with few studies being identified in a comprehensive review of multiple data bases across the behavioural sciences, business and education. Two studies use an interview technique with experienced coaches. Diochon and Nizet (2015) conducted a study with 27 certified executive coaches from the French Coaching Association and the French branch of the International Coach Federation on the usefulness of ethical codes specific to coaching

or organizations. Duffy and Passmore (2010) conducted a study specific to coaching psychologists where the ethical codes in use were those of psychology-based associations and thus not specific to coaching. Both studies found that ethical codes were not sufficient to resolve ethical dilemmas encountered in coaching. Diochon and Nizet (2015) suggest ethical codes need to strengthen the ethical motivation and character of coaches. They suggest that ethics issues should be at the heart of coaching, not the periphery. A third study (Allan & Law 2009) found that issues of confidentiality and boundaries between coaching in general and therapy were those that received particular attention. Peltier (2010) suggests that it is the responsibility of the coach to have a frank discussion with the client and, specific to executive coaching, his/her sponsor where applicable about requirements in respect to safeguarding confidentiality. These requirements, Peltier suggests, might form part of a written agreement which is made early in the coaching relationship.

The issue of how executive coaches approach their practices ethically has placed in the shadows some potentially problematic issues of what coaching stands for in the broader frameworks of leadership development and the ethical behaviour of both individuals and the organizations in which they work. It was first given cogency with Ian Day's questioning of executive coach behaviour and possible collusion with the client's agenda in respect to the 2008 global financial crisis, Day suggesting that coaching becomes 'detached, self-obsessed and far too narrow' (Day 2010, p. 9). The competencies of developing empathy, trust and rapport in executive coaching have been at the cost of 'edgy' conversations which challenge the client and introduce tension in a constructive sense. Day asks how a coach can stay sensitive to big picture systemic issues, including sustainability, ethics, diversity and the environment in a results-oriented business context, while at the same time maintaining a strong and trusting relationship with the client. He suggests that the relationship needs to be strong enough to withstand those tensions and for the executive coach to be willing to take risks.

Shoukry and Cox (2018) develop an argument that executive coaching is a social process with the potential to shift power and support agency. They suggest that

where executive coaching adheres to an instrumental mindset, the risk is that coaching becomes a tool for organizational and social conformity as part of the effects of neoliberalism and its dependence on a discourse of individual competitiveness. Shoukry and Cox further suggest that executive coaching is implicit in the ideology of neoliberalism, quoting Tabarovski as saying 'it strives to attain individual responsibility via an accountability based on the construction of moral agency' (p. 4). In the context of neoliberalism such moral agency is reflected in a self-responsible accountability for one's own good. It is also important to recognize, as Shoukry and Cox do, that executive coaching occurs in a social context that includes the organization and the wider culture of both coach and client. Shoukry and Cox allude to the humanistic psychology which influences coaching as also being complicit with neoliberal ideology. Binkley (2011, p. 377) describes a 'technology of happiness' which is prevalent in a range of fields, including business and executive leadership and in coaching. Binkley relates the compulsory optimism of the happiness discourse to the same corporate aims that led to the global financial collapse and other corporate scandals. It is a discourse that promotes a conservatism and an attachment to the status quo that preserves inequalities and abuses of power.

An executive coaching perspective that derives from positive psychology locates coaching in what Richardson, Bishop and Garcia-Joslin (2018, p.18) summarize as a 'grab bag of techniques from counselling and clinical psychology' that guides individuals to alter their cognitive outlooks in such a way that they see themselves in a more favourable light and, with an 'emotional flush', to perform at a superior level. Hence the good becomes a subjective evaluation that is based on an egocentric, inward-looking perspective, one which is vulnerable to self-deception and blinkers both executive coach and client from the broader social and cultural contexts that Shoukry and Cox (2018) highlight. Sugarman (2015, p.111) is explicit in suggesting that positive psychology and coaching are reformulating the meaning of relationships in the context of an enterprise culture and that what is being eroded is the idea that 'happiness emerges from the depth of our moral concerns and commitments, and the intertwining of emotional lives with others in the bonds of long-term intimate relationships'.

Western (2012) suggests that, as part of an emancipatory approach to ethics and as a trusted partner, the executive coach does not act as an echo-chamber for the client, but offers his or her own thoughts and insights from a big picture perspective that challenges norms or behaviours that do not promote the common good. Short-term goals that characterize coaching engagements, Western suggests, should be used as an opportunity to be more reflective and strategic, helping a leader to take a networked perspective that emphasizes connectivity, ethics and inter-dependence, including the need to engage managers in creating bottom-up transformation rather than relying on a top-down approach. In this respect, Western suggests that executive coaches should have a broad knowledge of organizational and leadership theory and practice and, against casting coaches as neutral, content-free agents, they should act as informed, knowledgeable ones. He advocates for the use of discourse analysis to understand how knowledge and power are embedded and distributed in the social world and that of organizations, but also to explore the hidden norms and truths that underpin the practices of coaching systemically and personally in respect to the individual coach (Western 2012, 2017). Western (2017) argues that a networked discourse on organizations, where coaches recognize that there are multiple actors in fluid, connected networks operating in eco-systems, shifts the ethical role of coaching from being a neutral sounding board to that of active change agent with an ethical stance. It requires that the coach takes a helicopter view where they can work with clients and their organizations in other discourses that are more strategically oriented.

Contributing to ethical practice in coaching in general, Cox (2013) stresses a symbiotic relationship between phenomenological reflection (generally perceived as reflective practice) and critical thinking, suggesting that each is dependent on the other. She suggests a form of phenomenological thinking where the client first describes significant events and their experiencing without evaluation. However, this first step is followed by what Cox describes as the aim of thinking critically: to observe the values and beliefs of the client as they arise and examine the assumptions they embrace, using reasoning. While acknowledging the value of clients' challenging themselves to consider ethical issues in a way that is implicit in a critique of capitalism, she suggests



that facilitating critical thinking capacity supports such a critique indirectly. Cox acknowledges critical theorist and adult educator, Stephen Brookfield, in suggesting how important it is to identify and challenge client assumptions, but also how difficult it can be, a risky task in all coaching, requiring trust and sensitivity to potential emotional responses that are anxiety producing for the client.

Drawing on the importance Cox places on critical thinking, it is useful to find both theoretical and practical understandings of ethics beyond the literature specific to coaching. Cunliffe (2009; 2004, p. 407) discusses critical reflexive practice in the leadership development field as an embrace of subjective understanding of reality in what Pollner defines as 'an unsettling'. She suggests that critical reflexivity is an examination not only of the assumptions underlying actions and their impact in a critical reflexive analysis of organizational policies and practice, but also how they reflect good management practice, not only helping to support learners to engage in critical thinking but to become moral practitioners. Cunliffe invites reflection on three issues: the existential issue of identity, and what sort of person I am and who I want to be; the relational issue of how I relate to others and my world; and the issue of praxis, how a self-conscious and ethically aware subject critically questions not only past actions, but how future possibilities can be shaped.

Cunliffe (2016) suggests that by being reflexive about their own beliefs, values and ways of relating to others and treating them, and being critically reflexive about organisational practices, policies, structures and knowledge bases, leaders can better achieve 'ethical, responsive and responsible organizations' (p. 741). The subjectivist ontology becomes an intersubjective one where it is not possible to think of the self without recognizing that people are always in relation with others, the foundation of thinking ethically. In respect to improving profits in organizations and sustainable growth, authentic leaders act towards those ends through leading from values and purpose, taking responsibility for self and others, deciding through both head and heart with an understanding of the pressures and influences around them, working on self-awareness, on-going self-development and being oneself (Cunliffe 2009). The 'philosopher leader' for Cunliffe is one for whom leadership is relational, moral and

critically reflexive. Leadership as moral activity is not about business ethics with a code of ethics, but is rather who you are.

The limited literature on ethics in executive coaching represents a lack of attention across the industry to the underpinning importance of a strong commitment to ethical practice not just as a professional requirement in respect codes of practice, but in the equally important issue of the development of ethical leaders. It is taken for granted that ethics will prevail, but the complexity of executive coaching, especially in organizations where other values are in play, manifests issues which are not so easily resolved, as the Diochon and Nizet (2015) study found when executive coaches identified the limited value of codes of ethics in resolving ethical issues. Ethics, together with the knowledge, expertise and public service of individuals and the collective, are key factors in the establishment of a profession, but they also represent a moral imperative to do no harm, not only in respect to professional standards. Gray, Garvey and Lane (2016), suggest that a code of ethics is not sufficient to produce ethical professional practice, and that all coaches need to be trained in how to make ethical decisions, a competency that they extend to coaching managers and leaders. The research landscape in respect to ethical coaching is sparse, not just in relation to ethical codes of practice, but also to the larger issue of practice in executive coaching.

## **2.7 Learning and Executive Coaching**

Learning occurs pre-consciously, from before birth (Jarvis 2010). It is fundamental to our humanity and Jarvis notes that, as Dewey pointed out, 'life means growth', where learning and education are enterprises which ensure growth, irrespective of age (Jarvis 2010, p. 12). Dewey (1938) expressed a belief that all genuine education comes about through experience, but that all experiences are not genuinely or equally educative. He suggested that all experience is a moving force, but it is to be judged 'on the ground of what it moves toward and into' (1938, p. 38). It is the responsibility of the educator (or coach) to understand the needs and capacities of the learner at a given time, in a given situation, to help set the groundwork for later experiences which are deeper and have a more expansive quality. That is, they lead to growth and the power

of freedom to frame purposes, judge wisely, and intelligently evaluate courses of action on their likely consequences and significance. Dewey's influence is pervasive, not only in respect to school education but also adult learning. It is a philosophy of direct relevance to the contemporary practice of coaching.

In people's working lives learning is built up in daily experiences, the formation of every day habits, and the sedimentation of the ordinary expectations of the business world, organizations and institutions (Saevi & Foran 2012). Executive coaching is concerned with working lives, and learning is implicit in the continuing adaptation to workplace practices. Hence it is that many definitions of, or introductions to, coaching in its many manifestations make reference to learning as established earlier in this literature review. There are others who do not specifically reference learning and are more likely to focus on goal-directed or performance-oriented criteria (Stern 2008). There are dissertations and journal articles that describe adult learning theories as they apply to coaching as well as a small number of books (for example, Askew & Carnell 2011; Brockbank & McGill 2012; Cox 2013; Potter 2017). Learning happens in executive coaching (Ellinger & Kim 2014). It is suggested that it is learning theory that underpins all coaching practice (Brockbank 2008; Brockbank & McGill 2012; Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck 2010; Potter 2017). Gray, Garvey and Day (2016) describe all coaching as, in essence, a dialogic learning process. However, as Brockbank and McGill (2012) comment, coaching has tended to borrow from disciplines such as psychology and psychotherapy. The research base on learning in executive coaching is limited, with few peer reviewed research articles identified in my review. Sammut (2014) investigated learning from the perspective of eight coaches and suggested that transformative learning principles could be found in their approaches to coaching. Other studies have been conceptual (Brockbank 2008; Fazel 2013; Griffiths 2015). Kolb's experiential learning cycle is theorized (Kemp 2008; Turesky & Gallagher 2011). Cox (2006, 2013, 2015) has written on andragogy, transformative learning, experiential learning and critical reflection, applying theory to the practice of all coaching.

In understanding learning in executive coaching two polarities come into play, one founded on the humanistic principles of Carl Rogers, and the other on an

understanding of learning which reflects Paulo Freire's description of the 'banking' metaphor (Cunliffe 2004; Hager & Hodkinson 2009). In his critique of it, Freire (1972, p. 4) described the banking approach as a transfer of knowledge by 'those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing'. The key assumptions of the banking approach are that social reality is objective and that learning occurs inside the head as a structured cognitive process where knowledge is aligned to individual actions in order to achieve efficiency and effectiveness in practices across many spheres of human endeavour. Rogers (1951) suggests that what is desired from learning and education is growth, and this involves a change in the self, drawing from the client's own resources. However, in respect to group learning, Rogers suggests that the 'leader' of the group has responsibilities (1951, pp. 401-418). First, it is the leader's responsibility to set the mood or climate based on trust in the group. The leader helps to elicit and clarify the purposes of the learning and identifies and makes easily available all the resources the students may wish to use for their learning. The leader becomes a flexible resource to be used by the learners, and as a participant in the learning process may express a viewpoint. It remains the role of the learner to assess that opinion and accept or reject it and evaluate whether his/her learning goals have been met, which is itself an opportunity for growth. Rogers' approach to learning reflects some of the principles he applies to therapy, but these are not identical and the learning facilitator has a different range of responsibilities compared to therapy.

It is Roger's person-centred therapeutic approach that has been widely applied to coaching in general. The principle is adopted that the coach be non-judgemental and, whatever the client may say or do in a coaching session, the coach must accept the learner's right to make their own choices. The client is regarded as a capable and resourceful individual who can take full responsibility for their own learning, with the coach's responsibility being to create a safe, reflective space in which the client can do so (van Nieuwerburgh 2016). Adopting Rogerian principles from therapy, the coach is expected to be non-directive, reflecting back to the client what she or he has heard, only to confirm understanding of the client's perspective, not to comment on it. This autonomous human being is thus seen as being capable of finding their own solutions.

The atomized client is dependent on her/his own resources for learning. In practice, neither of the ideologies, the banking or the person-centred therapeutic, are full accounts of contemporary understandings of learning, focused as both are on the individual. It is important to be aware that workplace practices, including those of management and leadership with which executive coaching is particularly concerned, are sites of powerful and pervasive learning (Boud & Hager 2012). Practice theory has become a contemporary lens for analysing all kinds of human activity, including learning. Boud and Hager describe practices as the linking of ends, means and feelings to what are sense-making approaches to the way things are done in the workplace, that is to a shared practical understanding. Professional learning can be described as an outcome of participating in practices, where individuals draw on the expertise of peers and others in progressively extending their capabilities and skills in a complex web of context, interactions and expectations. Executive coaches expect their clients to be resourceful and responsible for their learning, but it seems unlikely that any individual, including coaching clients, have all the resources necessary for learning new practices in the workplace. Nor may the executive coach, but it is the collaborative effort with the client that is more likely to generate learning and development when their respective resources are shared. Ultimately, Boud and Hager (2012) suggest that in respect to individual professional development what is acquired is only of value when played out in practices.

In summary, learning can be understood in three ways. Firstly, learning is the acquisition of knowledge or skill, both know-what and know-how, which is a product that can be transferred from one situation to another. It is individually acquired and portable (the banking metaphor). Secondly, learning can be understood as participation, a process of engaging in socio-cultural activities and construction which is still associated with the individual's 'knowing from within' (Cunliffe 2004, p. 411). Thirdly, in practices, learning can be understood as emergence and becoming, an ongoing embodied activity in complex systems where shared learning and individual learning is co-dependent (Boud & Hager 2012). The humanistic values of Rogers' client-centred therapy with its emphasis on self-efficacy and personal responsibility can form a back-drop to shared learning approaches as they relate to leadership

development and learning for work where it is recognised that individuals alone are unlikely to hold all the keys to personal change.

I now move to an account of two learning models which are specifically associated in the literature with coaching in general, experiential learning and transformative learning. I also include dialogic learning as being particularly appropriate to coaching.

### **Experiential Learning**

It is the work of David Kolb that forms the bedrock of much of the contemporary literature on experiential learning. Kolb (2015) is explicit in acknowledging the legacies of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget in his work. Kolb draws from Dewey's classic book, *Experience and Education* (1938), and his philosophy of pragmatism. Lewin is a central influence in respect to his contributions to social psychology and organizational behaviour. Kolb refers to the vast scope Lewin's work, including the introduction of T-Groups (training) which included a focus on the value of subjective personal experience to learning. Piaget is acknowledged in respect to his work on cognitive-developmental processes and Bruner's adaptation of the processes to curriculum development where children's learning is experientially based.

Experience, states Kolb (2015), plays the central role in the learning process. Kolb suggests that as a learning theory, an experience-based approach is a holistic, integrative experience 'that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behaviour' (p. 31). It is not a simplistic interpretation, a valorisation of experience as the source of adaptive learning. Rather it is represented as a learning cycle that engages 'the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/abstraction' (p. 51). Kolb's account of what learning needs to be effective requires particular kinds of abilities within each stage of his process. The concrete experience phase needs to be engaged in fully, openly and without bias in new experiences, a demanding requirement that our assumptions are made known to us and put aside. The reflection to abstract conceptualisation stage requires that the learner reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives and integrate those experiences into

logically sound theories to make decisions and solve problems. This then leads to active experimentation which itself triggers another round of experiential learning. The requirements of each of these stages represent an ideal that Kolb himself acknowledges is hard to achieve and that the 'dialectic conflicts' involve tensions. It is through a resolution of creative tensions among the four learning modes that learning arises. In respect to coaching in general, Cox (2013) recognises that there are transitory activities in the experiential learning cycle which requires dialogue and support from a coach. She elaborates on her constructions of reflection to incorporate the clarification of meaning in terms of self, with detailed descriptive accounts including perceptions and emotions. This is followed by encouragement of critical rational thought before it is integrated into experience as a taken-for-granted way of thinking and acting.

Kolb notes the critiques of his model that it is highly individualized and privatized experience, with such an emphasis down playing the historical, cultural and social context of learning. Kolb in response defends individuality and relatedness as poles in a dialectic of development in experiential experience. Kolb says that learning is not a 'single specialized realm of human functioning such as cognition or perception' (2015, p. 43). It involves the integrated functioning of the total organism—thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving. To learn, it is important that the individual reflect on the experience they have had and find new ways of thinking, feeling or doing in a process of becoming. The executive coach's challenge is not just to support a client in relating her/his experiences, nor to simply reflect on those experiences. The abstraction and conceptualisation phase is where learning happens according to Kolb, and it is likely to be the most demanding part of the coaching process in an experiential learning model. The action step in the cycle is also a powerful learning opportunity.

### **Transformative Learning**

Jack Mezirow introduced his theory of transformative learning in 1978. For Mezirow, learning is understood as 'the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future

action' (Mezirow 2000, p. 5). Transformative learning, according to Mezirow (2012, p. 90) 'involves liberating ourselves from reified forms of thought that are no longer dependable'. The key principles on which such learning rests are those of frames of reference or 'meaning perspectives' or habits of mind and points of view which are dimensions of those frames of reference. Learning occurs when meaning perspectives are challenged and changed. Believing that there are 'no fixed truths or totally definitive knowledge' (Mezirow 2012, p. 73), Mezirow suggests that adult learning should emphasize contextual understanding, engage in critical reflection on assumptions, and validate meaning by assessing reasons. This occurs in the process of reflective discourse, and then the taking of action. These are principles which lend themselves to the practice of coaching and led to its being identified as a pillar of coaching in general (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck 2010).

Reflective discourse is of particular interest as a tool for the assessment of the justifications and interpretations of belief in order to build new understandings. Mezirow (2012, p. 81) describes discourse as 'the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience'. This requires the ability of the coach to support the client to critically reflect on his/her tacit assumptions and expectations not just in relation to their own experiences and perspectives, but in relation to those of others and to a normative context where there are obligations, standards and expected ways of doing things. These are influences on our assumptions which need to be surfaced and explored in identifying what could or should change. For Mezirow, it is a form of cognitive processing, an epistemic cognition which includes reflection on the limits of knowledge, its certainty, and the criteria for knowing. In other words, we must be able to justify our beliefs rationally and in relation to our emotions not just on what, but also how we think. It is not just reflective process but a reflexive one which transforms the way a client makes meaning. Transformative learning at the level of reflective discourse and subjective reframing can be an 'intensively threatening emotional experience' (Mezirow 2012, p. 76) but this form of critical reflection is what makes possible a high degree of autonomous learning. Thus it is for Mezirow that transformative learning enables



people to act on their own purposes, values and meanings to better take control of their lives as socially responsible and clear thinking decision makers.

Executive coaches as learning facilitators can challenge clients to critically question their epistemic assumptions, how they know the world that they experience, and reframe their assumptions in an explicit way that provides critical distance from them. Changing these assumptions requires critical self-reflection, including applying insights from alternative narratives to one's own. Mezirow (2012) believes that such discourse is integral to transformation theory, describing it as a specialized use of language in search for common understanding as well as critical assessment of assumptions. It becomes the role of the executive coach to facilitate that critical assessment. Cox (2013) brings to coaching an account of the practices of reflection on experience and critical thinking that captures the value of transformative learning but draws from a broader theoretical and phenomenological reservoir which incorporates those practices into a useful model for all coaching, inclusive of executive coaching.

### **Dialogical Learning**

Dialogic learning is a particularly relevant approach to executive coaching in its one-on-one learning relationship and a conception of pedagogy which is 'concerned with relationships, attitudes and approaches that take place *between* people rather than those that are delivered from one person to another' (White & Peters 2011, p. 10). Occasional reference is made to dialogical learning in coaching in the general literature (for example, Gray, Garvey and Lane 2016), but in my search of relevant databases, it does not seem to appear in the peer reviewed literature in a thematic way. The dialogic, as introduced by Russian intellectual and teacher Bakhtin in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is an open-ended play of meanings which supports the development of self-consciousness through interpersonal understanding and the presence of an abiding tension between self/other which is unresolved (Mittra 2013), notwithstanding a genuine concern for one's partner in interaction (Arnett, Bell & Fritz 2010; Kathard, Pillay & Pillay 2015). Bakhtin (1986) introduced the distinctions that are made in language between sentences and utterances, sentences as a unit of language and

utterances as units of speech communication. Bakhtin describes the utterance as being filled with dialogic overtones. That is, it includes an expressive aspect in a subjective emotional evaluation of the semantic content of the speaker's utterance and that of the other. An utterance is a response to what has already been said in any form of communication and there is no such thing as an absolutely neutral utterance. For Bakhtin (p. 92), thought itself is 'born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with other's thought'. Hence it is for Bakhtin that dialogism is an inter-relatedness of self and other in both language and being, where knowing emerges in the crucible of difference, in judgement, and self-consciousness based on that judgement (Aggarwal 2015). A dialogic learning outcome is not only about acquiring knowledge, it is also about being able to become different, imbued with the capability to transform. While there may be a focus on the individual's 'becoming,' the dialogic, following Bakhtin, is an embodied open-ended play of meanings that supports the development of self-consciousness through interpersonal understanding. This focus on meaning was achieved through a 'phenomenological analysis layered with a concern for ethical responsibility or oughtness' (White & Peters 2017, p. 930).

Johnsson (2013), in investigating learning at work, introduces the principal concept of dialogism as explanation for how 'the uniqueness of individuals can be reconciled with sociality in the world' (p. 1253). *Being* in Bakhtin's terms is always co-being in a world that cannot be other than social. Johnsson (p. 1254) quotes Bakhtin as saying that 'dialogue is composed of an utterance, a reply, and relation between the two. It is the relation that is most important of the three, for without it, the other two would have no meaning.' This thirdness opens up a circumscribed meaning to a time beyond itself where it can always be renegotiated in an ongoing relationship, or any of the relationships that follow. However, it is also represented by Bakhtin's superaddressee, the assumed idealized third person who is present to the conversation, and who is both understanding and just. The superaddressee is the conscience of both, an ethical presence (White & Peters 2017). To dialogic relationality is added the concept of answerability for the step taken together, a step which is not just constructed meaning, but is infused with an understanding of its associated values, locating that step not just in the temporal or spatial, but also the axiological. These dialogic steps or

moments are tied together with judgments of whether the time and place are good or bad, with all the shadings that may be implied. This introduces the concept of ideological becoming, where ideology is read as a desired ideal (Matusov 2011, p. 28). It is about how humans construct their viewing of the world or their own systems of ideas. Change in how those viewpoints and systems 'can be made possible only through dialogic interactions with others and the diversity of voices heard (or not heard) in these interactions' (Matusov 2011, p. 28). In that interaction, decisions will be personally made and justified as to what voices are acknowledged and what ideologies are privileged.

Holquist (2002) describes the Bakhtinian enterprise at its heart as dialogue marked by constant struggle and movement. Coach and client each bring a unique perspective to the dialogic learning space. The executive coach's role can be to introduce dialogic provocations that ontologically engage her/his coaching partner in justifying and testing his/her own alternative responses in what Matusov describes as 'responsive authorship' (2011, p. 27). The dialogic provocations can be either emergent or prepared, depending on what the coach and client agree as conversational threads that may contribute to achieving the client's goals or broader objectives. Differences in meanings are to be celebrated with knowledge growing only when humans immerse themselves in the variety of meanings that exist simultaneously among conversational partners. Bakhtin uses the term 'heteroglossia' to reflect the coexistence of a diversity of voices, having distinct meanings and values, whether in a speech act or in text (Aggarwal 2015). To that diversity in dialogue we all bring what Bakhtin calls a 'surplus of seeing' (Aggarwal 2015, p. 35). Each of us sees something which the other cannot yet see. What is shared in the relation is a mutuality of difference. The greater the diversity of voices, the more likely there are new communication challenges, 'but also exciting opportunities and possibilities for expanding our understanding of the world' (Freedman & Ball 2004, p. 6). Those which are most effective in promoting learning, suggest Freedman and Ball, are those where there is tension and conflict. The idea of coach as provocateur may be a controversial one in executive coaching, but fully understood as dialogical learning, executive coaching opens itself to the introduction of variety of ideas or discourses where the coach does not set herself as the voice of

authority but nonetheless facilitates a contest of ideas with the tension and struggle which characterises dialogic learning.

In this part of the literature review, I established that learning is ubiquitous and that typically definitions of coaching in general refer to learning. Given the pervasiveness of this definition, it might have been expected that learning is a phenomenon that has been extensively investigated in coaching. However, the research base is small. Drawing from the literature and looking at learning in executive coaching, I characterised an approach to learning as Rogerian, which at its limit represents the learner as an atomized individual fully responsible for his learning without input from the coach other than as an affirming reflective partner, balancing that with Roger's own account of learning. On the other hand, I drew from the literature to show that learning is more multidimensional and embedded in social practices. I described models of learning which have been particularly associated with learning, all of which require the executive coach to play a more active role than simply reflecting back the client's own perceptions or accounts of experience. Experiential, transformative and dialogic learning all involve tensions and the facilitation of critically reflective analysis through a discourse which challenges assumptions and interposes alternative narratives to those of the learner. Dialogic learning in particular references the mutuality of difference and the appeal to an ethics, or what ought to be done, suggesting the role of coach as that of provocateur. In summary, Rogerian principles are important to the extent that the learner needs to feel valued by the coach and to accept responsibility for his/her learning. Just as important is the social context of learning and the tensions that this may generate.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

In this literature review, I have outlined the development of executive coaching described some of the discourses that demonstrate a set of challenges in specifying what executive coaching is. Coaching has migrated through multiple iterations which are reflected in its origin as a personal form of tutoring to an emerging discipline in its own right, but one which does not yet have the status of a profession. I have set out

the general research effort as applied to the evolution of executive coaching and how it defines itself as a practice. As an emerging practice in the workplace, the research base is not large, and there remains a lack of consensus on what executive coaching is, which creates particular problems in respect to how it might develop as a profession, what it is that researchers are actually investigating and how executive coaches represent themselves to their clients. The language of psychology adds particular perspectives on how executive coaching is understood and practised in the contemporary literature which at the level of practices may not be distinctively different to those who are not psychologists. However, highly individualised wellbeing and interior personal development approaches may become the specific purpose to which a goal-free executive coaching applies itself, and the executive coach's role cast as one of unconditional positive regard and non-judgemental acceptance of the client's viewpoints, independent of the workplace context. In a workplace learning approach, a banking metaphor would place the executive coach in the role of knowledge expert and directive advisor who tells the client how to meet the behavioural expectations of the organization. Neither of these extremes is likely to be tenable in respect to executive coaching but this characterisation serves to reflect the polarities between them.

At issue is whether executive coaches will play a role that is non-directive, believing the client to have all the resources necessary for learning and development, or one that is more aligned with the dialogic protagonist in challenging the client's assumptions and stretching learning with the suggestion of alternative narratives in the practice of leadership. In practice, it may be possible that the two approaches be integrated. When coaching started as a form of tutoring, knowledge was seen as stable and certain. It was transferable in a way that is consistent with a banking metaphor of learning. That is no longer the case and the understanding of learning itself has evolved. Overlaying all approaches is the ethical perspective, asking what ought to be done at the individual and systemic levels of leadership development and executive coaching. In asking the question 'what is executive coaching?', it is timely that this question be asked and considered in a way that does not foreclose on the

study, but acknowledges the organisational context of executive coaching and the broader field of leadership development.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will explain why and how I arrived at my selection of Husserl's phenomenology as a research methodology. Husserl's is a descriptive phenomenology (Welton 2000). I will describe how Husserl's approach resonated with me at a personal level for this research project, explore descriptive phenomenology further at a general level for the research I had planned to undertake and then outline some of Husserl's key philosophical principles. The method of research that Husserl used was highly technical, innovative and at times inconsistent. It is technical, reflecting Husserl's background as a mathematician and his training in formal logic. He was largely self-taught as a philosopher and his work draws from ancient and contemporary (of his time) philosophical work. Husserl's phenomenology is innovative because Husserl radicalized the philosophies of Descartes and Kant in creating a philosophy and methodology which was distinctively his own. Inconsistencies arise because of the vastness of Husserl's work and the task of deciphering, editing and translating it has meant that further developments in his thinking have not been taken into account by some writers and commentators on his work. Gill (2014) suggests that in selecting a phenomenological research method, it is important to understand that methodology rests upon an interpretation of the philosophy which underpins it. This overview of descriptive phenomenology aims to achieve a level of understanding of Husserl's philosophy, while acknowledging that there is an active community of scholars who continue to decipher, interpret and critique Husserl's large body of work. For example Vagle (2014a) expresses reservations about the concept of essences, suggesting that phenomenology proceed in dialogue with the work of Deleuze & Guattari (1987), with their concept of lines of flight. Sparrow (2014) notes the 'end of phenomenology' (p. xi) in a constructive criticism of phenomenology as metaphysical, and as facing the challenge of speculative realism. I note that in philosophical circles the status of phenomenology continues to be contested, much of which, to quote Sparrow is 'incoherent' (2014, . 186). These debates are beyond the scope of this account of phenomenology, but is important that I acknowledge them.

Husserl's concerns were focused on how people come to know phenomena in acts of consciousness. As the investigator, it is the active researcher who applies the principles and practices of those personal acts of consciousness consistent with Husserl's phenomenological methodology, the principles and practices of which will emerge in this and the following chapter on research design. Husserl investigated the relationship between object and subject, how each is reciprocally understood in terms of how the world and its objects are constituted in perception, or take shape through the dynamics of experiential life (Pulkkinen 2014). That experiential life is what we are familiar with in the 'natural attitude', the habitual way in which we passively assume that a 'real' world exists for us. For Husserl, there is a real 'being-in-itself' for the world and all that is objective in the world. However, we can only know that being through the 'sense bestowal of consciousness' (Moran 2005, p. 5881/8010). While phenomenology shows us how we do this, it also shows how we can overcome what we take for granted by adopting a self-conscious stance through reflectiveness and reasoning in an analysis of the essential meaning structures we attribute to objects in the world. I will, in this study, be exploring the meaning of executive coaching as it occurs in the natural attitude and as essential structures in Husserl's distinctive reasoning process.

There is a distinctive ethical call in Husserl's work. Husserl was called by the circumstances of his times, lamenting as he did the crisis of European sciences and their application to the 'humanistic disciplines' (Husserl 1970, p. 4). Husserl shows how the legitimacy of the methodic accomplishments of the sciences in modernity had separated them from their own humanity in striving for objective, empirical evidence unrelated to practical life and the values of what is in the interest of the common good. He sought a philosophy that was against an 'absolutization' of a world that is independent of human consciousness and knowledge of it, invoking instead the idea of a full, living sense of all humanity, with its cultural institutions and history as the foundation for absolute rationality (Moran 2005, p.5278/5285). Husserl advocated for the possibility of collective responsibility and renewal in the ideal of a 'community of love' as an expression of his social ontology and as a striving for the common good



without compromising the inalienability of individual will (Miettinen 2013, p. 330). That will is understood in respect to the necessity of self-responsibility. The self-responsibility that Husserl holds as first principle is a commitment to self-conscious reasoning on the object of consciousness through reflective critique and justification (Cai 2013).

Descriptive phenomenology as a philosophy following Husserl is concerned with a conceptual analysis on the basis of reason, and not with our inner private feelings or reports (Tieszen 2016). Husserl rejected categorically any attempt to equate phenomenological intuition as a type of inner experience or introspection, and he even argued that the very suggestion that phenomenology was attempting to reconstitute a method of introspection to be 'preposterous' (Zahavi 2017, p.13). Zahavi goes on to suggest that the goal of phenomenology has not been to offer descriptions of idiosyncratic experiences but rather to attend to the invariant structures of consciousness in creating the meaning of phenomena, the starting point of which is an individual's access to his/her own lived experience. That lived experience is reflected in how people come to know the world, but the more encompassing project of phenomenology is found in a reasoning process that brackets the world as naively experienced. This bracketing is achieved through the epoché and reduction, techniques which will be described as this and the next chapter unfold. The lived experiences of individuals has lent itself to contemporary approaches to phenomenology drawing more of their philosophical foundations from Heidegger (Gill 2015). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, for example is an example of the flourishing use of introspective accounts for the analysis of individuals' self-consciousness, as Gill notes in suggesting that it is well suited for studies which bring emotions, for example, into the study of organizations. My study acknowledges the importance of lived experience in Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, and integrates it into Husserl's reasoning processes in an approach which is relevant to my research question. As I have chosen empirical examples to ground 'lived experience' of the phenomenon in question, that is executive coaching, the reasoning processes applied provide depth to the reflective analysis of establishing the 'whatness' of the research object. It therefore provides a unique and rigorous process for developing definitional

clarity to the phenomenon in question, that is as an approach to the research question 'what is executive coaching?'.

As might be expected from a methodology that now has a century's thought and development behind it as the world slowly oriented itself to Husserl's works, there are various adaptations and conflicts as to what it means to 'do' phenomenology. I remain close to Husserl as I work through a selective range of viewpoints on how phenomenological methodology has evolved. I outline some of the typical definitions of phenomenology but have sought only a flavour and reinforced the tentativeness of phenomenology before moving on to a discussion of descriptive phenomenology as Husserl's distinctive methodology. Phenomenology uses terminology that is sometimes difficult to decipher. I introduce some of its key features and provide more detail in the chapter on 'Research Design and Methods'.

### **3.2 Husserl's Project**

Husserl developed a methodology and a set of conceptual tools which reflect what he sees as 'the demand for a philosophy aiming at the ultimate conceivable freedom from prejudice, shaping itself with actual autonomy according to ultimate evidences it has itself produced, and therefore absolutely self-responsible' (Husserl 1999, p. 220/3112). Husserl's intention was to provide to the world a phenomenological movement and this movement was presented as a working philosophy. Hence it is that in working with phenomenology one needs to be aware that in contemporary terms the challenge is to decipher that philosophy in such a way that it lends itself to present-day research. Methodology, method and philosophy in Husserl's work are inter-related.

In the above quote Husserl's call for 'freedom from prejudice' is reflected in his insistence on the epoché and the reduction, the foundation blocks of what is in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century understood as method. The epoché is a personal discipline of clearing the mind of the beliefs, prejudices and presuppositions that are the natural attitude of people's day-to-day activities. The natural attitude is the habitual way people see, interpret and act in the world, and it will be discussed more fully as the chapter

progresses. The other side of the reduction, a leading back refers to ultimate evidences sought through close observation and deep reflection, and multiple aggregations of possibilities until there is a sense of truthfulness, bearing in mind that this truthfulness is always open to revision should further evidence warrant it (Husserl 1969). Husserl does not envisage a world of truthful certainty but nonetheless he strives to achieve what he knew to be the impossible goal of identifying the truth. The ideal persists only until the next piece of evidence overturns it. All science, in Husserl's model, must recognize its own subjectivities and belongingness in a lifeworld, one shared by all humanity.

With considerable indebtedness to the works of one of his early philosophy teachers, Franz Brentano, Husserl's early work represented a typology of phenomenology consistent with the dominant realist paradigm of the time (Moran 2005). However, Husserl came to believe that philosophy could provide the foundation upon which the natural sciences then stood (Schwab & Woodruff Smith 2014), reflecting Husserl's ambition for a fully scientific humanity as its point of highest achievement (Cohen 2014). Husserl's ambition for philosophy was to be a rigorous science, one that exceeded realism by giving consciousness a privileged status as immanent perception – that is, consciousness itself as something independent of experience (*a priori*), fully self-given (*apodictic*) and certain. Husserl is not arguing that perceptions are certain, only that perception itself is universal, and therefore certain, among all conscious human beings (Gable 2006).

### **3.3 Towards a Definition of Phenomenology**

It was lamented in 1958 that, with the passage of time, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what the term phenomenology means (Lauer & Gurwitsch 1958). Husserl characterized phenomenology as the systematic study of an essential correlation between subjectivity and objectivity (Moran 2005). He wanted to clarify the meaning of the domain of essence, that which 'necessarily belongs to the nature of something as the very kind of thing it is' (Moran 2005, p. 443/8010) rather than as what our inner mental structures assume it to be. A life of knowing is approached as a

life of meaning or intending that is always at its essence object-directed. Object is anything to which perception is directed, material or immaterial. Knowing (subjectivity) and being (objectivity) are correlated in phenomenology. Hegel is claimed to be the first philosopher to construct a technical meaning for phenomenology, that is, knowledge as it appears to consciousness (Moustakas 1994). Husserl radicalizes and transforms Hegel's meaning, drawing much from Kant's project of transcendental philosophy. Kant introduced a doctrine which suggested that objects as they occur in space and time are appearances which we can only know as an inner, introspective sense (Stang 2016). Husserl sought a renewal and reform of Kant's transcendental idealism as he sought to develop his own approach to the issue of how things appear to us (Luft 2014; Moran 2005). He applied the term 'transcendental' to cognition as being occupied not just with objects, but also with the mode of cognition of objects (the way people see the things they see), to the extent that it is possible *a priori*<sup>1</sup> (Lawhead 2015). It also shifts a study of experience in general to 'the necessary conditions of its possibility' (Lawhead, p. 361). Transcendental structures of experience are those formal features that are not limited to any particular experience but are the universal and necessary features of all experience. Hence, in respect to the phenomenological topic of coaching, I seek to find evidence of those *a priori* structural features that are a necessary condition to the experience of executive coaching, or, in other words, what is it that underpins the possibility of an executive coaching experience, where, in Husserl's terms, possibility is essence.

A definition of phenomenology, as Reeder (2010) suggested, is only ever tentative. Phenomenology attempts to describe, as faithfully as possible, the layers of evidence from our conscious reasoning that underpin the knowledge claims of lived experience. Like Kant, Husserl sought to integrate two opposing philosophical epistemologies as they were emerging at the time (and continue to do so) – the realist, analytic approach and the idealist, continental approach (Reeder 2010; Sebold 2014). Idealism reflects

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<sup>1</sup> Husserl uses the term *a priori* 'to denote the material content that conditions all knowledge upon the natural standpoint' (Kelly 2014, p. 42). Moran & Cohen (2012) describe *a priori* knowledge as drawn from the resources of the intellect. It can be derived from a formal ontology such as mathematics, or a material ontology, such as the genuine content of what is perceived, such as a house, a colour or a tone. As an *a priori*, an object requires necessity and universality.

the German movement that proposed that 'everything must be understood as intrinsically dependent on some sort of mental or spiritual reality' (Lawhead 2015, p. 379). Husserl's treatment of idealism reflects his attempt to move away from any proposition that could attract the criticism of being metaphysical. The realist approach is based on the acceptance that reality exists independent of perception. The world is empirical, actual and real. Theoretical constructs are developed in phenomenology to explain the actual characteristics of the real world (Patton 2015). However, Husserl believed that the realist approach was not sufficient to account for how human beings develop their knowledge of the world and determine what they stand for in normative terms.

Van Manen (2014) provides an etymological account of phenomenology, the term 'phenomenon' meaning, that which appears, and *logos*, word or study. He points out that, unlike similar terms such as psychology, phenomenology is not just the study of phenomena. Rather, phenomenology at a broad level is a study of how phenomena appear to us and meaning is made of them. Following Husserl, Creswell (2013) notes that the focus and purpose of phenomenology is to take individual experiences to a description of universal essence, without precluding revision should different evidence emerge; in other words, it may not be a truth, or it may be a truth only for the specific circumstances of a particular example. It is important to reiterate that lived experience is part of the natural attitude, and that it is placed in brackets in that part of phenomenological analysis which is based on reason and the application of eidetic variation, a practice which will be explained in this chapter. However, it is to lived experience that researchers return when they seek to ground their phenomenological insights into the world of a practical teleology.

To distil the various accounts of phenomenology, the key words are experiencing of an object in consciousness, object itself being anything to which a person pays attention, concrete or abstract. The accounts provided thus far give a flavour to what phenomenology is. To invoke the tentativeness that is a feature of phenomenological practice, I suggest that definitions of phenomenology can only give a sense. Phenomenology continues to cycle through different iterations, now blending between

analytical and continental philosophy as it evolves (Luft & Overgard 2014). Multiple strands of phenomenology have emerged with their origins in Husserl's insights, in his own time, throughout the twentieth century and now with the contemporary development of 'postphenomenology,' a coupling with pragmatism referred to as empirical or material phenomenology (van Manen 2014). Husserl believed he had integrated empiricism into phenomenology but his critique of the natural sciences made it clear that empiricism by itself was not sufficient as evidence due to perspectival and serial mode of givenness (Moran 2005, p. 3106/8010); that is, people may perceive objects as a whole, but they do so without peeling back the layers of what that object is in perception. In effect, this is what Husserl's approach achieves but what is fundamental to it is the use of the reduction and epoché as tools for finding the essences upon which phenomena are distinguishable.

(Moran 2005, p. 6890/8010) explains that Husserl was clear that science cannot substitute for philosophy and that the methods and procedures of the natural sciences are not those of philosophy. Husserl believed that philosophy required a wholly new method separate to that of the positive sciences. No distinction is really being made here between method and methodology and it would be impossible to think of Husserl's philosophy entirely as method. From what is his methodology, paying attention to the way he conducted his own investigations, it is possible to establish a series of steps in constructing a method and a research design. Before moving onto those steps as deployed to research design and execution in the following chapter, it is important to clarify some of Husserl's key concepts which represent the keys to understanding those tools.

### **3.4 Phenomenology – Some Key Concepts**

The language of phenomenology is highly specialized and some of the taken-for-granted words of a 21<sup>st</sup> century vocabulary do not reflect the meanings attached to them by Husserl and others. Here, I will explore some of these words as the core concepts that are integrated into Husserl's phenomenology in the spirit of Husserl's tentativeness as his phenomenology evolved. I have gathered together a

representative collection of Husserl's original writings, which I regularly consult. However, I am not a philosopher and interpreting Husserl directly is a life-time's work. Therefore, I access a secondary literature in supporting my understanding of Husserl's work.

### 3.4.1 Intentionality

A paradigmatic Husserlian concept is that of intentionality, 'phenomenology's response to the problem of how mind transcends itself to grasp an objective reality' or 'directedness of mind to its objects' (Drummond 2014, p. 125). The intentional object to which mind is directed makes explicit the meaning attached to that object, that is its *givenness*<sup>2</sup>. In phenomenology, an object is understood as anything whatsoever, abstract or concrete, real or imagined (Thomasson 2017). The word 'intentionality' is not used in its common vernacular sense of an act of intending, that is having a plan or an aim (Oxford Dictionary 2015). Intentionality describes how we are attached to the world and how consciousness is always *of* something (van Manen 2014). Consciousness stretches out beyond itself towards an object like an invisible thread that connects subject with object, the relationship between a person and objects or events, that is the things that make up our everyday lives (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom 2008; Drummond 2014). Every conscious experience has two 'poles' an ego-pole and an object-pole. These poles are what Husserl called transcendental correlates. The ego-pole is the subject pole, that of the human being. The object-pole is that of all the other things in the world of which we are conscious, encompassing animate objects, inanimate objects and ideas (Vagle 2014). In consciousness, one pole of intentionality does not exist without the other. Hence it is that Husserl identifies the structures of intentionality in two dimensions (Drummond 2014). There is a directedness to the objective reality, the object pole. The ego pole has a directedness towards 'the self as a temporally extended and unified flow of experience' (Drummond 2014, p. 125).

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<sup>2</sup> Givenness – how an object appears to our consciousness as being what it is.

### 3.4.2 Horizons

A key part of Husserl's schemata includes the idea of intentional *horizons*. Every perception has a horizon belonging to it, a horizon that emerges with the act of perceiving. Perceptual experience is always full, that is of a 'whole thing' (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom, 2008, p. 49), referred to as experiential horizon. Even if it is just glanced at, the intentional object will nonetheless 'present itself' as itself (Hopp 2014, p. 148). That object has an inner and outer horizon. The inner horizon is constituted by what Husserl refers to as 'empty intentions' (Hopp, p. 148). These are the body of contents of an experience that specify inclusively those features of the object, which are not immediately perceived but are part of its 'givenness', having all the attributes associated with its perception. As Hopp (p. 148) explains, the object is 'transcendent' to my experience of it. There will be more to it than what is revealed in the phase of a single experience or even multiple experiences whether past or expected in the future.

The outer horizon is the surrounding environment or background against which an object appears in its givenness (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom 2008). That background 'might be temporal, spatial, theoretical, cultural, or some combination' (Drummond 2014, p. 129) but, as Hopp (2014) explains that environment is there for me, even though I may not pay attention to it. This outer world is also expressed by Husserl as the lifeworld, the horizon which includes all our goals, all our ends that implicitly encompass everything in advance (Husserl 1970). The lifeworld is the 'horizon of all horizons' (Miettinen 2014a, p. 158). It offers a background against which individual things, objects, events and practice are 'projected with a certain idea of expectancy and normality, of familiarity' (p. 158), a normality which is specified through the intersubjective confirmation of its social, historical, and cultural practices.

There is also a temporal horizon in Husserl's theory of intentionality where consciousness, for Husserl, is time-consciousness. Every mental process has an open and infinite temporal horizon, a stream of experience, without beginning or end in a limitless temporal space, in which the weight of the past always affects our actions in the world (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom 2008). Reflecting on the work of



phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom explain that bringing together the past and present provides 'a nexus in which new and expanded understanding is possible' (p. 52) in what is a regenerative and intended process. Anticipated experiences also influence that nexus to become a moment in the present when consideration is given to the meaning and significance of an object in the process of understanding.

### **3.4.3 Transcendentalism**

In broad terms from Kant onwards, the point of transcendental philosophy has been to address the coupling of subjectivity and objectivity, and maintain a tension that exists between them (Loidolt 2014). Kant defined the transcendental as being concerned not with objects, but with the way in which knowledge is possible in that we can only attain knowledge of empirical reality as it appears in subjective constitution (Westerlund 2014). Husserl's work is viewed in two chunks--his early work, which was regarded as largely consistent with the empirical realism of the time, and his later work after 1905, when the so-called transcendental turn emerged as reflections and elaboration of the Kantian project (Moran 2000). Husserl (1977, p. 14) wants individuals to think about their lived experience of thinking, that is, how 'mentally produced formations' appear as concepts, judgements or inferences, for example, from which propositions are derived. These propositions and their meanings Husserl describes as 'ideal' objects, abstract as they are, about which people can make statements in the same way as for real objects. Hence, when philosophers talk about transcendental idealism, they are talking about universal laws that apply to consciousness of experience in the lifeworld. Husserl (1977) makes the distinction that in the one, nature (empiricism) comes to givenness, the coincidence of what an item is and how it is perceived in consciousness; in the other are ideals, that is essences. Essences are the norm based forms or rules that govern intentional content. These are what give objects as perceived their meaning, and it is this notion of meaning which gives phenomenology its transcendental standpoint (Crowell 2014). Husserl's transcendental idealism is fundamental to his principle that every object is to be

understood as a correlation to an experiencing subjectivity (Zahavi 2003). However, as Zahavi points out, the object remains a real object as intended, the being itself.

Husserl brought to bear the transcendental *constituting* of how people come to know and make sense of the world and their being in it through the dynamics of experiential life (Pulkinen 2014). Husserl refers to his work as a new science, which he called ‘a pure or transcendental phenomenology’ (Husserl 2012, p. 974/8010). This science, he said would cover a new field of experience, ‘transcendental subjectivity’, that is ‘an absolutely independent realm of direct experience’ (p. 974/8010). In doing so, Husserl insists that consciousness must be conceived of as transcendental, that is ‘as a condition for the possibility of the objective world in all its appearing forms’ (Moran 2005, p. 307/8010). Without consciousness, there is no possibility of the objective world appearing to individuals. Heinamaa, Hartimo and Miettinen (2014, p. 2) explain the phenomenological use of the term ‘transcendental’ as a motive to do philosophical reflection that does not take for granted the everyday (the *natural* world), but asks for its foundation in our experience of the world ideally. Putting it another way, they highlight that ‘transcendental inquiries concern those ‘conditions of possibility’ that allow us to constitute the world as true, valid, and objective and ourselves as beings in this world’ (p. 2). What is fully *given* in phenomenology is the world itself as a sphere of meaning that allows for things to be understood in a certain way, an ‘Husserlian hermeneutics’ (Luft 2011, p. 307).

#### **3.4.4 Transcendental Description**

For Loidolt (2014), the challenge of transcendental philosophy is to hold on to both a world of objects and to subjective idealism. It is a challenge which Husserl sought to resolve. Categorical phenomenology is the first level of description that takes place as phenomenological description (Russell 2006). It is the point at which the structural appearances of an object are given their meaning, the phenomenon appearing to an experiencing consciousness in an ‘as’ structure (it appears to me as ... ) the object appearing to consciousness before the work of interpretation. Loidolt (2014) suggests that the ‘space of meaning’ is the actual achievement of phenomenology. The direct,

straightforward perceiving of the object in consciousness and the ongoing constitution of meaning is one of letting the entity be seen in its historicity and layers of sedimentation, or what Husserl describes as genetic investigation at the individual level. The straightforward perceiving is a static phenomenology, the level at which essences may be identified, that is the ways of givenness to the subject. Constitutive phenomenology broadens the horizon by building up layers and levels to that static analysis in a network of meanings. Genetic analysis deepens and extends Husserl's early static phenomenology to his later work on how the formation of the concepts and beliefs based on experience are part of the lifelong co-constitutive influence of the community (Lohmar 2014).

Overlapping genetic phenomenology is generative phenomenology, the 'geo-historical, cultural, intersubjective, and normative ... process of becoming' (Steinbock 2003, p. 292). Husserl is quoted as claiming that 'evidence without teleological-historical reflection is 'like an appeal to an oracle' (Aldea 2016, p.30). Aldea argues that such a reflection ought to interrogate the dynamic between the non-theoretical experience of the lifeworld and theoretical inquiry, including that of philosophy. Hopkins (2014, p. 3934/6814) writes that 'the key to Husserl's formulation of the role of historicity in the constitution of the ideal meaning of logically ideal objects, which is to say, in the constitution of their 'ideality', is found in his characterization of the 'sedimentation of meaning' (Hopkins 2014, p. 3959/6814). Welton (2000) describes Husserl's treatment of horizons within a structural description and expanded by a genetic account as 'both an archeology and a teleology of meaning' (p. 23), in other words, a form of phenomenological historicity and interpretation where teleology is the trajectory to the fulfilment of meaning.

### **3.4.5 The Natural Attitude**

The term 'natural attitude' has been used several times in this study and it demands some space to itself. In Husserlian writing, the natural attitude and the natural sciences that may inform that attitude were counterproductive to understanding the subjective nature of how people make meaning of experience. Husserl was reservedly

happy enough for the natural sciences to do science, but he did not believe they were equipped for the task of philosophy, largely due to the particular nature of subjectivity. For Husserl, the truths of logic and mathematics could not be reduced to the factors of human psychology (Carr 2014). Human science, Husserl believed, 'corresponds to an autonomous region of being with its own categories' (Carr 2014, p. 234), with persons not as things but as relations and particular predicates which included motivation (rather than causation), intentions (that is a particular way of perceiving), actions, goals and social relations. Because of individuals' familiarity with the world as inhabited, be it small or large as circumscribed by their daily lives, people come to adopt habitual ways of thinking, doing, knowing and being. Crowell (2013) explains it in terms of everyday life as characterized by a kind of global realism, a belief in the factual existence of what is encountered.

It is a tension between subjectivity and objectivity that lies at the heart of understanding the natural attitude. The solution, as Husserl presents it, is to 'bracket' out the natural attitude, a belief in the objective world. This is the radical epoché which demands that, in the first instance, philosophers suspend all spatio-temporal realities in their transcendental reflections on the ideal meanings attributed to objects. Husserl (1970, p. 176) says that in the epoché, 'nothing is lost, none of the interests and ends of the world-life, and thus none of the ends of knowledge'. Instead those interests are set aside, remaining outside phenomenological reflection but available to us at any time we decide to return to the objective world of the natural attitude. Husserl refers to a method of zigzagging between the natural world and the phenomenological, the pure subjectivity of reasoning. In the phenomenological attitude, the subject 'encompasses everything; ego-pole and universe of ego-poles, multiplicities of appearance or object-poles and the universe of object poles' (Husserl 1970, p. 179). Hence, for Husserl, the world is not lost, but a naïve belief in it is suspended while the philosopher or researcher is now freed up in a reduction, a return, to focus on 'purely intentional life' (p. 241), the subject-object correlation and the meaning content of the object and how it is given to consciousness. As Zahavi (2017) suggests, it is through the epoché that the investigator is now able to approach reality in a way that it allows the disclosure of true sense, or meaning.

### 3.4.6. Essence

The idea of essence was central to Husserl's theory of consciousness and more specifically, intentionality. Perception of an object is possible because we have appropriated the rules which make it what it is. Husserl (1970 p. 173) said,

But all this—the appearance of things through the epoché) and this is what makes scientific discipline, description, phenomenological-transcendental truth possible—is pervaded by a set of fixed types, which as we have said, is one of essential types and can be methodically encompassed as a pure a priori. .... For our part we, who up to now have constantly carried out our systematic reflections within the re-orientation, can at any time restore the natural attitude and, within it, inquire after the invariant structures of the lifeworld.

For example, when an individual sees a tree, it is perceived by virtue of a set of rules that constitute 'treeness', or the essence of a tree. It is not necessary to see the whole tree to know what it is. One only needs to see a particular profile of the tree to know it as a tree that meets the rules of 'treeness', unless there is further disconfirming evidence that prompts harder looking. Furthermore, there is an intersubjective world in which 'ego-subjects' are oriented towards that common world and things in it, an experiential world with all its practical structure, which nonetheless holds to what is its essentially lawful set of types. The epoché is the philosopher's method for accessing the lifeworld transcendently and revealing the meanings of those essential forms, rather than arriving at naïve, subjective meanings. Hence, the essence, or the doctrine of essences, as an eidetic science is an attempt to position the researcher in establishing 'descriptive eidetic laws' through a 'genuinely scientific' practice (Sowa 2014, p. 254). The term *eidetics* derives from Plato's concept, meaning the form that makes many objects to be of the same sort (Reeder 2010). This is the foundation of an ontological account, within philosophy, which Husserl used to characterize the whatness of that which presents to consciousness. All actual and possible examples

will be part of the same structural claim, and were any individual examples destroyed, the same essential structural claim would persist.

The science of eidetics encompasses much of the phenomenological territory that Husserl has mapped. For Husserl, essence can be approached from two points of reference: that of the individual or mind-independent empirical as posited by Kant (Luft 2011) or that of pure essence, that is transcendental essence (Husserl 2012). Husserl says (2012, p. 11) 'whatever belongs to the essence of the individual can also belong to another individual'. This is Husserl's claim that his eidetic science is one of 'transcendental subjectivity' (p. 1) as opposed to an empirical ego. However, Husserl does use essences in two distinctly different ways (Sowa 2014). In a broader sense the term can be used somewhat like concepts or an 'ontic, object-determining universal', a material essence (Sowa 2014, p. 261). In the narrower sense it includes only pure meanings that do not claim to be worldly facts or of the factual world at all. Sowa also points out that a stronger meaning of essence in Husserl is applied when 'it designates that without which an object cannot be thought of as an object of the type ascribed to it' (Sowa 2014, p. 263).

Husserl (1970) advocates that investigators make the attempt to identify essences, to undertake the task of eidetic knowing as transcendental accomplishment, in all its individual and intersubjective accomplishments. He recognises that no single individual, even within the epoché, can 'hold fast to anything in this elusively flowing life, repeat it with always the same content' (Husserl 1970, p.178). Husserl nonetheless advocates for this particular way of subjectivity. At its simplest, it is an injunction to take nothing for granted but to search with openness and wonder. In this, the eidetic reduction, we search for invariant characteristics and meanings of the phenomenon as described (Finlay 2008). There need not be anything particularly complex about essences. As Dahlberg (2006, p. 12) states, 'when we experience the world we see essences'. Merleau-Ponty (2012) suggested that 'phenomenology is the study of essences' (p. 1459/16103), and that they belong already to the lifeworld. What the phenomenological researcher does is to disclose the meaning of those essences in the act that takes place between researcher and phenomenon, in all their

manners of appearing in respect to both inner and outer horizons (Dahlberg 2006). Vagle (2014) argues for a more hermeneutic approach where intentional relationships are always being interpreted. This raises the distinction between descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology, which for some writers is definitive (Finlay 2012; Giorgi 2009). However, this is not clearcut, particularly in respect to Husserl's genetic phenomenology where there is no fixed opposition between description and interpretation, and in relation to Husserl's own statement that 'all intentional analysis, all self-clarification of consciousness that finds its expression in description is interpretation' (Appelbaum 2014, p.2). Both descriptive and hermeneutical phenomenology demand an openness to openness. We can search for invariant meanings in their ideal, but we do so with humility and acceptance that these meanings can always be critiqued and revised (Cai 2013).

#### **3.4.7 Eidetic or Imaginative Variation**

Husserl speaks to the ontological dimension of phenomenology, including what it means to be a particular object, or how we can examine the essential structures to determine what holds true for any example (Zahavi 2017). In respect to grasping those essential structures, Husserl applies his method of eidetic or imaginative variation. It is a process in which the features of the thematic object are varied in imagination, beginning with particulars, from an experienced instance or a possible instance that can merely float before us in reflection (Drummond 1995). It is a form of conceptual analysis which helps to identify an ideal or universal object of thought, or an essence, by adding or removing particular properties without which the object would cease to be what it is (Zahavi 2003). Mohanty (1985) suggests that the purpose of imaginative variation is to isolate what is contingent from what is necessary. It requires that one mentally removes an aspect of the phenomenon to see whether its removal alters it in an essential way. If the phenomenon appears radically different because of that removal, it leans toward being an essential feature of it. If it does not change the phenomenon with its removal, that aspect is likely to be a contingent part (Giorgi 2009).

The variants imagined may be potentially arbitrary and endless, that is completely open. However, as eidetic variations they emerge from the starting point of exemplars which are intended as conceivable contributions to what is an essence (Aldea 2016). These exemplar variations occur against a background of what is motivated towards the grasping of universality, not particularity. Husserl (1973) writes that in respect to concepts of essences, the universal first comes to prominence in the empirically given. We allow ourselves to be guided by a fact taken as a model. New and similar images are obtained as copies, images which 'are all concretely similar to the original image' (Husserl 1973, p. 341) but are held in retention, in memory. Where it becomes evident that there is an invariant and it is retained as a necessary general form without which an object would not be thinkable at all, there is a general essence. We can step outside the empirical framework and imagine a multiplicity of variants and look for conflicts in them in such a way that the differences bring out what is congruent. In this phenomenological shift, the identity of the individual is dropped and changed into what imaginatively is possible for the object to be experienced as pure generality in an infinity of particulars. To put it another way, high-level invariants do not depend on sensory experience. The sensory experience depends on them (Tieszen 2016). What is determined as invariant, as essence, then holds for everything that is factual. Essences have reference to empirical reality as they 'prescribe rules' to every actual thing (Husserl 1973, p.354).

Notwithstanding that variation can be arbitrary, it is a rigorous process of searching for evidence in a process of ideation or contemplation, an orienting regard towards the object of perception, finding evidence as an act of reason in the search for a complete intuition of the thing itself. It is necessary to incorporate the object's surroundings, its internal and external horizon, its various properties in the circumstances of normality or abnormality. In this orienting regard, we are not focused on subjective acts, but on what is experienced in those acts as a thing in perception, seeking what is self-same in general. This is not a direct, linear process. It is a zigzagging between idea and method, reason and non-reason which is characteristic of phenomenological analysis. This zigzagging also serves to highlight the entwinement of theoretical reason as applied in variation, and that of Husserl's enduring interest in the concept of practical



reason, value-judgment reason in general (Laurukhin 2015). Value-judgement for Husserl invokes the principle of acting reasonably, aiming to achieve the best choice in any given situation. How this is reconciled in Husserl's methodological premises in transcendental phenomenology is not resolved, but the ethical issues reflected in the idea of practical reason are a foundation in his critique of scientific rationality and his adoption of transcendental phenomenology as a humanising force.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have laid the foundations for the research methods to be applied to an exploration of the essential structures of work related coaching using Husserl's descriptive phenomenology. I have observed that Husserl wanted his philosophy applied to practical ends. Husserl's ethical concerns in relation to science and humanity are one foundation to my decision to engage with his methodology directly. Applying Husserl's distinctive descriptive methodology is an original approach to phenomenology not before used in coaching research, following a wide search including Proquest's Dissertations and Theses data base.

This relatively brief overview of the key concepts of Husserl's transcendental descriptive phenomenology provides a flavour of his large and complex body of work. Phenomenology is 'consciousness of' and this research establishes me as subject in respect to my own consciousness as researcher, drawing from Husserl's approach but with an awareness that his approach was philosophical and its practical application may require adaptations. Lived experience is a concept common to all approaches to phenomenology and this has been incorporated into my account of descriptive phenomenology. The focus is not just on my own experience of coaching from which I have drawn insights, but on what coaching is as an experience, that is as an object in the world which I approach reflectively, drawing from Husserl's methodological principles. Descriptive phenomenology is different to those approaches which describe phenomenology as a methodology for collecting introspective, recollective accounts of first person experience of particular events. Descriptive phenomenology is concerned with the logic of the concepts identified on the basis of reason, theoretical

and practical, not on accounts of private inner feelings. The conceptual analysis in description is multi-layered, bringing into consideration historicity and intersubjectivity. Phenomenology has evolved and accounts of subjective experience as a research method are popular. However, phenomenology from a descriptive perspective has evolved also, and how this is applied as a research method was an unfolding journey in this study.

## **Chapter 4: Research Design & Method**

### **4.1 Introduction:**

In the previous chapter I discussed some of the methodological underpinnings of Husserl's philosophical phenomenology as the foundation of its contemporary practice. In that chapter, I signalled the difficulty in phenomenology of separating methodology and method; hence there is overlap between these two chapters and a return to key concepts in this one. I turn now to descriptive phenomenology as a contemplative, reflective method, and thus to this study as a distinctive genre within the family of qualitative research which is consistent with a dwelling in the research question and the data, that is sitting with the data in contemplation. In the first part of the chapter, I address the purpose of the study and, following my literature review, the contribution of the research question to the knowledge and practice of executive coaching. I address the important technical issues which constitute a research study. I then introduce the reader to the frameworks for qualitative research and the general concepts, techniques and tools adopted for this qualitative study. The approach to data analysis is outlined to show how I have applied the descriptive phenomenological method to this study (see Appendix 6, Research Design for an overview).

### **4.2 Purpose of the Study**

A purpose statement enables the researcher to articulate the goal or intent of a research project (Creswell 2013, 2014; Lewkowitz 2010). Lewkowitz suggested that it grounds the researcher, especially at the stage when research becomes more complex. The statement needs to identify the research approach in order to plan the research design and approaches to data collection, analysis and reportage (Creswell 2013). A purpose statement might include the intent of the research, its scope and its direction in specific, precise terms that avoid vague, ambiguous or confusing language (Lewkowitz 2010). In keeping with Creswell's (2013) emphasis on the need to identify a central phenomenon, mine is executive coaching as a practice which broadly encompasses leadership development and associated personal challenges that are

relevant to the workplace, an outer horizon of that practice. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe and reflectively explore the phenomenon of executive coaching as it takes place between an externally contracted coach and a coaching client who wishes to improve his/her work performance or working environment in some way. From these descriptions, an answer to the unresolved question of what executive coaching is will be given greater clarity as it integrates the empirical lifeworld of actual coaching conversations with phenomenological analysis. The literature review was a first step, an acknowledgement of the importance of a generative phenomenology.

The core of the study is the descriptive analysis of three authentic executive coaching conversations between coach and client, recorded for the purpose of exploring the actuality of executive coaching in practice, identifying key themes and evaluating them for potential as essences of executive coaching practice. These coaching conversations were provided by executive coaches who were independent of each other and had volunteered to participate in the study. The coaches were experienced and well qualified in the delivery of work-related coaching services, which I will further discuss in the section on sampling. The recorded coaching conversation was specified to take place at the midpoint in an executive coaching relationship where patterns of interaction had been established. It is a study whose purpose was to inquire into executive coaching in the real-life environment of work-related challenges.

### **4.3 Research Question**

A phenomenological research question can be only a tentative project because of its distinctive emphasis on consciousness and objects as self-given in experience. Embree (2011) says that argumentation and even scholarship are no substitute for the careful work of observing and describing the research object as it unfolds, with an openness and curiosity as free from preconceptions as the rigorous application of Husserl's reduction allows. My research question is 'what is executive coaching?' It is open-ended and phenomenological, consistent with Husserl's characterization of phenomenology as a viewing of essences (Moran 2000). Phenomenology is a

philosophy of openness, wonder and inquiry (Vagle 2014; van Manen 2014). The focal question that phenomenology asks is ‘what is the appearance of things?’ It represents what Zahavi (2017) describes as the ontological dimension of phenomenology, achieved through an examination of the essential structures belonging to a region of objects where it seeks to determine what holds true for that region using the tools of the epoché and reduction.

Husserl does not go directly to the issue of a research question, but he does write about two levels of posing questions: simple and justificatory. Simple questions are those that provide an answer through judgments that are made. Justificatory questions are those to which the ego must work toward a ‘conclusive, assured judgement, toward a judgement which the ego can ground and justify, one which, correlatively, is directed toward actual, true being’ (Husserl 1973, p. 311). For Husserl, justificatory questioning requires a process of drawing nearer to the object of the question and engaging in reflections to open the possibilities of what it might be using eidetic or imaginative variation. Husserl’s reminder is that while justificatory questions may be intended to the establishing of a truth, their answers will be a judgement and may not be conclusively true. It is then that people must ask themselves if and how their answers can be justified. This questioning can be worked through in a cyclical level and what appears ‘actual’ or ‘true’ may not be considered conclusive, as new horizons open up. My research question seeks to be justificatory and is deliberately open.

My research question is framed as a descriptive phenomenological experience. Experience is a broad term phenomenologically which is inclusive of that experience as an act of reflection. The experience in this study was that of the researcher and the focus of the study was on her experiencing of the coaching conversations recorded, the literature associated with describing those conversations and their emerging themes, and her lived experience as it appeared in practical reasoning applied in an evaluation of the research findings. However, as is consistent with descriptive phenomenology, this experience is bracketed in a process of conceptual analysis. As mentioned in the introductory chapter to this study, I earned my coaching post-

graduate qualification in the Psychology department, firmly within the paradigm of cognitive science. It was an enriching experience for which I am grateful. With experience, however, I realized that psychology was one piece in the mosaic of executive coaching practice that supports adults to learn, develop and change in evolving workplaces. An outer horizon of executive coaching is the workplace and the general context is that of leadership development. Hence it is that my questioning about what coaching is emerged from my own lived experience. However, the research process accepts lived experience as the first and perhaps a concluding factor, but the essential intermediary task is application of phenomenological method with its structured steps and a closely argued reasoning activity.

In coaching generally, there is a strong penetration of psychological theory and research, with claims that psychology is the science that underpins coaching (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck 2010). I have come to believe coaching in general and inclusive of executive coaching to be multidisciplinary, as reflected in other recent commentaries (Cox 2013; Tooth 2014). Being clear and explicit about our beliefs is an important part of phenomenological methodology. Husserl never argued that there was not an objective world out there. Husserl was never opposed to science per se. On the contrary he is quoted by Moran (2005) as writing that his mission was science alone. What Husserl opposed was the natural sciences as a totalizing force. Rather, individuals access that world through the ego's subjectivity, one which is pre-scientific in that it defines people as beings conscious of a world around them before science comes into play (Moran 2000). Husserl suggested that people live in a double world – the theoretical world of mathematical formulae and geometrical relations that are the cornerstone of objective knowledge, and the subjective, unpredictable world of human experience (Ucnik, Williams & Chavatick 2015). Where this human world is severed from the formal, objective knowledge of the sciences, such scientific knowledge becomes bereft of that which is human. Hence the place of humans whose responsibility for the world they live in becomes problematic. Husserl worked tirelessly to remedy that imbalance. In this sense he was a committed humanist and critical of the dominance of technology and science as a totalizing force in

understanding human development. These are the principles that informed my research question and choice of descriptive phenomenology as research method.

#### **4.4 Contribution to Knowledge**

Following on my literature review, I reiterate that executive coaching has emerged in recent decades as a widespread leadership development activity in workplaces, yet evidence about how and why it is successful remains elusive (Franklin & Franklin 2012; Theeboom, Beersma & van Vianen 2014). There is no agreed definition of executive coaching and coaching in general, nor have I been able to identify research studies which have addressed themselves specifically to the question of what executive coaching is. Coaching professional associations aspire for all coaching to be recognized as a profession, but an agreed knowledge base is yet to emerge (Ellinger & Kim 2014). In the period 2008-2012, Stern and Stout-Rostron (2013) identified 263 peer reviewed journal articles on coaching. Stern and Stout-Rostron conducted their analysis using an annotated bibliography compiled by Grant (2011). I reviewed all the articles collected by Grant for the year 2010 (the most recent in his bibliography) and none were based on a direct encounter with experienced executive coaching as it is enacted in a workplace context. Coaching is a confidential and intensely personal process. Gaining access to coaches and their clients as they participate in a coaching conversation is a challenge, so there is little research that is based on first-hand analysis of established coaching conversations in a workplace setting. Gaining such access is a feature that has distinguished my research from those studies that are based on self-report, training rehearsals, interview or consensus building among coaches, for example.

There have been a number of dissertations and theses that have applied a phenomenological method to the study of coaching in general and executive coaching in particular, although none have used Husserl's descriptive analysis as I outlined in my methodology chapter. The only phenomenological study I found that has used direct observation is that of Marlatt (2012). Marlatt observed his own experience of being a coach. He recruited three volunteer coachees whom he coached three to four times, and then interviewed them about their coaching experience with him. My approach

was to research experienced executive coaching conversations that occur in the usual practice of organizational life. As such, the conversations I have described were part of a paid contractual agreement between a coach and the client and/or the sponsoring organization where applicable.

#### **4.5 Sampling**

Husserl conducted much of his research reflectively and the notion of sampling did not apply to his intellectual work. It is possible to do phenomenology using imaginary case studies or as few as one account (Finlay & Manolo-Fisher 2008). My research question required that executive coach participants be 'experienced'. Thus my sampling has been purposeful (Patton 2015). I have been fortunate to have the support of industry partners who are highly regarded in the business and academic communities. Their executive coaches are all highly qualified and experienced in both business and coaching. These are coaches who have been contracted to provide coaching services external to the organization sponsoring the coaching. For this study coaches were asked to volunteer if they were comfortable with the process of recording one of their conversations. These executive coaching conversations were 60-90 minutes in duration. I also recruited participants through my Linked In contacts. Linked In is a professional networking service. I scoured my lists to find coaches who had forty or more personal endorsements for their work (coaching and/or executive coaching), more than three years of experience as a coach in work-related practice, and a credible coaching qualification, either from a university or from a coach training provider accredited by the International Coach Federation. The clients were not screened in any way. I collected ten executive coaching conversations, and chose to use those that were associated with industry providers who have an established reputation.

Giorgi (2009) and Creswell (2014) suggest that three cases are enough to provide diversity in a phenomenological study. Moran and Cohen (2012, p. 138) note that for Husserl, there is an 'open infinity' of examples in experience that can be drawn upon but that an essence can be established in a single example. Once identified, an



essence is recognized as having arrived and will always pertain within the study specific to it, no matter how many examples are examined specific to the particular researcher. Van Manen (2014) suggests that in phenomenology the researcher does not so much search to make empirical generalizations as to identify invariant meaning structures and that the term 'sample' as a subset of a population is not appropriate to a phenomenological study. The aim is rather to obtain 'examples' of rich descriptions of experience (van Manen 2014, p. 353) and the essential possibilities that make it what it is.

The research participants in this study were relatively homogenous, but likely to be representative and typical of executive coaching as a business practice given the scope and industry status of the coaches and coaching businesses who have participated. In this sense, it was a criterion-based selection (Patton 2015). One of my specified requirements was that the conversation be recorded in mid cycle, when coach and client were in an established coaching relationship.

#### **4.6 Data Collection**

Participating executive coaches agreed to record a coaching conversation with their client on a smart phone or recorder. Sound recording was selected as it has minimal impact and visibility. It was important that the conversation be natural and not staged. The disadvantage of relying solely on audio-recording was that non-verbal communication was not observed. However, the alternative of video recording would have been too complex and time consuming for the participants, and invasive. Private Dropbox accounts were established for each coach to protect anonymity. Dropbox is a cloud-based data storage and sharing facility. An MP3 audio-recording was uploaded by the participating coach to my private Dropbox account to which only I had access. Coaches were advised that it could take up to an hour of their time to attend to the technical side of the recording and uploading of files. No personal details were collected from coaches or their clients in order to ensure that confidentiality was preserved and that participants could not be identified.

Transcripts of the coaching conversations were made by a professional transcription agency with experience in research data recordings. Participants were de-identified, and any references to a particular work place or individual made during the coaching conversation were removed or fictionalized; this process is also described in the following section about ethics.

#### **4.7 Ethics**

The first guiding principle of this research was to do no harm. The University of Technology, Sydney, sets high standards in the conduct of human research, standards which have been fully complied with in this research. My research had the approval of University's Human Research Ethics Committee, and it remained valid for five years from 5 May 2015 (Appendix 1). Proper and thorough attention must be paid to the ethics of conducting research in the planning and designing of all phases of qualitative research (Creswell 2013). The distinctive features of my research that have informed ethics decisions will be outlined in this section.

Coaching conversations as they occur between a coach and client are confidential as sensitive issues may be discussed. A client may sense some vulnerability in the normal course of a coaching session as he or she discloses personal challenges to be overcome and uncertainty about future directions. These feelings may be exacerbated with the presence of a third party. The researcher presence in my study was remote as the design of the study paid special attention to a method of discrete observation where the researcher was not present to the conversation, which was being recorded by the coach. Both coach and client were aware that the conversation as recorded was to be subsequently subject to research scrutiny and this was included in a written briefing to all participants (Appendices 2 and 3).

The approach to protecting participant identity was developed collaboratively between the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and the student researcher, myself. My priority was to put into place protective measures that safeguarded the confidentiality of coaching conversations and ensured the anonymity of the client in

particular. The HREC required that an audit path be established so that in the event of any follow up to the conduct of research becoming necessary, it would be possible to establish contact with the client participant. It was agreed that the client not be asked to sign a consent form. If necessary, the client could be contacted through the coach. A scripted agreement for the research to occur was read to the client by the coach at the commencement of the recorded coaching session, and again at the end, when the client had the opportunity to decline use of the recording, in which case the recording would have been destroyed (Appendix 4). The coach was asked to complete a written consent form and was advised that withdrawal from the research project could occur at any time up to the submission of the doctoral study for examination (Appendix 5). Clients, coaches and any reference to other individuals or organizations were de-identified in the production of transcripts and the descriptions in this study.

In order to protect confidentiality and ensure the anonymity of the participants, coach and client, I did not discuss the case with either. I have also not enquired into the nature and scope of the organization which the client works for in order to protect confidentiality and reputation were there to be any implications which might cause concern to that organization. It was important that I make that commitment to participants, through the coaching provider as applicable, so as to ensure that I was able to secure their participation and to ensure that coach and client could conduct their executive coaching conversation without feeling constrained. As previously noted, I collected no personal information on coach, client or the organizations for which they worked. My study used authentic, direct reporting of and quotations from actual conversations. This required that there was no opportunity for identifying the participants in any way.

As the research evolved, I changed the title of my thesis and modified my approach to the research question. This did not impact on the research approvals where the central concern was to respect the confidentiality of the research participants and ensure they could not be identified.

#### 4.8 The Qualitative Research Paradigm

Creswell (2014, p. 4) describes qualitative research as ‘an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem’. I have identified phenomenology as what Creswell has described as a philosophical worldview that relates to the design of a study. In the previous chapter on methodology, I outlined what that particular worldview was from its original historical development in the work of Edmund Husserl. Husserl’s is a qualitative research approach which historically is at the threshold of a subjective methodology that places the researcher at the centre of design and analysis. Creswell (2014), describes how the researcher as key instrument is a core characteristic of qualitative research. This is particularly so in descriptive phenomenology where the researcher is the sense-maker who gives meaning to the data, which is in contradistinction to a qualitative research approach where primacy is given to researching participant meanings. I provided a description of myself and my interest in this topic in the introduction to the study in Chapter One.

In the previous chapter, I outlined some of the principles of the epoché and reduction in phenomenology, a process which is called bracketing in general approaches and in more recent approaches to phenomenology. In contemporary terms this can also be related to another of the core characteristics which Creswell (2014) introduces, that of reflexivity, the process in which an inquirer reflects on her/his role in the study and how personal background, culture, and experiences potentially shape the interpretations and the meanings ascribed to the data. In phenomenology, the researcher zigzags, alternating between methods and ideas in order to seek a grasp of each (Brainard 2007). In doing so, the researcher is self-responsible for their own reasoning activity, which means that phenomenology places an emphasis on reflexivity.

My research question ‘What is executive coaching’ was purposely open. The literature review included an account of learning, given its ubiquity in how coaching is defined and applied, but it also reflected my personal commitment to learning as intrinsic to

coaching experience. As I proceeded on my own phenomenological journey, I had to face the challenge that this was a result of my own 'natural attitude.' The everyday suppositions and my own love of learning pre-disposed me to look for and find in executive coaching conversations the taken-granted assumption that the essence(s) of coaching related to learning. This conviction sprang from my own experience as a career coach and my active participation in the practitioner coaching community in Australia.

### **Identification of Themes**

I decided that phenomenologically I needed to identify themes in executive coaching in a way which quarantined my beliefs as much as possible. As Brainard (2007) suggests, the epoché by no means dispenses with all beliefs, relying on the power of reason in the reduction to harness those beliefs. I decided, however, that particularly in the early stages of phenomenological inquiry, I would bracket my beliefs about learning as intrinsic to executive coaching as I went through a process of identifying themes from my empirical research. However, learning is a well-established function of all coaching, inclusive of executive coaching. While I remained sensitive to my own convictions, learning is part of the discourse of coaching and was thus incorporated into this study while not being identified as an essence as such.

I hold other values which are relevant to the study, insights to which were found in my literature review when I addressed the issues of ethics in executive coaching. I became interested in coaching in organizations based on my own experience and in particular the challenges of having occupied a senior leadership role in a large hierarchical and complex organization which was under threat. I became the 'go to' person for other leaders and managers who were struggling in an environment focused on bottom-line results and the bullying that emerged as the chief executive drove through the policies adopted to achieve those results. I have included reference to this as it has impacted on how I see executive coaching not as a practice which is focused on a command and control agenda of improving performance through management fiat, but rather as a way of encouraging leaders to support and engage

the employees in the relational approach to leadership that I raised in my literature review. From a research perspective, these relational values impacted on my approach to the purpose of executive coaching, and how I reasoned from within the prism of my own lived experience as I explored the meaning structures of executive coaching. The humanistic values which drove Husserl to question how we deal with knowledge and being are what, in part, motivated me to follow his path. I chose not to bracket from this study my own humanistic values. I acknowledge them as part of the reasoning processes in which I engaged.

The researcher in a phenomenological study needs to have a good understanding of the lifeworld situation of the participants (Giorgi 2009). My own coaching practice has focused largely on individuals who are at transition points in their careers. I have also been an office bearer with the International Coach Federation (ICF) in NSW and interacted with a broad range of coaches. A feature of the ICF is the ethical conduct of practice and I often describe coaching as a sacred place of confidentiality between coach and client. It was my close involvement in the coaching industry that enabled me to access participants for this study who were willing to share that confidential space.

Another of the core characteristics of qualitative research suggested by Creswell (2014), is that of emergent design. Plans in qualitative research cannot be tightly controlled and some or all phases of the process may change as the researcher begins to collect data. My initial research plan changed significantly as I shifted my research focus, which was initially based on the phenomenological/psychological approach of interpretative analysis outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). I experimented with structured approaches to identifying themes recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and Giorgi (2009). I created tables and coded, but found these reductive processes to be artificial. These approaches are also dependent on transcripts from interviews with research participants as they recounted their experiences, a different approach to that of descriptive phenomenology as I have interpreted and applied it. As my knowledge of phenomenology deepened and my

research question guided me, I found these psychologized approaches would not enable me to undertake a deep but open study into executive coaching.

I experimented with the existential modes of being that van Manen (2014) recommends, those of relationality, corporeality, spatiality, temporality and materiality. Again, this approach did not work well when addressing 'the thing itself', the executive coaching conversations which had been recorded and which I then attempted to mould into van Manen's categorizations. As van Manen (2014) cautions, analysing a phenomenon is a complex and creative process. A free act of seeing needs to be driven by the epoché and the reduction. In other words, it was essential to break with the natural attitude, as I have done in some measure by partitioning learning from a specific thematic analysis, and focusing on the themes that emerged from the study. This was my own act of 'sense constituting' which is a foundation of descriptive phenomenology, outlined in my Methodology Chapter. In respect to my 'ego pole', the sense making of that activity, I related to the object pole of which I was conscious, the coaching conversations as I engaged deeply with them. It is an approach which also coincides with another of Creswell's (2014) principles of qualitative research, that is inductive and deductive data analysis. Themes are organized from the bottom up and refined into increasingly more abstract unities of information. My themes were developed from close engagement with the empirical data itself, and the themes themselves were further explored, moving in and out of the bracketed phenomenological attitude, zigzagging between reason and non-reason in describing the meaning of each of them.

#### **4.9 Distinctiveness of Phenomenology as Research Method**

Reflection plays a central role in descriptive phenomenology (Cai 2013). In phenomenological method, reflection starts with the epoché, the break with the natural attitude as the sole access to how we achieve knowledge of the world. It is recognized that people exist in a parallel horizontal structure of 'thing' experience and ideas, the realm of transcendental reflection. In research employing a phenomenological method, researchers, as they zigzag between both, the real and the

irreal, seek evidence sufficient to achieve certainty of being in a way that retains a belief that experience is always open to critical reflection. In other words, to find the essence of an object, they alternate between phenomenological reasoning and ordinary reflection in the natural attitude with its accounts of the spatio-temporal world and the broader intersubjectively constructed understandings of that world. The overarching principle with respect to both aspects of reflection is, for Husserl, that there be an ethical commitment that the researcher is able to continually justify and accept responsibility for her thinking. It is 'the norm of a life of conscience and responsibility' (Cai 2013, p.26) that is the principle that underpins the phenomenological method. In respect to that self-responsibility, Husserl demanded that the researcher 'lay claim to nothing other than what we are essentially able to make transparently evident in consciousness itself' (Zahavi 2017, p. 28). This is what reflection, zigzagging between phenomenological reflection and the real world, requires. Mind and world are bound together. Empirical concepts form our expectations regarding particular objects and shape the meanings we make of the object in question. Phenomenological reflection does not eliminate the empirical, but translates it in inquiring into the essence of a phenomenon as transcendently constituted. In descriptive phenomenology, the first and last point in analysis lies with access to lived experience.

#### **4.10 Lifeworld Description**

In each of my three research chapters, I start with a lifeworld description of the executive coaching conversations I had recorded. I immersed myself in the those conversations, listening closely and intensively reading the transcripts, experimenting with the approaches outlined above, with reference to Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009), Giorgi (2009) and van Manen (2014), and reflecting on issues as they arose from my literature review. Those executive coaching conversations have become my lived experience, part of a concrete world of practice. A free act of seeing needs to be driven by the epoché and the reduction. In other words, it was important to break with the natural attitude in identifying themes themselves as they emerged from the study. However, the epoché and reduction are not a discrete part of a



phenomenological research project, a process which is adopted as an upfront declaration. It is integrated into the full study, with a consciousness of the zigzagging process which at times suspends the natural lifeworld and at others engages directly with it (see Appendix 7, page 265). This was my own act of sense constituting which is a foundation of descriptive phenomenology, as outlined in my Methodology Chapter. In respect to my 'ego pole', the sense making of that activity, I related to the object pole of which I was conscious, those poles of phenomenological intentionality where objective reality and self as a temporally extended flow of experience are connected. It is important too that the outer horizon is the workplace is recognized as the immediate background of the coaching conversations with its social, historical and cultural practices.

The lifeworld descriptions I provided at the commencement of each research chapter was an empirical account which proceeded as object pole, attempting to do so without judgement, qualification or analysis. These accounts served two purposes. The first was to provide the reader with direct access to the research object, the coaching *in situ*. The unfolding conversation provided a unique insight into the practice of coaching in real life, without embellishment or explicit interpretation. Secondly, that immersion in the lifeworld situation provided the foundation to what were the emerging themes of each of the three conversations. While emerging from the lifeworld, those themes have reflected the principles of the epoché as outlined by van Manen (2014). In descriptive phenomenology, a theme is simply an aspect of experience that is focused upon (Reeder 2010). It can be an idea, a concept, claim or problem. Themes can be seen as 'fasteners, foci, or threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated' (van Manen 1990, p. 89). The lifeworld descriptions provided the horizontal context from which the themes emerged. I did not look for themes which expressed generality across the three conversations. I treated each as a unique experience with particularities which would enrich my coaching descriptions.

#### **4.11 Exploration of Themes – Hermeneutic Descriptions**

My three research chapters are each organized around the themes that have emerged. There are three themes in each the chapters. I peeled back the layers of meaning of each of those themes, embedding them in my experiential accounts of the coaching conversations and exploring how each is understood through genetic/generative phenomenology. Husserl's development of generative phenomenology (Welton 2000) shows how intentionality is understood through intersubjective confirmations of the social, historical and cultural practices which are teleologically related to the meaning constitution through which we all live and to which we are normatively oriented. In other words, we are intentionally directed to a fulfilled understanding of the phenomena through which we live (Miettinen 2014a). Husserl (1970) recognized that thinking and therefore reasoning cannot confine themselves to the present moment and its factual accomplishments but need to have regard to the infinite horizons of ideas. Husserl said that as subjects of acts, 'we are directed toward thematic objects in modes of primary and secondary, and perhaps also peripheral directedness' (1970, p.109).

In his later works, Husserl describes how we can have secondary experience of a state of affairs which makes knowledge sharing possible and representative of first-hand experience (Averchi 2018). These spoken or written expressions have meaning because they are associated with sense-bestowing acts. They store or transmit knowledge but we appropriate that knowledge accepting that it is someone else's knowledge (Averchi 2018), making our own judgements as to its credibility or applicability. Our horizons are what may function as limits, but as Husserl recognized they are also gateways to something beyond, a concept which Hans-Georg Gadamer took forward in his call for a hermeneutic dialogue with texts in phenomenology (Moules 2002). This again raises the distinction between descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology, which I have said is for some writers definitive (Finlay 2012; Giorgi 2009). However, this may not be so, particularly in respect to Husserl's later phenomenology where there is no fixed opposition between description and

interpretation. Van Manen (2014) speaks of insight cultivating, reflections that draw on scholarly phenomenological and related texts. I have drawn largely from phenomenological texts, but where this was not available, I accessed academic sources which have practical relevance to the interpretation of themes and their relevance to lived experience as it is made concrete in these descriptive accounts.

Patton (2015) suggests that the first-order purpose of observational data is to describe in depth and detail what was observed and the activities that took place in the setting observed. This has formed the first part of this study and from it the emergence of open and discovery-based themes. In bracketing my own preconceptions, I had no preformed commitment to the essences as they emerged, although Patton (2015, p.358) refers to 'sensitizing concepts' as those which observers hold when they enter a field of study. In this sense, themes might be predictable, as, for example, that of relationality in coaching. However, these themes in their unfolding have held surprises for me and taken me in directions which were unanticipated. In exploring these themes, I identified them in my own engagement with the lived experience of the conversations themselves (Reeder 2010). That engagement alternates between direct experience and the hermeneutic elements of phenomenological description. This is the zigzagging between concepts and the original experiencing. These concepts can be thought of as pre-constitutions, determinations of the object from diverse sources with their own ladders of meaning formation. Husserl (1973) states that there is constant change in a thematic horizon, and what comes to attention as thematically alien is put into relation with that which 'enriches and fulfils the interest in the initial theme' (p. 213). The initial object remained executive coaching itself, and the thematic horizon brought in interests or substrates which were on the side of what became a thematic complex. I explored these thematic horizons, linked them to my experiential accounts and then at the end of each chapter, I returned to the phenomenological object, the question of what coaching is as a phenomenological experience. In identifying essences as a response to the question of what executive coaching is, I employed eidetic variation as it applies to each of the themes in the chapter, the themes becoming exemplar in a reasoning process specific to them.

#### **4.12 Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed thesis requirements for research design and method, incorporating those that are relevant to my study. The chapter is not designed as a complete road map. Rather, it presented a landscape of the principles and practices relevant to a phenomenological study, the territory of the 'bricoleur' (Papson 2014), the creative improviser who will be at home in Husserl's zig-zagging methodology. It was my responsibility to constantly check in with that landscape to ensure I met my goal of integrity in the research activities and the thesis as a whole. Descriptive phenomenology is complex and evolving and as such it is not something that can be unequivocally tied down. In respect to addressing the research question I adopted the methodology of Husserl as a rigorous approach which would yield an answer, but one in which the insights achieved in the descriptive analysis of themes would yield new knowledge in a study of executive coaching where the journey was as important as the destination.

## **Chapter 5: Mates at Work (Luke and Adam)**

### **5.1 Introduction to Mates at Work**

In this study, the relationship between coach (Luke) and client (Adam) has been distinctive in its reflection of mateship. Luke addressed Adam as a 'mate', which in Australia is an evocative feature of Australian colonial history, one which has contemporary resonance. Mates look after each other, and in this coaching case there has been clearly demonstrated that Luke is concerned with Adam's wellbeing. Mateship is born in adversity and shared struggle and this executive coaching case Adam has been on an emotional journey, but one in which he retained a strong sense of his own agency despite the challenges he confronts.

This executive coaching session was the fourth in a plan of six meetings aimed at achieving goals that have been identified by Adam at the start of the engagement. In the middle of this session, Luke affirmed that the original goals that the client sent to him were basically about building relationships which will enhance his career opportunities. This coaching story can be summarized as one of a journey into the development of more positive interpersonal relationships in the workplace and strengthening relationships within a broader network of friendships, as is made explicit in the ongoing conversation.

### **5.2 Lifeworld Description**

It became clear as the session began that some diversion from the overall purpose of the executive coaching engagement of the previous meetings had occurred. Adam (client) had developed a financial plan which would have enabled him to leave his executive role. That financial plan had been a focus of the previous coaching session, but it had now become apparent to Adam that mistakes had been in the investment strategy he had adopted as a pathway to financial independence. This meant that he could no longer plan on leaving his employment as he had hoped. In this coaching session, he expressed his frustration and anger, and some remorse.

Adam: So that reality is now sort of right in front of me ...

Luke: Right.

Adam: Which I can't ignore and um,

Luke: So it's triggering what sort of feelings?

Adam: Ah, frustration, ah ...

Luke: Yes.

Adam: It's just a bit of anger and frustration.

Luke: Right

Adam: Just a bit shitty and you know, a bit of beating yourself up.

Adam was confronted with the need to address the challenges of deriving greater satisfaction from his work and of addressing his problematic interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Adam recognized that his interpersonal approach created tensions with colleagues; he declared himself to be a perfectionist and expressed a belief that he is misunderstood as he is simply trying to be professional. In confronting the issues of his current situation, Adam was hesitant and reflective, with extended moments of silence. I am 'just in a funny spot', Adam said. Luke urged Adam to 'allow the space mate. Just allow this to emerge'. Adam admitted to being 'jittery' as he struggled to 're-centre'. He expressed awareness of his own frustration, 'hearing myself to be negative' when his purpose was, he said, to be in charge, positive and proactive and 'not listening to the inner critic'. Luke paraphrased Adam's comments and encouraged Adam's self-awareness as a process of becoming 'more real' and as a 'first step' to making change. Adam was taking the lead and Luke murmured 'hm' or 'yeah' many times as he continued to get 'a handle on the pattern' and reflect it back to Adam. Luke paraphrased Adam's reflections as 'a cycle of self-recrimination, and beating yourself up, and saying 'oh fuck it, I should have ...'

The conversation continued in this way for a little more time as Adam recounted his sense of frustration and recrimination. He reflected on being 'just not grounded'. He noted that while he does not meditate (as advocated and taught by Luke), he does 'pause' in terms of 'pulling myself up'. Luke reinforced this as 'a big step'. He followed

up by suggesting to Adam that 'what works best is to notice what's working and just do more of that', recognizing 'your self-sabotaging pattern'. Adam responded by suggesting that 'maybe it's not beating myself a little bit. It's just that ... it's impatience'. 'Once I make up my mind on something I just want to go to it, get it done'. 'Get it done right and um, be very firm about it'.

Adam then turned his attention to the one thing they had not spoken much about thus far in this coaching session:

Adam: But ah, so the one thing, I don't know if we have spoken about it much is, um, the one thing that I am always going with, but it's getting more in the back of my mind and maybe you can help out with this, is ... (15 second pause)

Luke: No, you need a moment? You need a tissue, mate?

Adam: OK (pause). The one thing, because I came to you on Jane's recommendation for um, to work on primarily, at the time, it was, like corporate relationships.

Luke: Yes.

Adam: As, as you know, building careers.

Luke: Right.

Adam: But the one thing I'm probably at my absolute worst is my personal relationships.

The problem with his relationships has manifested across both Adam's work and social networks. Adam said '...in terms of my network of close friends it's something I haven't, particularly since I've had a family, um, I haven't invested time in and it's something that I've probably been suppressing ....' Luke interspersed with reassuring words – 'right', 'ok', 'yeah'. After another pause of about five seconds, with deep breathing, Adam went on to express his embarrassment at not maintaining relationships, saying that being a perfectionist means he is always comparing himself with other people and he fears ending up as a lonely, angry old man ('I don't want to be that'). Adam expressed embarrassment because 'that's the polar opposite to you'

(Luke, the coach). Luke responded by asking permission to share something with Adam. Luke described his own struggles in the past when he had 'fucked up' and lost a lot of money and his marriage. He suggested that this was a journey and he could walk in the shoes of Adam. Luke related his own experience and realization in the past that he did not have himself as a friend, and 'I needed to repair my own relationship with myself'.

In that sharing of his experiences and insights from them, Luke suggested that this might be a 'learning' for Adam, if that sharing helped him. He spoke further about the need for Adam to find the strengths within himself and to love himself as a step towards believing that others could love him. Adam replied with a firm statement: 'I don't dislike myself. I know I'm critical of myself and what frustrates me the most is I just feel completely misunderstood'. He said he interprets himself 'in a professional sense of ... let's get on with things'. Adam said that 'the way people react to me is ... I think that I somehow do it in a way that is fully perceived as seeming to be too critical and harsh'. Adam attributed this to his upbringing on a farm without 'having lots of kids my age to run around and play with'. Luke responded to this with some reflecting back. He suggested that it was only normal that Adam did not necessarily have the skills that he is 'now looking to learn'. Luke suggested to Adam that there was a need for him 'cutting some slack' because of his experiences growing up, with Adam reaffirming that he is happy to accept 'who I am'.

After a little more discussion about relationships, Luke shifted attention by introducing Adam to the GROW model of setting goals, testing reality, creating options and specifying what will be done by getting the client to work through that process. Adam articulated his goal (G) as being to work on relationships that what would enliven him and be beneficial for him and others. Adam provided a time frame for improving those relationships as six months. He also set a goal of being forgiving and accepting of who he is and one of demonstrating interest in other people. Adam said he was drawn to the word 'loving' but was reluctant to actually write it down as it relates to intimacy, whereas he sees himself as provider and a doer. He chose instead to be 'accepting' and, with some prompting by Luke, decided to aim for accepting and loving together.



On further prompting, being vulnerable was identified by Adam as a goal for building relationships and in a related sense, being open to others.

Luke shared an extended review of previous work done in the executive coaching process with Adam, and explained the importance to Adam of going on a journey within himself before he was able to improve his relationships. Adam expressed his happiness with the conversation as enabling to see 'the perfectionist driver' in himself and recognise when the perfectionist surfaces in his relationships, particularly with his children. There was a discussion on how Adam's criticisms of himself were embodied (through the head, as a lightning bolt). Adam declared that having this sort of conversation was 'great'. There was an opening up to having an emotion and being able to identify it. Adam said he had started writing down words like 'being' and the choices he can make about 'being in relationships'. At this point, Adam was able to state 'I can, I guess, love myself a bit more'.

Luke raised the distinction between authentic listening and inauthentic in relationships, and then advised Adam to find one or two people with whom he could 'practise' as he was building his relationship with himself. Adam nominated a work colleague and some friends. Luke asked if there were any new 'mates' he could form relationships with at the children's school where parents interacted. Adam replied 'I've actually been a bit shit scared of that', and then scaled his emotion back to being 'uncomfortable'. Luke asked Adam, 'what would be some simple baby steps that you can put in place to a) have a better relationship with yourself and b) with others?' Adam replied 'the self-bit is the self-reflection, I think it is'. Luke asked Adam to identify questions he may ask himself to help focus on a better relation with self, and suggested a focus on gratitude, with which Adam agreed. Adam also added self-forgiveness, commitment to the 'journey' and doing things differently.

Luke then shared with Adam an extended description of the sense of shame and guilt he had experienced in the past, which meant that he could not build relationships with others. He related his personal insight that he first needed to repair his 'sense of self', which included some reflections on the need for Adam to do similar inner work. Adam

responded with his own commitments to getting grounded and paying attention to his mental energy and thought patterns. Adam said, 'The only elixir I can think of to the shame, if you want to use that word around, and embarrassment around where I'm at with some of my relationships, is to actually get on the court'. Adam then went on to discuss the need for conversations to get beyond 'footy', acknowledging that it is not necessary to 'get all deep and meaningful in every conversation'.

Luke shifted the focus to work relationships and what some of 'the baby steps' might be for Adam to build relationships at work as part of the 'Options' related to the GROW model with a question on whether Luke wanted 'to be snarling or smiling.' Both laughed and Luke pointed out to Adam that he had been smiling more often in this session than in previous ones. Adam agreed that people would notice if he smiled more at work and that his relationships would improve if he used positive language, including acknowledging others. Luke suggested using more questioning of friends and colleagues in order to balance enquiry with advocacy. He reassured Adam that in the six week period of coaching, he had grown dramatically in his consciousness. He introduced the journey as moving from unconsciously incompetent through to unconsciously competent<sup>3</sup>. Adam reflected that he had not expected to be talking about 'what we're talking about', even though it had been 'simmering away in the background,' and he had been 'parking it'. Luke likened this to wearing a mask, which had been taking a lot of energy away from the issue Adam was now dealing with, going on to reinforce the need for Adam to be authentic with 'this other person', with whomever he is in conversation. Adam stated his need to 'go away and sit down and work on these a little bit more' with an intent to see if a list of strategies developed between himself and his coach would work on relationships, so he could actually 'take some action'.

Adam introduced his relationship with his children, speaking about how he showers them with affection, almost feeling it as a 'luxury' or a 'self-indulgence,' but then

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<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to the Transtheoretical Model of Change which is widely used in psychology and psychologically informed approaches to coaching (Petrocelli, J.V. 2002).

recognising that there was no constraint other than his own thinking. Luke suggested that Adam accept this not as indulgent, but rather something that he deserved. He went on to suggest to Adam that he do some 'mirror work', affirmations to be read every day in the mirror as Adam was shaving. Adam worked to reframe some statements he might make, with moments of hesitation and silence. When Adam had finished framing his affirmation, Luke led him into a meditation of about one minute, followed by repeats of the affirmation. There was a period of silence again, as Luke asked if there was anything else Adam wanted to share 'from this centred space'. Adam responded that on his last repetition of his affirmation, he had truly found the essence for himself in committing to change which he owed to his family, that of being the best person he could be as an example to his wife and children - 'a win, win' as he described it. This would extend to his workplace, professionally.

In coming back from the meditative space, Luke again shared his own experience 'at this stage of the journey', that any setbacks Adam might experience not be turned back on himself as self-criticism. Adam confirmed the importance of this cautionary note. Luke said that 'we all learn through this, right? We all learn through each other's journeys'. In respect to the journey, Adam said he was 'just going from one place to another'. Luke went on to reinforce the need for self-forgiveness when sometimes there are relapses. Adam re-stated his own metaphor of needing 'to get on the court'. The coach then briefly summarized key points from the session before bringing it to an end.

## **Themes**

From this lifeworld description is a summary of the executive coaching conversation between Luke and Adam, I have identified three themes as:

Relationality – Coach and Client

Teleology and Conation -- Ends and Means

Narrative Identity – Becoming and Being

In identifying these themes I maintained an attitude of curiosity and wonder, conscious of not allowing my own beliefs, attitudes and values to prescribe what these might be and, in this respect, acknowledging the importance of the epoché and reduction. These themes are not unfamiliar to coaches, with the executive coaching relationship covered addressed in the study's literature review. Ends and means emerged as themes, emerging from Adam's unexpected discovery of a life purpose, one of a teleology that opened up a wider perspective on the place of goals in coaching. The theme of narrative identity was unexpected but emerged from Adam's frequent return to his own self-conception as a provider and doer, a major influence on his sense of self in the world and how this framed his goals, particularly in respect to his interpersonal relationships.

### **5.3 Theme 1: Relationality – Coach and Client**

Coaching emerged as thematic in this executive coaching conversation in two ways, one as an issue for Adam at work and in his broader interpersonal relationships and the other as manifested in the coaching relationship itself. It was the second that I concerned myself with in this account, it being more relevant to my research question 'what is executive coaching?' The importance of relationship in executive coaching is well established as shown in my literature review, with Carl Roger's therapeutic approach accepted by some as an approach to the coaching working alliance, but questioned by others. In this coaching partnership between Luke and Adam I describe their relational interactions and locate them within a framework of intersubjectivity and empathy from a phenomenological perspective.

Intersubjectivity is fundamental to Husserlian phenomenology, as subjectivity is. Husserl states:

Here we soon see, as another apriori, that self-consciousness and consciousness of others are inseparable... There need be no one in my perceptual field, but fellow men are necessary as actual, as known, and as an

open horizon of those I might possibly meet. Factually I am within an inter-human present and within an open horizon of mankind (Husserl 1970, p. 253).

As Husserl shows, phenomenology recognizes that we as humans are fundamentally in relationship with others at not just the personal level, but at a transcendental level. Intersubjectivity is an essence of the experiencing ego. Our consciousness of the world is defined as intrinsically relational, even when we are not actually with others. Husserl does not retreat from the 'pure interiority' of the experiencing person, being for itself and in itself as originally its own (Husserl 1970, p. 255). There is a reciprocity between that intersubjectivity and 'pure interiority'. The ego remains the site of experiencing subject, a living self that is sensed as identical over time. However, the being of a person is not just an achievement of a self; rather, it is a result of a communicative intertwining where the ego or subjectivity occurs only within intersubjectivity, with the other (Zahavi 2014). In that communicative intertwining is found empathy. Daley (2014) describes empathy as being constitutive of intersubjectivity at the primary level of intentionality, that is in the directedness of our conscious states. It is what gives intersubjectivity its meaning. It is a mode of perception in the shifting attention between an 'I' and a 'we'. Empathy is the entry point to the more complex process of interpersonal understanding, which requires an interpretation of the actions of others, their 'whys, meanings and motives' in a particular context (Zahavi 2010, p. 296). In his phenomenological account, Zahavi describes this communicative intertwining as that of the experiencing ego whose pure interiority brings its own experiences and beliefs into an understanding of the other, just as that other might influence the formation and continuation of those beliefs.

My account of the relationship between Luke and Adam uses the term 'empathy' in the phenomenological sense as two experiencing subjects who were sharing a 'we' space, one of mutuality in respect to the goal of improving Adam's interpersonal relationships. Luke opened his conversation with a simple question, 'So how are you mate?' Adam did not answer the question directly, but made an opening observation of his own.

Adam: You always check out my body posture at a distance.  
Luke: Do I?  
Adam: Yeah.  
Luke: That's what you feel. You're feeling that?  
Adam: No, I always feel like you're doing a quick ...  
Luke: Scan?  
Adam: Scan and just try to read the vibe  
Luke: Ah, did you think that's what's happening. That's interesting, maybe I am but I hadn't thought about that, thank you.

Adam's was a perceptive observation. He inadvertently captured the sense of Husserl's *lived body*, the material body unified with senses and perceptions in a dynamic whole, the physical and the psychic as a single objectivity (Heinmaa 2014a; Heinmaa 2014b). It is only through this first sense of ourselves that we can conceive of others similarly constituted as lived bodies. In perceiving the movements and behaviours of others, Husserl talks of a transfer of sense, recognizing through passive associations that the lived body of the other has its own systems of sensations, ones that I cannot live through but are indicated to me (Heinmaa 2014b). It may be that as this is a passive process Luke has been unaware of his scanning for 'the vibe', reading Adam's bodily cues for a sense of how he might be feeling. We can, however, make the bodily scanning process thematic as Adam has done, bringing the process to awareness and as an experience to be communicated. Adam may have reacted in an instinctual way to his coach's simple question 'how are you, mate?' Adam has a strong sense of his own body which has been apparent in the metaphors he used. Adam said 'he feels' like Luke is doing a quick scan. Etymologically, 'feeling' derives from a touching, a sensory experience (Etymology Online 2018). Feeling is a sensation.

There was something in Luke that had touched Adam, a transfer of sense that was possibly found in a fleeting movement as Luke's gaze swept over him. Husserl speaks of how the mindedness of the other is included in gestures and facial expressions which are part of an expressivity that is imbued with meaning from the start (Zahavi 2014). Luke may have been looking for these early cues and Adam has picked up on

himself as the object of the gaze, his sense of himself as the 'alien other' who is being interpreted, alien taken as simply meaning other than myself. Husserl calls this mediated self-experience, experience that emerges in communication with another (Zahavi 2014). We can see ourselves as the other might see us, and reflexively adopt an 'alienating' attitude towards oneself (Zahavi 2014, p. 140). Zahavi refers to Husserl's position that mindedness can be found in the expressivity of the other and how the thinking, feeling and desiring of is imbued with meaning. It is in empathy that these meanings are grasped. Adam's observation was empathic. He perceived and interpreted Luke in his own experiencing intentionality. Each of the participants has framed the executive coaching relationship in his own terms, Luke's as an expression of mateship and Adam as other who contributes his perspectives as uniquely his own. It was a first hint of difference in mutuality, the distinction between that intersubjectivity and the 'pure interiority' that characterizes a phenomenological account of empathy.

Luke opened the executive coaching conversation by referring to Adam as a 'mate'. Mateship is an enduring Australian phenomenon steeped in early colonial folk lore. It was in a spirit of mutual support that Luke positioned himself to support Adam in the difficult work to be done. An existential condition of being is relationality (van Manen 2014). An appeal to mateship is an appeal to relationality. It was significant that mateship was invoked by Luke as an opening to this particular conversation. Mateship fosters a sense of egalitarianism. The difficult conditions of working class farm workers such as the shearers are at the Australian root of mateship. It is a concept which has evolved through generations of Australians. Mateship invokes the camaraderie of troops in the first-world war, in the trenches with only each other to rely upon in the face of extreme hardship, likely death and lack of trust in the command structure. The challenges that Adam brought to the executive coaching sessions may not represent such fiercely existential threats as those in the trenches of war, yet threat itself is not unusual in the contested terrains of organizations. The coach shared his own experiences of hardship with the colourful language typical of working class banter that framed the understanding of mateship in Australia:

Luke: I feel like a brother in arms with you. At your age ... I fucked up ... and later,

Luke: And I walk in your shoes and say, hey mate, I was exactly like you ...

This appeal to camaraderie was stronger in the coach than the client. Adam swore occasionally ('it's shitty, it's shitty actually'), ('I'm just bloody rambling) and ('I've actually been a bit shit scared of that). He holds back a little, not using the F-word. Swearing is a form of language that is evocative. In this instance, it was a form of inclusion – I am your comrade in arms. It is a form of knowing – I understand what you are experiencing. It is an ethics of friendship and solidarity – I accept your otherness, but I draw you to me in the shared challenge of existential threat. The strong words, profanities such as the one used by Luke, have a direct line to emotions (Bergen 2016). Bergen suggests that, used well, such swearing can help to express feelings or even to withstand pain. Profanities can also reflect an in-group term for positive self-identification, depending on context, and among close peers slurs are acceptable (Bergen 2016). Bergen affirms that swearing can be used as a valuable social tool. Luke's appeal to mateship and his use of a particular language of mateship, the use of the 'F-word', reinforced the idea of a partnership of equality and power sharing. What was apparent was the sharing that was occurring between them as they integrated their different perspectives where the self-experience of Luke was shared in reassuring Adam as he grappled with difficult emotions. Adam described his situation as 'shitty', in response to which Luke let Adam's account unfold with acknowledgement but without comment. Luke asked him what sort of feelings were being triggered by the reality of some of his changed circumstances. Adam described those feelings as frustration and anger in response to the poor choices he has made in organizing his personal finances. This is compounded by his having just come from a meeting at work which was 'really frustrating as well'.

Luke gave Adam the opportunity to express his frustrations and anger until he asked Adam how those feelings 'impinge on your performance going forward and achieving the goals you want to achieve'. I have framed mateship as being forged in adversity, in existential threat, where there is a shared task to be done. Luke acknowledged the



need for Adam to 'vent' his anger but invited him to seek 'a solution focus around the other side of it'. Luke was managing the executive coaching conversation, mindful that there were goals to be achieved which require planning and action. Adam was not yet ready for that shift into a future orientation. He described himself as just 'bloody rambling' but Luke pressed him and Adam responded reflexively, in mediated self-experience:

.... I think actually that's part of my frustration, is I'm sitting here and I'm hearing myself be frustrated, I'm hearing myself be negative and I'm listening to myself say all those things.

Adam has responded to Luke's observation that 'we are coming to a deeper sense of what's going on for you'. As a coach, Luke was giving voice to the meaning he attributed to Adam's 'bloody rambling' as Adam described it.

Luke: So by re-centering, you're setting a kind of, it feels like you're setting a new default position where you fall back to, when you feel like, you've, your inner judgements, your critical self can relax, but not into the deep space of deep criticism, it's sort of like you can observe it, but you won't fall deeply into it

Adam: Yeah, and I think that is actually, that's part of my frustration ....

Luke encouraged Adam to continue, suggesting it would allow Adam to actually name what was really going on for him, expressing what he was consciously aware of. Luke then described how he was getting a handle on Adam's pattern of behaviour, how, as the coach, he interpreted it. It gave Adam the opportunity to see himself through the other's eyes. While this mediated self-experience is typically indirect, in this coaching situation, it is being shared directly, reflected back to Adam. Adam simply listened, often offering only 'hms' and 'yeahs'. Luke described Adam's behavioural pattern of 'beating himself up' as 'an old friend'. Adam responded with his own position. He said 'And maybe I'm overstating the, um, beating myself up a bit. Because, certainly I'm not, like I said, down in the dumps about it.' He was not accepting Luke's

characterization of his behavioural pattern and he clarified his own understanding. It is a phenomenological principle that I can only be self-aware of myself and it is impossible to be self-aware of someone else (Zahavi 2003). Empathy is not an experience which eliminates the difference between self-experience and other-experience. This means that in respect to any relationship there is an asymmetry as a 'necessary and persisting existential fact' (Zahavi 2014, p. 151). Our experiences are our own and the other will never have access to them in the same way we ourselves do. Adam had asserted his own perspective, rejecting the idea that 'beating himself up' is an 'old friend', as suggested by Luke. Adam responded with a renewed insight, one which shifted his sense of 'frustration' to one of 'impatience'. He saw himself through the other's eyes, and it enriched his self-experience within the mutuality of the relationship, without any reduction in the strength of the relationship.

Adam continued with the reflection that the one thing at which he was worst was personal relationships and he described how it was impacting on his career and his partner. He expressed a fear of ultimately becoming lonely. He described his embarrassment in sharing it with Luke 'because I know that's the polar opposite to you'. Luke responded by sharing a description of his own experiences, starting with the declaration that 'I feel like a brother in arms with you', an appeal to the mateship I have referred to. Luke referred to the loss of his money, of his marriage, of his friendships and his realization that he did not even have himself as a friend. He reassured Adam they were not polar opposites, but had 'just gone through different phases'. Luke also shared the realization that at this point in his own life he needed to repair his relationship with himself. He expressed his hope that for Adam, it was a learning and his (Luke's) sharing was a help. Adam replied affirmatively. Luke advised Adam to look for his strengths, his loving spirit and express gratitude for it. Adam responded, 'Yeah, it's thanks for sharing that. Um, I mean the funny thing, I understand what you're sort of saying, you've got to love yourself before others will love you'.

Zahavi (2014) describes any coupling as a relationship of mutuality, one where the full range of interpersonal understanding is only reached in acts of communication. This

requires the collaborative effort of both agents in joint meaning production (Martens & Schlicht 2018). This process was apparent in its fullness as Luke and Adam shared their experiences and beliefs. There was both experiential and emotional sharing, particularly in respect to the vulnerability they have each expressed and which was no longer just one or the other's but was 'ours'. Both coach and client opened themselves up to being influenced by the other and did so in an atmosphere of shared trust and safety. Sharing that vulnerability does not presuppose a fusion, or identical sameness of the experience. It remains distinctive to each but the emphasis is on bi-directionality and reciprocity (Martens & Schlicht 2018). There is, in Husserlian phenomenology, a recognition that there will always be a difference in what I empathize with the other and what the other is experiencing. It is in the recognition of an existential difference, however, that phenomenology finds an expressive unity. When it came to planning actions which Adam would take to build his own relationships, Luke was careful to ensure that Adam used his own words. Adam would be committing himself to those actions in writing them down and they must be sincerely meaningful to him if he is to implement them with authenticity and commitment.

Adam and Luke did not always gel with each other. When Luke talked to Adam about generative growth, intimacy or deep surrender, Adam responded more pragmatically in respect to his actions, often returning to his self-characterization as a doer and provider. It was a conversation which Adam said he was 'happy to have' but at the same time he 'wants to get on the court', and start taking action around improving his relationships. Their differences nonetheless worked in a complementary way. Luke as a coach brought into play his own experiences and a focus on the journey they were on together, with compassion and honesty. Adam responded in his own way, also with honesty, accepting some but not all of Luke's insights as relevant to his situation.

Compassion may be a feature of relationality, although it is not equivalent with empathy understood as 'perception-based direct acquaintance with the minds of others' (Zahavi 2014, p. 152). Compassion can be defined as a feeling that arises in response to another's suffering and a desire to help (Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas

2010; Lomas 2015), but like empathy it is a controversial and contested phenomenon. However, compassion is broadly understood as ‘offering others patience, kindness and non-judgmental understanding, recognizing that all humans are imperfect and make mistakes’ (Neff 2003, p. 224). Compassion has been evident in this executive coaching conversation through Luke’s caring reassurances and open sharing of his own failures and the sense of shame he felt about how he behaved earlier in his life. The compassion extended by Luke was demonstrated by creating a sense of spaciousness with his silence and encouragement as Adam grappled with his own emotions to the point of tears. Luke was non-judgmental in his responsiveness to these emotions, but used them to reflect back to Adam the importance of the journey Adam was on. Luke’s own emotional resonance with Adam’s suffering prompted Adam to divulge his own self-experiences, in what Zahavi (2014) describes as ‘a mutual awakening’, where an understanding of the other uncovers both similarity and difference. It was as a result of that coupling, and in particular its similarities, that Adam came to have new experiences of himself that he may not have been able to do on his own. It is the interplay between sameness and difference that must be in place for empathy to be possible (Zahavi 2014). It is also a feature of the dialogic learning referred to in my literature review. Both Luke and Adam have shown vulnerability in revealing themselves. Luke’s compassionate caring demonstrated an authentic relatedness that supported Adam in taking his own self-awareness to a deeper level. Adam remained the doer and provider as he framed practical steps for taking these fresh insights into his relationships at work.

I have established the importance of the executive coaching relationship as a key theme in the coaching in which Luke and Ryan are the participants. In this description of the relationship between Luke and Adam, I integrated and broadened that perspective to explore intersubjectivity and empathy phenomenologically. Here, I have seen a dynamic interplay between self and other where a common humanity is shared but the experience of each is only ever fully his/her own. Empathy is found in sharing, and the coach’s appeal to mateship has been a resonant conduit for exploring the relationship between two quite different individuals. Mateship and the language of mateship have fostered a communicative intertwinement in this conversation. In

the shifting attention between an 'I' and a 'we', Adam, the client is a provider and a doer who has assertively held his own ground while acknowledging that he is not effective in building relationships. His coach, Luke, was, in Adam's words, the polar opposite. Luke succeeded in persuading Adam that they were not that different and was successful in helping Adam recognize the importance of finding his own 'loving spirit'. The mutuality of the relationship in its shared coaching objectives has sustained a dynamic of co-operative intent. At the same time, the differences in perspectives that each brought to the conversation has contributed to that dynamic in such a way that Adam's agency has been respected and facilitated, enabling him find enriched insights into himself while framing action-oriented goals.

Luke provided Adam with the opportunity to apply and test a different vocabulary for naming and making sense of his own feelings. As the conversation proceeded Adam appeared to become more confident about adopting that vocabulary as he moved to articulating the practical action goals he proposed to take. This was an iterative process with Luke continuing to ask questions and guide reflection with observations of his own. Throughout there was a reciprocal meaning making process of building Adam's self-awareness about his struggle with 'the intimacy side of things'. To more fully capture the nature of this particular coaching relationship, I introduced Luke's compassionate care as filling out the relational quality of empathy with emotionally resonant values that enable Adam give voice to his vulnerabilities, and chart a course towards becoming the 'best version' of himself for his family and his colleagues.

#### **5.4 Theme 2: Teleology and Conation**

Luke and Adam characterized their coaching project as a journey.

Luke: We all learn through each other's journeys ...

Adam: It is a journey at the end of the day, isn't it?

Luke: Just a journey ...

Adam: Just going from one place to another.

This exchange occurred towards the end of a 90-minute coaching session. For a practice that calls itself 'coaching', it should be a surprise to no-one that coaching in general might adopt the metaphor of a journey for the process of coaching for change. It is indeed a process that leads from one destination to another, not just in physical terms but in the personal flow of experiences, perceptions, recollections, plans made and goals achieved in the passing of time. Van Manen (2014, p. 306) suggests that lived time, our own subjective time, can be experienced 'as telos, the wishes, plans and goals we strive for in life'. It is that telos that this study now takes up as a theme of work that Luke (coach) and Adam (client) created together in respect to the wishes, plans and goals that Adam expressed. Executive coaching is purposeful and is often described as goal-oriented (David, Megginson & Congleton 2013; Grant 2017) although as I established in my literature review, this is not universally accepted. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a goal as the object of a person's ambition or effort, or an aim or desired result. It also defines goal as the destination of a journey. It is in the metaphor of journey that a complexity is added to what a goal is. Journeys are not always just about directly going from one place to another. There can be many detours, twists and turns and barriers. They might take a linear path, but sometimes, journeys backtrack or deviate from the main route. Nonetheless, journeys have a futural quality, as do goals.

Luke and Adam's executive coaching session opened almost immediately with a discussion about Adam's plans 'for maybe escaping the rat race', as Adam described it. Adam was also frustrated with a workplace meeting. Luke asked 'how does that impinge on your performance going forward and achieving the goals you want to achieve.' Goal directedness is a recurrent theme in this coaching session. Grant (2012) advocates for goals in coaching by asserting that 'Human beings are goal-orientated organisms. Without goals we could not exist as conscious sentient beings' (p. 152). Merleau-Ponty refers to the temporal horizons that implicitly present what has been past and what is anticipated as the future (Romdenh-Romluc 2014). This characterizes life as the threshold for possibilities for action, some of which may be taken up and others not. It introduces that component of mind that is referred to conation, the will to take action towards an end. I have alluded to telos as an

overarching dimension of our goals in van Manen's conception of lived time. I now provide a short of account of what is meant by teleology and conative phenomenology before moving to a description of the goal oriented journey which Adam and Luke take in this particular conversation.

### **Understanding Teleology**

Teleology is said to be goal directness or an account of goal-directed activity (Moran & Cohen 2012; Wattles 2006). This definition offers a first handle on a fuller understanding of how teleology is historically understood and is expressed in more recent philosophical approaches. A fuller understanding of teleology in relation to goals was important to this executive coaching case as the goals which were pursued have been framed in pragmatic terms, the GROW model. However, as the conversation between Luke and Adam proceeded, it could be seen that a richer picture of goals emerged. According to Aristotle, the final purpose or outcome is the aim of organisms to take actions for their own good, in order to sustain their own being as substance and function (Quarantotto 2014). In other words, our purposes and our causes are ultimately to be life-sustaining human beings whose needs are met as we go about our daily activities in realizing our hopes and desires. To sustain themselves, Aristotle contended, humans are always striving, growing and self-moving, that is acting to achieve ends in a life which is an integrated whole directed towards living well, or eudaimonia, the highest good in human flourishing (Gurtler 2008; Kraut 2016). To achieve those ends we act to achieve practical outcomes, but it is virtuous action that represents the highest good, action which not only contributes to our happiness but also which employs wisdom. It is in action, not in a state of being, that living well expresses the virtues such as acting so as to demonstrate qualities such as justice, generosity and courage (Kraut 2016). It is in reason that they are assessed and in which the highest good is found.

In the telos of realizing the intrinsic potentiality of the Aristotlean virtues, it is an aspect of human flourishing that humans use reason to envision goals, decide on steps to follow and commit themselves to action (Sharar 2018). Husserl (1969, p. 160)

relates this to the life of consciousness as having an 'all-pervasive teleological structure' towards the discovery of correctness, the good which is achieved through an appeal to reason. All human life for Husserl, is a constant striving, found in the felt affective levels of life and in conscious thought, the ultimate end of which is a state of fulfilled happiness (Peucker 2008). It also links the person to his or her limits in respect to both life and death, and the teleological influence of past and future generations at the level of family, state, nation or culture. This introduces a generative phenomenology and its concerns with intersubjective, historical movement which is oriented to future possibilities and, for Husserl, to the critical project of generating new meaning structures in response to the crises or challenges which emerge over time. It is in this openness to future possibilities that people may be seen as not just pushed by the events of the past, but as being pulled forward toward their imaginative anticipations of the future (Hersch 2011).

Adam's plan for escaping the rat race had been derailed. In the interim period between this and his last executive coaching session, his situation changed. There was now a 'road block' between Adam and his 'end game', as he described it, the result of some of the 'poor choices' he had made. Luke suggested they might develop a plan to help Adam achieve his goal of changing his career directions. Adam was aware of the need to plan, but responded that, in respect to his escape plan for achieving financial independence, it was a task which he could achieve independently, without assistance from his coach. Subsequently, Luke said that he 'was looking for a couple of outcomes that you'd like to achieve in this session'. Adam changed the focus of the coaching when he responded by referring back to their previous meeting when he and Luke 'spoke a lot last time about relationship and did a little bit of role-playing ...' He described his view of coaching, 'the whole purpose of being here is to, um, is to think, it's to be in charge or be positive, proactive,' but his declared self-criticism and negativity were frustrating the 'I can' or conative phase of the teleological good which eludes him. Ultimately, struggling with his emotions, Adam identified his primary purpose for coming to coaching as being to work on his corporate relationships, and he broadened this when he said that he is at his absolute worst in his personal



relationships. It was a circuitous journey, but there is now emerging a clear teleological direction for not just this coaching session, but those to follow.

Adam thought he had an end game and a clear strategy for achieving it. He had worked on goals and taken actions to get to that end, all of which were now in doubt. Luke acknowledged Adam's frustration, but as a coach he remained intent on a plan, with a 'solutions focus'. There were times when Adam might have agreed without hesitation. He said that once he made up his mind on something, he just wanted to go to it and get it done right. He is action-oriented, the provider/doer who says of himself, 'you know, let's get on with things, let's do things'. When that end game of an alternative lifestyle was no longer in sight for Adam, he had faced up to a deeper reality, an existential crisis. Adam struggled to express himself and said he is 'actually embarrassed'. There was a pause, a long silence except for the sound of Adam's heavy breathing. Finally he said '... I could just end up being a lonely, angry old man' and that 'I don't want to be that'.

Adam had faced up to a deep fear, a vision of the future which he now articulated and recoiled from. It is a teleology of negative outcomes, the antithesis to an ultimate end of fulfilled happiness. Adam took a first action step by revealing himself to his coach despite the embarrassment he felt. As the executive coaching proceeded and Luke introduced the GROW model to frame actions Adam may take to build his relationships, Adam had to make decisions not just about actions, but also who he wanted to be. This was not simply a teleology of goals, but the teleology of a whole life, the purposes which Adam needed to identify in order to avoid becoming a lonely, angry old man.

Quarantotto (2014) refers to an immanent teleology, the aim of individuals to achieve their own good in Aristotle's conception, a good which coincides with both their being and functioning. The complete life is found in the defining activity that governs a life and integrates one's activities (Gurtler 2008). Adam found this in a sudden realization as he worked through the issue of finding happiness and joy inside himself. For him, it was what will allow him to be the best parent, the best husband, the best version of

himself. He said 'it is well and truly the essence of it for me'. This was not a simple goal. It was a wish, a desire, a teleological end. It was what motivates a striving for fulfilment in life, the fulfilment of which is a sense of pleasure (Summa 2014). Desire, according to Husserl, is a feeling intentionality, an evaluative striving which realizes itself in an act of the will (Summa 2014). Wishes and desires, are incorporated into a conception of 'abstract goals' which sit at the top of a hierarchical organization of goals (Milyavskaya & Werner 2018, p. 164). These incorporate one's broader identity and values. I discuss values separately in Chapter Seven.

Adam's professional sense of himself as getting on with doing things had led people to perceive him, Adam believed, 'to be critical and harsh', in his own words. He expressed his desire to be the best person he could because of his family values. Luke suggested to him that this had ramifications for his professional, working relationships. Adam's family values and his desire to be the best person for his family needed to be reflected in the specific goals that were formulated in respect to improving his corporate relationships. Luke reminded Adam that he had a choice and need not be trapped in his old patterns of behaviour. In Husserl's conceptualization, the teleological dimension of attaching a good to our pursuits calls us to an authentic human life, one of rational, free, insightful agency (Drummond 1995). Adam had provided himself with good reasons for living authentically with a new goal as 'best person', one which he crafted for himself. Being a 'best person' is a way of being that is a whole of life project in shaping the choices he makes in that complete journey. It was the end to which Adam aspired. This teleology of the self as a life purpose is one of continual becoming. The challenge for Adam was to integrate it into the teleology of the 'good' which inheres in his regular goals, decisions and actions as they unfold over time.

### **Understanding Conation**

Closely related to the striving that characterizes teleology is conation. Where teleology is about ends, conation is about the means. Conation refers to the taking of action in the planful, goal-oriented striving of motivation, connecting knowledge and

affect to proactive behaviour (Huitt 1999). Phenomenologically, conation is a conscious, willing act, an intentional object that can be realized through action (Kriegel 2013; Lotz 2006). Action itself is a practical object, a process of getting things done in a way that is distinctively different to feeling or valuing acts or theoretical acts, those of thinking or sensing. This is not to say that an intentional act is not framed through reflection and evaluation in a decision making process. Thinking is designed for doing, as Seligman et al. (2013) suggest. Willing is dependent on value. The will to action must be in some way attractive, reflecting the good that Aristotle describes as a teleological end. In his account of conative phenomenology, Ricoeur focuses on deciding as the fundamental act of the will (Kriegel 2013). Ricoeur (2013) distinguishes between behaviour as conscious processes of deliberation, decision and choice on one hand, and unconscious processes such as reflexes, habits and instincts on the other. Ricoeur describes deciding as presenting the intentional object (or project, as he calls it) as being achievable within my power, a pull to action as definitive of deciding. Ricoeur (2013, p.45) emphasizes the importance of judgement in the act of deliberating, describing deliberation as 'going back and forth among ideas and feelings, etc.' until the point of the last practical judgment in an act of election, the choice of the action to be taken. Feeling is that which helps to define what is valuable to a person. A decision is made following the principle of apparent good, the best that is available in the present situation or what is described as Aristotle's mean point between excess and deficiency, which requires a full and detailed assessment of all the circumstances by the decision maker (Kraut 2016). The act of will, for Husserl, is a practical possibility, a preference formed in affective values but then assessed against a further norm of what ought to be done through a cognitive appraisal (Crowell 2013). This does not exhaust the valuing process. It replaces or contributes to a higher value which is what motivates what we do.

The account thus far in this study has shown that Adam to be action-oriented. His goal was framed as one intended to improve his personal and professional relationships, and Luke employed the GROW model to help Adam articulate his goal and decide on actions to be taken. However, this is not a simple process as the reality testing and adaptive strategies for action are integrated into a deliberative process. As Luke and

Adam went through a deliberative process, Luke acknowledged Adam for taking the journey. Luke said that most guys cut out early because they think just 'give me the results'. However, Adam's frustrations with himself and his fear of becoming 'a lonely, angry old man', brought him to a point where he recognized the need for change. Adam's challenge throughout lay in his impatience to get things done. Husserl (1973) suggests that every action of the will is grounded in evaluative striving. This striving is for the possession of that which is valued as useful or pleasing. In Adam's case, action itself is an object valued as useful or pleasing. The evaluative process which Adam applied to decision making means action has been taken, but it is at a cost, an inability to build and sustain enriching interpersonal relationships professionally and personally. For Adam to turn this around, Luke said there is bridge building to be done. In order to build his relationships, Adam must first build a relationship with himself. Luke explicitly re-directed Adam from the outward resolve to take action in respect of his relationships as focussed on doing, to the potentially more difficult task of mending the relationship with himself. The realization was there for Adam, but he again deflected attention from it, saying he does not have 'that natural knack' in relating to others. This was the point at which Luke introduced the GROW model to support Adam in making decisions about what 'techniques' he can adopt to develop his relationships with others and with himself.

In the first step of the GROW process, Adam's goal was stated as being to work on relationships which enliven him and others. Adam's choice of the word 'enliven' was interesting in itself, invoking a sense of energy, a value which reflects Adam's action orientation. The pull to action in this goal was powerful and he wanted to achieve dramatic improvements in just two months. He was strongly motivated in respect to the feeling, valuing aspect of deciding, but practical reason is the entwinement of judgement and valuing. Adam's feeling attraction to his goal overwhelmed his judgement. Luke asked whether Adam was being realistic, the 'R' in the GROW model. He again suggested to Adam that he needs to start with the self first of all, specifically asking 'what kind of relationship do you think you need to have with yourself?' There was a tentative start on this project before Adam switched back to the outward focus. Again, Luke guided Adam back to the inner journey, suggesting that there are two

action columns in the notes that he had asked Adam to write as they went through this process. One activity was that of building relationships with others and the second with the self. Luke also suggested that he should not get 'stuck' with 'who I am', but he should consider 'who you are becoming.' This was challenge and opportunity for Adam, calling on him to take action not just on the outer work of doing, but also the inner work of becoming. Adam accepted the challenge. He said 'Yeah, I mean the word loving comes to mind but it's a word that I, um, I don't want to write it down.' He acknowledged that it is the intimacy side of things which is 'lacking'. As the GROW process unfolded, Adam identified what 'being' actions he will commit to in how he can find the will to love himself. These included states of being, such as accepting himself and allowing himself to be more vulnerable in his relationships. Practical actions were identified as sharing more of himself, and being open in specific personal relationships within his circle of friends. Adam also decided on actions he could take in the workplace, such as smiling more, giving more compliments and consciously compensating for his tendency to just 'let's get it done.'

The session concluded with Adam re-iterating a metaphor he had used several times, exemplified when he said 'I think, emotionally, what I need is actually to get on the court'. Following the GROW model, wrapping up, the 'W' of GROW, has captured the iterative processes of conation. For Adam, it has been an unexpected conversation. He did not 'expect to be talking about it, what we're talking about.' The GROW model was not used in a mechanistic way but has taken Adam on a journey which has integrated the past, present and future. It also opened for Adam the need for self-understanding, an inner journey of valuing himself and talking about self-love with slowly increasing confidence in use of the word 'love'. In this he has found a new 'practical possibility' and a higher value of loving himself so he can be the 'best person' for his family.

There was a lengthy process of goal-setting and actions which in this conversation oscillated between what Adam needed to do in respect to his interpersonal relationships and what he needed to do in relation to 'who you're going to be,' as Luke paraphrased it. Adam's personal commitment to a particular being, the best person,

was an insight and a vision that has emerged from the GROW process, not one that has driven it. The coaching session evolved, and the GROW model used as a tool to develop what Husserl calls 'the capacity for self-fashioning, for gathering one's life as a whole, under a certain practical norm' (Crowell 2013, p. 274). As teleological oriented feeling, being the best person he can be was strong motivation for Adam in taking action towards the good he identified, one that reflected a life purpose in the valuing of his family. Under the practical norm that Husserl directs us to, there is also to a teleological willing towards what ought to be done, which is a rational process of mediating between logic and desire in freely choosing the best from all good things, the absolute value following Aristotle, and acting in a way that is consistent with that choice. The use of the GROW model in this example provided a space of pause, a slowing down of the willing process that engaged a deep level of reflection, successfully drawing together valuating motives with rational deliberation. If teleology were to be understood as ends in life as a whole, and goals as means in a conative process of determining action, they are shown here to be dynamically inter-related as Adam strove towards personal and professional success as a self-responsible person.

Drawing on the words that Luke and Adam used in describing their coaching experience, I characterized this theme as a journey, a road taken to a particular destination. In coaching generally, that destination is sign-posted as a goal, often a purposeful action statement of what is to be achieved. However, the centrality of goals to executive coaching has been challenged in the contemporary literature. I have looked beyond that literature and sought to understand the goal setting process in coaching in a phenomenology that has its roots in the ancient conception of teleology as articulated by Aristotle, and then in the more recent approaches such as Ricoeur's, to taking action in a conation, acts of will. I did not anticipate where that might take me and found myself in an analysis of the GROW model which integrated teleology and conation in an enriched re-discovery of that coaching model.

In finding the distinction between teleology and conation as separation of ends and means I saw a whole of life self-integrating purpose ordered towards the finalization of the 'good' life. Actions I saw as the means of realizing that purpose through goal-

directed striving. What I found in this executive coaching conversation is that purpose is not necessarily a front end to goals. It can be an emerging phenomenon of that action-oriented striving in a deliberative process. I was also curious to find how goals are motivated by the feelings brought to an evaluating process and how these need to be accounted for in a rational process of determining what actions we choose in willing, the conative. Taking action for Adam was a value in itself, embedded in his identity of the provider who get things done, something which was now causing him emotional distress. Husserl's attention to practical reason as entwinement between the affective and the cognitive or rational is integrated into Adam's deliberations. In facilitating a goal making process and decisions on actions to be taken, coaches are able to focus on both aspects of practical reasoning because the will to take action is motivated by feeling, a pull to action which has its own teleology. Husserl makes it clear (Crowell 2013; Laurukhin 2015) that our self-responsibility lies in determining an absolute value in assessing what ought to be done in a hierarchy of values which requires we distinguish the best from a range of good options.

### **5.5 Theme 3: Narrative Identity**

The metaphor of journey was an entry point to my discussion on teleology and conation. As Luke and Adam engaged with that metaphor, Luke asked Adam if he knew of the 'lovely work by Joseph Campbell about the hero's journey' (Campbell 2008). Campbell studied mythology, and how stories throughout history articulated in narrative the trajectories or plots of humanity's shared struggles on life's path (Robertson & Lawrence 2015). His works on the hero's journey have served as inspiration in confronting life's challenges in a wide variety of stories, real and imagined. Halstead (2000) describes these narratives as embodying 'the essence of that sacred space within which one evolves and comes to a qualitative shift in conceptualizing self in relation to others and world' (p. 1). According to Halstead, the impetus for embarking on the steps in this journey can be described as a call to learning, which may tax an individual's resources as she journeys through the challenges to be met. Here there is a character, the hero/heroine who is transformed in a quest. That character has an identity, one which on the one hand remains

constant throughout the narrative and yet, on the other hand, is changed by his/her experiences. In my study, I focus explicitly on the phenomenology of identity, the importance of narrative identity, particularly drawing again from the phenomenological work of Paul Ricoeur whose hermeneutic philosophy of identity and narrative was developed in a series of works over the decades. Identity has its Latin roots in the concept of sameness. The theme of this section of my study addresses how sameness is dynamically played out in the dialectic between sameness and change as Adam grappled with his identity of provider/doer in its transition to valued colleague and friend whose relationships are mutually enriching.

The narrative view of identity reflected a claim that human understanding takes a narrative form (Atkins 2004). As self-understanding beings, persons have narrative identities. They have stories that they tell about themselves, to themselves, and to others. Adam's narrative was explicit in its telling to Luke, identifying himself as provider and doer, reflected in the metaphors he used, his repeated need to get 'on the court', and put into action the ideas and insights that emerge in the coaching. He created his personal meaning in life as an embodied, action-oriented individual engaged with the practicalities of life. Adam's was an explicit first-person account, one where he found within himself a continuity of sameness as the provider and doer who get things done. This sameness reflects that aspect of identity that provides coherence and continuity to a sense of being in the world (Ricoeur 2016). However, it was that personal coherence found in the commitment to getting things done that impacted on Adam's interactions with others, creating a tension in how Adam saw himself compared with how he perceived others to see him. Adam said he feels completely misunderstood by others. He described it as 'the story I make up ... I fundamentally relate to myself in a professional sense of myself, you know, let's get on with things, let's do things'. As Adam described it, the result was that people respond to him in a way that reflects a perception that he 'seems to be critical and harsh'. Seeing himself as others do, introduced a third person perspective that challenged Adam's values, his commitment to just getting on with things as a provider/doer. Values as a feature of sameness represent part of what Ricoeur (2016) attributes to the apparent



immutability of identity, that is the sense we may have of our identity as a unity persisting over time.

Ricoeur (2016) asks how we resolve the immutability of identity with a need for change. He finds this in the mediating role of character, where the identity of the story unfolds with the identity of the character. It is in the story's plot that the character finds this mediation between permanence and change. Ricoeur (1994) suggests that there is a confrontation between the two sides or polarities of character, the sides of sameness and selfhood. It is a polarity which he describes as a dialectic, one which was played out clearly as Adam struggled between the continuity of his sameness story and his desire to transform his interpersonal relationships. Sameness is found in a numerical identity, the singularity of a person which is established in a reflective act of appropriating my body-subject as me (Ricoeur 1994). That embodiment incorporates what is described by Ricoeur as the involuntary, the sedimentations of habit, the acquired identifications made up of values, norms, ideals, models and emotions. These are the dispositions which inform the evaluations we make as we go about our daily lives. Such dispositions are associated with that aspect of character which is seen as uninterrupted continuity across time, a permanence which defines sameness.

The selfhood side, that of change, involves another dialectic, that between itself and other than self. The self is the 'I myself', a reflexive identity with a sense of 'mineness' (Ricoeur 2016), a reflective self-consciousness of myself as an object of my own thoughts, recognizing myself as an embodied individual across time. Whilst there is a self-constancy, a promise of the self to itself and to others, it also implies an ethical answerability which holds that self accountable and responsible for its acts, not just to him/herself, but to the other and to the broader community where normative values are established. In this answerability, we make evaluations of the good, or of our happiness, of what we make of ourselves, the character in the story, one who is accountable to self and to others. Those evaluations are what Adam experienced as a discordance between how he sees himself and others see him. Character is not, as Ricoeur (2016, p. 11) describes it, 'a fixed, abridged portrait locked up in a formula'.

Rather, it is the site of my desire, a way of feeling about myself which at least finds itself in the 'inertia' of habit and a sedimented world of values which are not typically called into question, the quality of sameness. However, character is also potentially open to all the values of human beings and, contrary to the desire circumscribed by an inertia found in the continuity of identity, it is the desire for happiness in the totality of our lives that provides a field of motivation. The mediation of character is the task of being a person, one who can refigure his or her identity in narrative as an expression of human freedom. Ricoeur says that 'what sedimentation has contracted, narration can redeploy' (1994, p. 122).

Adam was both narrator and character in this story. His life journey potentially represented an *emplotment*, as Ricoeur (2016) describes it, one which reconciles identity and diversity with sameness and self in the narrative of personal identity. *Emplotment* refers to the historical unfolding of events in a story, its plot. It is in the sphere of temporality, accounts of the past, dilemmas of the present and futural projection, that mediation is to be sought – the battle between the sedimentation of habit and the disruption of innovation. This is reflected in the narrative *emplotment* where the character's 'concordance' is disrupted and 'discordance' is experienced in the tensions and ambiguities of action which can threaten identity. These tensions were made manifest for Adam in his sense of being misunderstood and his fear of becoming an angry old man. Concordance is the principle of order. Adam's personal narrative as provider/doer provided orderliness and consistency to his actions and his sameness in identity. Discordances are the reversals of fortune that disrupt that order and precipitate a transformation from the initial disorienting situation to a resolution. It is this concordant/discordant relation that is characteristic of every dramatic structure in Ricoeur's (2016) account of personal narrative.

The provider/doer identity which Adam claimed in his willing to get things done is now precisely the source of a crisis which he is experiencing. In his story, Adam's determination to get things done has been so compelling that he, as the agent of his own discourse, or actant as Ricoeur prefers to call it, has been judged by what he does not do, which is pay attention to interpersonal dynamics. Ricoeur talks of a narrative

semiotics as identification – the sameness of identity. It is expressed in the actant's discourse as doer in what Ricoeur describes as a phenomenology of the 'I can' in the emplotment of actions in narrative (Ricoeur 2016, p. 204, 257). Adam, asserted that:

sort of intellectually, you're always going to have all this stuff going on. Always have this emotion, and you need to just identify it and really what's required is a, thank you, I can decide what I'm actually committed to and whom I'm committed to being in my relationships.

Adam declared his freedom to decide, but it represents only one side of the dialectic of identity and the character in his narrative. Adam's discourse of doer, as actant, masked the complexity of transformation. Habits and emotions may catch us unawares, when we are not looking. It was the semiotics of that narrative that needed to change for Adam as he confronted the sedimentation of habits that constitute his identity by entering into the concordant/discordant relation characteristic of a dramatic structure. This is a refiguration of the story where the substantial identity of sameness combines with mutability in more than a decision, notwithstanding that it reflects a commitment to action, but perhaps not to being and becoming found in the rites of passage in the hero's journey. It is possible to see where Adam started to do this, first by initiating a new element of drama when he struggled to tell Luke that there was a larger issue which he needed to address. As actant in discourse, Adam gave voice to his frustration and embarrassment in the confession he made to Luke when he declared he was at his absolute worst in personal relationships. The tensions were manifest as Adam and Luke engaged in a discourse where Adam described himself and wrestled with ambivalence over self-interpretations. When Adam acknowledged that he understands that you've got to love yourself before others will love you, he insisted that he does not dislike himself. Then he offered the observation that he is critical of himself. Adam invoked his past, growing up on a farm and not having many friends to play with, saying that when he came 'to the big smoke' at the age of 18, mentally and socially he was feeling like he was probably five years old. He described this as 'yes, that's all the story.' Then he offered the observation that 'I'm, um, happy to accept, you know regardless of how I got here, it is, I am who I am.' He

wanted to be forgiving of himself and comfortable 'in his own skin, accepting'. Then it 'popped' into his head that the key gateway to relationship is interest in the other – 'I'm so preoccupied on this in my own head, um, I don't build that bridge. I don't get over there and I don't ask questions.' Adam acknowledged that he has problems with intimacy but then invoked his perceived need to be accepting of himself as he is. There has been a dialectic in play, the countervailing forces of sameness and wanting to be different. Caught in the drama of change/not change Adam had been grappling with the immutable core, that is an identity that does not change, the actant as doer.

In the human narrative there is an inevitability to change as we find it in lived experience. The confusion Adam was experiencing is one part of the plot, a necessary stage in moving bad fortune to good fortune in the hero's journey. The narrative composition that mediates discordance and concordance is achieved by a synthesis of the heterogeneous. This represents a successful mediation between sameness and self. In this part of the executive coaching journey, the synthesis was experienced in Adam's teleological call to be his best self, for himself and his family. While for Ricoeur (1994) the plot in a narrative seeks to resolve itself through configuration, it is the character's transformation which is at stake in the myths of the hero's journey. For Ricoeur, as soon as there is language, there is interpretation (Kearney 2007). Speaking to another is an activity of translating oneself to another. This occurs in the dialogue between coach and client. Adam's self-understanding was a narrative theme co-created in the dialogue, but there was a broader issue at play in the principal challenge which Adam identified, the issue of his interpersonal relationships. He expressed simply the wish to have more people in his life, and compared himself with Luke as his coach, someone he perceived as a model for building good relationships. Luke moved on to suggest to Adam that he start by liking himself, looking for his strengths and his own loving spirit. The impetus for self-love was established in this plot as a path to changing the quality of Adam's relationships with others, the point of configuration in the narrative. Ricoeur (1994, p. 179) addresses this in describing the act of self-interpretation as a becoming of self-esteem, which itself follows 'the fate of interpretation'. In Adam's story he interpreted the problems in his professional relationships in terms of himself as a victim. He at first claimed to have been

misunderstood. However, as his story unfolded Adam acknowledged that other influences in his life meant that in respect to relationships, he did not have the 'natural knack'. That natural lack resides in the sphere of the involuntary, the sedimentation of habits, values and emotion. It is in character and the unfolding plotment of the story that he wrestled with self-determination ('I can decide') and the weightiness of identity as sameness.

The personal narrative does not stand alone as an instrument of transformation. The achievement of an ontological claim made in narrative will be demonstrated in the actions as judged by others in the public sphere (Vandeveldt 2014). In this respect, Adam is both responsible and accountable, not just for, or to himself, but to others. This invokes the introduction of the ethical plane and the plausibility of Adam's self-interpretation in the eyes of others (Ricoeur 1994). The reflexivity of the personal narrative risks turning in upon itself, and a moving away from openness to what is the generalized good life, again in Aristotelean terms of living well. There was a necessary turning in as Adam reflected on the problematic of his relationships and how to turn this around. He established his relationship goal as developing relationships which enliven him and others, focusing on his own needs while acknowledging the other. The Aristotelean principle of the 'good life' is reflected as a small step here as Adam acknowledged that relationships do not exist exclusively for his personal benefit. Self-love as that which makes each person his own friend does not just have an inner directedness. It is oriented towards the good, and implies a mutual relationship with the other and with the reciprocity implied in friendship.

For Ricoeur (1994), Aristotle does not fully resolve the issue of whether self-love is a pre-condition to friendship. Ricoeur, however, suggests that in order to be a friend to oneself, one must already be in a relation with others. In his relations with others, Adam believed himself to be perceived as 'arrogant and aloof'. He has been in relation with others, but these relationships as friendships have been incomplete as they perhaps lacked authentic mutuality. Adam recognized that to develop those relationships, he needed to build some bridges which meant giving more of himself. He identified two friends with whom he could have a more 'meaningful relationship'.

The 'good' man embraces other than self. His self-esteem makes a contribution to friendship without taking anything away. Friendship constitutes a 'a fragile balance in which giving and receiving are equal' (Zahavi 2014, p. 188). These are principles that can be deployed in all our relationships, personal and professional. It also requires the quality of solicitude, care and concern for the other and for his/her future. Ricoeur (1994) concludes that there is no self-esteem unless I esteem others as I do myself. This is reflected in narrative identity as the ethical call. For Ricoeur there is a dialectical tie between self and other which is more fundamental than that which is between selfhood and sameness in the ethical dimension of the personal narrative. This finds its resolution for Ricoeur through identity understood as responsibility for and in the other. Further, this responsibility lies in a foundation within identity of a conscience which folds back into what one holds as ethics, values and morality, as reflected in the Aristotelean 'good'. Hence Adam's transformation is at a threshold but is not yet complete in the unfolding of his personal narrative. Luke observed that Adam would be taking the 'baby steps that you actually become, part of who you are, going forward'. Both Adam and Luke acknowledged that his old patterns of relating are 'almost hard wired' as Adam expressed it, and that he needed to do a bit of 'reprogramming'. The dialectic of self/same was played out clearly in Adam's narrative. The importance of the 'other' in that dialectic has been made apparent, and the narrative introduction to the ethics of friendship have added another dimension to the change process.

Earlier in the conversation, Adam expressed as a goal his need to be forgiving and accepting 'for who I am'. As described in my previous account on teleology and conation, Luke challenged him not to be stuck on 'who I am' but to focus on whom he was becoming. That becoming represents the changes that are mediated between the sameness and change in narrative identity. This emerged as a difficult task for Adam but he has started on the journey, a new stage in the emplotment of the character's transformation. He said 'giving myself, cut myself some slack, then I can, I guess love myself a bit more'. In his self-authoring, Adam has been persistent in criticizing himself, attributing it to that part of himself that is a perfectionist. He expressed his need to acknowledge where he has been unsuccessful in his past, and where he stands

in his current critical appraisal of himself. Adam acknowledged the need for change and listened to the voice of an 'heterogeneous' other, his executive coach, reflecting a Bakhtinian dialogics of self-consciousness evolving in an interpersonal crucible of difference and language itself as struggle. There are other voices which have led to his self-questioning, a colleague who has pulled him up when Adam was critical of team members and to whom he then needed to make amends. His partner, Jane, has been critical of him and it was on her initiative that he sought coaching to improve corporate relationships. Adam has heard many voices and become aware 'that the way I interact can lead, can really put people off'. The narrative requires not just hearing these heterogeneous others, but thinking through what it means and planning solutions in what I earlier referred to as Hersch's (2011) imaginative anticipations of the future. Adam implicitly asked himself 'what am I going to do differently tomorrow, or what would I do differently?' and painted a picture of how that could happen. He said the real test will be 'actually having anything more than, you know, a conversation about the footy'.

There has been a dialogical tension in the coaching conversation that represents a discontinuity in the way Adam sees success for himself as 'action-oriented, the sort of person, once I make my mind up on something, I Just want to go to it, get it done'. Now he is going to take some time to 'get grounded' as he said. Part of this requires a letting go of the former self-critical perfectionist in an act of self-forgiveness, and then testing his new realities in the material, embodied world. This for him is where becoming is enactive. Welz (2010, p. 269) draws from Ricoeur in suggesting that 'the process of becoming can be seen as a process of conflict management' where we live out the capability of managing the emotional conflicts within ourselves and between each other. The self is seen as change, as dynamic, a movement of becoming for that part of identity which represents continuity and sameness in the mediation of character, but one which is always relational. Identity is then not yet fully given, but a goal 'that cannot be reached without letting oneself be moved and transformed' (Welz, p.269). Conflict is the engine of transformation, tensions which both Ricoeur and Bakhtin acknowledge and which Welz suggests is part of the persons we are at an existential level. Conflict was apparent in Adam's narratives, his accounts of his

relationships, but also in struggle to reconcile his identity of provider/doer with one of being loving of himself and others. Self-understanding will always remain unfinished and therefore identity remains unfinished in this task of becoming, a process of self-transformation but one in which we maintain our sense of ourselves as self-conscious beings who persist over time (Welz 2010).

Becoming is ultimately a dynamic between self and other, one which is judged not just by oneself, but by how others evaluate our actions as consistent with the integrity that is expressed in how our whole selves can be relied upon, a criterion which Ricoeur (1994, 2016) describes as self-constancy. Adam struggled with the distinction between being, which represents permanence and stability, and the inherent ambiguity of becoming, with its uncertainties. In looking for a 'good grounding' Adam sought that which is solid. He does not need to abandon his identity of provider and doer. However, in the mediation of character, he can integrate his commitment to being the best person he can be for his family as an overarching goal which supports that identity. It is here that his narrative can have self-constancy, while he continues the work of creating new and more enriching relationships which require the vulnerability that Adam himself has now acknowledged as a condition for intimacy. Adam started a new narrative, not just of loving himself, but of being loving in his relationships, even though it was a struggle for him to yet fully incorporate it into his own vocabulary of self. In 'getting grounded', he will continue to have this conversation with himself, but he will also engage in the narrative with his partner, the friends he has identified as being open to 'deeper' conversations and his coach. This returns to the optimism of Ricoeur when he says what sedimentation has contracted, narration can redeploy.

The difficulty of transformation in the face of the sedimentations of a personal identity have been made explicit in this account of the struggle in which Adam's narrative of self unfolds. The coherence he has found as a person of action, the provider/doer whose focus is on getting things done has been potentially at risk. The discordances that Adam had been experiencing arose not just in the coaching conversation. They seeped into his awareness in an increasing acknowledgement that he has been inattentive to the interpersonal dynamics of his ways of being in the world of both



personal and professional relationships. On the one hand, he felt misunderstood, but on the other he recognized that does not have 'the knack' that others have in developing positive relationships. Finding that 'knack' has been the call to learning which is the transformational path in his personal narrative of change. It led to an inner conflict between who he was, and, in his coach's words, who he was becoming. It was this tension that drove change. There is an inherent ambivalence in the dialectic between identity as same and self as change as the story pulls the character in two opposing directions, but the transformational moment for Adam was his sudden insight that he wants to become the best person he can be for the sake of his family. Luke succeeded in helping Adam with that learning which is self-interpretation and acceptance. Adam pushed outwards to the actions he could take in building his relationships.

It is in the process of narrative configuration that Adam has been learning to be a friend to himself as well as a friend to others. It has an ethical dimension which Ricoeur identifies as a responsibility for and in the other. Ricoeur (2016) argues that it is this dimension that comes first. Adam's family values provided an impetus for change in his narrative quest, with the risks that are entailed in allowing himself to become more vulnerable. Luke focused Adam on the need to look first to his own self-esteem as a path to valuing others more broadly. The reflexivity of the personal narrative has turned in upon itself in the form of Adam's self-understandings as they have emerged in the dialogue with Luke. As the narrative continues, Adam turns back to the world. He will be self-accountable for mediating between his own perfectionist driver and the commitment made to being the best version of himself in forging meaningful interpersonal relationships where he will be judged by others. For the integrity of character found in the self-constancy of meeting that commitment, he will also be accountable to his coach, Luke, and his partner, Jane, as he indicated in the conversation. Effective coaching provides a safe, trusting environment where the mediations between concordance and discordance can lead to successful transformations in the narrative of identity.

## **5.6 Phenomenological Reasoning – What is Executive Coaching?**

The title of this chapter 'Mates at Work' has sought to capture the particular quality of the relationship in this executive coaching example. It was the strength and quality of the relationship that infused this coaching session, one manifested as struggle and emergence. Coach and client played out different roles, one as guide and provocateur and the other as 'hero', the character who has undergone a process of transformation and who has been responsible for his own unfolding narrative - past, present and future. A quality of egalitarianism lay in their playing these distinctive roles where there has been a mutuality in the purposefulness of achieving positive outcomes for the client and ensuring his/her wellbeing.

### **Relationality as Essence**

To turn to a form of imaginative variation, a phenomenological reflection on what is an essence, is to ask the question 'what is executive coaching'; can coaching 'be' without relationship? Is it possible to imagine coaching without the existential of relationality as either an imaginative or a factual variant? Husserl (1970) describes intersubjectivity as fundamental to human life and meaning. Self and other are conceptually inseparable in a transcendental inter-human present. The example of Luke and Adam was shown to have its own particular characteristics where mateship is a key metaphor. Theirs was an egalitarian partnership in the face of a shared challenge to which coach and client brought their individual perspectives, through which the relationship delivered insights and outcomes which Adam would unlikely have achieved otherwise, particularly in respect to the challenge which Luke threw to Adam, that he learn to love himself.

The principle that relationship is an essential feature of executive coaching is well established, and cannot be varied out in imagination or in empiricism. The task then became to reflect on what is specific to the nature of the relationship between coach and client as object-determining characteristics of executive coaching. This I have done through the lens of phenomenology which gives a distinctly different

understanding to those of the Rogerian principles which underpin a therapeutic approach to the nature of a coaching relationship. Husserl and Zahavi provide accounts of intersubjectivity as mutuality in difference, and the possibility of mediated self-experience, the ability to see ourselves through the eyes of the other. These are not principles that are inimical to the therapeutic approach, but they highlight difference as a key dimension of the coaching relationship. This points to a conception of executive coaching as reflecting a robust relationship where challenge is part of the collaborative effort of coach and client in joint meaning production through the interplay of sameness and difference. This requires that there be a high level of trust between coach and client where the client feels supported and valued by the coach. It is the dynamic between challenge and support that is of essence in executive coaching relationship.

### **Teleology and Conation as Essence**

Temporality is an existential found in the goal-seeking activities of Luke and Adam's journeying, particularly as Adam frames for himself a life purpose, one which is authentically his own and will guide his actions into the future, motivate his commitment to deepen his personal relationships and improve his professional interactions in the workplace. As he stretched into the teleological dimension of being the best person he could for his family and for himself, he constructed an overarching framework within which his goals will have greater meaning and affective power in the present. These goals set in motion in the process of willing, deciding and taking action, the means to his ends. In turning again to imaginative variation, I asked whether teleology and conation form the 'what' of executive coaching. In this coaching session, teleology as life purpose has revealed itself as an emergent phenomenon, not a conscious process initiated as a task to be directly addressed. Luke's urging of Adam to investigate his internal world, the place where he will find a loving spirit not just within himself but in others as well, had its own teleology of purpose. If, as Aristotle suggested, we as humans are always striving, growing and self-moving towards what is 'good', then it can be said that coaching is an implicit teleological activity. This is the

position I have taken as I varied teleology in imagination and found it to be an essential part of coaching.

Conation as a phenomenology of the will articulated by Ricoeur (1994, 2016) and approached as goal directed activity is one which cannot be varied away. As humans, we always have goals, whether trivial or critically relevant to our existence, goals which might be explicit or implicit. They are essential to our survival. In executive coaching however, they are expressed as a choice we make. They are made explicit by the choice people make to enter into a coaching engagement, which is itself an act of will whether taken independently by the individual or negotiated with the sponsoring organization. In coaching generally there is an act to be performed, the actualization of a thought or a desire, to make the time and investment available to achieve that which motivates the act of participation in coaching itself. Drawing on Aristotle, Ricoeur (2016) describes being itself as activity. Here action itself is an existential, a universal theme of life. It can be embodied and spontaneous, beneath the levels of conscious awareness. Coaching, including executive coaching, raises action to conscious awareness, bringing action to the level of decision-will as Husserl frames it. Goal formulation as an expression of decision-will is an inescapable feature of executive coaching, even if taken as a vague sense of the need for some change or simply to develop personal insight. In coaching, goal setting occurs as a dialogic reasoning process where the best 'good' is sought in arriving at the point of decision, the will to act. The application of even the most simple model for a decision making process, the GROW model, has revealed itself in this study as complex, multi-layered, and dynamic. Goals understood as decision will are a necessary and essential feature without which executive coaching cannot be imagined as the activity it is.

### **Narrative Identity as Essence**

Narrative is the temporal existential which links the past, present and future in the authoring of our identities as Ricoeur (2016) describes it. In executive coaching, clients inevitably tell their stories of lived experience, what they have done, what they want to do, and in this doing, who they want to be. These stories may emerge as

spontaneous acts of sense-making as Adam has done when he talked about his childhood on the farm, an act of self-understanding around the quality of his interpersonal relationships. Executive coaches sometimes ask clients to tell particular stories about their successes or how they move forward to the future with their stories of being and becoming. Stories in executive coaching cannot be varied away in an imaginative process. Narrative identity is an essential feature of executive coaching, implicit to coaching as it is in any account of personal change. It is an essence which may not have a voice, but which nevertheless lies in the practices of coaching as part of the human condition. As a coach, Luke did not need to talk about identity, but he understood that the stories Adam was constructing for himself were part of his being, who he is. Luke also challenged Adam to alter that narrative to one of becoming. In executive coaching, narratives of implicit identities that have been and will be reflected in the on-going dialectic between identity as same and self as change. The future is an imaginative space where innovation of self and disposition of identity are in a creative tension between what has been and what is yet to come. In managing that tension, the coherence and consistency of identity is to be acknowledged and respected. It is what provides stability in the face of the dissonances of complexity, conflict, ambiguity and uncertainty. The creative tension between identity as sameness and self as change is clear in this particular account executive coaching.

Ricoeur (2016) suggests that the self is never assured, as there are conflicting demands to be satisfied, the vital life of pleasure most manifest in the flesh, and the intellectual life of happiness, the practical wisdom of the good. This is reflected in the embodiment of identity as habits, values, beliefs, norms and emotions on the one hand and, on the other, the striving of the self for the 'good' as one sees it and as it is reflected in the ethics of responsibility to and for the other. In effect, it is a question of whether we are all on a hero's/heroine's journey in a struggle to reconcile identity and innovation in Ricoeur's emplotment of discordance and concordance as we make sense of our actions and hence ourselves as capable human beings. I have said that stories in the 'what of executive coaching' narrative cannot be varied away. If narrative is an essential feature of executive coaching it seems that the possibility of change requires that that tensions in the dialectic between sameness/change need to

be acknowledged. Those tensions then become a positive prerequisite in a call to learning that achieves sustainable change in effective executive coaching where narrative identity is an essence.

## **Chapter 6: Steady as She Goes (Lisa and Zoe)**

### **6.1 Introduction to Steady as She Goes**

Zoe, the client in this executive coaching conversation, is in a leadership role in a not-for-profit organization. Zoe identified three broad goals she initially specified for the coaching sessions: being more strategic and looking outward, succession planning, and developing her staff. To this was added the specific goal of adopting a mindfulness-based meditation practice in support of those three goals. This was the fourth coaching session and thus represented a mid-point in the coaching as indicated in the coaching conversation itself. It appeared that most of the effort to date had been on succession planning, developing staff and providing feedback effectively. The direction of the session was led by Zoe, with Lisa, the coach, largely taking a role of encouragement and support, but making her own contributions towards problem solving and management principles. The conversation evolved as a series of recollective narratives from Zoe as she recounted how she had dealt with the effectiveness and challenges of arrangements implemented following a recent restructure of roles and responsibilities. In managing her team members, Zoe was able to anecdotally relate her leadership activities to some of the principles for effective management which had been covered in previous coaching sessions. She had been adopting a 'steady as she goes' approach to what is a problematic organizational restructure in its early stages, one which has been stressful for two newly appointed managers as they adjusted to their roles in an environment of change. Zoe also shared with Lisa some of the other challenges and successes she had experienced in managing team members more broadly. The duration of the session was one hour.

### **6.2 Lifeworld Description**

In broad terms, this executive coaching conversation was about managing change, improving supervisory responsibilities and engaging in effective management practices in the workplace. Most of the session was dedicated to Zoe reporting on how her work was proceeding and how she has met some its challenges, with Lisa largely

providing her with positive reinforcement on the progress she has made but also challenging Zoe when she perceived there may be an issue which concerned her. Zoe's goal of understanding how other service providers operate in a similar environment as part of adopting a more strategic approach to her leadership was mentioned but not directly addressed in the coaching session. Mindfulness was identified as a goal and practice that would support Zoe across all areas of performance. It was clear that Zoe works in a high stakes service delivery organization in the not-for-profit sector. The phenomenon, my experience of this executive coaching, was that of a conversational approach that was characterized by laughter and two conversants often talking over the top of each other in the excitement of moments of shared meaning or connection. There was an eagerness and intensity in that sharing that reflected the collaborative space of an executive coaching conversation that provided Zoe with an opportunity to debrief on events and how she has handled them. She reflected on her successes throughout the session, but the challenges presented in an organizational restructure were a source of concern to her. Lisa's role as her coach was largely one of facilitation, positive feedback and encouragement, while challenging Zoe in ensuring that she was implementing good leadership practice.

The executive coaching session began with a three-minute centring meditation. At the end of the meditation there were sighs. Lisa switched from that meditative space with a cheerful 'hello' followed by an outburst of laughter, one shared by Zoe, albeit with a little less gusto. Lisa followed with a review of the previous coaching sessions to 'check in' that previously set goals were still relevant.

Lisa: (referring to her notes) Looking outwards in particular, a balcony view of what other providers are doing in this area, and also succession planning and developing your staff. Does that, do they, and I have mindfulness as a side?

Zoe: A side thing?

Lisa: More than a personal piece that would support those kinds of things – all of those areas. How does that strike you now, is that, is that, just to



share my notes, are those still very relevant or, and, what's jumping out for you at the moment?

Zoe: Yep, strategic is. Obviously, it serves something.

Lisa: Yep.

Zoe: Definitely the succession planning, only because (staff worker) was away for a lot of this time, that I haven't actually had the chance.

The coaching was clearly agreed to be purposive and focused. Lisa was checking on her notes from previous meetings, and Zoe played a confirmatory role, which reflected her own wishes for the coaching session. The goals for the session were task related and specific to the effectiveness of performance in the workplace. The mindfulness practice was continuing as a supportive activity, one which was integrated into home life and shared with the family.

Lisa: And your mindfulness practice, has been pretty good for you?

Zoe: Yeah, that's all good.

Lisa asked a question with a pre-supposed answer. A specific mindfulness related exercise that Zoe had shared 'with the kids' and her partner, prompted laughter. Home and work are not discrete; they mesh with each other in this executive coaching conversation. Lisa shared her observations about the mindfulness, suggesting that some journaling might be a practice to which the client could come back in the future. Zoe expressed interested in journaling, but said that time had not allowed her to adopt it.

Discussion proceeded to succession planning and the positive initiatives that have been put in place by Zoe during a manager's absence, which will support her return. Leave arrangements for Zoe's staff were discussed, including the possibility of job share. Zoe gave a narrative account of the actions she has taken. Lisa interspersed Zoe's story with brief comments of acknowledgement, confirmation and support such as 'right, yes.' Zoe's implementation of a 'new way of communicating' was related by her, including the offering of positive and direct feedback to her staff on job

performance in an environment of change and discomfort with its uncertainties. For the most part, however, this part of the conversation proceeded as a form of reporting and sharing which temporally is a retrospective account of events which have happened, although the ongoing advantage of future staffing arrangements was raised with some detail in conversations that Zoe has had with the managers who report to her. These were for the most part practical details, such as rostering and email messaging. They reflected, however, the challenges of implementing change in the workplace.

Zoe: ... I've just been giving them feedback, but sort of in a positive way. Like, I'm trying to, it's something new for everyone. I guess they're trying to get used to this new way of communicating.

Lisa: Uh huh, and transparency?

Zoe: Yeah, I was .. more like a consistent messaging to the team, and it shouldn't matter whether it's from (staff member) ...

Lisa attempted to introduce a new topic into the stream of reporting on how things were going, that of transparency, but Zoe did not engage with it. This reporting took a large portion of the coaching time. Zoe offered the observation that her staff were still 'I guess learning about the role, so I wanted to give them that feedback'. This was in quite an extended account of managing emails, to whom they should go, who should be included and the importance of copying in the manager (that is, Zoe) in respect to issues where there is a potential for them to be more sensitive or problematic, such as dealing with the finance department. Lisa offered the observation that Zoe was handling such issues so much better than she had at earlier stages of the coaching. The conversation continued with specific detail of delegating and feedback experiences of Zoe, and how her staff were handling their responsibilities.

Lisa: ... the thing I find about this sort of leadership or management is just how different individuals are and what kind of support or guidance, or their attitudes to work is.

Zoe: Very different.

Lisa: And you need to really not assume everyone's on the same page or what's needed and what might be a bit more flexible for one and ... looking after oneself at the other end, and what the norm is for the team so it's sustainable.

Zoe: Exactly.

Lisa continued to contribute her observations on leadership, then taking up more of the conversational space, while Zoe made short statements in agreement or clarification.

Lisa: So it's recognizing that, understanding when the work load has gotten really high and maybe there's some extra support needed and they're just not saying, oh there's a skill gap. Or, approaching it from the self-care angle again, again and again, and that you know if she's going a bit under the radar with it that you, the transparency again, I know these sites are a bit remote but you're aware and it shouldn't be happening.

Zoe: Yeah.

Lisa: If it happens once with the roster, big deal, but if that becomes a regular, that you have that, kind of duty of care that you extend to your staff. That's about supporting them and making sure they're well.

Zoe: Yeah. Exactly.

This was an assertive input from the coach, reinforcing with some emphasis (again, again and again) the care level she believes is necessary for managing staff. It was a challenge and a teaching moment with direct advice, ensuring that the coach's philosophy of management was shared with Zoe. She followed up by seeking reassurance from Zoe, asking whether 'they've got the capacity and capability?' to do what the client was asking of her staff members. Zoe affirmed her belief that they did.

At almost the half point of the coaching session, Lisa checked in with Zoe, asking if, thus far in the session, it was a helpful way for the coaching to proceed. She reflected on the calm of Zoe and how well she had been performing in her leadership role. The

conversation continued in the same pattern, with Zoe relating how she had received a bonus payment, and what some of the administrative issues were which arose. There was quite a lot of laughter and talking over each other around the conversation about this and how Zoe was organizing her time. This was followed with further accounts on how Zoe was managing her staff, with positive reinforcement provided by the Lisa on hearing successes ('Right, yeah, that would be fantastic'). After some further discussion on being less reactive in the management of conflict, Zoe presented her own account of a particular example of managing potential conflict:

Zoe: .. I sort of rephrased it, I'm hearing that you're blaming me for this but let me just clarify (both coach and client laugh). ... So I said to (staff member) here, okay, I'm hearing you're frustrated too, I said, but, ... I don't want to take this like you're making this a personal thing and it's actually, like it's actually nothing to do with me.

Lisa: Yes.

Zoe: How do we come to an agreement, and you could just hear her calm, it was so funny.

The skill Zoe had been developing was about active listening, and the laughter shared by coach and client may reflect previous discussion on the practice of ensuring that a conversational partner acknowledges that she has 'heard' that person in offering a personal reflection on what that person has proposed. Zoe acknowledged that this was homework from the previous coaching session on giving feedback in a supervisory role. Lisa offered some strong positive reinforcement:

Lisa: So just with that, I love that story because I think you're doing that more and more, and that's notice your own reactivity.

Lisa went on to paraphrase and reflect back to Zoe her reaction to the story:

Lisa: It's a different dynamic. It's no, we're both, I think you said, we're both frustrated by this, and here are some more facts ... it wasn't,

like, I'm trying to defend and push you back. I'm trying to offer 'us', so it starts to become rather than the me/you, it's? ..

Zoe: Yeah. It's us.

Lisa continued to provide advice on the need for feedback to be approached from a learning perspective rather than being seen as remedial.

Lisa: When something goes wrong, we're on it, and I think what the message there is ... sometimes we're watching people to catch them doing a wrong, and that chance to recognize how we all pull together and manage this. Because it is really bloody challenging ...

Along the way Lisa asked:

Lisa: Do you feel like that's giving you dividends? Do you think that's a good, a helpful way for you to frame?

Zoe: Oh, I think so. Yeah. No, definitely. I mean it's not nothing. It doesn't come naturally as yet but it's something I might, OK, how can I do this? Let's do it like this, let's work it like this. Yeah. I try.

In respect to discussion on delegation, Lisa introduced the new (to the client) concept of scaffolding:

Lisa: The word scaffolding I wanted to share with you. So in delegation the opportunity to, and a lot of leaders have challenges too, to, understanding from 'I will micro manage you, to okay, it's all yours.' So looking at what's the skill level and capacity or capability, just see how, okay, they are just to, go fly. Is there a need for scaffolding and person-to-person support ...

Lisa explained that it is important to be aware of the skill level and capacity or capability of a staff member to perform a task, in which case the supervisor needs to

provide support or training. She pointed to an issue where two staff members were not confident in performing a particular activity (the issue of rosters) and suggested a half hour training session for them. Her advice was to follow up again after implementation of the activity.

This moved the coaching session on to the last ten minutes available, and Lisa asked Zoe how she would like to use it. Zoe responded by saying she was pleased with the scaffolding. Lisa queried whether they had talked about polarities, which Zoe said they had not. Lisa provided an overview of polarities and how their use was applicable in the workplace (not all problems can be solved and flexibility is required). She suggested the concept of polarities might be discussed in the next session. Mentioning feedback and succession planning, Zoe said this had been great. She then diverted into an account of what had happened at a recent meeting and how she handled issues to which she does not have an answer. Her team were observing, in effect, that when Zoe is unable to answer a question or resolve a problem, she frequently says she will take it on board and get back to the staff. They were appreciative of this, Zoe stated.

With only a few minutes left on wrapping up, Lisa again asked what would be of use over the next few sessions of coaching.

Lisa: Again, we are close to wrap; I'm just looking for some homework for you. What would be useful to you at this point, because we are, we're at the half way mark. What would be something useful for you to do that would assist us to get the most of the next few sessions of our coaching?

Zoe: Maybe some more shots at strategic. Like I think I've got the practice side of things. .... I think the succession planning stuff is going well. May be looking at, I don't know if I can. Okay, I just don't feel strategic enough.

Lisa asked Zoe if she would like some reading to be sent to her. Zoe responded by saying that that would be perfect, and would be good homework, as well as putting the 'scaffolding thing' into practice. Zoe suggested that the next session which was scheduled for four weeks away, be extended to six weeks away. The session was then closed.

## **Themes**

As with the previous chapter, the themes of this case have emerged from a deep experiential immersion in listening to the taped coaching conversations and repeated readings of the transcripts. These themes were experienced as the object poles of consciousness which have stood out as distinctive in respect to the particulars of this executive coaching conversation:

Sensemaking – Zoe makes meaning of her experiences

Laughter – Lisa and Zoe bring lightness and mirth to the coaching relationship

Mindfulness – Contemplative practice as a goal which has been taught in coaching

Sensemaking was a dominant theme as Zoe recounted her experiences since the previous coaching session. She has struggled to deal with the challenges of an organizational re-structure and the demands these had made on her as a leader. There has been nonetheless a positive construction on the events that she has been dealing with and how she handled them. It was impossible to ignore the laughter that Zoe and Lisa shared throughout the coaching session, demanding its investigation as a theme in its own right. Mindfulness was established as a goal for Zoe's development as one which underpinned the other goals she had initially identified as important to her. In this respect, it was a central theme in respect to its relevance the coaching specific to this particular coaching example.

### 6.3 Theme 1: Sensemaking

Zoe had much to relate to Lisa in respect to the challenges of the organizational restructure and her management experiences. The difficulty of these challenges was very much felt as Zoe shared her experiential accounts of how she encountered and responded to the events that have transpired since her last meeting with Lisa. Zoe told her stories as a re-enactment of events, a process of making sense of her new and different experiences. This re-enactment when understood as a sensemaking activity is a process of contextualizing and attributing meaning to events in a way which supports learning and resultant knowledge whether applied to the past, present or future (Bosma, Chia & Fouweather 2016; Colville, Pye & Brown 2016). It is the dominance of Zoe's looking back at the events of the past weeks that makes sensemaking thematic in describing and understanding the coaching conversation. There is a limited literature on sensemaking and coaching (Cox 2013; du Toit 2007, 2014), the most detailed being that of du Toit.

Sensemaking is a process 'by which people construct, interpret and recognize meaningful features of the world' (Gephart, Tophal & Zhang 2012, p. 275). This is a characterization of sensemaking which applies a broad brush but captures the everyday perception of what it means to make sense of our lives, activities and relationships on a personal and organizational level. The writer particularly associated with sensemaking in organizations is Karl Weick (1995), who made an extensive study of how people make sense of work-related events. He describes the ongoing sensemaking process as a 'good story', one that preserves plausibility and coherence, that is reasonable, embodies past experiences and expectations, and resonates with others; one that is constructed retrospectively but also has a prospective use and captures both feeling and thought (Weick 1995, p. 59). Some decades after Weick introduced the idea of sensemaking in organizations, Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) describe sensemaking as a process of sizing up a situation while continuing to act and in acting partially determine the nature of what is discovered. Sensemaking is concerned with action, not with passive diagnosis. Sensemaking is described as a social process that 'edits, abridges, simplifies and brackets our firsthand experience



with flux' (Weick & Sutcliffe 2015, p. 33), the changes with which organizations regularly contend in managing the unexpected.

The sensemaker seeks to affect the trajectory of a developing situation. It is a process where perceptually based knowing is transformed into a cognitive process that is concept driven. Weiss and Sutcliffe (2015, p. 33) caution that the concept driven process runs the risk of being 'empty, ungrounded, and too general', while perception driven processing may be 'blind, undifferentiated, and too singular to suggest a pattern'. Effective sensemaking balances what Weiss and Sutcliffe (2015) suggest is a social process where acquaintance and description or conceptualizing is actively differentiated and a nuanced appreciation of context created which provides a richer set of shared conjectures in organizing and taking action. Hence sensemaking occurs as the construction of a plausible narrative that links the past, present and future (Bosma, Chia & Fouweather 2016; Sandberg & Tsoukas 2015; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005).

Organizing is a process of enactment, the results of which people seek to make sense of by retrospectively chopping their lived experiences into meaningful chunks, labelling them, and connecting them (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2015). Enactment is an important part of sensemaking's feedback loop, suggesting that there are three interrelated processes: creation, interpretation and enactment. This is a cycle of meaning-making and taking action. A schema is created with an interpretation based on a plausible analysis and it is enacted as forward action in the normal course of events. That enactment might trigger a shift in meanings if it is disruptive, which creates another cycle of sensemaking. This may happen unexpectedly but can also be of one's own making through a process of noticing. Noticing, phenomenologically speaking, happens when environments are brought to conscious awareness, that is an intentional relationship is formed when some sort of saliency or value has been triggered in a motivated way by whatever happens to be going on at the time in the subjective world of experiencing (Thompson & Stapleton 2009). Weick asks 'how can I know what I think until I see what I say?' (1995, p. 18). The act of saying can be an act of noticing.

It was in telling how her new team members have been struggling with rosters and new ways of communicating that Zoe described the situation as a 'shmozzel' in a growing realization that her team leaders were struggling but also that she as their manager did not have a solution other than to press on, relying on 'trial and error' while reassuring herself that these team leaders would be fine. Zoe's approach was to continue meeting with the team members to spell out their roles and support their learning. This is sensemaking as plausibility. Offering ongoing support may be a reasonable approach to the disruption and ambiguity of the restructure as she and her team leaders have been experiencing. Talking this through in coaching did not resolve the problem for Zoe, but provided her with greater clarity about what the problems were and reinforced the need for ongoing dialogue with her team members. Through dialogue and challenging questions, executive coaching introduces a process of noticing that which is disruptive, replacing old ways of knowing in what Bosma, Chia and Fouweather (2016) describe as semantic transformation, making meaning anew.

Weick said (1995, p. 109) 'Language transformation can be a pathway to behavioural transformation'. Semantic transformation occurs in dialogue, a process of creatively opening up semantic spaces wherein old terms are given refreshed meaning or are reinvented in novel ways that extend patterns of meaning in broadened 'horizons of comprehension' (Bosma, Chia and Fouweather 2016, p. 24). New stories are created that replace former inadequate or outmoded interpretations of experience. Not only are meanings transformed, but disruptive dialogues create a language for the future which facilitates the creation of novel meanings and devises alternative ways of engaging in action. In this way habitual sensemaking activities have been interrupted and linguistic playfulness transforms how sense is made of the future, and, most importantly, what action will take place in the future (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2015). Language provides webs of meaning, with meaning always implying a degree of generalization, such that we create abstractions that firm up the boundaries of knowledge (Bosma Chia and Fouweather, 2016). These abstractions are created and maintained through storytelling, allowing the sharing of experience and knowledge, and the application of new knowledge in different contexts. Thus learning has taken

place which is consistent with Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Over time, it is suggested that these stories become schemas unconsciously used to create meaning and improve sensemaking ability (Steinbauer, Rhew & Chen 2015).

With respect to staffing arrangements, Zoe, the client, had been reflecting on how the new model of integrating the roles of her two recently appointed team leaders was progressing. The organizational re-structure was a disruptive event, exacerbated by the absence on leave of the manager who would normally supervise the two leaders. Zoe, as the manager's supervisor, had been taking responsibility for them in her absence. She was now dealing first-hand with the frustrations these two leaders were experiencing with the re-structure. The integrated role arrangement had been proceeding on a trial and error basis, which had resulted in the team leaders becoming 'flustered' and working longer hours than is desirable. Zoe explained to Lisa:

Zoe: But I know it's trial and error, they're a bit flustered this week, and sort of just saying they don't, like Debra (one of the team leaders) was saying, I don't know where I'm meant to be or what I'm meant to be doing.

In sensemaking terms, Zoe noticed and therefore created as an issue some of the problems associated with integrated roles in the workplace. Zoe understood that they were 'freaking out' about a particular responsibility they have for doing staff rosters, as well as other problems associated with the new structure. Her solution was to continue giving them feedback 'in a positive way'. Zoe determined that future action was to continue the integrated roles as a trial, and then review the roles. She related this in a sensemaking dialogue with Lisa, who for the most part simply acknowledged having heard Zoe's issues. From time to time Lisa challenged Zoe with questions about whether or not the team leaders had the support they needed. Lisa reflected that 'it's a bit messy, isn't it?' Zoe responded 'oh so messy'. This represented an interpretation in sensemaking activity, but indicated the present reality that Zoe had not yet formed an alternative way of engaging in action, other than keeping the dialogue with the team leaders open, even though she acknowledged that she did not 'know if they've

really got what they need.’ Zoe had been trying to make sense of an ambiguous and confusing state of affairs, a new restructure that required time to implement and fully assess, the absence on leave of a key manager, and the frustrations of new appointees who were struggling to make sense of their roles and cope with unfamiliar systems. As the conversation moved on, Lisa offered some broader comments on how Zoe might continue to support her service leaders. There had been a quite lengthy account from Zoe on feedback she has been providing to them on delegation issues, retrospectively providing an account of principles that had been agreed in previous coaching sessions and how she had applied them. Lisa expressed her delight at Zoe’s clarity around doing her own job, and not stepping in to do her team leaders’ jobs for them. Lisa also provided positive affirmation on the constructive way Zoe herself had provided feedback on how she expected work to be done. This was a sensemaking dialogue between executive coach and client on the importance of feedback *in situ*, particularly the need to approach feedback as a learning opportunity for how work could have been done differently. It was an account of feedback which was grounded in the experience of Zoe’s and her staff’s activities. Lisa had been supporting this by paraphrasing the client’s spoken observations and offering positive feedback and encouragement, constructing and shaping a shared experience of a phenomenon the two of them had been exploring. In respect to sensemaking’s feedback loop, Zoe connected with principles of managing and organizing as meaningful to her own leadership practice, she has enacted them and she strengthened their plausibility in a new narrative. Weick describes this as the ‘strange’ sensemaking loop where individuals enact their reality, retrospectively make sense of their new action and repeat the cycle as part of an unending cycle which is at the heart of sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2015, p.8).

The discussion on feedback led Lisa to broaden the focus of the coaching conversation, hearing a concern from Zoe that her staff are working extra hours and prompting Lisa to comment on burnout. Lisa introduced new terminology, ‘discretionary effort’, opening up an enriched dialogic space around the commitment people have in helping industries to working long hours beyond what they are paid for or what their formally designated roles call for. Lisa introduced this new terminology in the following way:

Lisa: For you to understand the motivation here, maybe about, you know, they call it discretionary effort. So organizational studies, and sort of like this organization, in particular rely on, as you said before. We all do extra within reason.

Zoe: Yeah.

Lisa: Watching family and organizations, would fall over if we didn't have good will that says I, people, will offer more than is strictly their minimum.

Zoe: Oh it means so much. Statistics came out two days ago that people do, it means so much.

Coach and client were sharing and creating meaning together on an important management issue, reflecting Weick's emphasis on sensemaking as a social activity. There was an excitement in this conversation with Lisa and Zoe talking over the top of each other in confirming how important it is to acknowledge discretionary effort. Lisa reinforced her point with the comment that when the workload gets really high, there is a need to approach it from 'the self-care angle, again, again and again'. Introducing the term 'discretionary effort' has led to semantic transformation, making meaning anew on the importance of caring for the people for whom one is responsible as a leader and adding a broadened horizon of comprehension to the role of leader. Lisa has focused on reinforcing a values-based management style that recognizes discretionary effort and ensuring that the necessary levels of support are in place. She opened up the meaning frame to include an over-riding duty of care. Zoe agreed, saying, 'yeah, exactly'. This part of the conversation can also be understood in terms of Weick and Sutcliffe's (2015) sensemaking principle of bringing together the experiential and the conceptual, Lisa having introduced the concept of discretionary effort and Zoe integrating it as a principle into her leadership practice in an endorsement of care.

Over-reliance on habitual routines and responses to familiar situations is interrupted in sensemaking as a process of challenging how those routines are useful or

dysfunctional. Executive coaching can extend horizons of comprehension, an example of which is found in Zoe's attempts to be less reactive when engaged in difficult conversations, a challenge to her which had been made in previous coaching sessions. She recounted her reaction when one of her staff was critical of previous decisions made by the organization in a story that reweaves her past experience and attributes meaning to it.

Zoe: She is saying, like you made this decision, and I'm like, don't go off, because I could easily lose it, but I was ... okay, and then I sort of rephrased it. I'm hearing that you're blaming me for this, but let me just clarify. I wasn't actually the manager six years ago ... I'm hearing that you're frustrated too but it's not a, I don't want to take this like you're making this a personal thing ...

Lisa: Yes.

Zoe: How do we come to an agreement, and you could just hear her calm. It was so funny.

Zoe: Yeah, and for her, giving her the chance to likewise?

This was an example of sensemaking in action, thinking and acting intertwined. Zoe made sense of the emerging cues, a noticing of the emotions of the staff member, and her own arousal in the present moment of intentionality. She was able to pause in the moment, telling herself not to 'go off', and to reflectively evaluate the situation before she engaged in a potentially difficult conversation with that staff member. Using frames of past moments of learning, Zoe was able to diffuse the situation. This was consistent with how the content of sensemaking is found in the frames that are created from past experience and the cues of present experience which are made conscious in creating meaning and responding forward (Colville, Pye & Brown 2016). This vignette exemplifies how action clarifies sensemaking, because people not only make sense cognitively, they do so by acting their way into meaning. Lisa went on to say that she loved that story because it demonstrated that Zoe was noticing her own reactivity. By engaging in narrative accounts of her experience in the coaching session,

Zoe reinforced her own learning. Lisa assisted in reinterpreting these events and providing Zoe with new horizons of comprehension which extended her meaning-making frames. Zoe affirmed that she was in an ongoing learning journey, recognizing that 'it doesn't come naturally yet', but that she is trying.

Colville, Pye and Brown (2016) suggest that learning from a sensemaking perspective is learning that is found in the activity of updating and re-punctuating experience. In this sense, Zoe's observation about her own progress reflected their principle that a sensemaker learns by staying open to a process of experiencing, not just what is going on but how it is going on. Zoe has not just been making sense of the situation. She has been making sense of her own self, her own capabilities, the progress she has made, and how she can carry this forward. Zoe's narratives were stories derived from embodied sensemaking, the existential corporeality of being in the actual trenches of leadership in uncertain times (Colville, Hennestad & Thoner 2014). In executive coaching, it is important to recognize that experiential accounts alone are not sufficient for a sensemaking process, but that the relationship to forward action is to be found in the activity of noticing how those past experiences have been enacted in such a way as to open up new horizons of comprehension for the future. It is also important to acknowledge Weick's approach to sensemaking as an ongoing process of clarification of action and the outcomes of action as traces that are interpreted and reinterpreted.

Zoe had not finished with her account of providing positive feedback. How sensemaking frames become embodied was also found in the conversation between coach and client on the need for giving staff positive feedback, as noted previously. It was raised by Lisa as something Zoe enacted subsequent to the previous coaching session. Zoe also reported back on how the activity of providing positive feedback to her team transpired when she complimented them in a meeting:

Zoe: I don't think they knew how to respond at the time, and that was so funny. And they were like, then (staff worker) was just like, oh, that's lovely. And then, (another staff worker) was still thinking ... but then I

go, I'm just trying to give appreciation, and then she's like, oh it was so funny. I didn't know how to deal with it. So I was, that reaction just means I must not have given it enough, so I go, I've got to be more mindful about that next time. They were really like, oh wow, okay, thank you.

In responding Lisa said that she loves the fact that Zoe took the topic of giving feedback as 'homework' from their last meeting. The learning from the sensemaking of that previous session went through an embodied enactment, and its importance was reinforced in the present conversation. Lisa was also careful to keep a focus on the future, and being aware of what is a helpful way to going forward. Future ways of enacting feedback were discussed by Lisa and Zoe as sense is made of the experience recounted. This future orientation made thematic the importance of the temporal orientation of sensemaking. Traditionally, sensemaking had been thought of as a retrospective activity, but more recent models have introduced perspectives on temporality that include the past, present and future (Maitlis & Christianson 2014). Our past oriented sensemaking allows for extrapolation and making sense of the future (Bosma, Chia & Fouweather 2016). As these authors suggest, a new past, a new present, and a new future that may be radically different to those previously established have to be linguistically constructed, as is apparent in these coaching interactions. Colville, Pye and Brown (2016) write of 'historical foresight' (p. 23), a way of coming to grips with the future by learning from the past. In highlighting the importance of spatiality and temporality in sensemaking, they write of thinking in the future perfect tense. This is relevant to executive coaching in respect to constructing goals oriented to future action and performance in terms of imaging how these might be retrospectively understood. Drawing from Bakhtin, Ritella & Ligorio (2016), in adopting a dialogical approach, refer to the space-time organization of the material world where sensemaking takes place. This includes the interconnectedness between the present and previous or anticipated events, as they emerge throughout the semiotic process, an example of which can be seen in the feedback where Zoe recognized that in the future she needs to be mindful of the importance of letting her team know when they are doing well.



The feedback story continued to occupy the attention of Zoe and Lisa, with Lisa's emphasis on how 'bloody challenging' it is to not use feedback to catch staff doing a wrong because time is precious and there is a need to recognize how a team or individuals all pull together. She introduced the term 'scaffolding' to the Zoe, coming back to the issue of delegation that was introduced early in the coaching session when her two team leaders were struggling with their new roles. In a similar way to which she re-framed the issue of time at work to one of discretionary effort, Lisa has introduced a new concept that expands the linguistic repertoire of Zoe as she makes sense of her own supervisory experiences in the workplace. There is a sense that, for Lisa, this had not been satisfactorily resolved, and she has been reaching back in the conversation to suggest practical ways Zoe can apply to making the transition smoother for the team leaders. Lisa suggested scaffolding as a practice where support is given on a person-to-person level, taking into account the individuals' skill level, capacity, capability and attitude. Her earlier attempts in this coaching conversation to achieve this were not successful, but this time, Zoe's attention was gained. She appeared intrigued with this new word 'scaffolding' and how she might apply it. This device, a new concept for Zoe, opened a new round of sensemaking, a semantic transformation which gives new meaning to the process of supporting workers to learn new skills on the job. It captured the imagination of Zoe in a form of prospective sensemaking that is not simply retrospective understanding, but a creative act of interpretation which can shape a future action. Zoe said: 'Scaffolding was great, pleased with that'. Being able to contextualize and attribute meaning to one's experiences enables learning, and from that learning individuals are able to make sense of experience linking the past, present and future.

At the beginning of this description, I suggested that a vital feature of sensemaking is saliency, the trigger to noticing what is going on in an environment. Zoe's experiences of managing her staff have prompted her to dwell extensively on what has been causing her concerns in the workplace, issues which she cares about but which she has been unable to confidently resolve. Her lived experiences were related in 'meaningful chunks', as Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) describe it. As brief narratives, these chunks

were integrated throughout the coaching session with concerns held by coach and client for providing proactive support to team members in a positive and constructive way. Lisa's role as executive coach has largely been to allow Zoe the space to work these narratives through in her own accounts, supporting her in the 'saying as thinking', the vocalisation of her concerns. She sustained an environment where Zoe could update and 're-punctuate' her experience, re-framing her own meanings and developing self-insight. Lisa, however, offered her own insights in respect to values, offered practical queries and suggestions, and enriched the dialogic space with her own meanings and perspectives. Lisa's introduction of semantic transformations not only created new meaning for Zoe, but enabled her to imaginatively grasp new opportunities for action.

Sensemaking has been introduced in this study as a way in which meaning is made from experience, but one which also has a temporal quality as it links the past with the present and the future. Meaning is ultimately found in enactment, the embodied element of sensemaking. While sensemaking can provide some clarity, order and reason to the disruption and chaos of our moment-by-moment experience of the world, it does not simply provide an account of past events. It signifies what is important to us. Further, the narrative quality of sensemaking introduces the idea of linguistic playfulness from which new meanings may be created. Through creating an enriched dialogic space, Lisa, the executive coach in this study, opened up for her client new possibilities in the management of her staff, with linguistic tools provided which expand her sensemaking repertoire. The prospective nature of sensemaking provided for the client a future-forward action orientation towards achieving her goals but also enactment as a key feature of the feedback loops that sensemaking embodies. These enactments will precipitate a new round of retrospective sensemaking, and another opportunity for a sensemaking narrative which will again create new actions, new meanings and hence the potential for learning.

#### **6.4 Theme 2: Laughter**

In the account of Mates at Work, the ethics of friendship and solidarity were found in

the executive coaching relationship. Lebanese American poet, Khalil Gibran (1923, no page numbering), says 'In the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures. For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed'. Laughter bubbled up throughout the conversation between Lisa and Zoe in this coaching account, sometimes uproariously so and sometimes as quiet chuckling or what is experienced as a 'smiling voice' (Wang et al. 2016, p. 1154)). A smiling voice is a pathway to laughter, a gentle tone which encourages warmth and sociability. Here it has been a bridge which links the quiet meditative space of a period of mindfulness meditation which has been shared by Lisa and Zoe at the start of the coaching session, heralding at its end a return to the material world. The smiling voice was reflected in the first 'hello' in the opening greetings between Lisa (coach) and Zoe (client). It was followed by Lisa with a light laugh, reciprocated in the hello and laugh with which Zoe responded. This laughter was a foretaste of the laughing that was peppered through the conversation, mostly as a warm chuckle but at other times with loud enthusiasm by one or other of the participants. Often the laughter was shared. Both coach and client seemed comfortable with laughter throughout the coaching session at whatever level or occasion it emerged. Sometimes it was used in amusement, such as a report that a staff member finds doing rosters as 'sort of like a rubik's cube', an apt metaphor for the frustration she was feeling in tackling a complex task for the first time and one to which Lisa and Zoe could relate. At other times laughter has been in response to uncertainty, an uncertainty that Lisa makes explicit, accompanied with laughter.

Lisa: You just seem to be very calm, (laugh), I'm so happy, because you're telling me about it and stuff which is, actually pretty like, there's a lot of uncertainty, and there's a lot of what's one doing, what's the other one doing...

Zoe: It's like here we go again.

Lisa: (Laughter). It's not strung you out. I'm so pleased.

Client and coach laughed together, both in recognition of the challenge of all that 'stuff' that is going on, and the paradox of Zoe's apparent calm in the face of adversity.

Lisa and Zoe laughed at a particular quandary in respect to the role-sharing responsibilities of the two team leaders whom the client was supervising, when Zoe said, 'They both learn in different ways so that's also a bit of challenge, yeah, I don't know. We'll see'. There have been emerging problems in respect to shared responsibilities among team leaders, which Zoe had only recently become aware of and with which she was preparing to deal in the coming weeks. With no immediate solution, laughter floated up to acknowledge the dilemmas and uncertainties of change. Words sometimes cannot be found in the moment, but laughter appeared to be the embodiment of feelings of frustration which Lisa and Zoe experienced together.

The intents of laughter are not well researched in the general literature, but its ubiquity is now of interest to the psychological community (Kurtz & Algoe 2017; Kashdan et al. 2014). Laughter is both corporeal and relational, pulling together the existentials of lived body and self-other, as expressed by van Manen (2014). Laughter is described as emanating from a feeling, that is an emotion (Chafe 2007). Similarly, the physical or involuntary eruption of laughter that was evident in this conversation was largely involuntary vocalizations, those that come from felt emotions (Bryant & Aktipis 2014). Laughter is widely considered to be a behavioural expression of amusement or mirth (Kurtz & Algoe 2017), but this study has shown that to be an insufficient characterization of laughter. Lisa and Zoe were not amused or cheerful at the situation which Zoe has been required to manage. Theirs might be better described as a relational or affiliative laughter which represents the shared aspects of being together in a safe environment characterized by a sense of belonging conducive to social bonding (Kashdan et al. 2014). It was important to the coaching conversation that Zoe felt safe and valued if she were to fully disclose any difficulties which she is experiencing in the workplace. The interpersonal closeness that laughter fosters promotes sharing and acceptance. Lisa and Zoe were in this coaching relationship together, both with an interest in the outcomes that they might produce collaboratively. Most importantly, Zoe may have needed to feel supported in dealing with a problem for which she did not have solutions.

Twentieth century philosopher and sociologist Norbert Elias (2017) wrote an extended essay on laughter, making sense of the wide variety of expressions and descriptions from the side-splitting laughter of merriment to the restraint of polite adults. Laughter, Elias says (2017, p. 282) can include a ‘chuckle, chortle, giggle, cackle, burble, snigger and titter, or even smirk, simper, guffaw, and cachinnate<sup>4</sup>. In this conversation as a whole, laughter has emerged as chuckles, giggles and even cachinnates. The most robust laughter came largely from Lisa, in response to anecdotes from Lisa on her self-reflections in respect to performance and feedback from staff where theory and practice have collided. For example, Zoe described feedback she had received in a meeting from her own staff on her management practices:

Zoe: ... they (her staff) were joking about something else because I always forget their RDOs<sup>5</sup>.

Lisa: Right.

Zoe: And I’m so bad at it, and so it’s a bit of a joke. And she’s (staff member) like, ah, guess what? I forgot (staff worker’s) RDO today, so I’m just like, I’m becoming you.

Lisa: Laughter (loud)

Zoe: ... and I was cracking up (chuckling).

Lisa and Zoe were laughing together, the coach with much greater exuberance. They were laughing at the gentle teasing that a staff member had directed at her supervisor, Zoe, for her forgetfulness, but also at the self-reflection of Zoe on her possible imperfections.

Laughter is believed to be pre-linguistic and shared with other species in the animal kingdom (Bryant & Aktipis 2014; Wang et al. 2016). It is thought to be similar to the vocalizations associated with primate species whose play is accompanied by open-

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<sup>4</sup> Cachinnate means to laugh loudly or immoderately (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cachinnate>)

<sup>5</sup> RDOs: Rostered Days Off

mouth vocalizations, and which existed in humans prior to speech. It is also thought that laughter provides a reliable signal that the person vocalizing is unlikely to launch a physical attack (Bryant & Aktipis 2014). Rather, its evolutionary trajectory signals positive affect and co-operative intent among humans. In phenomenological terms, this places laughter in the pre-reflective domain, that which exists before individuals add the understandings and constructions of the natural attitude. The bodily expression of laughter erupts without conscious thought. It is important that executive coaching is felt by a client to be a safe place. Playful and reciprocal laughter encourages a sense of safety in the face of the vulnerability likely in a sustained focus on the client's performance and worth.

Shared laughter was first experienced in this coaching example with the opening hellos referred to at the beginning of this section in the lifeworld description. This was soon followed by a discussion on a mindfulness game which Lisa recommended in previous coaching sessions could be played at home with Zoe's children. Zoe's partner joined in the game and, much to the hilarity of coach and client, he approached it with competitive intent rather than the mindful reflectiveness it is designed for. Both Lisa and Zoe first chuckled when Lisa asked if it had been shared with the kids, but Lisa laughed loudly when it was revealed that Zoe's partner did not understand the meditative intent of the game. It resulted in the partner being 'banned' from the game. It was a 'funny' interlude for Lisa and Zoe, potentially representing a humorous bonding of two women and a strengthening of their social bond at an early point in the coaching conversation, setting a tone of both solidarity and connectedness.

Lisa and Zoe then went into a detailed discussion of staffing arrangements and who can step up to higher level roles. The conversation developed into a broader discussion on the performance of the individuals concerned in respect to changed role responsibilities. Both Lisa and Zoe laughed from time to time during this extended period, Lisa the more so, but with episodes where the laughter is shared. Laughter appeared to have been used by Lisa to soften her own comments when she offered cautionary concerns about how Zoe's staff might react to Zoe's suggestions. It may be thought as an ameliorating effect of laughter, interspersed to reduce threat and

maintain the social bond, with the laughter emerging without conscious intent, but serving as a natural communicative device which implies a playfulness rather than a serious implied criticism. It opened up the possibility of friendly, non-defensive discussion. Lisa's was an empathetic response, which her laughter reinforced. This was not the laughter of amusement or mirth. It appeared to emerge for quite different purposes, those aligned with not only a social bonding in a general sense, but a confirmation that Zoe's challenges had been understood by Lisa, and she was sympathetic to her need to find a solution to staffing arrangements in the new environment of changed organizational structures. There was a note of misgiving in the circumstances of uncertainty precipitated by these arrangements. Following on in this thread of conversation Zoe commented:

Zoe: ... yeah, I don't know how it is going to work. Look, it may not work and that's fine, but let's give it a go. (Zoe laughs and Lisa joins in).

When Lisa summarised the situation by describing it as 'messy', Zoe agreed. Laughter is being used perhaps to ease the discomfort of that messiness, not to diminish its challenges. It manifests as a form of self-soothing in the face of ambiguity and the uncertainty which characterizes this part of the coaching session.

Laughter may be at times a response to the ridiculousness of life itself. The idea that life is inherently absurd is an existential principle, attributed to philosophers including Kirkegaard, Camus and Sartre (van den Bos 2009). It is underpinned by a belief that life does not make sense, wherever one looks (Proulx 2009). This senselessness evokes an arousal state which is a 'feeling of the absurd', suggested by Camus in 1955 (Proulx 2009, p. 250). Cullin (2008, p. 192) suggests that it is 'the not making sense that is a significant defining feature of absurdity'. Hence, according to Proulx (2009), a sense of absurdity arises when any committed meaning framework is violated. In the face of despair, we can laugh at the ridiculousness that confronts us and we can also try to construct meaning from it. Lisa and Zoe confronted the incomprehension of bureaucratic systems with both laughter and perspective taking. The uncertainty and

messiness of working in a complex system has occupied the serious attention of coach and client. This seriousness was broken by laughter in the face of its vagaries. Lisa laughed with reassuring sensitivity, saying she was pleased at how the client is dealing with these situations. Zoe in turn related an anecdote about how her day off had been interrupted because she needed to attend to some unexpected work-related banking problems due to 'silly systems'. She had been spending the day with her mother-in-law whose response was to say 'I'd be screaming and telling this person to go jump'. Both client and coach were laughing at the normality of these system failures. They agreed that no-one was going to die so everything was fine. They normalized the absurdity and Lisa turned it around to a narrative on the beauty of flexibility. Together, they made sense of the situation by reconstructing the meaning they might ascribe to it, continuing to laugh their way through a joint reconstruction of the meaning of organizational life which may otherwise confound with its absurdity.

Chafe (2007) suggested that laughter is associated with the emotion of non-seriousness. Non seriousness is seen by Chafe as deflecting seriousness from situations in which there is benefit to be achieved from that deflection. It may occur when there is uncertainty about the adequacy or appropriateness of the comments chosen. Executive coaching is an intense period of time in which both coach and client are engaged in a high-stakes activity in the sense that the client is the subject of concentrated focus. Maintaining a serious demeanour throughout that engagement demands a lot from both partners. The interpolation of moments of light-heartedness expressed as laughter may break any tension and replenish energy for the continuing hard work involved.

In response to Zoe's comments on the selection of staff potentially able to replace her during imminent leave, the coaching conversation proceeded:

Zoe: So I said to her and to (co-worker), I would hope that one of you, or both of you can step up, yeah.

Lisa: So how does that, how would that affect them both hearing that, do you think, as far as competition (laughter) may be?



Zoe: Emily actually wasn't interested when I ...

Lisa: Oh, alright (laughter).

There was the possibility of implied criticism in Lisa's suggestion that Zoe's actions might arouse some competitiveness between her two team leaders, both of whom might have aspired to taking on the higher paid role in Zoe's absence. Lisa's laughter may have downplayed any seriousness that her suggestion be construed as implied criticism, hence preserving the social relationship with her client. This laughter does not appear to be calculated. It appears to happen at a level beneath conscious reflection, signifying perhaps a tentativeness that is not explicit.

Laughter may enhance the perception that one is valued, cared about and understood (Kashdan et al. 2014). It is consistent with the establishment and maintenance of a coaching relationship described in my Chapter Two Literature Review, reinforcing the need for a baseline of positive feelings and perceptions between partners in an interaction, even when the content of the interaction may create tensions (Kolb 2015). Laughter in a coaching interaction cannot be authentically manufactured as it would be easily detected as contrived. There is a distinction between spontaneous and volitional laughter, which invokes different responses in a relationship (Scott et al. 2014). Volitional laughter is a controlled, deliberate form of laughter. It is involuntary laughter that is more highly associated with positive emotional expression and a reduction in social and psychological distance. Genuine laughter is both an appreciation for and encouragement of social contact (Wang et al., 2016). Genuinely expressed laughter builds affiliation and enhances collaborative effort in the coaching relationship. The laughter shared by Lisa and Zoe appeared to be genuine and spontaneous, reflecting the strength of the coaching relationship they had created together.

In summary, the laughter in this case study has been particularly prominent. Laughter emerged in the other conversations in this study, but it is notably pervasive in this one. Laughter serves to refresh, as Khalil Gibran's verse suggests, bringing lightness and warmth to the coaching conversation between Lisa and Zoe. Laughter might erupt in

amusement or mirth, as when Lisa and Zoe laughed at the Rubik's Cube metaphor for doing rosters. In this account, however, it holds other broader social and ameliorative functions. It has fostered mutuality, a sense of being together in confronting the messiness of Zoe's organizational predicaments. Shared laughter has signalled that Zoe is safe, she can confidently disclose her vulnerabilities and uncertainties. Laughter has the function of smoothing the way through any tensions in the face of tough dilemmas which coaching brings up if difficult changes are to be made. Laughter can imply a playfulness, a non-serious suspension which sets a shared tone of mutuality in engaging challenging work. It creates some perspective around the idea that organizational life is at times absurd, and there are of no immediate solutions to its occasional, or even persistent, messiness. Laughter enhances and sustains a productive learning relationship. Its genuine expression helps build a foundation of the mutual positive regard that is intrinsic to successful coaching conversations.

### **6.5 Theme 3: Mindfulness**

'Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor.' — Thich Nhat Hanh (Hahn 2017).

Conscious breathing is a ubiquitous practice in mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn 2005). Just as sensemaking is a way of looking at experience, mindfulness is a practice with a strong experiential quality. The three-minute mindfulness centring we saw in the discussion on laughter, from which the coach and client emerged with gentle laughter, set a tone for the coaching session as a whole. Mindfulness practices have been introduced as a goal for the client in this particular case, one which is, as Lisa summarizes it, 'a personal piece that would support those kinds of things', those other goals to which Zoe has committed. Lisa and Zoe's executive coaching session commenced with a centring meditation used to clear a space, one which is more generally described as providing a helpful spacious quietness (Dreyfus 2011), a space free from the chatter of our normal thoughts or sensations as they flit from one topic or feeling to another. In this way, it opened the coaching session with a sense of peace and calm.

Mindfulness is a practice introduced into workplaces over the past thirty years, gaining more popularity in recent years (Hyland, Lee & Mills 2015). Mindfulness is rooted in Buddhist philosophy but is commonly approached as a secular practice largely focused on health and wellbeing effects, particularly within organizations. By simply observing our experiences as they unfold, it may be possible to reduce stress and achieve greater equanimity in the face of complexity and uncertainty. It is suggested that coaches who maintain a mindfulness practice may strengthen the qualities and skills which are important to building an effective coaching relationship (de Haan 2014; Virgili 2013). Virgili suggested further that the benefits of mindfulness are such that it may be usefully taught to coaching clients.

Mindfulness is described as a state of receptive, open attention to and present-moment awareness of passing events and experience (Good et al. 2016; Krishnakumar & Robinson 2015). According to Virgili (2013, p. 41) mindfulness is often 'described as a type of attention to one's experiences (for example, thoughts, emotions, memories and sensations) as they arise moment-by-moment, and in a manner that is non-judgmental, non-reactive, open, and accepting'. Despite a commonality in some definitions there is, however, no consensus on a definition of mindfulness (Good et al. 2016; Lutz et al. 2015; Virgili 2013). One widely used definition is that of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who describes mindfulness as 'paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally' (Felder & Aten 2014, p. 4). Kabat-Zinn (2011) describes mindfulness as an invitation to suspend judging as much as it is possible and to avoid black and white thinking in favour of a kind of wisdom through which one can see the subtleties. With its Buddhist roots, Kabat-Zinn (2005) says, mindfulness reflects a tradition which concerns itself with deep questions on the nature of life and humanity's yearning to know itself, a way of being rather than a collection of techniques. Those descriptions that are presented through the lens of psychologized and pragmatic adaptations limit an understanding of mindfulness in respect to its ancient philosophical roots in eastern cultures, but it is those adaptations that are prevalent in the mindfulness based interventions found in organizations, as Kabat-Zinn (2011) acknowledges in respect his own programs on mindfulness based

stress reduction. Kabat-Zinn speaks of his wish to not decontextualize the wisdom of Buddhism, but rather 'to recontextualise it within the frameworks of science' (2011, p. 288), with an emphasis on non-judgemental awareness, wholeness and lovingkindness as indirect teachings consistent with Buddhist teachings.

Dreyfus (2011) takes a scholarly perspective in his review of the pluralistic traditions found in Buddhism's ancient roots and texts, and compares these with present-day practices. From this perspective, he argues that the central feature of mindfulness is to hold its object in contemplation and allow for sustained attention, whether or not the object of attention is present. He questions the non-judgmental nature of mindfulness as it appears in the contemporary psychological literature where the emphasis is on practical interventions, such as for stress management and relaxation general. The value of these practical interventions lies in 'de-automatization' of habitual judgmental tendencies simply by observing the experiences as they occur and not elaborating on their content (Dreyfus 2011, p. 43). Achieving a calm and focused state is seen as a gateway to greater understanding and clarity in responding to day-to-day activities. However, for Dreyfus this does not fully capture the practice of mindfulness proper. He suggests that mindfulness has a more explicit cognitive end which at an early stage requires clear comprehension. Dreyfus suggests that a more classical Buddhist account is that mindfulness is not exclusively present-centred but is a capacity to hold an object as the focus of sustained attention in a way that is explicitly cognitive, evaluative and retentive. According to Dreyfus, this holding ability is natural, exists in every person, and can be strengthened by practice. Dreyfus (2011, p.50) describes an aspect of mindfulness as development of 'clear comprehension' or 'wise mindfulness'. This echoes Kabat-Zinn's call for the cultivation of both wisdom and compassion in mindful practice.

In respect to van Manen's existentials, corporeality can be seen as a specific feature of mindfulness. With respect to the lived body, attention to the breath brings body and mind together in the mindful practice of noticing the sensations which come to our attention in passing awareness. Thoughts and sensations are simply noted as subjectively experienced and then let go of as focus returns to the breath, not to the

thoughts that arise in our wandering minds. This is said to open the way to a more reflective way of addressing difficult circumstances in life with an attitude of curiosity and self-understanding that releases the individual from habitual responses and compulsions (Dreyfus 2011). With its emphasis on observing experience as it unfolds, it is suggested that mindfulness has a strong relationship with phenomenology as a process of reflectively focusing on something that is already self-evident in the stream of consciousness (Cavill 2010; Felder et al. 2014). While contemporary mindfulness is not Buddhist in a secular sense, it is embedded in the practices, ethics and morality of Buddhism (Nanda 2009). Childs (2007, p. 370) quotes Varela's description of Buddhism as 'a living manifestation of an active disciplined phenomenology, a distant mirror of what we need to cultivate in our science and the western tradition'. Varela says a rigorous phenomenology requires a change of direction in the movement of thinking away from its habitual content-oriented direction towards the arising of the thoughts themselves (Childs 2007, p. 370), suggesting a link between mindfulness and phenomenological method. Husserl (1970) described attentiveness to the life-world as it appears in the stream of experience, a sensibly experienced intuition that is part of one's living body. It is said that, for Husserl, it was through an active meditative reflection on bodily sensations that one could expand concentrated mindful awareness (Felder & Robbins 2016). Felder and Robbins (p. 8) suggested that Husserl's phenomenological emphasis is on direct intuition or presence through 'a mindful meditative stance of non-interference that allows the experience of being to unfold naturally.'

In describing Lisa and Zoe's executive coaching session, I made thematic the practice of mindfulness because it launches the session and is in the background of much of their coaching. The silent meditation at the commencement of the coaching session was opened by the coach suggesting that she and the client 'start with a quick centring'. Centring is a process of bringing attention to the body and emptying the mind of the cluttered thoughts which race around in the course of people's busy lives. It is usually accompanied with a focus on the breath, slowing the pace down and thus providing space for a focus on the task ahead. Lisa led an entry into the centring, suggesting feet on the floor, feeling supported by the chair, aligning mind, body and heart, and taking

deep breaths. She suggested in introducing the meditation that an intention be set for the coaching session. There is some background noise, and Lisa suggested noticing it and letting it pass. Reflecting a corporeal existential, this was a meditation which focused on the breath, invoking the living body in awareness of the sensations of body, noticing sounds in the environment in the moment and letting them pass. It was a mindfulness that involved an experiential process, placing attention on the internal, such as thoughts and emotions, acknowledging them and then steering the mind away from external objects, such as the background sounds in this example (Good et al. 2016). This process is undertaken without immediate attempts to derive meaning from what floats in and out of awareness. It is intended to be free of evaluation. Except for the introductory centring and a reminder just to notice those background sounds, Zoe and Lisa's meditation occurred in silence.

As she and Zoe directly entered back into the coaching session, Lisa reviewed the goals for the coaching overall, and said she has in her notes mindfulness as a 'side piece' to the other goals. Zoe questioned whether it was a side piece. Lisa responded that it was more of a personal piece that would support the client's goals, 'all those areas'; that is, the specific other goals that have been set in previous sessions and reaffirmed as of value in this one. After reviewing the overall goals, Lisa asked Zoe how she is going with her (meditation) practice. Zoe said that it is all good, and that she is 'still doing the mindfulness' and other related activities for practice at home, some of which had been shared with the family. Lisa and Zoe agreed with each other that the mindfulness is an individual, in-the-moment awareness. This part of the conversation then opened up into a recollective account of the Zoe's work situation as described in the theme on sensemaking. It is an account that has a mindfulness quality in its experiential stream of Zoe describing her activities over the past weeks in a recollective and non-critical way. The slipping into experiential accounts, however, continued throughout the coaching session, up until the last few minutes. These were full of detail, recounted in the present, but as accounts of the past which were indicative of the day-to-day challenges of operating in a 'messy' environment of change and uncertainty. These accounts were delivered by Zoe with calm and with acceptance, Lisa commenting on Zoe's calmness. This accounting and sensemaking is,

in part, consistent with qualities of mindfulness that are described as accepting or observing without evaluation and being calm and not driven (Childs 2007). However, both Zoe and Lisa made evaluations in recognizing that there is a messiness, and that this is posing some managerial challenges. Mindfulness set the tone for the coaching session, and while the dilemmas with which Zoe was faced were handled with equanimity by her, Lisa introduced challenge into the conversation.

While they have a mindful quality, these recollections have not been approached by coach and client as a mindful practice, and they were not fully developed as such. Zoe was present to her accounts of experiencing but she was not directing her attention to the immediate experience of her accounting for those experiences. In paying attention to her past experience without focusing on how she was experiencing those accounts, Zoe's mindfulness was not coupled with meta-awareness, the apprehension of the current state of mind in the coaching session (Good et al. 2016). Whilst evaluations did occur in Zoe's reflections, they were not prevalent. Nor were they necessarily antithetical to mindfulness, so long as they are closely attended to in a moment-by-moment awareness. De Haan (2014) speaks of cycles of experiencing and reflecting, which are ever present in coaching generally but need to happen sequentially. To learn or change, one needs both immersion and realization, and it is at the cusp of these that something new happens. Experiencing alone does not necessarily generate new knowledge or behaviour. It may deepen or reaffirm the learning that has been accumulating in the experiences themselves. In this case, learning emerged as part of the sensemaking process when Lisa opened the semantic space, in a process that disrupted that mindful quality.

With all the challenges and frustrations of the management role, Zoe was able to step back and say that things were going well. Lisa reminded Zoe of the value of using the breath in those situations that are more stressful.

Zoe: ... Oh yeah, and I've really got in my head, that you know, our roles are replaceable...

Lisa: It's not going, no one's going to die if the process ...

Zoe: That's my, the big thing that (co-worker) always puts in my head. I love it. Seriously, is the client going to die, not going to die? All right that's fine. We'll all be fine.

Lisa: And can you feel yourself just physically, breathe, and then letting that go...

Zoe was accepting the pressures in her role, and Lisa re-affirmed with her the mindful technique of breathing through difficult events. This is calming, and allows responses which are not immediately reactive. Mindfulness practices do not need to be adopted in a purist sense for benefits to be achieved around coping and stress release. In that brief period of taking a deep breath, it is possible make a shift in perspective that will enable a sense of rest or ease in times of crisis. A focus on the 'in' and 'out' breath fosters calmness in mind and body (Cavill 2010).

Successfully adopting a mindfully aware approach in the workplace equips a person with the skills to be aware of one's interpretations and internal experiences. As we saw in the discussion of sensemaking, Zoe, in one of her recollections, described how she handled a potentially volatile situation when a member of her staff challenged her about a management decision. In the moment of pause when she noticed her own potential frustration and anger, Zoe was able to frame the conversation in a more measured and non-confrontational way. She went on to acknowledge the worker's frustrations explicitly and de-escalated the situation so that both she and worker could calmly address the situation. Lisa affirmed her approach and reinforced Zoe's success in managing the situation:

Lisa: ... I love that story because I think you're doing that more and more and that's noticing your own reactivity.

With mindful awareness of and attention to reactions, a distancing from self-relevant evaluations is achieved (Good et al. 2016). In this case, Zoe could have reacted angrily and self-defensively. She was able to identify and capture her own emotional reactivity, and decide on a positive framing of the situation. Lisa reviewed the



experience and reflected it back to Zoe with her observations about the nature of feelings when both parties are frustrated and the importance of an 'us' perspective without defence and pushback. This served to reinforce the principle of non-reactivity and consolidate learning from the experience. Lisa complemented Zoe on how deftly she handled the situation. Zoe took this further by relating an experience in giving feedback to her team. Zoe decided to acknowledge her team and express her appreciation. Team members did not know at first how to respond to her expressions of appreciation. Zoe took this as a signal that she needs to do it more regularly. This learning insight opened up to comments from Lisa on the offering of feedback from a learning perspective in ways which do not make people minimized and wrong, thus building on the experiential reflections of Zoe, and also reflecting the principles of non-harm which is at the foundation of a Buddhist inspired mindfulness practice.

Kabat-Zinn (2005, p. 102) suggests that the foundation for mindfulness practice 'lies in ethics and morality, and above all, the motivation of non-harming'. Felder and Robbins (2016) similarly provide a reminder of the importance that the original ancient definitions of mindfulness as found in an embodied and ethically sensitive practice, one suggestive of socially engaged ethics. Taking it out of its Buddhist roots, suggested Gethin (2011), loses sight of the of Buddhist goal of diminishment of greed, hatred and delusion. Kabat-Zinn (2005) describes how in his clinical work he and his colleagues as a rule do not directly raise the ethical principles of mindfulness. Instead they embody those principles through practising an 'openhearted presence, trustworthiness, generosity, and kindness' (Kabat-Zinn 2005, p. 106), with more explicitly directed conversations happening naturally out of conversations that people share in dialogue about their experiences in meditation practice. Lisa in this example brought her ethics into the executive coaching conversation. Her concern for Zoe and for Zoe's team permeated the conversation, but for the most part unobtrusively, through her embodiment of an open-hearted presence to her client, trying to ensure she is supportive, positive and constructive. At times, Lisa was also direct in responding to Zoe's experiential accounts in such a way as to reinforce an ethic of care and positivity towards those whom Zoe was supervising.

As was seen earlier in this chapter, Zoe's two team leaders were experiencing some challenges in adjusting to their new roles. Lisa from the outset gently questioned whether there is sufficient support behind them. She raised issues early in the conversation on the possibilities of there being skills gaps, on having role clarity, and on whether they have the capacity and capability to perform in their roles. Lisa expressed her belief that these issues had been addressed, and that the individuals were fine, while acknowledging that the roles are still being worked through. Lisa did not press her concerns immediately but continued to listen to Zoe's experiential accounts of how the situation was developing, while making some reflections on the level of support or guidance in place. Lisa had not finished with her concerns, however. It was close to the end of the session, and Lisa was eventually successful in encouraging Zoe to look at her staffing issues with an action orientation. It is here that Lisa introduced the word 'scaffolding' as introduced in the section of this chapter on sensemaking. Lisa urged that Zoe spend person-to-person time with her new team leaders, 'just to see how OK they are' and to develop their skill levels. When Zoe agreed to adopt scaffolding to support her team leaders, the coach's patience and quiet persistence in upholding the values of care for those that the leader supervises were rewarded. The mindful ethics of care supported Lisa's non-critical suggestion, and Zoe, in turn, was pleased to embrace a personalized approach that would support her team leaders in a practical way.

In summary, mindfulness can be approached in a number of different ways, some on the basis of technique alone and others which to varying degrees reflect a Buddhist philosophy. The techniques of mindfulness based stress reduction which focuses on awareness and breath were pioneered in the health services and workplaces by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005). These techniques provide the basis of the model which has been the most influential in disseminating mindfulness into work places. In the executive coaching session reviewed in this study, Kabat-Zinn's model appears to be the foundation for the use of mindfulness practice introduced to the client, Zoe. However, as an embodied practice, Lisa has brought to her coaching a more ethically attuned mindfulness which is reflected in the concept of care. It exceeds the techniques which Kabat-Zinn offers in his operational definition of mindfulness, but reflects his broader

commitment to Buddhist principles such as those of wisdom, compassion and doing no harm. The relationship between mindfulness and phenomenology has been introduced in this consideration, particularly in respect to the strongly experiential descriptions which the Zoe herself has introduced into the conversation. This focus on experience gestures towards Dreyfus's argument for mindfulness as holding an object in contemplation, allowing for sustained attention. Mindfulness is a difficult concept to pin down, and in these early days of its implementation in coaching, its lack of definitional clarity in scientific accounts can be seen as a gift in the service of compassion in work places. That openness to the understanding of mindfulness enables coaches to value experiential accounts as a contemplative practice in coaching which leads to greater self-understanding and the potential of emergent learning from those experiences. However, it is important to be aware that recollective experiential accounts themselves may not be sufficient for learning to take place.

## **Summary**

In respect to this executive coaching session, a half-way mark had been reached, as Lisa notes. Zoe and Lisa had settled into a rhythm reflecting a familiarity with each other's personal style of relating in the context of a coaching conversation. Wrapping up the session at its end, Zoe said that she feels her goals around succession planning and managing her staff were 'going well', and that she believed she has 'got the practice side of things'. Zoe and Lisa shared laughter together at this analysis. Zoe has embodied the principles of effectively providing constructive feedback to her team, delegating responsibility and managing conflict while recognizing that it will take time to fully embed those principles in practice. She understands what needs to be done and is able to do so when working under pressure. The session has been largely one of consolidation of previous learnings as Zoe reflected on her recent experiences in managing her team and her own activities as a leader. There have been challenges, but Zoe has risen to most of them in the difficult circumstances of a new and untested organizational structure. In respect to the struggles of her two team leaders who are new to their roles, Zoe and Lisa found a pathway to better supporting them by adopting a process of scaffolding their learning through personalized tuition. Zoe

appeared to have been able to apply the principles of supporting and managing her staff which have emanated from previous coaching sessions. Hence it is that I characterized this session as 'Steady as She Goes'. Zoe has been able to give voice to her experiences, her reflections and application of the learning principles that have emerged in previous sessions.

## **6.6 Phenomenological Reasoning - What is Executive Coaching?**

In addressing the three themes of this coaching session, sensemaking, laughter and mindfulness, I focussed on the research question and the extent to which each might contribute to finding its essence in coaching. I again practised a form of imaginative variation, asking whether I can 'vary out' the themes in such a way that executive coaching will retain its meaning without them. As with the previous chapter, that imaginative variation was complemented with the empiricism of the accounts provided in this Chapter.

### **Sensemaking as Essence**

The existentials of embodiment and temporality have each been called upon in the description of sensemaking in this Chapter. Relationality was implicit in that sensemaking, as Lisa and Zoe shared their insights. Husserl's theory of embodiment extends beyond the idea that subjectivity is present in 'lived bodies' but that it is spread over the lifeworld and 'embodied' in the shared meanings with which they are culturally inscribed (Pulkkinen 2013). In other words in our lived experience of the world we have to actively give meaning to things but at the same time, meaning is embodied in the environment at the level of passive consciousness and pre-giveness. In this way, sensemaking is a reciprocal dynamic between cultural meanings and the material world in our ongoing, embodied experiential lifeworld as practical engagement. That lifeworld experience has meaning to us. What executive coaching does is to make meaning explicit in the client's experiential accounts, bringing intentionality to notice, not just to the individual, but to the shared attention of coach and client. It actively becomes explicit and conscious. That sphere of activity can be a

simple turning of attention to something, but it can also engage a more complex form of conscious activity. Here it can be newly interpreted and understood, and new meanings can be formed. For Husserl, this attentional activity is an inseparable part of subjectivity, an activity which broadens our understanding of the environment (Pulkkinen 2013). It is essential to coaching on two levels. It brings into view habitualities, those of the already functioning, familiar lifeworld which is temporally in the past and manifested in the present. However, it also opens to transfers of meaning that change those habitualities into what Husserl calls higher levels of meaning, whether produced from our own insights and reasoning, or other intersubjective perspectives. In this way, there is 'an overarching enrichment of experience with layers and levels of meaning that do not have to reside in or originate from this experience itself' (Pulkkinen 2013, p. 137). Meaning resides in the lifeworld itself, available for awakening in the creation of new meanings in an active reasoning process which is implicit in sensemaking.

In this executive coaching session, Zoe has focused on her experiences and Lisa has supported her in that process. Zoe has been making sense of those experiences, recognizing on one level that she has been unable to fully support her newly appointed team leaders, but on another she has successfully met the coaching goals she had identified in relation to managing her team generally. The 'strange' sensemaking loops referred to in this section play themselves out in an unending cycle of relating experience, making meaning, trying new actions and making sense of them anew. This enrichment of experience is always available in sensemaking as new meanings and learning about organizational roles is created and insights gained in how better to perform them. Those reservoirs of meaning are phenomenologically richer and deeper than what that experiencing delivers at first blush. It is a reminder that our coaching clients have their own deep resources from which to draw. Sensemaking cannot be varied out of the executive coaching conversation. Coaching clients are the agents of their own meaning-making. Coaches cannot make sense of their clients' experiences on their behalf, although they can reflect back their own understandings of what clients relate in their sensemaking stories and they contribute their own meaning-

making perspectives. Sensemaking is an essential feature without which I cannot imagine executive coaching.

### **Laughter as Essence**

In Chapter Five, I established relationality as an existential theme that is essential to executive coaching. In respect to laughter, the existentials of relationality and embodiment have been described in this account of Lisa and Zoe's coaching conversation. Laughter is a pre-linguistic phenomenon, one shared with other species and shown to indicate safety and freedom from attack. Laughter is embodied. It is the expression of a felt emotion, the warm feelings of sociality in a coaching relationship. At its least intrusive, laughter can be experienced as 'smiling voice', the vocalised pathway to laughter. At a deeper existential level, it may be a response to the absurd, reflecting Camus' meaning of a complete lack of fit between 'reason's aspirations' and the world 'as we find it' (McBride 2012, p. 51).

Laughter as it has been described in this study is a natural, communicative function, ranging from smiling voice to roaring enthusiasm. Its sociality infused this particular coaching conversation, and it was present in the other two cases which form the basis of this descriptive analysis. From the perspective of determining the essential features of executive coaching, the question becomes one of whether or not laughter itself is such a feature, one which is necessary in delineating the boundaries of coaching in imaginative variation. In other words, can I imagine executive coaching to be coaching without the presence of laughter? It is here, present in space and time to the experience of these coaching conversations, particularly in respect to Lisa and Zoe's case. However, at the ideal level, that of transcendence, laughter would need to be a generality that is represented in an indefinite plurality of occurrences without which the purpose of coaching will not be met (Zhok 2016). So far, I have suggested that coaching is relational, teleological and conative, and that narrative and sensemaking are essential re-identifiable features of coaching over time. These features have stood up for me in both spatio-temporal terms and in imaginative variation. The issue of laughter is, however, less clear. Laughter can be considered as a continuum as has

occurred with Lisa and Zoe, smiling voice at one end and bellowing at the other. I cannot imagine the relationality of coaching without smiling voice, particularly in respect to the need for a coach to build a trusting relationship with her or his client. However, defining smiling voice as laughter may not satisfy common understandings of what laughter is. Further, that smiling voice is a quality which is subsumed by the more encompassing nature of relationality in executive coaching. Zhok (2016) suggests that, in Husserlian phenomenology, essential features are those which are identity-bestowing in respect to the intentional object. Laughter is not an identity-bestowing feature of executive coaching beyond the extent to which it contributes of relationality. It has been a significant feature of the relationship between Lisa and Zoe. It is not possible, however, to conceive of laughter as an essential, self-evident condition that transcends all instances of executive coaching. In imaginative variation, I have varied it out and therefore do not accept it as an essence of executive coaching.

### **Mindfulness as Essence**

There are two approaches that can be taken to mindfulness practice in executive coaching, one that approaches it as a structured practice which the client learns, and the other as an embodied, experiential process intrinsic to the coaching process itself. This description has leaned to that of systematic, structured practice. This is how it has been introduced in the executive coaching conversation between Lisa and Zoe. It is that structured process which has been adapted for workplaces, and introduced to coaching. In this sense, it is content that is introduced and taught on the initiative of the executive coach. In respect to the question of what is executive coaching, mindfulness as a structured practice is not something that I would suggest is common to executive coaching across all instances, neither at a spatio-temporal level nor as an essential element which would pertain at the level of ideality in phenomenological terms. It is able to be varied out. This is not to make a judgement on its usefulness in workplaces, particularly in its potential for supporting leaders to be less reactive, attuned to their bodily sensations and better equipped to maintain a calm and focused state.

I now turn to the idea of executive coaching itself as intrinsically mindful. A key feature of Lisa and Zoe's coaching session has been the concentration on experiential accounts which Zoe has provided on past events and her handling of them. This is distinctively different to the focus of attention on passing events as they occur in the present moment, which is widely accepted as characteristic of mindfulness. Zoe's accounts are recollective, and, while she has broadly approached them in an open and accepting way, it is not purposive in the intentional way that Kabat-Zinn defines it as wisdom-seeking and sensitivity to the subtleties of passing thoughts and sensations in the moment. Nor does it quite meet Dreyfus's more explicit cognitive account of mindfulness where there is sustained attention to the object in mind. Zoe flits from event to event, caught up in her own narrative in response to the pressures she has been under in a way that is often neither contemplative nor consistently evaluative. Lisa's response has been as collaborative problem-solver, at times offering her own suggestions and at others supporting Zoe's approach, reinforcing principles that have been learnt by Lisa through the executive coaching process. Space has been made for Zoe's narratives to unfold, and Zoe remains generally calm, although there are times when Lisa and Zoe talk over the top of each other as each is eager to make her point. It is difficult then to make a case empirically that this executive coaching session has successfully integrated mindfulness practice into coaching practice. It is therefore also difficult to make a case that coaching is essentially mindful as it has been interpreted in this study. On this basis, mindfulness is again varied out as an essential feature of executive coaching.

Next, I address myself to the relationship between phenomenology and mindfulness. It is possible to relate mindfulness to some of the particularities of Husserl's phenomenology, and some of its derivatives. We can, for example, suggest that mindfulness encompasses aspects of relationality and corporeality, as I have described in my account of linkages between mindfulness and phenomenology. However, relationality and embodiment does not, of necessity, invoke phenomenology. An awareness of arising thoughts is not specifically phenomenological. Husserl's lifeworld is a complex affair, and the deeply ingrained beliefs held at individual and systemic levels influence the validities we bring to phenomenological reflection. This is why



phenomenological reflection is an intricate process of stripping away or identifying those beliefs in unravelling the dynamic between non-theoretical experience of the sort Zoe has narrated, and theoretical inquiry either empirically or philosophically (Aldea 2016). I agree with Tieszen (2016) that the term phenomenology has been often referred to as simply first-person or introspective reports which was not Husserl's philosophical intention, and I note Tieszen's description of phenomenological understanding as concerned with conceptual analysis on the basis of reason. Childs (2007) in particular makes a linkage between mindfulness and phenomenological method, and echoes claims that a rigorous phenomenology requires attention to the arising of thoughts themselves. There may be circumstances where this is so, but it is an inadequate conceptualization of descriptive phenomenology. We can have a thought in phenomenology, but it is then methodically explored. Observing our thoughts is an important principle in mindfulness, but in isolation from methodology, it is not distinctively phenomenological.

Dreyfus's (2011) account of mindfulness as a capacity to hold an object as the focus of sustained attention in a way that is explicitly cognitive, evaluative and retentive perhaps has a more phenomenological quality. His suggestion that this holding ability exists in every person, and can be strengthened by practice has some resonance for coaching. Mindfulness in this sense can be thought of as a general invariant characteristic of executive coaching, resistant therefore to being varied out as ideal possibility. At this ideal level, it would be necessary to show this to be self-evident in executive coaching. In coaching, the client is required to keep self in mind, to be aware and to pay attention to her own way of being in the world and in life, to remember what it is she or he has set as goals or purpose, how this has been unfolding in the coaching sessions and outside, and evaluating that unfolding in such a way that she might achieve clarity and wisdom about what needs to be done to achieve those goals. The evaluative process may engage a mindful awareness of body, feelings, consciousness and conceptual understanding. This requires focused attention and concentration, with the ability to recognize when the mind is wandering and bringing it calmly back to focus. Whilst this does not fully reflect an understanding of mindfulness in the Buddhist tradition, it is one that has general application to

coaching. Mindfulness has an historical trajectory of thousands of years in Eastern philosophy. Dreyfus reminds us that in English, mindfulness has old etymological roots. It originally meant 'of good memory', or also 'recollecting' or 'thoughtful' (Etymology Online 2018). At the level of imaginative variation, it is attractive to include mindfulness principles as understood by Dreyfus and as occurring at different levels of achievement. This has emerged in variation as an idealizing process, originating from the exemplary case of Lisa and Zoe's coaching conversation where mindfulness has been made thematic. Executive coaching may be mindful in the old English sense of the term. That mindfulness as the holding ability described by Dreyfus may be universally identifiable in coaching practice at some level and may have some credibility as a tentative construction of an ideal object in coaching practice. However, Dreyfus does not isolate a holding capacity in his account of mindfulness. It is located in the broader framework of Buddhist philosophy, to which he adheres. To cherry pick those features which might arguably be invariant and suggest that these are indicative of mindfulness as a invariant feature of executive coaching would lack integrity. I was drawn to Dreyfus's account of mindfulness, but I was unable to suggest that it is an invariant feature of executive coaching as ontic universal on the evidence I have. Therefore, I conclude that mindfulness is not an essence of executive coaching.

## **Chapter 7: Leadership Transitions (Beth and Ryan)**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The client In this executive coaching conversation, Ryan, works for a multi-national corporation with a sales orientation, as alluded to in the coaching conversation itself. The coaching session was likely to be about the third in a sequence which would typically be around eight sessions as is usual for the executive coaching provider in this case. The duration of the session was 90 minutes. It is good practice for executive coaching in organizations that coach and client meet with an organizational representative, the sponsor of the coaching, to scope the coaching assignment and clarify expectations. This may be a someone from the Human Resources Department, or someone who is a supervisor of the coaching client. In this case, Ryan, and his executive coach, Beth, have met with his supervisor after the coaching has started. That meeting occurred just prior to the particular coaching session recorded for this study.

As with the first two case examples, the challenge for the client, Ryan, lay in the existential of relationality, the lived self-other. In the relationships that are implicit in this connectedness, the success of organizations ultimately depends on the commitment and wellbeing of all actors in their experiences of leading and being led. It is on his initiative that the organization has agreed to executive coaching. Beth has paraphrased Ryan's overall goal for the coaching as developing 'senior leadership skills including a more collaborative style', hence the characterization of this chapter as one of 'Leadership Transitions'. Ryan has said to Beth, as she reiterated it, that he 'wants to change some of his behaviours'. This included the need for Ryan to effectively set performance standards for and provide constructive feedback to those who report to him. Ryan had two sets of relationships where he needed improvement. One was a peer group leadership team in which Ryan is a colleague equal among others. The other was Ryan's own team, those members who report to him in a line management role. The goals that were agreed between Beth and Ryan appeared to have stemmed from a performance management review that included 360° evaluations (multi-rater

surveys on job performance from a range of co-workers including the supervisor to whom he reports, those whom he supervises and other colleagues).

It appeared that Ryan is a leader who has succeeded on the basis of his ability to deliver outcomes and in his present role he has continued to do so. However, Ryan had come to the realization that if he is to be an effective leader in his current role, his interpersonal relationships within the organization for which he works needed attention. Ryan aspired to higher leadership roles and wanted to become a better leader. He was preparing, as he said, to take 'the next step in a career'. Ryan wanted to put 'the best foot I can forward, rather than the same old me that has been successful up to now'. He wanted to better manage the performance of his team in achieving the outcomes he expected. Ryan also wanted to effectively influence colleagues to support him in shaping the strategic directions of the organization. Beth was focused on Ryan's specific goals and throughout the executive coaching conversation she consistently brought him back to those goals.

## **7.2 Lifeworld Description**

This executive coaching engagement was well established and the coaching relationship appeared to be one of challenge, trust and openness. Laughter occasionally interspersed the serious business at hand. During the conversation, the coach, Beth, asked Ryan if control was important to him. He replied: 'It was before we started having these conversations'. Both laughed. Beth and Ryan had recently met with Ryan's supervisor specifically to discuss his performance and guide the coaching objectives. The supervisor affirmed that Ryan has a lot of 'great' strengths. Ryan had delivered on achieving desired results, his supervisor said, but he had not always achieved those results in the 'right' way. This feedback was a focus of the present coaching session. Ryan had some difficult issues to resolve in respect to his interpersonal relationships in the work place. He at times resisted Beth's persistence in questioning some of his habits and but nonetheless he remained open to receiving direct feedback from Beth, which was challenging at times.

One of the issues raised by Ryan's supervisor was Ryan's use of swearing, which Beth assessed as being 'directly related to our coaching'. It was a surprise to both coach and client, and Beth was focused on addressing the issue of Ryan's swearing. Ryan did not initially recognize its significance. He acknowledged that he uses the F-word with peers, but not with his own team members. Ryan had been using the F-word in response to what he described as work frictions which lead to frustration and anger when he is unable to get his point across. Ryan explained that use of the F-word is part of a culture that comes from the top. However, Beth referred Ryan to notes she had made on the supervisor's comments, including words to the effect that 'in professional organizations that's inappropriate'. She shared with Ryan the perspective 'that educated people don't swear because they've got other, all sorts of other ways of expressing language'. The use of swearing in interactions with peers referred to his participation in a leadership group with eighteen members, of whom there were four with whom Ryan had been clashing. Beth explored this issue with Ryan, establishing that he had been using swear words to get his point across with the small proportion of his colleagues with whom he regularly clashed. She reminded him of the influencing model called 'Meet, Point, Dance' which she had introduced at a previous meeting. The model is a proprietary coaching/ leadership model. It is shorthand for first understanding the position of the other (meet) before sharing one's own agenda (point), and then dancing together between the two positions to arrive at a shared outcome. It is a model that was returned to several times in the coaching session. Beth threw to Ryan the challenge of using that model with the four people with whom he has been clashing when he feels his anger rising. Beth and Ryan agreed that Ryan would do this on at least two occasions with each of the four in the coming days and weeks and to make notes for himself on how useful it is, for discussion at the next executive coaching session.

Ryan had now accepted that the issue of swearing was part of the mosaic of his problematic interpersonal relationships at work. Ryan had come to the personal insight that he must change himself in respect to the way 'he looks, feels, acts, behaves ...' His stated commitment to adopting the 'Meet, Point, Dance' influencing model was part of the broader commitment he had been making to change. Ryan

returned to the need for himself to change at various points in the conversation. Beth suggested that changing is painful at the beginning. Ryan agreed, acknowledging that breaking a habit 'does take a lot'. One of the drivers for this change has been around Ryan's realization of the importance of family, and his role as provider, which may be at stake if he does not achieve his business goals. However, the other drivers for change occupying Ryan included his commitment to improve his current performance, develop his senior leadership skills and take that next step up in his career. Beth and Ryan agreed that altering his patterns of behaviour involves 'a massive mind set change'. Beth re-framed for Ryan what strong leadership is, specifically as seeing situations in a different way. Ryan responded by agreeing that this means 'changing the mindset of yourself basically' and not just looking at a situation from his own perspective.

Beth next steered the conversation to Ryan's management of the individuals in his team, including the need to explain to his team members why a task is important and to ensure there is clarity on performance standards, including time-lines. Ryan described his experience in attempting to implement such an approach since their last coaching session. He had remained very direct in his feedback to his team, but he believed he had been able to frame the feedback he gives individual team members using a more positive approach since the coaching started. Beth asked Ryan to rate himself on delivering a 'positive performance conversation', which he did by rating himself as a six out of ten. When questioned about where he would like to be on that scale, Ryan decided on eight out of ten, a hundred percent of the time. Ryan gave an example of where he had chosen not to take a positive approach to managing a team member who was misusing social media in the workplace. This led Beth to present a cascading set of challenges on what the risk was of continuing to be confrontational with individual team members. Ryan was unable to identify a way in which he could have handled the conversation with his team member differently, so Beth suggested a brainstorming approach to finding different approaches. She showed Ryan that a different approach was to gain an understanding from the team member's own perspective as to what the implications were of his behaviours and how he might change.

Beth delivered a strong critique of Ryan's performance. Ryan recognized that his behaviour was wrong, and declared that he knew it was wrong even before he delivered his criticism of the team member's performance, but he had decided to proceed even though he was aware of its inappropriateness. He described the realisation of not letting his anger prevail as 'coming', and expressed the view that the more he practised a more positive approach, the easier it would become. Beth observed:

Beth: And I think I said earlier that the stages of behaviour are first of all reflecting after the fact. Secondly, the second stage is catching yourself during the act, but still doing it. Of course, the third stage is not doing it.

Ryan: Obvious.

Beth: Yes, so you know that does take time, yeah?

Ryan: I reckon the track is right. It's just how quickly I can move it around. How often can I do these conversations as well in times of knowing, well, that I am going to do something and stop myself from doing those things.

Ryan remarked that he always plays his words in his head before he says something, and that he needed to change the conversations within his head before delivering them as criticism. Beth acknowledged this, but she reiterated her previous advice about what a huge impact it has on other people when they feel they have been truly heard, 'rather than going against the brick wall'. She asked Ryan to think of one of the four people in his leadership group he had nominated to try a different approach with, and to tell her about the strengths of that person, which he did. Beth then asked for the flip side, asking what this person's development opportunities might be. Beth then shifted the focus to the values which the client holds. She suggested that the anger Ryan was experiencing may occur because one of his values is being 'stomped on', to use Beth's words.

Beth elicited a list of values from Ryan by first focusing on occasions that made Ryan particularly happy and then those situations that caused anger or frustration. She suggested a period of reflection on those values, asking Ryan 'in the evening with a glass of wine,' to review those values to see if he wanted to make any changes. Beth requested that if he made any changes to drop her an email. She explained the importance of attending to values, reiterating that some of the clashes Ryan had been experiencing with colleagues may be related to the different values they potentially hold. Beth offered encouragement to Ryan, reassuring him that he is making progress and noting that changing is painful at the beginning. Ryan expressed his belief that he had been changing 'lots of things' in a short span of time, acknowledging that it was going to take a lot more effort.

A discussion on time frames for making an impact in a leadership role followed. This merged into an enthusiastic exchange between Beth and Ryan on a political figure that both admired, and how that figure had changed himself in order to transition to a very senior leadership role, while adhering to his core values. The need for collaboration in a leadership role was highlighted, as well as the possibility that a 'leopard may change his spots.' There was agreement between coach and client that what works towards success in one career role may not apply in another.

Beth and Ryan moved to a conversation around a team effectiveness approach, the Drama Triangle, which had been introduced to Ryan by a colleague in another city who had participated in training on the approach, with the suggestion that the team of which Ryan is a member might like to introduce it. Beth suggested that Ryan make notes about when he catches himself in the Drama Triangle<sup>6</sup>. Ryan agreed, commenting that he understood what the model was all about and its personal relevance, so that his realisation of its impact was coming through slowly. Beth

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<sup>6</sup> The Drama Triangle is a model developed by psychologist Dr Stephen Karpman in the 1960s to describe the interplay of dysfunctional behaviour in that individuals habitually adopt the role of victim, persecutor or rescuer when emotionally triggered. Playing out those roles is seen as toxic. Individuals are encouraged to recognise when they are lapsing into those roles and to stop themselves from playing them out (Berry 2015).



reinforced the principle that the concept may be great, but it is actually the doing it that is important.

There was discussion on a conference that Ryan would be (reluctantly) attending in Europe. Beth asked whether there were useful actions Ryan could take at the conference that might impact on what the coaching session had focused on. Ryan replied that he intended to keep a low profile, saying he disliked the limelight at global events. Beth suggested that it may be a good opportunity to identify a mentor who might, for example, help with the skills side of the Ryan's performance where some of issues for improvement identified by his supervisor had included more industry knowledge, more financial acumen and more attention to detail. Ryan identified a previous boss in the same company who would be able to take a mentoring role, and said he would think it over before having a conversation with his current supervisor and potentially the previous boss.

Beth finalised the session by making a distinction between a mentor and a coach. Mentors, she said, are useful for their organizational knowledge, and their ability to provide another perspective that would support the development path which Ryan is now on. Her job, Beth said, was just to ask challenging questions for Ryan to think about.

Emerging from the empirical experiencing of this coaching conversation, I identified three themes:

Habit

Emotion

Values

### **7.3 Theme 1: Habit**

Ryan's habit of swearing has become serious enough for his supervisor to raise it directly with him and his coach. In executive coaching, there is limited reference made

to habits in the literature, that being from a psychology perspective (Skiffington & Zeus 2003; Wasylyshyn 2014). In learning, recent literature suggests we may pay attention to the need for developing good habits say of writing well or even sometimes about learning to learn (Heft & Scharff 2017; Quardir & Chen, 2015; Warwick, Macray & Board 2017). Adult learning from a transformational learning perspective speaks of habits of mind, the set assumptions we make through which we make sense of our experiences (Mezirow 2012). Mezirow explains how these habits of mind might distort our meaning perspectives and therefore not serve us well in respect to critical reflection and learning (Kreber 2012). The account which follows opens up a phenomenological perspective. I make some general observations about the challenges Ryan faces in confronting his habits. I introduce Merleau-Ponty's (2012) concept of the 'plasticity of habits' and Weiss's (2008) emphasis on ordinary experience as the sphere of forming habit. My description of the interaction between Beth and Ryan related to this phenomenological perspective, building that perspective with reference to Husserl's account of habituality, and the permeability between the passive and active creation of meanings. My identification of habit as a theme relates to an ongoing process of learning and growth. Ryan recognized the need for change, but an initial reluctance is found in his concern that he may not achieve business outcomes if he makes those changes. I use Howell's temporal account of learning (2015) to help describe and understand the challenges that Ryan is facing in changing his habits with the promise of yet-to-be-realized benefits.

Habits, good and bad, are behaviours which form a substantial part of daily life. There are perils in clinging to old habits, and promise in forming new ones (Weiss 2008). Habits play a powerful role in shaping and reinforcing the behaviours of people and organizations, but there are also the opportunities that exist in what Merleau-Ponty calls the plasticity of habits (Merleau-Ponty 2012). Weiss (2008) says that for Merleau-Ponty, habits can be moulded and re-moulded. Habits can be changed and re-shaped in new ways, to adapt to our emerging concerns in the world as our horizons of understanding broaden, diversify and transform. Habits relieve us of the cognitive, affective and physical load of having to adapt to activities and challenges anew each time we encounter the routines of our existence (Grosz 2013).

Habits do not always serve us well. Ryan's reliance on swearing and confrontation with others has emerged as a threat to his career aspirations. Organizations are in transition. The corporate command and control organizational habits of centuries are being transformed by the realization that competitive advantage is enhanced when employees feel respected and valued. The value of collaborative work practices has evolved with the increasing complexity of both internal organizational environments and the environments in which they operate. There is an acknowledgement that individuals alone do not hold all the keys to success. Effective team work is critically important and positive and productive relationships are a key to leadership success (Chiniara & Bentein 2018; Gottfredson & Aguinis 2016; Lyubovnikova, Legood, Turner & Mamkouka 2017).

Ryan's record of delivering results through his own effort and drive has served him well in the past, but he has been confronted with the reality that the complex and uncertain world of contemporary times demands effective team work, even though accountabilities in organizations largely still rest with individuals. Ryan realized that he needed to change his management style if he is to meet his career goals in taking the next step up. His past experiences and the meanings he has weaved into his present leadership role no longer serve him well in respect to his aspirations. The sedimented horizons of his ordinary experience, those layers of meaning or perception in consciousness that have been laid down historically, needed to be understood and re-constituted to lay a new conceptual framework for leadership in the future. This meant addressing those habits that are inappropriate to a senior management role.

Weiss (2008) points to the different perspective that Merleau-Ponty applies to an understanding of habit, one that makes the bodily dimensions of habit a foundation. Merleau-Ponty shows that the body is the site for the cultivation of habit. Habit, Merleau-Ponty says 'expresses our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 4402/16103). Our habits can either enlarge or diminish the options we have for acting in the world. Habits, for Merleau-Ponty, are embodied structures of behaviour

attaching a person to the world. It is in dynamic interaction in relationship with the world that new meanings are formed. Thus it is that narrative accounts of the past can open up the cognitive, affective and embodied space for future action that is potentially more adaptive. This, for Weiss (2008) is habit that is formed at the concrete, material level of ordinary experience through openness to alterity – the otherness ‘that is always present within inter-corporeal existence’ (Weiss, p. 1281/3631). It is the openness to the other and that which is different or unfamiliar that transforms meaning. Coaching provides the opportunity to engage in those narrative accounts through making sense of habits and evaluating whether or not they contribute to the goals clients adopt, both in respect to achievement of workplace aspirations and in how they want to be perceived as principled people in the world.

Ryan has remained tentatively open to the otherness that is potentially available to him in the dialogic relationship with his coach, and also in his engagement with his colleagues. He recognized that if he is to achieve his goals of developing as a leader and enhancing his influencing skills he has behaviours that need to change. As part of the matrix of behaviours Ryan needed to change, the inappropriateness of his swearing has been made an issue by his supervisor and now his coach, although it is not the only habit that is a limit to his leadership aspirations. Swearing was a habit that Ryan had developed over the past six or more years. It had served him well in gaining attention when he was making a point at meetings or in dialogue with colleagues. It was economical in the sense that it represented a short cut to gaining that attention, and in this sense it has had utility. Now, it was time to appropriate fresh instruments, to follow Merleau-Ponty. Beth’s role, however, was first to help Ryan to see that the swearing habit was impacting negatively on his relationships in the work place. She framed the swearing as being directly related to the coaching engagement. Ryan initially resisted, concerned that he will not be able to make an impact without swearing. Beth asked him what the swearing is all about:

Ryan: I don’t know. I think it’s more around, I usually don’t swear when I know I don’t have to. It’s like, mainly, if I do feel passionately about something, I do throw in some words. Usually only the F-word, but

nothing detrimental to anyone personally as such. I don't use any other abusive words. It's only the F-word that comes out, and when it does come out, it is really, it really does come out very often in a conversation...

It is passionate feeling which has emerged as an issue for Ryan. Ryan initially defended his habit of swearing, presenting to his coach narrative accounts of when and why he has resorted to swearing. He expressed a belief that his use of the F-word gained attention from others in driving for the business outcomes to which he is committed. It was mainly used in peer leadership team meetings when he was defending his perspective on what needs to be done to achieve results. It had been economical, reducing the cognitive, affective and physical load that Grosz (2013) describes, although in Ryan's case, it is the affective load that has led to the swearing. In respect to his own team, Ryan said he did not use the F-word and nor did he use it at home. He claimed that swearing is not uncommon in the organization, even at a very senior level. He also explained that it is only since his previous role in the construction industry that he picked up the habit. It is a habit he also uses at times in anger or passion. Only now that direct feedback has been provided to him has he been giving it some thought.

Beth challenged Ryan's apparent complacency:

Beth: I don't know if you heard the message that (supervisor) was giving you around that. I think, in fact, I wrote down, some of those words, around in professional organizations, that's inappropriate. ... I understand you get angry, you need some way of expressing that. What could you say instead of that, because it's having a bigger impact than you realize.

It was a direct message from both the Ryan's supervisor and Beth that he needed to change what both coach and supervisor perceive as inappropriate behaviour in a leadership role. Beth impressed on Ryan that there is challenge in changing his behaviour:

Beth: I was going to say it's a simple fix, which is not true. Because once you've got into a behavioural pattern it's not a simple fix, but if you could focus on that it will have a bigger impact than you realize, as part of what you want to do, you know, around influencing people, taking people with you, that's just not a leader (to swear).

Beth was enlarging Ryan's horizon of what success in the workplace looks like from a leadership perspective, supporting Ryan to change what swearing means in respect to a leadership role. Ryan wanted to become a better leader, but his passionate commitment to outcomes or even his success in achieving them is not an adequate conceptualization of what leadership is. The problematizing of swearing by both the client's supervisor and now his coach has created a tension between two competing routes, the automatic, embodied route of the old habituated, or the reasoned, future-oriented choice to become a better leader. It required that Ryan re-frame swearing; in other words, to change the story he constructed around it. He needed to reinvent himself as a different kind of leader, one who is not limited by the meanings he has typically adopted in his conceptualization of the role. It represented in phenomenological terms a shift in focus from the marginal awareness in what Husserl refers to as passively given content to an active intentional process of forming new meaning (Pulkinen 2013). That passivity is not easily overcome because much of it is operating before conscious attention and it is therefore inaccessible to reason. It is where our taken-for-granted intuitions point us as we operate at the tacit level of know-how, saving us from having to actively reinvent our familiar meanings over and over again.

Meanings are always in a process of active 'contamination' through enrichments from the lifeworld (Pulkinen 2013, p. 137), incrementally and in association with pre-given meaning. In other words, without our being aware of it, incremental changes are made to that marginally passive content. It is that contamination to the sphere of marginal awareness and Ryan's recognition that something is holding back his leadership aspirations which now has his attention. According to Pulkinen's

Husserlian account we also have available to us the second mode of constituting the meaning of experience. Active modes of consciousness are an explicit turning of attention with the active engagement of the ego. Here we find the higher forms of meaning-making acts of 'axiological, practical and theoretical reason, and predicative thinking' (Pulkinen 2013, p. 129), the operation of practical reason. The challenge for coaching, particularly for Ryan, is to overcome passivity with approaches that engage values, achieve results and are consistent with a contemporary praxis of leadership. Ryan's predicative thinking required him to re-define what good leadership is. The behavioural goal for Ryan was to change a habit and stop swearing. As a goal it had immediacy. The longer term goal was to become an effective senior leader. It is the longer term goal which will have helped to shape the new stories Ryan constructs about his own way of becoming an effective leader in the corporate world.

In respect to his immediate goal of relinquishing swearing, specifically the use of the 'F-word', Ryan's passivity was expressed as ambivalence. He was concerned that he would not get the output he desires if he relinquished swearing and therefore failed to make an impact. Ryan says:

Our Chairman swears left, right .... Our CEO who is a lady, she swears left, right and centre. A lot of the people in the organization from the top, when you have meetings with them there's all kinds of words thrown into the meetings. I'm not saying it's the right thing to do, but I just don't know. I want to give it up, but I just don't know whether, how that then gels with the workplace.

Ryan was conflicted, caught in a dilemma between what is right and what he perceived to be a prevalent part of workplace culture. However, ambiguity is always with us. In respect to perspective taking, Merleau-Ponty says that ambiguity is the definition of the imperfections of consciousness and existence (Weiss 2008). Despite the ambivalence that Ryan had expressed about swearing, Ryan made a choice. He agreed that he would have to think of other ways of getting his point across, with impact. As indicated above, it emerged that there are just four people in his peer leadership group that were more difficult to influence, and with whom it he might have been

using the F-word. It was at this point Beth suggested the use of the influencing model, 'Meet, Point, Dance', one that she had introduced to Ryan in a previous coaching conversation. This model is re-presented as a substitute behaviour to be adopted instead of the swearing, one which he would need to introduce at an early point when Ryan sensed he was getting into a 'combative situation', signalled by his embodied sense of becoming angry. Beth compared the challenge in changing his habit of swearing as being comparable to going on a diet, which co-incidentally, Ryan was now on. Ryan responded:

... I had to make a massive mind set change to go away from what I used to eat, to go to salads, which I've hated all my life, just because I had in my mind that I need to change myself – the way I look, feel, act, behave, and in my health as well.

Beth directed this comment back to the executive coaching goals, the core issue being around developing senior leadership skills, including a more collaborative style and improving peer relationships. She located the use of the F-word in this context. It was at this point Ryan committed to use of the 'Meet, Point, Dance' influencing model, agreeing to practise it at least eight times with the specific peer group members with whom he has difficulties. The approach Beth used in changing this habit was to locate it in a larger motivational framework of what it means for his goal of becoming a senior leader, and to gain a commitment from Ryan to immediate specific actions which substitute for the habit of swearing. This has highlighted the practice aspect of active change in meaning through action, that is in the doing, not just the thinking or evaluating.

Whilst the scientific literature paints a picture of habits as being non-reflective, automatic and difficult to change (Neal, Wood & Quinn 2006; Webb, Sheeran & Luszczynska 2009; Wood & Runger 2016), a phenomenological perspective is more optimistic. Phenomenologically, Brockelman (2002) describes, at a broad level, the place of habit in the ongoing process of personal learning and growth. This learning and growth requires change to both immediate behavioural habits and habitual



attitudes toward life. In respect to changing habitual attitudes, these are described by Brockelman as hermeneutics, interpretive understandings, new ways of grasping meaning in temporal structures of creating re-imagined stories of self and behaviour. This, says Brockelman, requires 'taking time out for the always difficult and sometimes frightening process of transcending what we have been to take on new behaviours and ways of being' (Brockelman 2002, p. 235). Ryan was apprehensive that by not using swearing to drive home his arguments, he would not get the business outcomes he is striving for and would be dissatisfied with himself. Beth asked him what was at risk if he felt dissatisfied, and he responded that he would 'get very edgy and itchy'. Ryan expressed his belief that if he is not achieving his business outcomes, he may leave his job, and ultimately he would not be able support his family. From his perspective, the stakes were high.

I mean, if I lose everything ... if I don't have a job then I get back to family life ...  
That's what drives me all the time.

Beth worked with Ryan to build a compelling case for changing his habit of swearing, and also the aggressive way he handles performance feedback to his staff. Coaching has provided the time and space to Ryan for exploring and articulating what his new behaviours might be and why change is necessary. It has provided the opportunity for reconstructing a new story about being a different sort of leader, one that requires that Ryan change his aggressive and confrontational habits of the past.

Howell (2015) refers to Husserl's temporal account of the immediate perceptual past not as a neutral record of what has been experienced, but also as a meaningful claim that is open to being transformed. Drawing on Husserl, Howell also affirms the positive opportunities that exist in a phenomenological account of habit formation and change. Just as habits can close off some avenues of experience, they open up others where they become meaningful to the individual. According to Howell (2015), while habit contributes to various dimensions of behaviour, it cannot determine the future dimensions that may become available. In temporal terms, the significance of a habit can only be recognized in retrospect. Ryan was making sense of the meaning of the

habit of swearing with the growing realization it is one of a number of changes he was required to make for future success. Howell suggests that in this process of learning, the commitment to the task occurs before we are fully in a position to recognize what the implications of that learning may be. Beth has gained that commitment to task from Ryan. It will be at their next coaching session that the learning implications will be explored.

Beth supported Ryan to identify other options and, specifically, actions he could substitute for his current behaviours and actions which will deliver on the successful achievement of the work outcomes to which he is committed. This required of Ryan an openness to learning, and openness to something other than what his past patterns of behaviour may seem to pre-determine. With this comes tension between how the meaning of swearing has been construed by Ryan as contributing to his success, and the openness to re-assessing that meaning as relevant to his aspiration to hold a more senior leadership role. What is at stake in failing to learn anew has been made clear to Ryan in the course of the conversation with Beth, and has provided strong motivation for change. Not only has the motivation been established, an alternative and potentially more effective strategy for improving the influencing ability of Ryan has been identified through specific action strategies such as adopting the 'Meet, Point, Dance' model of seeking to authentically understand others. These strategies could then be experimented with and Ryan's next coaching session would provide the opportunity to describe his experimentation in substituting old habits for new ones and implementing new strategies for working with his colleagues.

#### **7.4 Theme 2: Emotions**

There is a view that in workplaces emotions are seen as inherently maladaptive and unwelcome, therefore needing to be controlled by rational thought (Wasylyshyn & Masterpasqua 2018). It has been shown in my account of habit that Ryan had been alerted to the problem that his habit of swearing was perceived to be inconsistent with a senior leadership role. He has been swearing when his goal of achieving his work-related outcomes was threatened by others who take a different view to his on the

way forward. That perception of threat evoked a strong emotional reaction in Ryan. He became angry. This theme explores the nature of emotion phenomenologically and the recent emergence of 'emotional intelligence' as a desirable attribute in leaders. Phenomenology takes a nuanced position on emotion, one in which emotion is part of a meaning-making process which is both bodily and cognitive. Ryan's anger was embodied and overwhelming in the moment. It impacted on his relations with his colleagues and his subordinates. His executive coach, Beth, has worked with him to manage those emotions and implement more positive alternatives in negotiating desired outcomes.

Ryan revealed that he swears 'mainly if I do feel passionately about something'. Beth asked him about anger and he described his as 'split second anger'. She suggested the swearing and the anger that precipitates it were having a bigger impact than Ryan realized, especially in respect of his coaching goals around influencing people and taking people with him. She was specific in saying to him that his is a behavioural pattern that 'is just not a leader'. It was a theme to which Beth returned, highlighting the concerns which Ryan's supervisor raised as requiring attention:

Beth: Then he (supervisor) said the other thing – knowing when to take things off the line, which is the emotional intelligence stuff ...

Ryan: Yep

Beth: ...Yeah, he (supervisor) said, how you do things, getting things done the right way. So you get things done but not always the right way.

Ryan: Dead bodies

Beth: Yeah, you know, you're working on that.

Ryan's metaphorical reference to 'dead bodies' characterized his determination to achieve the results he wanted in meeting business goals with all the tools available to him, positive and negative. The pace in the organization was fast, 'very hectic, as usual,' in Ryan's terms. The decisions he makes, he said, are not one-dollar decisions. They are millions of dollars of decisions. Ryan had been taking an aggressive approach

to his work and his fear was that he would lose getting the output he demands if he backed off. He recognized, however, that he needed to change his behaviour, without retreating from his business goals. He said:

That's where my improvement right now still lies. To say, rather than say I'm going to crush you or throw so hard. What else could I have used at that point of time.

These representations of his behaviour, the dead bodies, the crushing, were Ryan's own constructions, making meaning of his behaviour. Ryan's own diagnosis reflected his growing realization that allowing his emotions free rein was not just placing his leadership aspirations in jeopardy but was disrespectful and unproductive. Ryan said: 'I want to change all those things from my side, from the personal side.' It is an initial step toward the principle that he should not be treating people as objects. Ryan affirmed, 'objectifying is not the exercise, understanding is'. However, while Ryan has said it is the realization that is slowly coming through, Beth reminded him that he actually has to do it, that is not treat people as objects. Anger, impatience and the passion of his own convictions and determination to deliver results had been permeating Ryan's dealings with colleagues, where there is a lot of 'work friction', as he described it, in respect to directions that people want to take the business. This was also spilling into relationships with those for whom he is responsible in his management line. These emotions are sign-posts to the strong principles and values which Ryan has been bringing to his role.

A phenomenological perspective is that all emotions are experiences. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the mind is embodied, and that mental life includes emotions as modes of engaging with the world (Romdenh-Romluc 2014). To feel in a certain way about something is to perceive it in such a way, as became apparent in how Ryan's perceptions and emotions were linked. Husserl characterizes the lived body as 'a localization field for sensations and for stirrings of feelings' (Johnstone 2012, p. 183). Ryan experienced his anger as a flame:

Ryan: ... my anger is a split second anger. If I am angry, it's only for less than thirty seconds. I come back very quickly

Beth: Yep, yep.

Ryan If in those thirty seconds, someone inflames it, then the flame goes through.

Ryan has been experiencing his anger as embodied in a short but intense localisation of feeling. In describing an example, Ryan said of a conversation with a colleague:

Ryan: Right now, we don't need to be aligning with this one because if we try to align here, either you have to come from where you are or I have to step away from where I am. We need to have a common place. I'm not ready to move and you're not ready to move, let's just back off.

Beth: Okay.

Ryan: But he kept on talking and there were a few F-words thrown in by me and by him and then he walked off. After ten minutes, we again had the conversation, right.

Beth: Okay, then.

Ryan: I got over it.

Beth: Calmed down?

Ryan: Yes.

Phenomenologically, at its most basic, emotional experience has intentional content, just as all acts of consciousness do. Emotional experience is consciousness of a situation and the bodily experience of that situation is represented by a feeling (Cochrane 2017). In Husserl's characterization of emotion, intentionality is turned to one's own experiencing body and the sensing of feeling as it unfolds (Johnstone 2012). Those feelings arise when attention is turned to an object, and fade when attention shifts elsewhere. In an intentional act, the elicitor of the feeling is hence viewed as the object of that feeling, but the unfolding of experience extends beyond what is present sensuously. Emotion has meaning and it has an implicit purpose, that is 'to better understand an aspect of the world experienced first as an involuntary pull on our

attention that then feeds into a cognitive investigation of its relevance' (Cochrane 2017, p. 187). Ryan feels the pull on his emotions and he has cognitively assessed the situation as intractable in the moment outlined above. That first pull of emotions engages beliefs, but these are likely to be in what Husserl describes as pre-predicative judgements or what Johnstone (2012, p. 189) describes as 'non-symbolic cognition', that which is not represented by words, images or gestures. In other words, we may not be consciously aware of how our beliefs relate to the feeling as it first emerges. Husserl pointed out that feeling can be experienced at two levels, the living, where one is immersed in the feeling without judgement, and the other reflective, where the feeling continues but there is also a change of attitude which evaluates the experience and attributes meaning to it (Johnstone 2012). It is in the reflective attitude that the feeling is espoused or explicitly known, such as the judgement 'I am angry', as was relevant to Ryan's experience. This is a form of judgement, with emotions seen as providing evaluations of how the intentional object has meaning for us, in Ryan's case as a threat (Maiese 2011).

Maiese (2011) argues that emotion is complex, capturing elements of affect, motives, behaviour and cognition. She proposes that an essential factor in emotion is desire, engaging the matter of the purposes and goals about which we care, following Heidegger. For Maiese, the bodily attunement of care is what anchors us in the world and makes the objects and situations we encounter understandable because they matter to us in some way. What has been apparent from Ryan's angry outbursts is that he cares about achieving business results. This care reflects a practical involvement in the world and the totality of things by which Heidegger's Dasein, the being of the human being, is concerned about, her very being and temporality (Dastur 2014). This involvement in the world is a teleological background, an orientation towards an action in order to achieve one's purposes or goals (Maiese 2011). Hence in experiencing emotion, an essential factor is conscious desire as implicit in teleological directedness. In capturing the elements of both feeling and cognition, Maiese proposes, the embodied intentionality of emotion is infused with feeling, and this affective infusion determines the cognitive focus of emotions. In this entwining of body and 'brain', emotion is characterized as a sensemaking activity of the situated

organism. Maiese (2011, p. 83) calls this 'affective framing, the integrative process of interpreting ourselves in terms of embodied desiderative feelings,' relating, feeling, thinking and willing in that sensemaking activity. Maiese goes further to propose that 'all cognitive processes presuppose the capacity, at some basic level, for affective framing' (p. 85). Ryan's emotional response to barriers encountered to the achievement of his business goals contains all the sensemaking elements that contribute to affective framing. He felt a perceived threat viscerally and judged someone else's position as antithetical to business objectives and his desire to maximize business results, which is important to the longer term life goals which reflect his values. These values will be discussed in the following section. An understanding that emotions are implicated in the judgements and the interpretations that he has been bringing to bear on those judgements may help Ryan better manage his emotions.

Beth has raised the issue of 'emotional intelligence stuff' as encapsulating the challenges that Ryan was facing in wanting to become a more collaborative leader. This 'stuff' has become popular in the general press and in coaching following the initial conceptualization of emotional intelligence by Mayer and Salovey in 1990 (Peltier 2010). Peltier notes that it was popularised by Daniel Goleman in his book 'Emotional Intelligence', published in 1995. Peltier (p. 217) says that the refined definition of emotional intelligence published by Mayer, Salovey and Caruso in 2004 evolved into:

the capacity to reason about emotions, and of emotions to enhance thinking. It includes the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth.

This psychological approach is not inconsistent with the phenomenology of emotions introduced by Husserl and interpreted in the on-going work of understanding emotions from the phenomenological perspective. Ryan has started on this journey,

only now learning to reflectively identify and regulate emotions to facilitate his own growth as a leader. He has been working on the task of providing more constructive feedback to his staff in managing performance expectations. He described his usual conversations as always having been very aggressive, but he has been having different kinds of conversations following his previous coaching sessions. However, he recognized that he still had some way to go as he still reacted inappropriately in conversations, despite his reasoned understanding that he should change his approach:

Ryan: But, I knew what I was going to say and I still said it. ... I knew I could stop myself, but I chose not to ...

Beth: Yes

Ryan: Which I should not have

As this conversation shows Ryan did not lack a capacity for self-awareness or an appreciation of what he needs to do. His challenge was to regulate his emotions by identifying them as they emerge, and then to manage and channel them in a more productive way. In setting performance standards for a member of staff who has been using Facebook in the office, Ryan reported to Beth:

I mean it wasn't abusive of, or anything. It was more as 'if I see you using your phone for face book the next time when I'm sitting in the desk, I will just take your phone and throw you and the phone out of the office essentially', but not in the same language.

Beth challenged him, referring back to a previous conversation:

Beth: The, one of the things you said in our last meeting, the management meeting, was that somebody told you that you have the attention span of a two-year old?

Ryan: Goldfish.



Beth: The statement of smashing your phone, it's like spitting the dummy like a two year old, so it's ...

Ryan: It's ... yes.

Beth: Do you agree with what I just said?

Ryan: Yeah, of course, I mean ...

Beth: The observation, yeah?

Ryan: Throwing a tantrum essentially.

Beth: Yep.

Ryan: Yeah, as I said, I realize it was wrong... This time before saying it, I knew it was wrong, so I guess the realization is coming. It's just the more I practise it, the more I do it, the more easily I can sort of over-ride that thing.

This conversation highlighted the magnitude of the problem Ryan has had with his emotions. Beth used the accounts Ryan had introduced himself in respect to his attention span, and confronted him with a powerful observation on the childish way his emotions were expressed. Beth has encouraged Ryan to identify his internal emotional states and to evaluate them. She impressed on him the need to not only self-reflect but to acknowledge his emotions and develop some perspective around them. She provided Ryan with alternative approaches to providing feedback to his team member on his inappropriate use of Facebook in work time. Beth advocated for a shift of the locus of control away from Ryan and on to his team member. This could be achieved, she suggested, by encouraging that staff member to recognize for himself that personal Facebook use in the office is unacceptable. This can be achieved through a questioning process that enables the employee to reflect on and evaluate her/his own behaviour. Ryan acknowledged that there is a first pull of emotions in the way he has handled the situation, but he was still immersed in the emotion of the moment, reflecting his belief that his outcomes must be achieved. He briefly shifted to a reflective position but was unable to resist his emotion as it engaged his pre-reflective and enduring belief that achievement of his goals is paramount. The feeling continued and overtook any evaluation that might lead him to change course in order to have more constructive conversations. As said above, he chose not to stop. Emotion

trumped reflection, notwithstanding that Ryan recognized the need to change his behaviours through practice.

Anger can have both positive and negative impacts. At an ethical level, it can drive necessary change, such as in a social justice situation. However, when experienced as intra-personal anger, that is making decisions while angry, or interpersonal anger in a negotiation situation, anger threatens success in respect to both joint and individual outcomes (Jager, Loschelder & Friese 2017). For Ryan, his anger has had the short-term benefit of achieving results. It is the longer term impact on his career prospects where an inability to manage his emotions is likely to be negative. Furthermore, the anger that Ryan has been experiencing with colleagues and staff members is likely to impair cognition (Kligyte et al. 2013) and reduce his negotiating effectiveness. The extent of the problem lay in Ryan's descriptions of his anger as 'split second', or when he gets 'riled up, usually everything from the woodwork will start to come out very quickly'. Beth asked where in the body did Ryan feel it when he was getting angry.

Ryan: Heart beat rises.

Beth: A bit?

Ryan: Yeah. You can see everything going up, but as I said, it lasts only thirty seconds. But thirty seconds would give me pumping in my mouth.

Beth: Pumping in your mouth, a heartbeat pumping in our mouth, yeah?

Ryan: Yeah, that's right, and then I just flood out.

Beth: Yep, okay, so as soon as you start feeling this, start being curious, and so the first step there is active listening. So, repeating in some manner that whatever they've said. Okay. I understand. Let me make sure I understand that and ask a question around their position, rather than –

Ryan: Making my position straight away.

Beth: Yeah, like, really, truly understand their position. This won't work unless you're authentic about it. So it's really being curious about that

...

These split second reactions provided both problem and opportunity for Ryan. The fast and intense onset of strong emotions left little space for cognitive appraisal, that is the opportunity to alter interpretations or assess the situation from different perspectives (Klygyte et al. 2013). However, they also provided a potential strong, felt warning signal that danger may lie ahead. Silsbee (2008) describes that signal as somatic awareness, sensations which provide 'rich and direct information about how our conditioned habits are arising within our bodies' (p. 157). Beth has provided Ryan with suggested, immediate strategies for changing course. The cognitive appraisal Beth had been working toward involves an if/then strategy, that is, 'if situation X arises, then I will do Y' (Jager, Loschelder & Frieze 2017, p.32). If he feels these bodily sensations, then Ryan needs to introduce the 'Meet, Point Dance' practice as described in this chapter. Beth advocated that Ryan attempt to truly and authentically understand the situation from the perspective of the person who is triggering his anger.

In summary, Johnstone (2012) described how in the case of anger a surge of energy is felt with a sensation of bodily tightness that includes an impulse to act, one which is readily enacted with violence in what has become a habit-ruled response to achieve a particular aim. The bodily felt anger felt by Ryan has been shown. That emotional experiencing is phenomenologically intentional. The subject has engaged with an object and determined a meaning which is laden with emotional content that incorporates specific and distinct elements. These elements might include a cognition or a desire, or more likely a combination of both (Maiese 2011). Montague (2009) takes the position that emotions are learned, logical and intelligent, and that like any other judgements they entail presuppositions and relations that reflect any number of beliefs. Similar to affective framing, Montague describes this as affective content, content that is evaluative in respect to whether it is intrinsically good or bad. In respect to that evaluative content, Ryan has been assessing the opinions of others as a threat to the beliefs he holds about the way forward for himself and the organization. It is an evaluation that could be explored and evaluated when a client in executive coaching presents with an emotionally charged perspective. However, in this case, the evidence was sufficient for Beth to support Ryan to use his anger as a signal to hear,

understand and potentially re-evaluate the meanings he ascribes to his protagonists in the 'Meet, Point, Dance' process. It was a strategy that would enable Ryan to assess the appropriateness of his anger in the moment, given the circumstances and the additional information to which he may have access to as he seeks to understand the perspective of others. The evaluative content may not initially change with that first surge of anger, but at least the anger may have dissipated sufficiently for Ryan to proceed with a more respectful conversation.

Executive coaches need to pay attention to both ways of experiencing, the cognitive and the emotional, as they work with clients whose emotional experiences become salient in coaching. Bodily feeling, as distinct from emotions, may be non-cognitive and non-intentional, but the somatic component of feeling is integrated with the intentionality of experience and merits attention. In attending to the environments of our experience and the threats that are presented we learn habitual patterns of bodily responses. They are adaptive responses that may have served us well at some point, but when emotions overwhelm us, they may become maladaptive, as anger has become for Ryan in this case. Different adaptive responses need to be explored, practised and learned. MacLaren (2011) argues that we must become responsible for our emotions as enactments of judgement. Perhaps the first step on the journey was that Ryan had now realized that his anger response may have become a potential threat to his career aspirations. The competing priorities he then faced represent not just the imperative of getting the job done, but of getting it done the right way, as his coach has pointed out to him.

### **7.5 Theme 3: Values**

In this section, I establish why values were a theme for Beth's and Ryan's executive coaching session. I follow this with a description of this executive coaching case as the ground for further phenomenological exploration. I draw upon a phenomenological perspective of what values are thought to be, relating them to this study by drawing particularly from Husserl and Ricoeur. Husserl views values as a dimension of being, but one which is concealed from itself, becoming accessible only when emotional acts

reveal them through cognition and their relationship to ethics (Laurukhin 2015). Similarly, Ricoeur (2016) suggests that values lie in the involuntary of identity. Values can be made to appear reflexively as the possible motives for a decision and actions to be taken. In this respect, Ricoeur invokes the reflexive responsibility that is essential to motivation and will to action in a practical mediation between body and mind. The insights of Husserl and Ricoeur relate directly to Aristotle's enduring account of ethics and what constitutes excellence, that is what is the 'good' in any particular situation. Ricoeur (2016, p. 206) suggests that that it is the task of moral philosophy 'to elaborate an explicit typology of the implicit values' that contribute to standards of excellence as the immanent goods of a practice, such as leadership, and it is this that leads to a virtue ethics. It is important, nonetheless, to note that values and ethics are distinct from each other, values being concerned with theories of good or value on the one hand, and ethics establishing what kinds of action are right or wrong (Rinofner-Kreidl 2014).

Beth has reminded Ryan of feedback from his supervisor when they met to discuss Ryan's coaching objectives; that is, he gets results but not in the right way. The need to get things done the right way suggested a lack of alignment between Ryan's values and the ethical standards of behaviour which pertain to the business environment in which he has been working, notwithstanding that other people in that organization do use what has been suggested to Ryan as inappropriate language. My phenomenologically based exploration of values relates values to the principles of practical reason and recognizing what is 'good'. Ryan's determination to succeed even over 'dead bodies' demanded an investigation of what is important to him. The importance of values as a theme in this case has been established by Beth because, as she explained to him, Ryan's values are likely to be implicated in his outbursts of anger. More broadly, they may be implicated in the behaviours he has manifested in relation to the treatment of his co-workers and the aggressive approach taken to the performance management of members of his own team.

Values are seen by some as a central issue in coaching and are said to be 'in vogue' (Stelter 2016, p. 331). The on-line Oxford English Dictionary defines values as

‘principles or standards of behaviour; one’s judgement of what is important in life’ (pages not numbered). Values, however, are normatively related to ethics and morality, and intertwined as these concepts are, we cannot assume that values are by definition, ‘good’ in all circumstances or that we all share the same values or even ethics. Ethics are the moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an activity (Oxford English Dictionary). Morals are concerned with the principles of right and wrong behaviour (Oxford English Dictionary). Our own personal values may account for the meaning we attribute to the term ‘values’ and therefore people have different understandings of what is meant by the term.

In his phenomenological account of values, Husserl describes them in a broad sense as being engaged with ethical, affective and volitional thought in the context of Aristotle’s concept of practical reason, the reflection on what action to take as ‘good’ (Laurukhin 2015). Our beliefs stand as the foundation to the intertwining activities of logical reasoning and axiological reasoning, that is the sphere of values which is to be found in the acts of feeling that we assign to objects or events as we perceive and judge them, often without the active engagement of our conscious thinking (Moran & Cohen 2012). To thinking and valuing is added a third which is will, the intent of the acting person and the motivation to take particular actions in the world. Husserl suggests that once we have convinced ourselves that something is valuable, we will not question whether or not that holds (Laurukhin 2015). This muteness of evaluation, its embodiment, is also encompassed by Ricoeur (2016) in his phenomenological description of reflexive aspects of the will. If axiological reasoning is to contribute to the concept of practical reasoning, it is important that our values be explicit. It is the muteness of values that Ryan’s coach has introduced, bringing them to awareness in an explicit dialogue about those values.

In this executive coaching example, Beth invited Ryan to consider his values in order to help him understand and deal with his leadership challenges, specifically why he reacts so angrily in some situations with his colleagues. This was a process of values clarification that needed to be spread out over several coaching sessions and what has been seen here is the beginning of a process. Ryan had no difficulty in identifying what

his values are: honesty and integrity, achievement/outcomes, creativity, variety and decisiveness, with impatience as a 'negative'. Beth has framed a challenge for Ryan when she summarized some of the themes of the 'Meet, Point, Dance' model she has introduced him to.

Beth: Some of the key themes. I'll just reiterate, which is treating people as objects rather than as people. That they're irrelevant, it's just getting the thing done rather than seeing them as people. Don't meet them as equals whether it's inferior or superior, it doesn't matter which way. Justify your own bad behaviour by blaming others. You just did that this morning ...

Ryan: Yeah, that's exactly the same.

Ricoeur (2016, p. 207) refers to the ethical evaluation of actions as an obligation to the other, insisting on the Kantian imperative to 'act always in such a manner that you treat the humanity of yourself and of the person of others not simply as a means but as an end itself'. Beth delivered a dispassionate and forceful critique of Ryan's behaviour which reflected that imperative. Ryan accepted the picture that was painted by Beth. Beth and Ryan acknowledged that he had developed some unhelpful habits in relation to how he responds to others with whom he interacts angrily or dismissively when he becomes frustrated with their views or behaviours. Ryan placed a high value on 'robustness' in his conversations. In this respect, he valued a vigorous exchange of views on how the organization should proceed in meeting the business goals that he has a responsibility for. Similarly, his feedback to his own team members was direct and uncompromising as exemplified by the account he gave in this coaching session of a conversation with one of them:

Ryan: ..that means it needs to get done, you need to get yourself in a space that if I am sending you something to get done, then it needs to get done. I don't care whether you work twenty-four hours to get it done, but it needs to get done. If you can't, let me know straight away that you can't do it. I have had a conversation with him and said a few

things to him to get his thinking straight. I have to say, I don't like the way you work ...

Ryan's account of how he provided feedback to his team members revealed insights into some of the values Ryan may hold in respect to his interpersonal relationships. He believes himself to be achievement oriented, direct and honest, but has not yet been able to see how these values might shape his conversations with some of his colleagues and team members in a way that others may perceive as harsh or even unethical. Beth has suggested to Ryan that he may be reacting with anger and frustration when one of his core values is 'being stomped on'. Another advantage, Beth suggested, may be that identifying his core values would be helpful in respect to decision-making, allowing him to assess how he may be approaching a dilemma.

Beth: The second reason we establish values is that when you are at a decision point, whether you go right or left, and if one road stomps on your values and the other road doesn't, you may still choose to go down the road that stomps on your values, but it will take a lot more of you. Emotionally, physically, in all respects, it will take something out of you, out of your core.

Beth has provided cogent arguments for exploring Ryan's values. Personal values are specific to the fundamental principles and standards which individuals hold as their own guides for thinking, feeling, behaving or making choices across time and situation, consciously or unconsciously (Woodward & Shaffakat 2016). They may or may not have moral force. However, it is clear that values and ethics are implicated with each other. Our values reflect how we respond to others. Ryan's values needed to be made explicit to him because they have consequences both for him and for the colleagues and team members with whom he interacts. It is important in coaching to engage a client in the existential task of developing self-awareness and taking responsibility for herself, her actions and for others. It is this existential responsibility which shifts attention 'away from managerialist and often ego-centric assumptions to the notion of leadership as moral responsibility and ethical choices' (Cunliffe 2009, p.23), where our



moral selves embrace the ethical intention of living a good life with others. This requires reflexivity focused on self-understanding as integral to effective leadership, a bending back process of critical reflection as self-interpretation on actions taken, which an executive coach can facilitate. Critical reflexivity requires that our assumptions be challenged and re-evaluated. Values may lie at the heart of those assumptions. It is the principle of living a good life with others that provides an impetus to the critique made by Beth of Ryan's values, treating people as objects.

The first insight into the challenge that Ryan had in front of him in developing effective leadership skills came within moments of the coaching conversation starting when Ryan and Beth reviewed the performance feedback they had received from Ryan's supervisor. Ryan explained to Beth that his supervisor gives him direct feedback in their interactions, but it has always been associated with the work and its impact on business, not with his personal development needs. In respect to the concerns raised about his 'conduct', specifically his swearing, Ryan attributed this to the system: 'it's the system that has been given to me that has been given to me these last twelve months'. Ryan's first reaction was to deflect the criticisms away from himself. The reflexive claiming of responsibility as advocated by Cunliffe (2009) was not Ryan's immediate reaction. He went on to blame the situation for his swearing: 'in the office I've got a lot of deliverables and pressure to get things done.' In a similar vein, Ryan related that he had told his supervisor 'as a boss, you would need to step into these situations as well ... you need to help sometimes, to calm down these situations'. Ryan said that he can stop using the F-word, 'but unfortunately, I'm not the only one that uses it, and then it becomes more of a retaliation'. Beth responded by saying that she understood. She went on to say 'so you can't influence what other people use. It's, you've got to decide whether this is an object of yours to try and give it up in the workplace, to become a better leader.'

Beth confronted Ryan with the existential challenge of becoming responsible for himself. Ryan initially responded affirmatively, but then shifted blame to the culture of the organization. Beth handled this by introducing some practical steps Ryan could take to control his swearing, consistent with his coaching goal to improve his

influencing skills. He agreed to these practical steps, and took responsibility. He said 'it's not what I can influence with them, but the exercise is to change myself, so...'. This was a step towards taking responsibility and it was important that Ryan recognized that he needed to change himself. Exploring his values was another essential step in achieving that self-understanding and taking responsibility for his actions.

Beth's was a pragmatic introduction to inviting Ryan to explore his values, relating them to Ryan's anger and therefore his work aspirations. The process Beth suggested was one of both her and the client throwing out some ideas, starting with identifying situations which made him 'particularly happy, joyful, really feeling great about yourself'. From this emerged the first value Ryan identified, without hesitation – achievement. He described how, as part of a small team that worked together well with 'robust conversations', they came into alignment on how to respond to the difficult problem they were dealing with. A value emerging from this was identified by Ryan as creativity. What he held as core, however, was outcomes. He then introduced integrity:

One of the things I can tell you. The thing that I kind of pride myself on in the kind of role that I have, is integrity. That's a core... Everything I do is documented and everyone can have a discussion with anyone ... everything is above board. We have to sign all these things in any case, but even signing off, I don't care because, for me, you do something wrong once and then you lose everything that you have. Those two things (integrity and honesty) are the core to me.

Integrity and honesty are found in the virtue ethics developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) as ingredients in the virtue of courage. Here, integrity is described as an internal sense that one is a morally coherent being. Integrity can be found in situations and circumstances in the choice to do the right thing, even if it is difficult. What is the right thing becomes problematic in the context of Ryan's 'dead bodies'. A person of integrity will privately and publicly be true to themselves in representing

their intentions and commitments accurately, representing—privately and publicly—their internal states, intentions and commitments (Peterson & Seligman 2004). Ryan does this, but at the expense of his interpersonal relationships and the perception that he gets results, but not in the right way. Persons with integrity accept and take responsibility for their feelings and behaviours, owning them as it were, and potentially reaping substantial benefits for so doing (Peterson & Seligman 2004). However, as shown above, Ryan was slow to take responsibility. In phenomenological terms, this taking of responsibility for self reflects an existential choice as articulated by Ricoeur (2016), one in which a moral agent exercises freedom of choice in creating meaning and value in the world (Drummond 2015), including the way in which they present themselves to the world. However, for Ricoeur, that choice requires a ‘good’ that is found in self-esteem and is reflected in standards of excellence as articulated by Aristotle, but particularly in the extent to which one is ‘for others’ (Ricoeur 2016, p. 227). Ryan showed himself to be committed to the high standards he sets for himself to achieve results, but the extent to which he is for others is to be found in the leadership capabilities he is seeking to develop.

Beth pressed Ryan to identify some of his weaknesses, asking him what people at work or home would identify them as. He responded with the value of impatience as a negative. He said ‘Yeah, I just can’t just sit and do nothing for a period of time. I like to have something happening ...’ The action orientation which Ryan demonstrates may come at the expense of time spent in reflection. Executive coaching has allowed him to take time out for reflection and for reflexivity.

This was a first attempt at establishing Ryan’s values, and Beth asked him to reflect on the values he has identified over the coming weeks to confirm or revise them, at home ‘with a glass of wine,’ particularly reflecting on what he cannot live without. It will only be after that process of reflection that Beth will have explored those values in more depth with Ryan. However, from this initial inventory, there were issues that stood out. The first is that none of the values that Ryan had identified thus far related directly to an appreciation of or concern for others. In an account of Aristotelean virtues and what constitutes being a ‘good’ person, Annas (2015) identified human

qualities such as consideration, compassion and generosity. Ryan has focused on values that might be described as more analytical and self-oriented, centring around his achievement orientation. The absence of what Annas (2015) describes as human qualities in Ryan's values was unsurprising in consideration of the goals that have been set for his coaching. His leadership challenges were to be found in the need for Ryan to improve his interpersonal skills of influencing others and acting with greater 'emotional intelligence' in managing people. It was also consistent with research that business oriented environments attract individuals with a strong values orientation to achievement (Schwartz et al. 2012). Further, in the Schwartz model, achievement is found on the opposite pole to benevolence, care for others.

Beth suggested to Ryan that when he senses his anger rising, he could bring the list of his values to mind. Ryan replied that it would take a bit more time for him to be able to identify 'which one is getting poked at what point'. He did say, however, that in respect to integrity and honesty, he will know straight away. Beth counselled him that it may be more complex:

Beth: ... let's take honesty. Some people would be dishonest not for the sake of stealing or anything like that, but they might be dishonest to protect someone. They might be dishonest to get a promotion because the promotion is more important.

Ryan: Than honesty, OK.

Aristotle's golden mean teaches that excellence is not to be found slavishly at either ends of an extreme, a concept to be explored further in following paragraphs.

Understanding values is more than self-awareness of what the values are that are held. They influence how we act in the world, our motivation or volition to behave as we do. Ryan's value of honesty, for example, is unreflectively adhered to without having thought through the implications of being uncompromisingly honest. Before this exploration of his values, Beth has explained to Ryan why it is important to try to authentically understand someone else's perspective. He responded that 'it's really

hard to do that' and explained with an example of his anger when he believed the other party had behaved in an inauthentic way:

Ryan: So, that's my way of trying to understand what they are doing. When people start staging stuff for me, it's like, it's like that's not what you normally do and you need to show what you normally do. That's what sort of gets me riled up really quickly.

Beth: Yes, well, they're being false in that regard.

Ryan: Whenever I get riled up usually everything from the woodwork will start to come out very quickly ...

Now that Ryan's values had been made explicit, it was possible to look back and see that one of his values, honesty, a core for him, had been infringed. Honesty is a value which many of us would appreciate, but Ryan was not reasoning it through. Beth has taken a step towards helping Ryan gain a deeper perspective on his values as being both a strength, but also a disadvantage when rigidly held as an inviolable and unreflective call to action. Values are deeply implicated with our feelings and motives (Ricoeur 2016), and, as has been shown, Ryan has not been managing his feelings of anger well. What has become evident in the exploration of his values is that Ryan is strongly attached to his achievement value. His anger with colleagues and his own team members can be located in the threat they pose to the fulfilment of that value. Ryan wanted to achieve his outcomes and he does not want to be deflected or impeded in any way. It is a value which over-rides what many might think of 'good' leadership. The supervening value, or absolute value, as Husserl describes it, lies in finding the best 'good' available through the will and act of reason in practice. This requires practical wisdom, the harnessing of all the virtues in a rational deliberation, including a rational desire for the human good (Gronroos 2015).

The highest good is said by Aristotle to be desirable for itself, not desirable for the sake of some other good, and all other goods are desirable for that highest good (Kraut 2016). Practical reason, or prudence, is what Aristotle proposed as wisdom in action, where motivation is found in the 'golden mean' between two extremes. This is not an

arithmetic mean. It is a thoughtful analysis of the situation. Strong feelings, such as Ryan's anger, may be appropriate in one situation, but in another only a small degree of anger may be appropriate. None of the passions, according to Aristotle, should reach the point at which they undermine reason (Kraut 2016). Ryan's angry responses when he gets 'riled up' were arguably not reasonable. The virtues do not provide a set of rules which can be applied as part of a decision procedure. Virtue is found in excellence, that which individuals aspire to when they are at their very best, representing a universal and stable standard of the good (Cameron 2011). What is good in each situation requires deliberation, the application of practical reason. For Aristotle, the good person is someone who is good at deliberation (Kraut 2016). However, where practical reasoning implies that there is a goal to be accomplished, it is virtue which makes a goal the right one.

Ryan identified decisiveness as one of his values. Ryan said 'I don't evaluate my decisions' in the making. However, he added, later, 'I look back and then see if it was right or wrong. If it is leading towards the wrong decision then it's my job to make it right.' His impatience is reflected in this commitment to decisiveness, which in respect to business outcomes seems to have worked well for him. Ryan makes good business decisions without a great deal of deliberative effort, according to his own account. He will take responsibility to make them right if it is later shown to be necessary. However, as a value, the impatient will to achievement of outcomes with its lack of deliberative effort was playing out poorly in respect to Ryan's leadership in practice and in respect to his potential as a senior leader.

As introduced previously, Cunliffe (2009) advocates for leadership as a turning to moral responsibility and ethical responsibility. As noted in the introduction to this account of values, Ricoeur (2016) describes a phenomenology of the will, or volition as Husserl describes it. He suggests that we can bring the involuntary (the body) into consciousness through motives for willing, reflexively claiming responsibility for ourselves in an active relation of the self to the self. Ricoeur (2016) suggests that values are implicit in motivation, the will to act, and that these values should be made to appear to us in the reciprocal relationship between the involuntary of values and

the voluntary of deliberative effort. It is in that reflexive relation we claim for ourselves the freedom to choose to do what is right as a voluntary and responsible agent. This has been a challenge for Ryan. Despite his decisiveness in making business decisions, the impatience and the apparent constraints on deliberative reflection play against Ryan's need to carve out time for self-reflection. Husserl's principle of absolute value, the requirement that in any action a subject will choose the best from all the good things available in a particular situation, requires a will and commitment to act reasonably (Laurukhin 2015). This was a challenge for Ryan as Beth highlighted in her reference to treating people as objects. Late in the coaching conversation, in discussing the leadership of a prominent Australian, Ryan described how that person had put some of his beliefs on 'the backburner'. He went on to say:

... to achieve something you have to give up something now, and put the runs on the board and get it later on. Because then you have the authority and control you need to get things done your way.

In respect to critical reflexivity, Ryan's assumptions about what good leadership is have persisted, unchanged at this point. He reflected on what other things he 'needs to give up, short-term maybe or not ...'. Ryan had not yet come to the full realization that collaboration is the way to get things done. This does not mean he has to give up who he is, his core values. In practical reasoning, he needs to locate those values in the framework of a broader sense of the good. Beth has moved Ryan closer to the principles of the Kantian imperative (not treating other people as a means to an end, as objects in Beth's terms) in emphasizing collaboration and authentic understanding. In Ryan's case, the self-same dialectic in the involuntary of values is opposed to his voluntary willed goal of becoming a better leader. That is, his focus on outcomes and his impatience in achieving them is in a creative tension with his goal of becoming a better leader. Beth has suggested to Ryan that when he becomes angry he should attempt to identify which of his values is being challenged, but also to implement a course of action which is an alternative to his habituated responses. Ricoeur (2016) suggests that it is in action that the practical mediation between values and volition occurs. It is in this process that change occurs through reflexive judgement, the

expression of human freedom in making voluntary adjustments and commitments. Change becomes an act of the will.

## **7.6 Phenomenological Reasoning - What is Executive Coaching?**

In reviewing the preceding two chapters with a particular focus on each of the general discussion on 'what is executive coaching', I refer to the 'Mates at Work' chapter and my account or narrative identity. Here it was found that the phenomena of habits, values and emotions are incorporated into Ricoeur's involuntary qualities of sameness that constitute the self as identity. Phenomenological description concerns itself with parts and wholes, and each of these chapters provides parts to what will be a whole in respect to the question of what executive coaching is. In respect to parts and wholes, habits, values and emotions are fundamental parts of narrative identity, which I have suggested is an essence in executive coaching. Ricoeur (2016, p. 62) says 'there is no phenomenology of the purely involuntary, but rather a reciprocity between the voluntary and the involuntary' which is found in an expression of will, the decision to take action as a human voluntary intention. This is a dualism, potentially a struggle between the corporeal involuntary life and the voluntary of self-consciousness and decision.

In executive coaching it is important that this dualism is understood, even if it is not precisely framed in the terms Ricoeur uses in his accounts of the voluntary and involuntary. He suggests that it is of the essence of the act of willing that, through motives, values appear and it is of the essence of values that they form the possible motives for a decision. Emotion affects action with a shock, or a spontaneity that is 'risky for mastery of oneself' (Ricoeur 2016, p. 65). It may have unintended consequences. Similarly habit is a force, one which is an automatism. All have power, yet in their embodied form they remain largely opaque to consciousness, notwithstanding that they have the potential to either facilitate or sabotage the will to action as volitional choice. The importance of this to executive coaching cannot be over-estimated as that power is implicated in the decisions clients make and the actions they take. The question then comes to one of essence, and whether the



involuntary, in particular the phenomena of habit, emotion and values, is an ontic, object-determining universal (Sowa 2014), an identity bestowing feature of coaching.

At an implicit level, the involuntary and its existential embodiment is transcendent to human experience and therefore to the executive coaching experience. I have said that narrative identity is an essence in executive coaching, and it is here that the tensions or the reciprocity between sameness and self are played out. However, it I turn my attention specifically to the phenomena of habits, emotion and values, the picture is less clear. Habit is not a phenomenon that has been well explicated in coaching, receiving little direct attention as a topic in the academic literature on coaching, notwithstanding that there is a wide body of work on habit in psychology, particularly in respect to health management. Yet in acts of willing and in habits of mind, in changes in behaviour and creation of meanings, habit is ubiquitous. Executive coaching ought to be concerned about habit but is it able to be varied out in imaginative variation as an essence? When I focus and reflect on coaching as ideal object, I find it difficult to vary out the idea of habit, even though in the spatio-temporal world it receives little explicit attention in the executive coaching literature. On the other hand, it is difficult to think of habit as an identity bestowing feature of coaching even though it is subsumed in the larger phenomenon of narrative identity. In propositional terms, in respect to what executive coaching is, it is not specifically a 'habit'; rather habit is something which is brought to coaching, both by client and coach. Habit inserts itself into coaching implicitly, whether in respect to behavioural or developmental change, as facilitation or as obstacle. The same reflection applies to emotion and values, which cannot be varied out of coaching but may not be definitive of it.

To put it another way, these phenomena are intrinsic to the underlying dynamics of executive coaching as phenomenological objects that are able to be explored in issues with which coaching concerns itself. However, executive coaching may not be reducible to them except to the extent that coaching is about learning to be more skilled, more capable, and more self-aware and reflexive. It therefore raises the principle of parts and wholes, where learning and development may represent the

whole and habit, values and emotions represent parts of the whole. In respect to learning and behaviour change, it becomes apparent that habit, values and emotions represent the parts of the rich mosaic of experiential phenomenology, of our being in the world. They become properties or instances of the whole person, the narrative of identity, that which Husserl refers to as the 'I-myself' with all its knowledge of concrete life (Husserl 1970, p. 98). That 'I-myself' suggests a reflexivity on those parts, a knowledge of self that encompasses a consciousness of its being through its own cognitive structures of bringing that self fully to awareness. Further, I have found narrative identity, the whole of the self, including the voluntary and the involuntary, to be an essential part of coaching. That involuntary becomes constitutive of coaching, thus making habit, values and emotion parts of the whole. On my reasoning, habit, values and emotion would not each stand by itself as an identity constituting universal phenomenon of coaching, but as relational parts of learning and identity, they form important elements of that identity. It still leaves the problem of what is called for in phenomenology as the structural makeup of an object, that is its meaning (Overenget 1996). As pieces, habit, values and emotions are parts of the composite, the whole of executive coaching and Husserl established that parts can sometimes be missing. They nonetheless make up the constitutive moments of the whole, a sense of togetherness.

When we think of coaching, we do not rush to see habit, values and emotions as integral characteristics that come immediately to mind. They are not part of the fusion of relations in that they do not intuitively represent the intentional object as that which gives it meaning. However, it is precisely the role of phenomenology to go beyond the pre-established meanings of objects, to reflect on the essence of the object, reason it through and examine that object through imaginative variation. In this case, I proceed from my experience of this particular executive coaching conversation, my broader experience of coaching, and from the phenomenology of Ricoeur in varying the involuntary of character, that is inclusive of habit, values and emotions, as constitutive parts of that involuntary. I have found it difficult to vary out these themes but at the same time it requires a broader approach to a foundational meaning that describes what executive coaching is. However, the problem crystallizes in a consideration of the embodiment of values, emotions and habits and their power

in respect to how we make meaning of experience and turn to new ways of creating the reimagined stories of self and behaviour which are intrinsic to executive coaching as a vehicle for learning and development. Surfacing the involuntary is essential to the critical reflexivity that challenges client assumptions and leads to their re-evaluation through levels of greater self-understanding and self-responsibility, and with that understanding, enhanced capacities for acting in the world and achieving goals. In this respect values, emotions and habits become intrinsic to the whole, giving a more holistic account to the meaning of executive coaching and are therefore essential to it. These are an executive essence of coaching in respect to the whole self that a client brings to coaching.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

In this study, I sought to address the lack of consensus on what executive coaching is as reflected in the professional and research literature. In this chapter, I restate my research problem and its rationale, and then review my selection of Husserl's phenomenology as a methodology for investigating this problem. I provide a summary of findings with a focus of the Husserlian approach to practical reasoning which addresses both what something is found to be and what it should be (Loidolt 2009) (See appendix 7, page 265). This summary is organized around the essences of executive coaching as I found them to be from my descriptive account, applying Husserl's construct of essences (Husserl 1970). The contribution to knowledge of each of the findings is suggested. I conclude this summary of findings with a broad statement of what I have found executive coaching to be, based on those findings. A summary table is provided on page 266. I acknowledge and outline the limitations of the study in respect to a research study in general terms, as well as with respect to critiques of phenomenology's commitment to the concept of stable essences in post structural discourses.

In my final conclusion of this chapter, I evaluate what I have achieved. I address one of the principal issues that characterizes the competing discourses in executive coaching in respect to the polarities of a goal orientation with a behavioural focus or that of the facilitation of organic growth. It is in Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative identity and his articulation of the self-same dialectic (Ricoeur 1994, 2016) that I find particular promise for the integration of those competing discourses as an original contribution to knowledge in the research of executive coaching as a work-related practice.

#### **The research problem**

In Chapter 2, I established how executive coaching has emerged in recent decades as a widespread practice which supports leaders and managers, or those aspiring to such

roles, in a personalised approach to improving their effectiveness in the workplace. Leadership development is a top priority for organizations (Day & Dragoni 2015). Purchasers of executive coaching have identified leadership development as a clear purpose of executive coaching (Ciporen 2013; Underhill et al 2013). However, there is no consensus on what executive coaching is, or on how it should be defined. Nor had I been able to identify any contemporary research studies which addressed themselves specifically to the question of what executive coaching is or how it might be defined, although many integrate their ideas of what it is as part of broader discussions. The purpose of the study was to address this problem of the lack of definitional clarity by describing and reflectively exploring the phenomenon of executive coaching as it takes place between an externally contracted coach and a coaching client who wishes to improve his/her work performance or working environment in some way.

As I argued in Chapter 1, the absence of a consensus on what executive coaching is appeared to be a problem from a number of perspectives. Firstly, research activity is focussed on whatever researchers define coaching to be, not always making a distinction between executive coaching and other forms of coaching, such as life coaching. Thus, greater clarity on what executive coaching is may support better alignment and focus on what it is that is being investigated in research efforts. Secondly, purchasers of coaching would benefit from definitions of executive coaching which help shape expectations of what is likely to be achieved from its adoption. Thirdly, member-based organizations of coaching aspire for coaching generally to become a profession. To the extent that this aspiration is achievable or even desirable, a clear understanding of what executive coaching is would provide a foundation in advocating for professional status. In the absence of an agreement on what executive coaching is, it falls to individual coaches or to coaching providers to develop their own definitions and descriptions of what can be expected from an executive coaching intervention in representing themselves to potential purchasers of their services.

With the emergence of executive coaching as a discrete practice in the 1980's, the discipline of psychology became increasingly prominent in practice and in the

formation of a knowledge base specific to coaching. My own training as a coach was in the discipline of psychology, but I have a teaching background and extensive leadership experience. As my own practice grew, I became increasingly aware that executive coaching could not be fully accounted for in the psychological paradigm. This was the motivation of seeking to explore the issue of what executive coaching is from the different perspectives, including adult learning and philosophy, particularly that of phenomenology. As this study progressed, I articulated what became apparent to me as two competing discourses on what coaching is and which I have described as learning or development. At the learning pole is executive coaching as a practical, goal-oriented activity related to performance and action directly related to the workplace. At the other end is a counselling process of goal-free personal development which facilitates the organic growth of an individual separate to learning and indirectly related to the workplace. These were not proposed as research questions but rather as emergent conceptualisations reflecting the diverse views of what executive coaching is.

A significant problem for researching executive coaching is its confidential nature. The coach and client are in a relationship where trust is engendered by a confidence on the part of the client that disclosures are not shared outside that relationship. It is a relationship in which the client is able to freely express any vulnerabilities or personal challenges without fear of information being passed on to the employer or negative judgments made about attitudes and behaviours. Accessing that confidential space is difficult and coaching research generally has tended to rely on the self reports of coach and/or client, and in a small number of cases, reports of the supervisors or employees with whom the client works. A distinctive feature of my study is that it went directly to executive coaching practice; as I explained in Chapter Four, my research design afforded access to that confidential space by the medium of a recording made by the coach of a coaching session with an executive client. By going directly to executive coaching conversations concerned with workplace issues and engaging with a broader set of social and ethical implications, my study was also able to address a call for executive coaching research to be more contextually relevant (Athanasopoulou and Dopson 2018).

## **The Research Approach**

I selected phenomenology as a research approach because it is specifically concerned with identifying what a phenomenon is. In Chapter Four, where I reviewed phenomenological approaches in research, I argued my decision to adopt descriptive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology remains close to the original methodology articulated by Husserl (1970), in particular the meaning domain of essence, that which 'necessarily belongs to the nature of something as the very kind of thing it is' (Moran 2005, p. 443/8010). Descriptive phenomenology incorporates a generative phenomenology which may include the broader environment in which phenomena come to be understood. Generative phenomenology complements but does not substitute for how that meaning is constructed in a rigorous process of reflection and reasoning.

There is also an ethical call in the phenomenology of Husserl. While he appeals for an absolute rationality, Husserl frames phenomenology as a philosophy with a full, living sense of all humanity in a striving for the common good (Miettinen 2013). This invokes a social ontology which contextualises coaching in the workplace and the broader community in which organizations operate.

The finding of essences was a response to the research problem which brought a rigour and focus to my undertaking, as well as integrity to descriptive phenomenology as articulated by Husserl. I adopted the method of zigzagging, alternating between the reasoned approach of identifying essences in executive coaching and my experiential accounts of the lifeworld of executive coaching. This zigzagging approach included generative phenomenology with its socio-cultural considerations in the broader intersubjectively constructed understandings of a phenomenon. The phenomenological method led to the identification of themes and then essences that otherwise I would not have contemplated and took me on unexpected journeys of discovery which have challenged some of my own presuppositions about executive coaching but confirmed others.

## 8.2 What is Executive Coaching?

### Summary of key findings

In turning now to the research findings, I adopt Husserl's approach to practical reasoning. Practical reason is the mutual entwinement of cognition and ethics, judgement that something 'is so' and volition, 'something should be so' (Laurukhin 2015, p. 135). That entwinement finds its resolution in the ethical imperative to do the best that is available, an act of willing to achieve the 'highest practical good' (Loidolt 2009, p. 54). Logical analysis is not displaced, but it is in the lifeworld that the ultimate source of evidence for the judgements that are formed through that analysis is found. In this study, I have woven together the logical and the empirical. I established themes which derived directly from an experiential immersion in the authentic executive coaching conversations collected from real life. I sought to describe those themes in a way that integrated insights from the foundation of lived experience through a practical orientation, but one which drew on the wisdom of phenomenology, directly and indirectly. As a generative phenomenology, the findings reflect my broad engagement with the literature which has been a constitutive part of the study.

From these themes and their descriptions, I identified five essences which contribute to the 'whatness' of executive coaching. I have found executive coaching to be:

1. relational, a partnership between executive coach and client,
2. teleological,
3. identity constructing,
4. a sensemaking activity, and
5. embodied in respect to what Ricoeur (1994, 2016) refers to as the involuntary of character.

The embodiment of values, emotions and habits I established as parts of the whole in constituting the involuntary and found in identity. Transcendentally, these essences



are the conditions of possibility that constitute the practice of executive coaching. What I have found to be distinctive about executive coaching is that it is located in a particular context, the world of work with its performative expectations, to which clients bring their whole selves in a complex dynamic between person and role, thus integrating learning and development. In this respect, coaching is a type of learning, and development a becoming function of that learning from which growth emerges.

I turn now to the essences identified in my study to reflect on my insights, drawing from Husserl's account of practical reason. In drawing on these insights, I demonstrate how the study contributes to knowledge.

### **8.2.1 The Executive Coaching Relationship**

In this study, relationship between executive coach and client emerged as a key determinative factor in the ontology of executive coaching. In practical terms, the importance of the coaching relationship is well established as the crucible for the client's learning and development journey. This study affirmed that principle. It is a phenomenological principle that intersubjectivity is an essence of the experiencing ego as a relational being. Executive coaching is a time-constrained mission which demands a certain intimacy, a communicative intertwinement (Zahavi 2014) where trust in the coach needs to be quickly established and sustained. That trust and a collaborative approach to the learning tasks of the client was demonstrated in this study. My study has shown that the client is respected as an autonomous, self-determining individual, the decision maker and ultimately the agent of his/her own learning and development in or related to the workplace. However, what Husserl's phenomenology shows us is that there is a difference in mutuality, and that difference is shown in these case studies as a facilitative feature in the dynamic learning that emerges dialogically in the interactions between executive coach and client.

The recognition of difference in mutuality and the emergence of tensions and struggles in interactions is consistent with adult learning perspectives in the accounts of Kolb (2015) and Mezirow (2000, 2012), and those based on Bakhtin's dialogics (Bakhtin

1986). Moments of tension and struggle occurred in these executive coaching conversations. In my first executive coaching example, the client, Adam, struggled in confronting the challenges of building his personal and corporate relationships<sup>232</sup> and forging a different relationship with himself. In the second example, the client Zoe's calmness and apparent powerlessness belied her struggle in not being able to find solutions to better support her staff. In the third case, the client Ryan's ambivalence towards changing his behaviours led to his executive coach, Beth, to confront him directly with the inappropriateness of those behaviours. The executive coaches in this study persisted with conversations that reflected differing perspectives which brought challenge to each of the conversations, as well as personal support.

My literature review demonstrated that many of the principles and practices of Carl Roger's (1951) client-centred approach have been applied to executive coaching. In my study, I have acknowledged the relevance of those principles. However, my case studies suggest that Rogerian principles as outlined in my literature review may inform rather than define the executive coaching relationship, all coaches in this study bringing advice and new knowledge to in guiding their clients. The executive coaching partnerships in this study emerged as ones of high challenge and high support. High support in the coaching relationship is essential, with trust and confidence in the self-efficacy of the client as a pre-condition to what is sometimes a tough task of achieving positive change. High challenge occurs when the coach pushes at the edge of client assumptions, beliefs and behaviours in facilitating new perspectives and learning. As a collaborative partner in the coaching relationship, the coach brings to the relationship the facilitative use of her own self-domain, her own being, knowing, doing and feeling, within the framework of the professional learning relationship. The executive coaches in this study demonstrated those facilitative qualities, which included offering advice on possible courses of action as they accessed their own knowledge and perspectives on leadership and the development of productive work relationships.

In the application of Roger's principles as they underpin the therapeutic relationship and as applied to executive coaching, there is a view that the coach brings no particular expertise relevant to the leadership practices of an executive (Western

2017). From the Rogerian perspective, it is an accepted principle that the client has all the resources she needs to find the solutions to workplace challenges drawing from her own experience and insights alone. This is reflected, for example, in the International Coach Federation's coach credentialing processes. My study challenges that principle. Clients in this study were encouraged by their executive coaches to explore and identify their own solutions to the challenges they faced. However, it was clear in the executive coaching examples which this study has described that coaches brought their own knowledge of leadership practice to the coaching conversation. They challenged their clients to see and learn afresh when they struggled to identify their own solutions to change or work-related issues or to recognise their own self-limiting assumptions. This was transparently so in the particular case of the coach Beth and her client Ryan, where Ryan acknowledged the 'dead bodies' in the wake of his leadership style. Beth was explicit in suggesting different ways of achieving the results he values so highly at a personal and professional level. It was ethically important that she do so in supporting Ryan to treat people more respectfully and develop as a leader. It was also ethical in the sense that Beth brought to the relationship her own knowledge and, arguably, it would not have been helpful to Ryan if she had declined to contribute that knowledge. Her interventions were ones of high challenge. It was apparent that Ryan had come to trust Beth. This case study has shown how presenting challenges in a trusting relationship built on mutual respect, does not jeopardise the relationship when handled tactfully and shaped through appropriate questioning, observations, suggested options and high support. It does not threaten client autonomy when self-determination remains a foundational principle on which the executive coaching relationship rests. The client needs to carry what decisions are made into the world of work and its broader context. Without those decisions being made authentically and with commitment by the client, they risk not being implemented, nor sustained over time.

In exploring the concept of relationship in executive coaching evaluatively, I have questioned an understanding of that relationship which is exclusively based on Roger's client-centred therapy. I refer now to my account of ethics in coaching, and in particular Day's (2010) observation that the competencies of developing empathy,

trust and rapport in executive coaching have been at the cost of 'edgy' conversations which challenge the client and introduce constructive tension into the coaching relationship. Specific to executive coaching I referred to how Western (2012, 2017) advocates for an ethical approach to coaching in pursuit of which coaches offer their own thoughts and insights from a larger perspective focussed on the common good. Furthermore, Western suggested that executive coaches should have a broad knowledge of organizational and leadership theory and practice so as to shift the ethical role of coaching from being a neutral sounding board to that of active change agent with an ethical stance. Drawing from the broader literature on leadership development, I introduced Cunliffe's (2016, 2009, 2004) use of critical reflexive practice as an 'unsettling' of assumptions in supporting leaders to become moral practitioners with an ethical responsibility for the world around them. Cunliffe (2016, p. 741), speaks of her earlier definition of critically reflexive practice as thinking through 'the impact of assumptions, values and actions on others'. The executive coaches in this study were not neutral sounding boards.

The evidence from the executive coaching conversations in this study has been that these coaches did bring themselves as a whole person authentically to those conversations. Each coach demonstrated an ethic of care and brought to their executive coaching a values perspective where human relationships in the workplace become not just a means to leadership success but an end in themselves. They introduced their own knowledge as potential new learnings which 'unsettle' (Cunliffe 2004, p. 407), but which make sense to their respective clients. The coach Luke challenged his client Adam to search for his own 'loving spirit' and find that spirit in others. The coach Lisa persistently reinforced an ethic of care as she called her client Zoe to account in her handling of the difficulties her team leaders were experiencing in implementing a new organizational structure. In their coach-client relationship, Beth directly confronted Ryan and offered suggestions on how he might achieve his objectives in a way which is more respectful of people.

What this phenomenological study has shown is that the effective executive coaching relationship is characterized by skilful balancing of challenge and support. However,

what it takes from the person-centred principles of Carl Rogers is that an executive coach has a deep commitment to human-centred values and belief in the human capacity for positive change. It is the dynamic between high challenge with its potential tensions and high support with humanistic caring that characterized the coaching relationships in this study. High challenge is a driver of learning which can bring tension and struggle into the executive coaching conversation, an ethical obligation of coaches to do the best that is available following the principles of practical reason.

A strength of my research has been its use of philosophical insights into the nature of relationships in my descriptions and interpretative analysis. Difference in mutuality is part of a relational existential. This study has shown that difference is a resource to be used wisely by an executive coach in respect to achieving the highest practical good for and with their clients in a relationship which is characterised by high support and high challenge. Achieving that balance is itself a difficult task but an important one in coaching for ethical leadership.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

The introduction of a phenomenological perspective is an alternative theoretical perspective to the relationship in executive coaching as based on Rogerian principles. Drawing from the phenomenological principle that relationship represents a difference in mutuality, I found that the coach challenges a client in executive coaching to see things from different perspectives. This has been the case in these examples, where tension and struggle has been harnessed in robust relationships which lead constructively to opportunities for change. This represents an original contribution to knowledge which brings to light a different and productive dynamic to how the executive coaching relationship unfolds in practice and new insights into how it is understood and managed in executive coaching.

While ethics in executive coaching has not been identified as a specific essence of coaching in this study, its introduction in this study is an acknowledgement of its

importance in analysis of coaching. I have introduced the unsettling of assumptions as an approach to coaching in respect to critical reflexivity where high challenge characterizes the relationship. This study has shown that, in practice, executive coaches challenge their clients to interact with others in a way that is consistent with the principle that we treat others respectfully as an end, not just a means. My research has shown that executive coaches take a relational approach to leadership and corporate relationships which reflects an ethic of care and respect for others. It is a contribution to knowledge which calls for the ethical responsibilities within an executive coaching relationship to go beyond codes of conduct, and provides evidence to support those voices that call for the integration of ethics into the practice of leadership development (Cunliffe 2016; Day 2010; Western 2016).

### **8.2.2 Teleology and Conation**

This executive coaching study has shown that each of the clients had developed or were developing goals which would contribute to work-related outcomes. In respect to the coaching relationship of Luke and Adam, it was in setting those goals for developing better corporate relationships and friendships at a personal level that Adam developed pragmatic goals which then led to deeper reflections on self-love. He was able to find of an overarching teleological purpose which would guide his achievement of those goals. Zoe's goals were established in respect to leadership competencies, as were Ryan's.

The use of goals in executive coaching has been an intrinsic part of its history, but more recently it has been challenged, particularly in those discourses that privilege development over learning and goal setting (Bachkirova 2011; Stelter 2017). The history and philosophy of teleology tells us that as humans we approach life in general with a self-integrating purpose, that is the achievement of a 'good' life. In this respect, it is calling to what Husserl refers to as a supervening value, that is it is characterized as having over-riding ethical properties (McPherson 2015). Actions, the conative dimension of deciding, have a specific teleology in the goal directed activities of living out that purpose.

As noted in Chapter One, Dagley surveyed purchasers of executive coaching in organizations and found a clear message that 'great' coaching results in 'behaviour change' (Dagley 2010, p.66). This study showed that behaviour change was a central focus of each of them. From this, a practical good in executive coaching can be seen as a process of working ethically with a client to achieve goals that facilitate work-specific behaviour change in a constructive learning partnership that is guided by the client's own perspectives on what changes need to occur. This is initially framed by the goals that are articulated by the client as the intended end result of the executive coaching engagement, notwithstanding that the sponsoring organization may have a role in developing those goals. Those goals may change as coach and client deal with the complexities of change. There is a practicality reflected in the teleology of executive coaching, where organisational and personal objectives are to be met. These goals may specify what behaviour change is to be achieved. However, behaviour change is not a simple process and the pathway to its achievement can be circuitous, requiring deeper reflection and reflexivity. This study has shown such complexity in respect to the client Adam, with the emergence of the teleology of a life purpose, and the goal of learning to love himself as a foundation for improving his relationships with his colleagues and developing enduring friendships.

Executive coaching, even in respect to what is broadly thought of as development, aims to achieve something that is articulated, and as such is end-oriented and therefore goal directed, even if those goals evolve or new ones emerge in the coaching journey. The issue may not be so much about whether or not goals are set in executive coaching and how desirable this is, but on the quality of those goals as they are skilfully managed. It is also important to note that work is important not just in respect the gathering of the material resources for economic prosperity, but also in respect to development of personal well-being and broader life goals. All the clients in this study discussed their families, and in respect to Adam in the first executive coaching session, and Ryan in the third, they formed part of their motivation to do well and achieve their goals. Both indicated that their commitment to their families drove what they do in respect to work.

It is decision will which is crucial to behaviour change, decision will being the conative commitment to take action. In executive coaching, this can represent a commitment to leadership practice that is going to contribute to improved performance as part of a broader ethical commitment to the wellbeing and effectiveness of staff and stakeholders in the leader's sphere of influence. It is also, philosophically, in action as described by Ricoeur (2016) that we find being as an existential of life, the embodiment of Husserl's decision will. In executive coaching, it is in decision will and action taken to successfully achieve goal-oriented outcomes that the effectiveness of a coaching intervention can be judged in the workplace. Doing 'good' is what matters in the teleological function of pursuing the human good, action that is taken with ethical intent. In respect to practical reasoning, Loidolt (2009) suggests that there is an ethics of renewal and self-determination found in a whole life of free decision, with the will coming to the fore as a universal force that installs the primacy of the practical. The client's self-determination as reflected in the will to change is both an ethical and existential focus of a goal orientation in coaching consistent with the teleology of a personal, self-integrating life purpose of practical intent.

In effect, the goal of executive coaching is the learning task to which the client commits. It remains purposeful and teleological. Goals established in the lifeworld of executive coaching are a willing to action which may ultimately tap into a deeper purpose. As prosaic as it might initially be seen, the widely used GROW model in coaching has been shown in this study to foreshadow that deeper teleology. While not explicitly supporting their clients in expressing goals reflecting the teleology of a life purpose, the executive coaches in this study have shown that pragmatic goal setting did not constrain them in supporting the striving of their clients towards the achievement of highest practical good relevant to their situation.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

The coaching community has called for a deeper understanding of goal dynamics, to which this study contributes, drawing as it does from the ancient wisdom of Aristotle



in his description of humans as always striving towards that which is the highest good, taken up by Husserl as an appeal to practical reason with its ethical call. This study contributes to that understanding by introducing this broader perspective in what is an approach to goal setting founded in a philosophical framework which extends back to Aristotle's concept of the good with its ethical implications, taken up phenomenologically by Husserl and Ricoeur. It also introduces the issue of quality in respect to goal setting, and suggests that executive coaches can use goal setting in supporting clients to explore the deeper purposes to which they may commit themselves. The introduction to the conative and decision will in this study, particularly drawing from the work of Ricoeur, is a unique approach to goal setting in executive coaching. In Aristotle's conception, it is virtuous action that represents the highest good, action which both contributes to happiness and employs wisdom. It is in action, not in a state of being, that living well expresses the virtues. In this respect, the GROW model of goal setting in executive coaching can be understood in terms of practical reasoning, the entwinement of the affective and the rational in deciding what action ought to be taken in achieving the good for oneself, the workplace and the wider community.

### **8.2.3 Sensemaking**

In respect to the sensemaking loops described in the executive coaching conversation between Lisa and Zoe, I referred to the unending cycle of relating experience, making meaning, trying new actions and making sense of them anew. Sensemaking is about experience and how we make meaning of it retrospectively. In executive coaching for change and development, learning is about how that experience is interpreted and evaluated to make new meaning which leads to the trying out of new actions. The challenge for Lisa in coaching Zoe was shown to be Zoe's difficulty in making new meaning that found solutions to better support her team leaders. The value of sensemaking in executive coaching is that it can bring to attention what is salient to the client and can reveal meanings that have been previously missed. In this study, however, it has been shown that it was often the coach who identified what had been missed, Luke in supporting Adam to find his own loving spirit, Lisa when her

challenging of Zoe was unsuccessful, leading her to introduce the practice of scaffolding to support the team leaders, and Beth in supporting Ryan to manage his anger and overcome his confrontational relationships with colleagues and his own team members.

In Chapter Two, I discussed Cox's (2013) suggestion that there is a relationship between phenomenological reflection and critical thinking whereby a client describes significant events as experienced as a sensemaking activity, and is then challenged to think critically about the assumptions implicit in those descriptions. Sensemaking produces plausible interpretations of those events, but these interpretations are not necessarily accurate (Yue & Mills 2008). These interpretations can fail in the present which undermines sensemaking's usefulness to the future or the teleological ends which coaching identifies. Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) state that sensemaking is about an interplay of interpretation and action, not on the evaluation of choice but rather on making organizational life more orderly in continuing activity. Executive coaching needs to bring into sensemaking an evaluation of what is the best good for future action, one which reflects the importance of Cox's (2013) insertion of the need for critical thinking. This also reinforces Cunliffe's conviction about the need for philosopher/leaders and the cultivation of reflexivity in ethical leadership development (Cunliffe 2009). I also suggested that in executive coaching, sensemaking can extend horizons of comprehension and achieve linguistic transformations in creation of new meaning.

In examining learning in executive coaching, I discussed in Chapter 2 that Kolb's (2015) view that learning is a tension and conflict filled process with two primary dimensions, at one end that of concrete experiencing of events and at the other abstract conceptualisation. It was the executive coaches who for the most part introduced the conceptualisation phase in this study, having listened carefully to the clients as they made sense of their experiences. For Kolb there is a tension found in the movement from actor to that of observer, from specific involvement to general analytic detachment which contrasts with sensemaking's settlement in plausibility and Weick's downplaying of analysis. Coaches in this study handled that tension by quietly

managing the transitions from sensemaking to conceptualisation in a supportive way that introduced new knowledge as non-threatening contributions for client consideration.

Cox (2013, p. 97) suggests that challenging a client's assumptions is a 'tricky task', advocating that trust is necessary if a client is to accept challenge, that trust being hard won through a process of phenomenological reflection, allowing the client to dwell in her own experiential accounts as a first stage of coaching in general. It is this phenomenological reflection that was apparent in Zoe's sensemaking accounts in Chapter Six. However, as a creative and facilitative approach to learning in executive coaching, tension remains largely unexplored, possibly crowded out by those coaching approaches based on positive psychology. Beth confronted Ryan directly in my third executive coaching study, and he accepted it willingly, reflecting theirs as a relationship characterized by both high support and high challenge.

What I am suggesting in my phenomenological weaving together of the theoretical and the practical in a reasoning process is that sensemaking produces interpretations but those interpretations may not lead to learning. The executive coaches in this study have been able to see what the client is not yet able to. They have directly inserted their own perspectives in contributing a solutions approach to immediate problems the client is grappling with in a way which was helpful and supports learning. In drawing on the relational and reflexive principles of ethical leadership in general (Cunliffe 2009), executive coaches can be seen to facilitate a richer learning experience where sensemaking leads from the concrete and to the abstract in a way that fosters critical thinking and reflexivity. In respect to achieving the learning goals of the particular coaching engagement, critical thinking fosters a solutions focus in which assumptions are made explicit by the client in assessing the likelihood that proposed actions will bring wished for results. In that process, the client learns a way of thinking that extends beyond the instrumental goals of the executive coaching as he or she becomes a more critically reflexive leader in a process of ongoing development that exceeds the time limited coaching experience itself. This is an enhanced and enriched approach to sensemaking in executive coaching.

## **Contribution to Knowledge**

My empirical account of Zoe's sensemaking reflections suggests that sensemaking as a process of reflecting on experience and making meaning on the basis of plausible interpretation is not a sufficient condition for learning to occur. Zoe's sensemaking was shown in this study to be of limited value in resolving her leadership dilemma in respect to the impacts of organizational restructuring on her team leaders. When sensemaking did not result in clients' creating new meaning, the executive coaches in this study introduced new knowledge, providing solutions where their clients had been unable to do so. There is tension in and even confrontation in supporting a client to make the shift from that of experiencing to that of analytical detachment or problem solving. It reinforces Cunliffe's articulation of the need to be self-reflexive at the personal level, including a consideration of how we treat others (Cunliffe 2016). These findings do not undermine the value of sensemaking in executive coaching, but they bring a new dimension to the application of sensemaking in coaching, one where the coach plays a more collaborative and direct role in supporting abstract conceptualisation and learning.

### **8.2.4 Narrative Identity**

In my empirical lifeworld account of Luke and Adam's executive coaching conversation, tensions were clearly evident in Adam's struggle between his action-oriented identity as a provider and doer, and the difficulties he was having in his professional and personal relationships. From my descriptive analysis, I found that identity provides coherence to people's lives and to life purpose, a wholeness. Wholeness manifests in the integrity of our embodied being in the world, expressed explicitly as a self-constancy which, following Ricoeur (2016), reflects an ethical answerability to both ourselves and to others. Not all executive coaching is going to have such a striking tension between being and becoming as experienced by Adam in the first coaching conversation, 'Mates at Work'. However, the dialectic between sameness and change is implicit in the whole person who presents for executive coaching, particularly in the

dimension of Ricoeur's involuntary in the sameness of identity where dispositions, values, emotions and habits potentially constrain identity in its becoming. Not all executive coaching addresses identity explicitly, but it is directly or indirectly played out in the change processes which characterize leadership development. In an executive coaching relationship of high challenge and high support, the client learns to be reflexive in an evolving process of identity construction where Ricoeur's dialectics of same and self remain a lifelong project of becoming.

While recognising that many of the themes that clients bring to executive coaching are about action and decision making, Bachkirova (2011) advocates for developmental coaching, an alternative which is focussed on enriching lives and which is explicit in its intention to coach the whole individual, whether or not there are specific goals, or whether the coaching is directly related to the workplace in an immediate sense. Bachkirova's approach is one which is on the boundaries between executive coaching and counselling. Stelter (2014) advocates for exploring identity in collaborative coaching work generally, where coaching is focused less on goals and more on a specifically developmental logic, as he refers to it, a logic that evolves from the narrative process in a collaboration between coach and client.

Bachkirova (2011) and Stelter (2014) formulate developmental coaching as a discrete genre of executive coaching. However, my study has shown that in a directedness to goals, effective coaching contributes to personal development and identity construction as an ongoing reflexive process. It is implicit in Ricoeur's dialectic of the same-self of identity experienced in discordance and re-configuration as it emerges in the case of Adam, the provider and doer. The teleology of a personal, self-integrating life purpose of practical intent which I referred to above may be incorporated into executive coaching as intrinsic to narrative identity, the promise of self-constancy that Ricoeur suggests with its requirement for accountability to self and other in respect to broader social and normative values. Adam found this teleology in his realisation that he wanted to be the best person he could for his family, the foundation upon which he would seek to build meaningful and effective interpersonal relationships.

The highest practical good in executive coaching puts the reflections of the embodied story teller, the client, into the ethical practice of leadership, the voluntary of deciding, choosing and moving to action consistent with the promise of self constancy. This represents for the client an increased self-understanding that is personally enriching in contributing to a narrative of identity beyond a reflexivity limited to a turning in, but incorporates the practical wisdom of the common good of accountability to and for the other.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

The introduction of Ricoeurs' philosophical analysis of the self/same dialectic of identity construction brings to executive coaching a new perspective on the management of individual change. It brings to coaching the importance of engaging with the whole self in a process of learning and development. The integration of habit, emotions and values into the involuntary of identity and the broader responsibility of the client for actions taken brings a focus on that involuntary as integral to the achievement of goals, at whatever level they are expressed.

Ricoeur's (1994, 2016) philosophical account of the self-same dialectic suggests a continuous process of identity construction in an approach to identity as being and becoming in growth through the life-span. However, what is also evident is, following Ricoeur, it is within a phenomenology of voluntary action where the exercise of human freedom and the ability to choose is found in the deciding and doing. That freedom is expressed in a commitment to self-constancy, a promise to self and others within which ethical principles may be embedded as responsibilities. This integrative process of identity construction offers a new and different understanding to executive coaching practice, related to the goals which the client has specified, and the critically reflexive processes of self-understanding that occurs in a coaching relationship of high support and high challenge. It also demonstrates that development and learning are integrated in the engagement of the whole self in goal-oriented executive coaching.

### 8.2.5 The Involuntary – Habits, Emotions and Values

Following on the account of narrative identity, I refer again to Chapter Seven where Beth supported Ryan to achieve his goals of changing his behaviours, which he recognized as requiring a mind shift. Beth sought to support Ryan by showing him how his habits, emotions and values influenced his behaviours, hence developing his self-awareness and supporting him to make changes. In my study, I have suggested that the lifeworld, the world of ordinary experience where habits, emotions and values are formed, is a constant negotiation between Ricoeur's self and same as we learn to adapt to our changing environment in an active process of becoming and adaptation. Most of the learning in that process occurs under the radar, increments that barely attract awareness. We do not routinely examine how the habits we form, the feelings that influence us without reflection or the values that guide our decisions and behaviours, shape how we act and learn anew. In their deep embodiment, habits, emotions and values are experienced only passively for the most part. Executive coaching is an opportunity to bring to awareness those largely covert influences as valuable information in supporting clients to better understand themselves and their actions.

In Chapter Five, I have referred to what Husserl calls mediated self-experience, that which occurs in conversation with another, what he refers to as an 'alienating' attitude towards oneself. This happens in executive coaching when the client starts to make her/his own self an object of experience and reflection. In this sense, the client becomes 'other' to herself, the object of her own evaluations. In facilitating this self-experience, the executive coaching session of Beth and Ryan in particular has shown that a coach needs to be sensitive to what floats at the margins of awareness, surfacing the impacts of habit, emotion, and values in probing beliefs and assumptions that influence a particular client's path to goal achievement. This follows Ricoeur's philosophical insight that 'the phenomenology of the involuntary becomes a phenomenology of the powers to voluntary action' (2016, p. 64). Ryan has acknowledged that in respect to his habit of swearing and having emotional 'tantrums' he is coming to the realization that he needs to change his behaviours, and that this

requires him to make a massive 'mind set change'. This signals the need for a cognitive appraisal, a bringing to consciousness of those influences on mindset, the active engagement of thinking. Further, Ryan has recognised that the more he practises alternative behaviours, the more effectively he can overcome his emotional reactions. Beth encouraged him to use that emotion as valuable information, information which can inform more thoughtful responses in the situation that precipitated emotion and shape how he takes action in his relationships with colleagues and in managing the performance of his own team members.

This study has shown through its empirical account in the case of Beth and Ryan, that specific goals invoke a consideration of habits, emotions and values. This case shows that a full account of Aristotle's virtues invokes the golden mean, described by Ricoeur (2016) as the just mean between two extremes. This applies to the involuntary, where values are not always beneficial when they are overplayed. This is manifest in Ryan's case where his values lead to inappropriate anger and over-reactions that signal the need for a more rigorous account of the practical good. What Ricoeur shows is that the will of desire, the site of involuntary, is also subject to duty, the laws of reason and obligation.

Executive coaching is an opportunity to bring the powers of the body found in Ricoeur's involuntary to consciousness in a way that makes those powers available for exploration and reflexivity. This self-awareness paves the way to choice, the willing of voluntary action in the teleological achievement of goals oriented to the 'good', the best that is available and is ethical. Ricoeur (2016) believes that existence is both willed and undergone. We may never perfectly penetrate the involuntary, but we work towards its practical mediation at the level of deciding and acting. High challenge coaching may engage with the client's values, emotions and habits with an explicit focus or as they emerge from the client's own sensemaking activities and are evaluated in reflexive practice. High support is found in compassion and non-judgmental acceptance on the executive coach's part in what may be the difficult process of revealing the involuntary of client's personal identity and managing the on-going dialectic of same and self as part of a change process. At the same time, the



involuntary is not exclusively an issue for the client. The relational nature of executive coaching requires of the coach that she recognise that her own involuntary, particularly those of her values, are also in play in a coaching conversation.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

In Chapter Seven, my account of habit in respect to the client Ryan's swearing brought in the embodiment perspectives of phenomenology as expressed by Merleau-Ponty (2012) and others, where it shows habit as both opportunity and constraint in the potentialities for shaping future action as we make meaning of those habits. Similarly, the embodied experience of emotion has meaning and purpose in its involuntary pull which brings to attention that which we care about. Values are seen through Husserl are revealed by emotional acts and are related to ethics. The philosophy of Ricoeur integrates habit, emotions and values into an understanding of identity that is an important contribution to knowledge of executive coaching and to its practice.

The overcoming of the involuntary is found in the will to action, the exercise of freedom in choosing to engage in particular behaviours. However, this also requires self-knowledge as the influence of habits, feelings and values become salient in influencing the choices we make. This is a unique insight into how the executive coaching process might be managed. This again draws in Ricoeur's account of the dialectic between same, the involuntary, and self, the commitments to change, in applications to coaching which introduce new knowledge to an understanding of what executive coaching is and what practices which lead to the achievement of goals.

### **8.2.6 Summary Statement**

There has been a consistent theme in this summarizing of the 'whatness of executive coaching' as phenomenological experience that brings the rational and affective together in a reasoning process facilitated in a relationship of high challenge and high support. The ethical imperative to do the best that is available is found in the teleology of executive coaching itself. Here, coaches support their executive clients to

be self- and critically reflexive, self-responsible and self-determining as leaders whose practices support their followers and colleagues to also realise their potential and perform effectively in their roles and working lives. Thus, the study has shown the need for coaching practices to incorporate a preparedness on the part of executive coaches to champion leadership that is relational and ethical, with a concern for all the stakeholders for whom the leader or manager has responsibility, directly or indirectly. The findings suggest that this should be achieved as a facilitative process, not one which places the executive coach in a directive, didactic position, but one where the coach introduces new knowledge and suggestions to support clients in achieving new insights and changing behaviour when it is helpful to do so. The Aristotlean approach to wisdom applies, that is the need for executive coach and client to achieve a golden mean on a continuum of options in achieving coaching outcomes. New perspectives are formed through what I describe as the hidden curriculum of executive coaching where clients learn to be self- and critically reflexive as practices that persist beyond the coaching engagement itself. Those new perspectives may be hard won, and tensions need to be accepted as part of an experiential learning process in a relationship of high trust and mutuality in working towards the goals the client has set out to achieve.

Executive coaches in this study are not positioned as neutral bystanders. They have been found to introduce new knowledge or perspectives when it was clear that the client struggled to find their own solutions to changing behaviours and achieving their goals. Goal setting and change is a complex process, one that involves the whole person in a narrative of a personal identity where the relationship between the voluntary and the involuntary suggests the need for a deeper self-awareness as a necessary pathway to change.

In concluding through practical reason, that is, something is so and something should be so, I have found executive coaching to be an integrated learning and development process connected to performance in the workplace. It is enacted in a dialogic relationship of high challenge and high support to which clients bring their whole selves in order to achieve self-identified goals or purposes. It is an experiential,

reflexive sensemaking activity that generates personal awareness and insight while supporting behavioural change in the will to voluntary action that is oriented to the 'good', the best that is available and is ethical at the personal, relational and organizational levels of the workplace and beyond.

### **8.3 Limitations**

In respect to qualitative research, Merriam (2009) suggests that validity and reliability concerns require careful attention to a study's conceptualization, and the way in which data is collected, analysed, interpreted and presented, and that the researcher's conclusions 'make sense' (p. 19). For van Manen (2014), validity in phenomenology is secured in the research question itself in relationship to its intrinsic inquiry into a particular human experience, as this study has done. Van Manen (2014) suggests that in respect to reliability, it is not the aim of phenomenology to produce results which are repeatable, but rather to strive for new and surprising insights. Evidence is based on the internal meaning structures which make it possible to recognize the recurring aspects of a phenomenon, its essences. Thus, the strengths and limitations of a phenomenological study need to be assessed on its own grounds.

My study has established initial themes from the research data based on my experiential encounter as an immersion in the data against the background of the literature review and my general exposure to the coaching industry. Another person who analysed my case studies may have identified a different set of themes. The theme analysis which followed from the identification of themes in the experiential lifeworld was both inductive and deductive, drawing from a range of sources which reflected a generative phenomenology in their descriptive analysis. However, I acknowledge that these themes and their description were influenced by my own perceptions and values, values which were made explicit as I framed my research methodology and design.

This study relied on a small number of executive coaching conversations. They were specific to their client's respective workplace and while the coaches were experienced

and worked for coaching providers with established reputations in the field of leadership coaching, it cannot be claimed that their practices exhaust the possibilities of different approaches to executive coaching. The lifeworld descriptions of each of the coaching conversations grounded the study, and also provided readers with the opportunity to interpret and assess their approaches in respect to other models of executive coaching, particularly in respect to the goal-oriented approach which each of the coaches in this study utilized. The small number of empirical examples may be a limitation, but it also enabled rich descriptions of the approaches which integrated phenomenological and philosophical insights as part of the themes identified.

The executive coaching conversations were a snapshot, taken in the mid-course of a coaching engagement. In this respect, it was not longitudinal and as such it was not possible to show how the executive coaching relationship and its practices were established, developed over time or achieved its objectives in a conclusion. Nor was it possible to discuss the coaching conversations with the executive coach or client. The objective of gaining access to these conversations meant that confidentiality was a high priority, and the anonymity of the participants be safeguarded. However, what the study has shown is that it is possible to gain access to this private space. Even though the number of cases was small and limited to one executive coaching session, it is a valuable and distinctive contribution to coaching research, based as it is in real life examples of executive coaching in practice.

I acknowledge that each of these descriptions of the themes is constrained in respect to the structure and length of the thesis. In this respect, I made choices about the directions I would take and what I would include, reflecting my own priorities and observations, notwithstanding my application of the epoché and reductions as a form of researcher reflexivity. Any one of these themes could have been the subject of a thesis in its own right and in this respect, they cannot be said to have been exhaustively explored. Much more could have been said about each of them. Most, but not all, of my descriptive analysis sought to secure its foundations in the philosophical discourse of phenomenology. This provided unique insights where my data zigzagged between lifeworld data and the philosophical traditions which reached

back to Aristotle. This research differentiates itself in its philosophical concerns from those approaches to executive coaching based on psychology.

I am also conscious of the critiques of phenomenology and in particular, the concept of essences. In following the phenomenological intent of Husserl, I identified essences as representing critical elements of what coaching is. The notion of essences invokes the application of the universal as an absolute norm for all humanity, a principle that has been challenged on cultural grounds by Jullien (2009). Vagle (2014, p.29) suggests that the negative connotations associated with Husserl's use of essence are 'mighty strong' and carry a lot of 'baggage'. The notion of essences has been critiqued as a research outcome within the discourses of post structuralism (St. Pierre 2019), drawing from the philosophies of Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari. St. Pierre notes the refusal of the verb 'to be' with its features of identity, stability and closure. Instead, there is an ontology of immanence, that which remains within, where the interest is in 'what might be and what is coming into being' (St. Pierre 2019, p. 5). In this ontology, as St. Pierre describes it, 'being is difference—everything is different, the plane of immanence is always differentiating, always becoming, never static' (p. 5). Hence research does not look for themes and patterns because things are not alike. However, the purpose of this study was to address the present lack of definitional clarity among executive coaching practitioners and researchers. Becoming is what Husserl described as genetic and empirical (Lawlor 2002), and therefore worldly, the domain of lived experience to which Husserl remains committed in zigzagging between the ideal of essences and the lived experiences of the lifeworld. This does not overcome St. Pierre's objections to contemporary social science methodology, including phenomenology, but reaffirms this as an appropriate approach to the research question in this particular study.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 407) raise Husserl's idea of vague essences as those which are not fixed and formal essences, describing them as 'fuzzy aggregates'. Fuzzy essences exist between the thing and the concept where they establish a new relation between thought and things. Essence becomes a nomad, where it occupies and holds a smooth space, an intermediary between thoughts and things, 'a vague identity

between the two' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.408). That space is characterized as being occupied by nomads of absolute movement, who are always in migration. In respect to that movement, that energy and flow, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 407) suggest that essences 'are vagabond, anexact and yet rigorous,' 'anexact' meaning that which is internally rigorous but lacking finality as they are part of a creative journey. In effect, essence is not extinguished by Deleuze and Guattari. 'Vague' essence does have a determinative role in forming a distinct concept in the mix from which a judgement can be made, a moment of rest in the face of absolute movement. My study has been a creative journey and the essences identified can be seen as an intermediary smooth space in the on-going story of what executive coaching is that will be shared with the coaching community as I publish my findings in research journals.

#### **8.4 Final Conclusion**

My purpose, as I outlined early in this study, was to bring greater clarity to an understanding of what executive coaching is. I have achieved clarifications but also amplifications in respect to the executive coaching relationship, goals, identity, sensemaking and the influences of habit, emotion and values as Ricoeur's involuntary of ourselves, providing rich descriptions and fresh perspectives. What I identified as essences, material or fuzzy, I captured in my concluding statement of what executive coaching is based on my research findings. However, the clarifications I have made were not simplifications; they go beyond prevalent models of executive coaching based on psychology and offering insights from a different wisdom, that of philosophy. These clarifications were integrated into a characterization of executive coaching as being a relationship of high challenge and high support in facilitating the learning tasks that the client brings to an executive coaching engagement. It is an approach where skilful executive coaching is performance oriented in way which is intrinsically developmental and personally enriching for the client while focussed on practical learning outcomes in the workplace.

It is not the role of an executive coach to impose their own values on a client, but this is to be balanced with what I suggested is a 'common good' as first articulated by Aristotle and adopted by Husserl in respect to his account of practical reason. I have highlighted the issue of critical and self-reflexivity as a 'good' that is intrinsic to executive coaching, and which, as client learning, may persist beyond the coaching engagement itself. In the context of executive coaching and the workplace, the common good is also reflected in what has been found to be effective leadership practice in the academic literature and associated publications, a full account of which has been beyond the scope of this study. This study relied largely on the leadership development work of Cunliffe (2016) with its ethical commitments. However, I suggest that one of the implications of this study is that there needs to be a greater alignment between executive coaching research and leadership development research.

I have made specific in my introduction to this study and again in this final chapter's conclusion that in the executive and general coaching literature there is a tension between how coaching is seen as goal specific and learning oriented, on the one hand, or developmental in the broad sense of organic growth on the other. I have found in my study that executive coaching is teleological and goal oriented. As such, executive coaching aims not just to achieve new leadership behaviours but also to develop reflexivity and self-awareness as client assumptions about those goals and how they can be achieved are explored and potentially challenged. Changing behaviour is not a simple process. My study has shown it involves knowledge of one's own values, beliefs and teleological commitments, an inner journey as the executive coach Luke described it in supporting his client Adam to frame his goals in developing his corporate and personal relationships. My accounts of Ricoeur's narrative identity and the dialectic between self and same with the tensions between the voluntary and involuntary suggest that coaching goals reflect the ethical choices of a personal accountability for actions found in the exercise of human freedom as self-constancy. This informs the deliberative decisions made in the taking of action. The self-same dialectic points to an understanding of executive coaching that is developmentally

oriented and concerned with self-awareness, but also that decision will is oriented towards action and the learning of new behaviours.

My conclusion is that learning and development are integrated in executive coaching where the outcomes are increased competencies and capabilities that enhance leadership effectiveness, not just in terms of the beliefs individuals hold about their personal identities, but in how those beliefs are manifested in the actions they take in the workplace. In this study, the application of Ricoeur's phenomenologically informed account of narrative identity to executive coaching is a contribution to new knowledge in executive coaching. Its application to the learning/development dialectic offers a practical and ethical framework as a previously unexplored pathway through which executive coaching can be understood, practised and defined. The coaching examples in this study, particularly in respect to Luke and Adam, and Beth and Ryan, point to how that dialectic can be skilfully managed.

Ultimately, however, the client is in charge of his or her own 'good' and is responsible for the learning that occurs. While I conclude that a relationship of high challenge and high support facilitates change, an executive coach needs to proceed with respect and sensitivity. Skilful executive coaching requires that the client feels empowered, not diminished or overwhelmed.

Executive coaching is not a settled matter. It is evolving, 'becoming' as found in both the phenomenological and post structural approaches to qualitative research, with executive coaching itself open to being interpreted from multiple perspectives. However, my essences, material or fuzzy, give coaching a purpose and coherence as it occurs in the smooth space of this study with its integration of philosophical reasoning with lifeworld practice. The approach I have taken is an original contribution to knowledge with a methodology which draws from philosophy, is grounded in the lifeworld of actual practice, respects the genesis of coaching in learning, acknowledges the workplace as the lifeworld context of executive coaching, and adopts an ethical stance towards leadership development and therefore executive coaching.





## Appendix 1: Ethics Approval

# UTS HREC Approval

Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au

Tue 5/5/2015 4:07 PM Inbox

**To:** Susan Hanley; Helen.Russell@uts.edu.au; Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au; Keiko.Yasukawa@uts.edu.au;

Dear Applicant

The UTS Human Research Ethics Committee reviewed your application titled, "Coaching as Pedagogical Practice", and agreed that the application meets the requirements of the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). I am pleased to inform you that ethics approval is now granted.

Your approval number is UTS HREC REF NO. 2015000095 Your approval is valid five years from the date of this email.

Please note that the ethical conduct of research is an on-going process. The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans requires us to obtain a report about the progress of the research, and in particular about any changes to the research which may have ethical implications. This report form must be completed at least annually from the date of approval, and at the end of the project (if it takes more than a year). The Ethics Secretariat will contact you when it is time to complete your first report.

I also refer you to the AVCC guidelines relating to the storage of data, which require that data be kept for a minimum of 5 years after publication of research. However, in NSW, longer retention requirements are required for research on human subjects with potential long-term effects, research with long-term environmental effects, or research considered of national or international significance, importance, or controversy. If the data from this research project falls into one of these categories, contact University Records for advice on long-term retention.

You should consider this your official letter of approval. If you require a hardcopy please contact Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au.

To access this application, please follow the URLs below: \* if accessing within the UTS network: <http://rmprod.itd.uts.edu.au/RMENet/HOM001N.aspx> \* if accessing outside of UTS network: <https://remote.uts.edu.au> , and click on "RMENet - ResearchMaster Enterprise" after logging in.

We value your feedback on the online ethics process. If you would like to provide feedback please go to:

<http://surveys.uts.edu.au/surveys/onlineethics/index.cfm>

If you have any queries about your ethics approval, or require any amendments to your research in the future, please do not hesitate to contact  
Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Marion Haas

Chairperson UTS Human Research Ethics Committee C/- Research & Innovation Office  
University of Technology, Sydney T: (02) 9514 9645 F: (02) 9514 1244 E:  
Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au

<http://www.research.uts.edu.au/policies/restricted/ethics.html> P: PO Box 123,  
BROADWAY NSW 2007 [Level 14, Building 1, Broadway Campus] CB01.14.08.04

**INFORMATION SHEET (COACH)**

**Workplace Coaching In Practice**

(UTS HREC Approval No. 2015000095)

**WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?**

My name is Sue Hanley and I am a PhD student at the University of Technology Sydney, in the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, School of Education – Adult Learning and Applied Linguistics Program. Among other qualifications, I hold a Masters’ Degree in Organisational Coaching from Sydney University

**WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?**

This research is about identifying the essence of expert coaching from a learning perspective and the practices that underpin it. The researcher is not interested in the subject matter of the coaching session, but rather the communicative and structural features of an effective coaching conversation. The study will contribute to the multi-disciplinary knowledge base that informs coaching practice.

**IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?**

As a coach, you will be asked, with the agreement of your client, to record one of your regular coaching sessions on your smart phone. Your phone will require an appropriate recording application and the recording will be uploaded as an MP3/4 file to an individually secure electronic mail box. The recording will be assigned a code and fictitious names will be used. No personal details will be disclosed. Your name and some brief demographic details will be collected. The demographic details will be aggregated and disassociated from particular conversations.

**ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE**

Both coach and client may feel a little self-conscious at being recorded, but such recordings are a regular feature of the International Coach Federation’s credentialing processes and clients adjust to it well. Neither coach nor client will be identified in any of the research data, directly or indirectly, so there will be no risks to privacy.

**WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?**

Your Linked In profile identifies you as an expert coach.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF SAY NO?**

You do not have to say yes. This research is voluntary. If you say no, you will not be contacted about this research again.

**IF I SAY YES, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?**

You can change your mind at any time and you don’t have to say why.

**WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?**

If you have concerns about the research that you think I can answer you can contact me on [REDACTED] or email [susan.l.hanley@student.uts.edu.au](mailto:susan.l.hanley@student.uts.edu.au) or my supervisor, Dr Helen Russell, by email at [Helen.Russell@uts.edu.au](mailto:Helen.Russell@uts.edu.au) or telephone [REDACTED].

*If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the UTS Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772 and quote this HREC Approval No. 2015000095.*

Thank you for reading this information and considering your participation.

Sue Hanley, M Org Coaching, MA, Grad Dip Ed St, Dip Teach (Adult Learning), CAHRI

## **Appendix 3: Client Information Sheet**

### **INFORMATION SHEET (COACHING CLIENT)**

#### **Research: Work-Related Coaching In Practice**

##### **WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?**

My name is Sue Hanley and I am a PhD student at the University of Technology, Sydney in the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, School of Education.

##### **WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?**

This research is about identifying the essence of expert coaching from a learning perspective. The researcher is not interested in the subject matter of the coaching session, but rather the communicative and structural features of an effective coaching conversation.

##### **IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?**

As a coaching client, you will simply agree to one of your regular coaching sessions being recorded on your coach's smart phone. You will agree orally at the beginning of the recording to participate and again at the end of the session. None of your details will be required, including your name. Clients of coaching may feel a little self-conscious at being recorded, but such recordings are a regular feature of the International Coach Federation's credentialing processes and clients adjust to it well.

##### **WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?**

Leading providers of organizational coaching in Sydney are being asked to volunteer their time and energy to support this research into fundamentals of a coaching conversation. You are highly regarded as coach or are being coached by an expert coach who is a skilled facilitator of coaching conversations. You do not have to say yes. This research is voluntary. If you say no, you will not be contacted about this research again.

##### **IF I SAY YES, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?**

You can change your mind at any time and you don't have to say why. If you are a client, you will need to notify your coach, who will advise the researcher accordingly and the recording will be deleted. The coach and the client will be able to withdraw at any time.

##### **WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?**

If you have concerns about the research that you think I can answer you can contact me on [REDACTED] or email [susan.l.hanley@student.uts.edu.au](mailto:susan.l.hanley@student.uts.edu.au) or my supervisor, Dr Helen Russell by email at [Helen.Russell@uts.edu.au](mailto:Helen.Russell@uts.edu.au) or telephone [REDACTED].

If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772 and quote this number 2015000095.

Thank you for reading this information and considering your participation.

Sue Hanley

M. Organisational Coaching, MA, Grad Dip Ed St., Dip Teach (Adult Learning), CAHRI

## Appendix 4: Oral Consent Script



### CLIENT ORAL CONSENT

#### Work-Related Coaching In Practice

##### *At the beginning*

Client's first name: You have a copy of the information sheet on Sue Hanley's PhD Research project: Work-Related Coaching In Practice. Do you consent to our coaching conversation being recorded for use in Sue's research?

##### *At the end*

Client's first name: We are now finishing our coaching session. Do you still consent to the recording of this coaching conversation and its use in research?

If answer is Yes.

Please remember that if you change your mind later, I will let the researcher know and the recording will be destroyed.

If the answer is No.

That's fine. I will delete the recording immediately.

## Appendix 5: Coach Consent Form

**COACH CONSENT FORM**  
**Work-Related Coaching In Practice**  
UTS HREC Approval No. 2015000095

I \_\_\_\_\_ (coach's name) agree to participate in the research project "**Work-Related Coaching In Practice**" being conducted by Sue Hanley, telephone \_\_\_\_\_, email [susan.l.hanley@student.uts.edu.au](mailto:susan.l.hanley@student.uts.edu.au), as part of Sue's candidature for the award of Doctor of Philosophy. Her supervisor, Dr Helen Russell can be contacted by email at [Helen.Russell@uts.edu.au](mailto:Helen.Russell@uts.edu.au) or telephone \_\_\_\_\_.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to identify the essential structures of expert coaching from a learning perspective. The researcher is not interested in the subject matter of the coaching session, but rather the communicative and structural features of an effective coaching conversation.

I understand my participation in this research has been sought because I am regarded as an expert who represents a high standard of professionalism in the coaching industry. I understand my participation will also require the co-operation of one of my clients. I will agree, with the verbal agreement of my client, to make an audio recording of one of our regular coaching sessions. I will be asked to provide some demographic information, record a regular scheduled session of coaching and upload the recording and demographic information to a personal electronic Drop Box address specific to me. It is estimated that this may take up to an hour of my time, not including that involved in the actual coaching conversation.

I am aware that I can contact Sue Hanley or Sue's supervisor, Dr Helen Russell, if I have concerns about the research. I understand I am free to withdraw my participation from this research project at any time I wish without giving a reason.

I agree that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that does not identify me in any way. Publications might include journal articles, books, report of general findings and the thesis itself. The thesis will be submitted to the digital thesis site, which is open access. I understand that the data may be used for further studies or research on the topic of coaching with the same condition in place that participants in the coaching will not be identifiable.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature (Coach)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature (Researcher or Delegate)

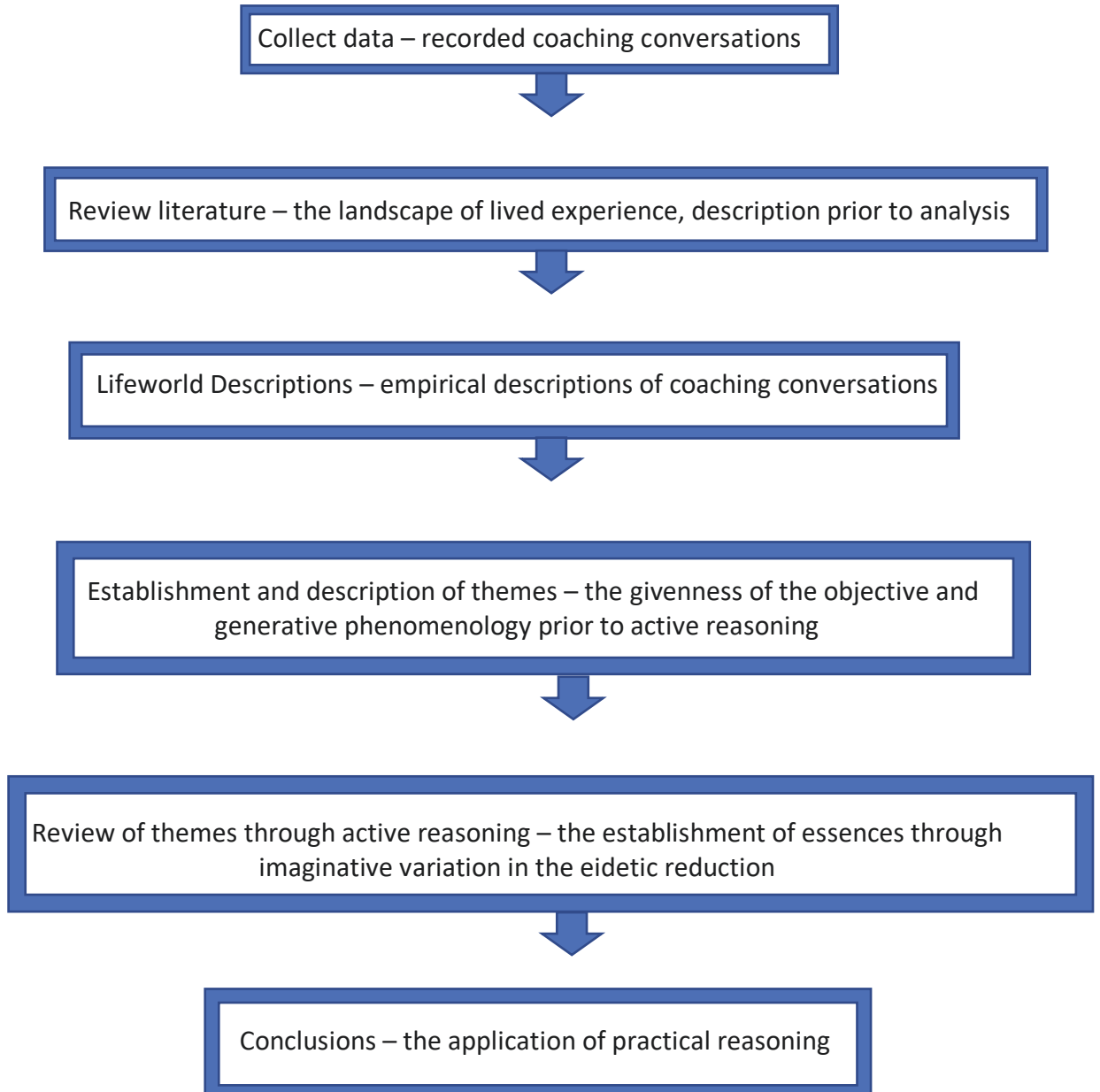
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*This study has been approved by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any aspect of your participation in this research that you cannot resolve with the researcher, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officer (ph: +612 9514 9772 [Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au](mailto:Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au)) and quote the UTS HREC reference number as above. Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome*



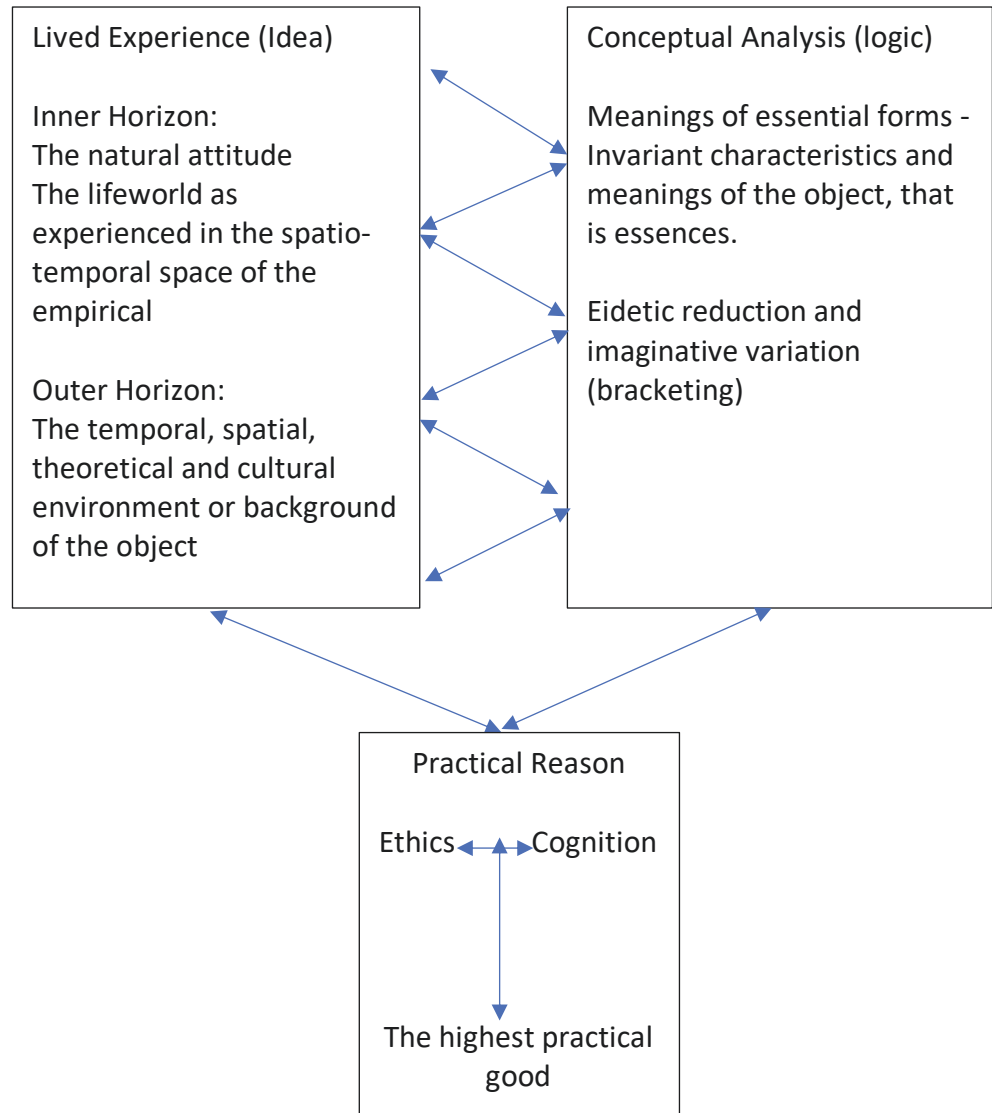
## Executive Coaching in Practice: A Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis

### Appendix 6 - Research Design



# Executive Coaching in Practice: A Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis

## Appendix 7 – The Phenomenological Zigzag



**Appendix 8 - Research Findings' Summary – the Phenomenology of Executive Coaching**

<p>Essences – the forms which makes many objects to be of the same sort</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teleology – Executive coaching is structured to achieve the client’s self-identified goals and purposes in meeting personal and organisational objectives reflected in decision will and actions taken.</li> <li>• Relationality (Executive Coach and Client) – a relationship of high support and high challenge informed by but not limited to Rogerian principles</li> <li>• Narrative Identity – identity as a construction where the dialectics of self and same are a lifelong project of becoming and accountability to self and other</li> <li>• Sensemaking – relating and making meaning of experience through evaluations which then guide future actions to achieve wished for results</li> <li>• Embodiment (Habits, Values, Emotions) – Executive coaching probes the client’s margins of awareness, bringing to awareness the powers of the body in achieving desired change</li> </ul>
<p>Inner Horizon – that to which the intentional object presents itself and is transcendent to the object, that is executive coaching</p>	<p>Learning &amp; Development – integrated and pervasive in executive coaching, as a balanced facilitative, dialogic process that respects client autonomy but introduces new knowledge and perspectives when appropriate</p>
<p>Outer Horizon – the surrounding environment and that which is part of the lifeworld</p>	<p>The Workplace – the context in which executive coaching occurs directly and indirectly, framing and influencing the changes sought to be achieved.</p>
<p>Highest Practical Good – striving for the common good in the mutual entwinement of cognition and ethics</p>	<p>The common good will be realised by the executive coach taking an ethical stance to leadership development and promoting practices in the workplace which support flourishing at the individual, group and societal levels.</p>

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