

# The coaching experience as identity work: Reflective metaphors



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**Orientation:** Coaching facilitates identity work, and metaphors are often used in coaching to make sense of the self.

**Research purpose:** To explore coaching clients' coaching experience as expressed through metaphors, from an identity work perspective.

**Motivation for the study:** The use of metaphor in coaching has not been realised, and coaching as a vehicle for identity work is underexplored.

**Research approach/design and method:** A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology and qualitative design directed the study. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven clients who had participated in a coaching programme. Reflective metaphors from the interviews constituted the data set, which was analysed through hermeneutic phenomenological analysis.

**Main findings:** Guided by identity theory, four themes were co-constructed from the data, which describe how coaching develops a self-processing competence reflected in these iterative cycles: (1) self-exploration and self-reflection; (2) self-awareness and self-insight; (3) self-acceptance and self-determination; and (4) self-actualisation and self-transcendence. These cycles of identity work align with transactional and transformational identity work to enable construction of an independent and interdependent self.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The findings highlight the value of metaphors as a self-reflective sensemaking tool. Coaching is aligned with integrated transactional and transformational identity work, which can be used to assess the transformational value of coaching as a process.

**Contribution/value-add:** The study describes the personal transformational value of coaching through metaphors, and it establishes identity work as a key process outcome of successful coaching. The findings offer a novel conceptualisation of transactional and transformational identity work as a process perspective to effective coaching.

**Keywords:** coaching; identity theory; identity work; metaphor; sensemaking; transformation; hermeneutic phenomenological analysis.

## Introduction

While identity and identity work are often pertinent themes underlying coaching, the literature frequently recommends coaching as a vehicle for identity development (Kragt & Day, 2020) rather than identity work (Snape, 2021). Coaching practitioners are more comfortable with the notion of development, and they are hesitant to engage in the psychological metatheory of identity work (Butcher, 2012). As such, limited empirical attention has been given to identity work as an explicit part of the coaching process (Snape, 2021). Enabling coaching clients to do identity work is, however, key to coaching effectiveness (Skinner, 2020). Coaching is also ideally suited to facilitate identity work, because it is a sensemaking activity (Du Toit, 2007; Skinner, 2020), and identity work at its core entails a sensemaking dynamic (Bennett, 2021; Brown, 2022; Moore & Koning, 2016; Vough et al., 2020). In coaching, metaphors are often used as a sensemaking tool (Offstein et al., 2023; Passmore, 2022). The relevance of metaphors to identity work is evident in that they promote deep self-understanding (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010), and in coaching, they enable making sense of the self (Emson, 2016; Nardon & Hari, 2021). Metaphor has a history of use in many different disciplines, including coaching (Moratti, 2021; Smith, 2008; Thompson, 2021). Yet research on metaphors in the context of coaching is scant (Britten, 2015), and the role of metaphor in coaching has therefore not been realised (Thompson, 2021).

Realising the need for research on both identity work and the use of metaphor in coaching, the researchers' interest in identity work during coaching, and as expressed through metaphor, was inspired. This article evolved from a broader study initiated to explore the coaching experiences of coaching clients. We found that, without intentionally soliciting metaphors during participant interviews, the data from the broader study were peppered with several rich metaphors expressing how coaching clients made sense of self during their coaching experiences. Analysis of metaphors enables theorising about how people make sense of lived experiences (Cassell & Bishop, 2019) and their identities (Moratti, 2021). Therefore, like Shinebourne and Smith (2010), returning to the data to focus on the metaphors used to reflect on the coaching experience seemed a worthwhile empirical endeavour to contribute to the evolving coaching and identity work literature. Consequently, the aim of this article was to explore coaching clients' coaching experience as expressed in metaphors, from an identity work perspective. Firstly, we conceptualise identity work as the metatheoretical basis for the study, after which we explicate metaphor as a valuable sensemaking tool in the coaching context. Secondly, we explain the research design. Lastly, we present the findings, followed by a discussion thereof and an explanation of the implications and limitations of the study, and we offer recommendations.

## Literature review

### Identity work: Making sense of self

In an organisational psychology research, identity has become an important phenomenon (Brown, 2015, 2017, 2022). Studies relate identity to self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-worth (Brenner et al., 2018), to positive emotions (Kalkhoff et al., 2016) and to coping and adjustment (Collins & Bertone, 2017). Identity makes one's life meaningful (Brown, 2022) and plays an important role in one's overall well-being and success (Caza et al., 2018). Self-identity is a socially constructed understanding of the self, as well as a subjective sense of 'Who am I?' (Brown, 2022; Ruane, 2013). In the conceptualisation of the self, multiple identities exist (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000) because one's identity encapsulates the set of meanings that define the self in terms of various role, social and person identities (Brown, 2015; Davis, 2022; Stets & Serpe, 2013). Identity is fluid and continually changes through various processes of personal transformation (Brygola, 2011). Identity change occurs when the meaning in one's identity shifts, and this is an ongoing, lifelong process (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2014; Stets & Serpe, 2013). The dynamic process through which identity is gradually and continuously shaped throughout the lifespan is called identity work (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). Identity work is aimed at achieving positive well-being and securing a strong self as a basis for social relations (Collinson, 2003; Knights & Willmott, 1989).

Identity work entails reflexive thinking (Brown, 2022) to constantly define and redefine the self through interaction with others (Vough et al., 2020) and construct meanings of

the self that are coherent, unique and valued (Ruane, 2013). It is a fundamental self-processing dynamic that includes the cognitive, discursive, physical and behavioural activities (Caza et al., 2018) that individuals engage in to form, present, repair, maintain, strengthen and revise identities (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Identity denotes one's understanding of the self, while identity work explains the processes through which this understanding is formed, maintained or changed over time (Brown et al., 2008; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006; Vough et al., 2020). Identity work is not simply an internally focused process of self-shaping, but a coming together of inner self-reflection and outward engagement, through talk and action (Watson, 2008). Thus, identity work includes both an intrapersonal (the self, 'Who am I?') and an interpersonal (the other, 'Who are we?') process (Ruane, 2013), and it is subjectively and socially constructed. Identity work is activated by life complexities (Moore & Koning, 2015) and work-life crises and transitions (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008) that cause identity threat (Breakwell, 2010) or identity uncertainty (Bennett, 2021). Personal uncertainty stimulates identity work and initiates sensemaking of the self (Bennett, 2021; Mills et al., 2010) to maintain self-esteem and coherence (Ashforth et al., 2008).

Identity work and sensemaking are intertwined, mutually enactive, reciprocal processes (Bennett, 2021; Brown, 2015; Moore & Koning, 2015; Vough et al., 2020). The former is part of a broader sensemaking process, and sensemaking is inherent to identity construction (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Koerner, 2014; Rothausen et al., 2017; Vough et al., 2020; Weick, 1995). In identity work, the focus of sensemaking is the self (Brown, 2022; Mills et al., 2010). Identity work constitutes an ongoing sensemaking process in which self-meanings are relationally constructed (Bennett, 2021; Kreiner et al., 2006a, 2006b; Van de Ven, 2020; Vough et al., 2020) to establish a meaningful balance, or congruence, between one's self-identity and one's social identity (Kreiner et al., 2006a; Watson, 2008). The coaching relationship is well positioned to facilitate constructive identity work, providing a safe space to make sense of the self in relation to others (Bennett, 2021; Emson, 2016; Yip et al., 2020).

### Metaphor as a sensemaking tool

People invariably use metaphors in their everyday discussions and storytelling to express themselves (Cassell & Bishop, 2019; Prince & Forr, 2021; Smith, 2008; Thompson, 2021). Apart from enabling vivid expression, metaphors are common, indispensable conceptual tools for making sense of everyday life and understanding complex lifeworld experiences (Lakoff, 1993). The power of metaphor in making sense of one's experiences is widely established, and metaphor is often used in research aimed at elucidating the meaning of work-life experiences (Cassell & Bishop, 2014; Flotman & Barnard, 2022; Grisoni & Page, 2010; Offstein et al., 2023). A metaphor is a symbolic expression of comparison, in which a literal object or idea is used figuratively to describe something else, implying a likeness

or similarity between the two (Marshak, 1993). Metaphors are visual, verbal and psychological conceptions people use to express meaning, and using them generates new understanding (Cassell & Bishop, 2014; Flotman & Barnard, 2022; Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006). As such, metaphors are sensemaking tools, not only for the self but also for others to whom metaphors are expressed with the objective of conveying meaning.

Metaphors are often consciously created to convey meaning, but they are also implicitly part of and universally used by the cognitive unconscious to interpret work-life experiences (Marshak, 2013; Marshak et al., 2000). Ultimately, metaphors connect cognitive understanding with emotional experience. Aptly referred to as the language of the unconscious (Bennett, 2022), metaphors are useful for expressing and making sense of more obscure emotional, intuitive and transpersonal experiences that are not always available for cognitive, analytical reasoning (Marshak, 1993; Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). The visual and symbolic nature of metaphors enables conscious, cognitive sensemaking (Dunbar, 2016; Emson, 2016; Parry, 2008), and in the coaching context, metaphors are a powerful and effective means to make sense of everyday problems and experiences (Cassell & Bishop, 2019; Offstein et al., 2023). The power of using metaphors in the coaching context lies in their ability to provide vivid, memorable and emotionally arousing representations of experience (Grisoni & Page, 2010), as well as to creatively, intuitively and intentionally disrupt conventional thinking, to enable new understanding and inspire social change (Moratti, 2021). Coaches can use metaphors very effectively (Passmore, 2022) as a method of self-reflection, providing insight into unconscious intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics (Grisoni & Page, 2010) and generating new personal and social identity narratives (Moratti, 2021) for the coaching client.

Metaphors in coaching thus go beyond sensemaking, to enable creative problem-solving, inspire behaviour change and facilitate personal transformation (Bennett, 2022; Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006; Thompson, 2021). In the coaching context, metaphors may therefore offer significant potential for the coaching client to reflectively explore their identity (Emson, 2016) and to research coaching processes (Offstein et al., 2023), such as identity work.

## Research design

The study followed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and employed a qualitative design, using qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. By applying a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the meaning of participants' lived experiences was co-constructed with them through the researchers' interpretation and theorising (Arghode, 2012; Kafle, 2011; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Tuohy et al., 2013).

## Research setting and researcher roles

The study included participants in senior leadership positions in a corporate setting who had participated in a

coaching programme of at least six sessions. Participants were coached by certified integral coaches from diverse industries. Interviews were conducted by LS at the business premises of each participant. Being a certified integral coach, LS gained access to participants through her network of integral coaches. Acting as gatekeepers, integral coaches introduced the study to potential participants and provided the researchers with the contact details of willing participants.

## Sampling and participants

Purposive sampling was used to select seven participants rich in experience of the research phenomenon and willing to share their experiences (Olivier, 2011; Ritchie et al., 2014). Inclusion criteria were being a senior leader in a corporate setting who had participated in at least six coaching sessions. Four participants were women, and participants' ages ranged between 31 years and 49 years (the average age is 40 years). The race distribution was four whites, one Indian and two Africans. All the participants were on a senior management to executive level and hailed from various industries, including financial services ( $n = 3$ ); telecommunications ( $n = 1$ ), transport ( $n = 1$ ); entertainment and media ( $n = 1$ ); and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) ( $n = 1$ ). To enhance homogeneity, participants were coached by certified integral coaches using the same coaching model. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used when referring to participants (i.e. P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6 and P7).

## Data collection

Data collection focused on the coaching experiences of coaching clients. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews commenced with a core question: 'Tell me about your experience of coaching and how it transpired for you?' This was followed by probing questions to elicit rich narratives on the coaching experience. Data saturation was reached after concluding the interviews with the seven participants. Data highlighting reflective metaphors were extracted from the transcribed interviews, and it constituted the primary data set of this study.

## Data analysis

Participants frequently used metaphors to describe their coaching experiences. Reflective metaphors were the focus of the data analysis, because of their explanatory richness and their value in condensing information and making subjective experiences tangible and easier to work with (Sullivan & Rees, 2008). Some metaphors were generated by the participants during the interviews when reflecting on their coaching experience, and some they recalled from their coaching sessions as used by themselves and their coaches. Thematic analysis was applied from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013, 2017). Interpretations were related to the theoretical framework of identity work, sensemaking and the use of metaphors in coaching.

## Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to UNISA College of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee on 13 January 2017. The ethics approval number is (2016 CEMS/IOP\_087).

## Results

Overall, the metaphors reflect participants' sensemaking, specifically their identity work, as a predominant outcome for them from their coaching experience. Four themes were constructed: (1) 'from self-exploration to self-reflection'; (2) 'from self-awareness to self-insight'; (3) 'from self-acceptance to self-determination'; and (4) 'from self-actualising to self-transcendence'.

### Theme 1: From self-exploration to self-reflection

In the data, coaching was frequently compared to a journey of self-exploration. Participant 2 reflected that the coaching sessions entailed probing questions, leading him on a journey of deep self-exploration and self-discovery, where he faced his 'own nonsense'. He said:

'It's been a complete journey of discovery that's gone to many different places. I don't think that stops, that journey. And I think it's helpful to do it with a third party. You can do a lot of introspective work, but it's tougher to see through your own nonsense, I think.' (P2)

He pondered the capacity for self-reflection that he has consequently developed through being coached, that is, to continue to journey the path of self-exploration as essential for his broader life journey, where he feels less threatened by self-exploration, to the point of seeing its value:

'So I would say the biggest shift here has been me recapitalising on my faith in myself. I now have very clear faith in myself, because I've connected with who I am, my first step. I can now appreciate this whole journey for what it is.' (P2)

The difficulty of the metaphoric journey of self-exploration is mitigated, and the journey is likened to moving 'like a feather in the wind'. Like a feather in the wind, P2 yields to being moved on the journey of self-discovery: 'It's here now, and then the wind will blow, and then it will drift a little bit and it will touch down here, and then you'll be there'. In yielding to the process of self-exploration, P2 implies engaging in continued self-reflection, even after coaching sessions were terminated.

Winter (2016) explains that metaphors are used to conceptualise an emotional experience. Both P2 and P5 described this journey with the self as an emotional journey:

'I think the whole thing is an emotional journey.' (P2)

'Yeah, but for me the coaching journey was emotional above anything else.' (P5)

P3 reflected on the emotional journey, indicating how difficult being coached was, because it exposed internal tension,

conflicts and struggles with the self. Having these exposed, however, enabled her to be more in touch with her emotions and how her body forewarns her about her emotions:

'For me, [coaching] was the most amazing life-changing thing, because it just created this self-awareness, and the journey that I've been on with her [the coach] has been all about my self-awareness – the words I use, the way I show up, my body language, how I speak, how I interact.' (P3)

Both P2 and P5 mention through the journey metaphor that coaching entails a process of self-exploration in which they became aware of difficult emotions, but that they had to cognitively process these, changing their way of thinking and behaving:

'I've been on a year-long journey of applying intellect to emotion, and from that self-awareness driving changed action.' (P2)

Another participant thus also remembers it as a valuable thinking journey:

'Because when I'd go on a lot of these thinking journeys, well, it's not good, it's not bad, it's not wrong, it's not right, it just is.' (P5)

Similarly, P1 likens the coaching journey to a more enduring self-exploration practice, which may suggest continued self-reflection after coaching terminates:

'We dealt with what we were originally dealing with, and together we've come to the end of that particular journey, and the next one might need a slightly different approach.' (P1)

P1 realised that working with the self is not an easy, fixed or straightforward process. One needs to take time to explore all the aspects of the self, which are unexpected yet naturally part of the self. There are aspects of oneself that one is not aware of, or that one wants to ignore, because they are uncomfortable. Yet the coaching journey taught her the importance of taking time to self-reflect, and she likens the self-exploration journey to meandering:

'You want to have some view where you're going, but it's better when you allow yourself to meander ... because more things are explored then.' (P1)

P1 was later more open to self-exploration, and ultimately these 'wanderings' became a worthwhile exploration of the whole self. She said:

'It became much more of a sort of meandering dialogue, much more about me holistically as a person and what I find important, where I'm sort of in my life stage and thinking about the future, and a different future probably, and how to ... exploring quite wide areas.' (P1)

Beyond the coaching space, she now enjoys the self-reflective capacity to 'meander' and explore herself in 'wide areas' as an insightful self-processing endeavour.

### Theme 2: From self-awareness to self-insight

Participants' coaching experiences indicate how self-exploration brings into awareness aspects of the self that they previously did not confront in a conscious way. P2 used

the metaphor of a chameleon to describe how coaching helped him realise the identity tension that he experienced between being himself and wanting to please others and conform to their expectations. Through being coached he became aware of how his 'chameleon' behaviour diminished his ability to fulfil his needs and consequently lowered his self-confidence:

'I've always been a bit of a chameleon ... If you throw me in a pot somewhere, I adjust very naturally, but I think possibly you do that with a bit of loss of identity too. That's where I was when we started [*with coaching*].' (P2)

This awareness of the consequences of his behaviour gave him insight into the role he plays in preserving his self-esteem. As a result, he started to take responsibility for his choices and behaviour. P2 said: 'I was looking more for what other people were describing I needed, rather than what I knew I needed'. Being coached led him to ponder the following: 'What is important to me? What does matter to me? What are my values?' (P2).

Developing self-awareness is described by P5 as a wrestling process, and he compared it metaphorically to being in a pressure cooker and crawling out of his skin. He related that during coaching:

'You need to go and wrestle with yourself and find things out about yourself that you don't want to find out, and you feel like you're pressurising yourself and the world is pressurising you, and it's just ... you're just in a pressure cooker.' (P5)

For P5, self-exploration caused extreme discomfort, because 'having to crawl out of your own skin and look at yourself from the outside it was hard'. However, this brought self-awareness:

'It was coming face to face with me and who I am and the way that I behave and realising that it's actually a different person to what I've also led myself to believe.' (P5)

This ultimately gave him self-insight, which brought relief:

'So with the wrestling and going deeper, what it actually did for me was it just made me comfortable in my own skin. Like now I'm not as concerned as I used to be that everyone must like me.' (P5)

The self-awareness that P7 derived from the coaching experience was compared to opening a window: 'It was almost like opening that window in your mind'. Metaphors of self-insight abound in her (P7) narrative about light and dark. These describe how through being coached she came to see herself and present herself differently in life:

'It was like my mind opening up. It was like the blinkers went on ... the way it got personalised ... It was like someone put the light on.' (P7)

This ability to be more self-aware, and its consequent insight into self-behaviour, becomes an enduring competence:

'The light goes on and it starts becoming active, and without you even knowing it, after you have coaching, ... it will be on forever. You'll never be able to switch it off.' (P7)

### Theme 3: From self-acceptance to self-determination

Being coached enabled participants' intrapersonal processing, leading to self-acceptance, and it enabled interpersonal processing, which empowered participants to become more self-determined. The metaphor of the Scottish King Robert the Bruce that P1 used indicates both her self-acceptance and how this empowered her to become more self-determined in her work behaviour. In developing the metaphor, her developing self-acceptance is initially demonstrated:

'Robert the Bruce, is his name. He wasn't a nice guy [*he killed a lot of people*], but his sort of vision [*was*] "Let's get people! Go!", and he takes the army. I kind of embraced a few traits that I didn't quite realise I was that person.' (P1)

She reflected on Robert the Bruce as being a leader with both positive and negative characteristics, and she realised that through being coached, she had learnt to accept her weaknesses and integrate them with her strengths. Her continued use of the metaphor of Robert the Bruce also indicates her evolving self-determination:

'And when I kind of realised that, that was also a penny dropper, sort of "Just get over yourself, you know. Be confident with who you are".' (P1)

She explained:

'And I really like that Scotsman, Bruce, because I'd love to be that person that can say "OK, that's where we're going. Let's go! We can do this".' (P1)

The metaphor illustrates how P1, through being coached, had moved to become more self-accepting and a more self-determined, participative leader and achiever.

P3 integrated her strengths and weaknesses as she referred to the paradoxical metaphor of light and dark, and she accepted herself for who she is in the tension between light and dark:

'Instead of trying to hide that stuff ... to hide the dark the whole time, it's just to go "I am dark and light".' (P3)

For both P1 and P3, being coached thus enabled them to confront and accept their strengths and limitations, and in doing so they found self-acceptance and were empowered to become more self-determined. P3 used various metaphors describing her self-determination. Prominent among these are the war metaphors she used. In using these metaphors, she emphasised her agency, stating that coaching was:

'for me the most amazing life-changing thing, because it just created this self-awareness [*of*] the words I use, the way I show up, the battles I choose to fight.' (P3)

She also highlighted being more self-determined in how she engages with herself, by referring to using a Samurai sword in becoming more authentic through being coached:

'So it was that whole process of why are you in this outfit of war, what you need to do [*let's call it a Samurai sword*], what do you need to cut out, and then what should you focus your energy on. It was almost "Who am I? What do I want from life?"' (P3)

The progression from self-acceptance to self-determination was illustrated by P4, through the metaphors of being 'the hero' and engaging with life as a 'dance' and becoming more agentic in the way she lives life. Through being coached she came to understand that she 'wanted to compensate, obviously, you know, to fill the gap in everyone's life, and wanting to be that hero', but she learns to accept herself:

'It [*coaching*] just helped me to really understand that no, ... I don't have to be the hero.' (P4)

This realisation led to not only self-acceptance but also an embracing of herself and her life, as reflected in the metaphor of dance: 'I love dancing, so yeah, life is a dance. Just go with the flow'. Accepting her life with its ups and downs, mistakes and challenges led to self-determination in the way she 'dances' her life: 'Yeah, go with the flow, and if you trip, you just do that in your steps and go on'.

#### Theme 4: From self-actualising to self-transcendence

Through various metaphors, participants described their coaching experience as reaching self-actualisation and evolving towards self-transcendence. In reflecting on his coaching experience, P2 describes himself as 'a seed' having landed in 'perfect soil' and growing into 'a fantastic tree'. Using this strong nature-inspired metaphor of growth indicates how P2, through being coached, has discovered his potential to be independent and self-confident, to the point of expressing self-actualisation. He said:

'I'm a seed, and I've now landed in perfect soil ... Now it is up to me to grow. In doing what I'm doing, how do I be the best me? ... How do I potentiate?' (P2)

P2 extends the metaphor to reflect how he goes beyond the limits of a singular self, describing his being 'a fantastic tree' and 'a forest'. In relating and explaining his seed, tree and forest metaphor, P2 moves from self-actualisation to self-transcendence, and he articulates his interdependence as being part of a larger social whole. P3 used two interesting metaphors, which similarly reflect her experience of self-actualisation and self-transcendence during the coaching process. By comparing herself to *The Jungle Book* character Mowgli, she recognises how during coaching she was confronted with and challenged by key questions, tensions and conflicts related to her identity:

'So there's this pack of wolves, and this little boy gets raised by the pack of wolves. He wants to be a wolf, he wants to be a man cub.' (P3)

Through being coached she realises her own needs and overcomes 'constantly battling with my own self' to ultimately explain how what she refers to as the 'Mowgli syndrome' was transformed into a sense of independence and consequently self-actualised behaviour:

'One day he [*Mowgli*] must realise that he's a boy, he's not a wolf: "I'm not a wolf." I would call it the Mowgli syndrome, and I would call it recognising how to run away from the pack, or to run separately from the pack or build your own pack.' (P3)

Towards the end, her metaphor progresses from self-actualising behaviour ('to run away from the pack, or to run separately from the pack') to self-transcending behaviour ('build your own pack'). In a further metaphor, the idea of self-transcendence as a key coaching experience is captured by P3 when she compares herself to 'a rock star' and speaks of 'being on fire'. She expresses a transformed self that is noticeable to others: 'I don't feel anything's really changed, but people will say "You're on fire" or "You're like a rock star"'. The effect of having been coached for her thus extends from her own experience of being changed to colleagues noticing the positive change in her work relationships.

The experience of self-actualisation and self-transcendence is eloquently related by P6, when he describes how his style has changed through being coached, from being a rigid archer aiming for the bull's eye to being more fluid and able to steer a boat with people in it in turbulent waters. The coaching experience led him to realise his independence, and that he still needs to actualise himself through goal-directed behaviour. It also revealed to him his interdependence as being part of a team. He noted that to transcend himself and consider the impact of his leadership on others, he needs to be flexible. He related the coaching discussion between himself and his coach in which he integrated the archer metaphor with the metaphor of steering a boat towards fluidity:

'My style when I started was very much ... as an archer. So I'm incredibly goal-focused, but within that, you know how an archer stands? They're incredibly rigid, only aiming for the bull's eye. That was ... how we drew me as I started. We said we're going to try to move more to the person that steers one of those rafts down the rapid. So you've got ... people in the boat. You're steering, but you're not going in a straight line, and sometimes you're going to hit turbulence. It's not going to work out exactly like your bull's eye. So that's what I hold on to now: "Are you steering the boat in the right direction, steering it in a consistent direction, knowing it's going to weave around?" But in order to be there, you've got to be incredibly rigid in your stance, you've got to be incredibly still, versus you're allowed to be a little bit more fluid.' (P6)

In this way, P6 both realises his goals and considers the ripple effect he has on others in the workplace. He said: 'I still am incredibly rigid, but the thing is I now know'. He therefore works hard at being mindful in considering making changes to his style that would benefit others in his team. He realises that success at work is not about him, but about him in relation to others.

## Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore coaching clients' coaching experience, as expressed through metaphors. The metatheoretical frame was identity work. The findings describe the coaching experience as a process of engaging with and making sense of the self through four themes. These themes describe how coaching elicits, develops and maintains an evolving self-processing akin to identity work.

In the first theme, participants used the journey metaphor to describe how being coached encouraged self-exploration and developed their capacity for self-reflexive practice. They refer to self-exploration as an emotional and thinking journey of self-discovery, through which they consciously discovered and worked through self-defences and internal conflicts. Self-exploration is similarly described in literature as an emotional and thinking journey of self-discovery (Cherry & Boysen-Rotelli, 2016; González, 2003). The self-exploration that was initially prompted and experienced with moments of intense discomfort was ultimately described as a rewarding journey of personal value, as they became more practised at self-discovery. Being coached thus awakened the process of self-exploration and continued to develop participants' growing capacity for self-reflection. Self-enriching experiences of coaching extend long after coaching comes to an end (Flaherty, 2010; Braks, 2023), and this study proposes that the enduring effect may be due to the capacity for self-reflection that develops during the coaching journey. The journey metaphor as reflective of identity work therefore describes how participants made sense of how the self was moving through a process of change, first by exploring deep-seated self-dynamics and then by translating coached self-exploration into a more enduring self-reflexive competence. The use of a journey metaphor to indicate the experience of personal growth is common (Prince & Forr, 2021). Being coached, as a personal transformative journey, represents a process in which coaching clients discover a new self (Goble et al., 2017), leading to personal transformation and growth (Krapu, 2016), which in the context of identity work reflects self-exploration evolving into the maturing capacity to practise self-reflection.

In the second theme, participants used various metaphors (a chameleon, a pressure cooker, opening a window and switching on a light) to reflect on how being coached elicited for them self-awareness, revealing unknown thoughts and emotions, which at first cause discomfort, internal conflict and tension. Intentionally engaging with these self-dynamics heightens self-awareness of how one often perpetuates self-inhibiting thoughts and emotions. This empowers the coaching client to realise their agency in choosing to resolve self-impeding behaviour. Self-insight thus evolves from self-awareness as a more mature self-understanding, in that the locus of control becomes internal. Self-awareness means being aware of one's emotions and embodied emotions, and using them as signals for potential change. Through critical reflection, which is both a cognitive and an emotional process,

self-awareness is raised in coaching (Mbokota et al. 2022; Passarelli et al., 2022). We propose that self-awareness thus develops into self-insight as the coaching client accepts responsibility for their behaviour and actively chooses to self-correct. Self-insight is regarded as key to coaching clients' self-change and enduring personal transformation (Bennett, 2022; De Haan et al., 2010; Thompson, 2021). Through the metaphors in this theme, identity work when being coached describes self-awareness as a central yet often difficult intrapersonal sensemaking process. Identity work requires it as the basis for developing self-insight, which reflects an integrative understanding of the self in relation to others, knowing that desired change is a choice that lies within.

In the third theme, participants moved from self-acceptance to self-determination, by using metaphors of battles and heroes (Robert the Bruce, a Samurai sword and a hero), which evolved into metaphors of dance. Through these metaphors, participants' coaching experience suggests identity work, as it describes how self-acceptance follows from self-insight (theme 2), as the participants accepted their strengths and weaknesses and could openly talk about and reflect on them. Hammond et al. (2017) assert that coaching could enhance sensemaking, through revealing and reframing one's limiting perspectives. A sense of 'I am OK' results and establishes the foundation for further developing self-agency. However, in theme 2, agency reflects an internal locus of control; in theme 3, agency builds into a sense of self-determination. Self-determination reflects how participants moved from accepting the self to becoming empowered in working with the self to achieve desired work and life outcomes, as reflected in the core universal needs of self-determination theory, namely competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2022). Self-acceptance translates into self-determination as participants take responsibility for what they are competent in, their choices and actions, and their interpersonal relationships.

In theme 4, metaphors reflect that identity work as the coaching client's constant striving for self-actualisation goes beyond a focus on self and realises a capacity for personal transcendence. Compton (2023) explains that self-actualisation was expanded by Maslow in 1971 to include a sixth need of self-transcendence which allowed a more spiritual dimension of self-actualisation. Themes of independence form part of self-actualisation, while themes of interdependence relate to self-transcendence. Metaphors of growth (a seed, a tree, a forest), existential identity (Mowgli, a rock star) and personal change (from being an archer to steering a boat) reflect the identity work in this theme. Through being coached, the participants experienced increasing independence, and they were able to recognise moments of self-actualisation, by choosing who and how they wanted to be and by showing up in work and life. Self-actualisation was also anchored in always striving towards chosen life goals, but the coaching process led participants to transcend the self, as they realised their interdependence and considered the impact of their behaviour on others. With this

realisation, being coached enabled consideration of how one impacts others. Participants thus expressed resolve to change and become more flexible, attuned to others and aware of their impact on others. Brown et al. (2021) and Passarelli et al. (2022) explain that coaching facilitates self-awareness in how the coaching client engages with other. Hawkins and Smith (2018) argue that transformational coaching frees the coaching client from being stuck in the self. A fundamental change in perspective to incorporate the other in the sense of self represents a capacity for self-transcendence and suggests deep personal transformation (Eschenbacher, 2019). This relates to the notion of transpersonal identity, which means personal transformation as expanding the sense of self (Collins, 2008; Vaughan, 1985; Walsh, 1992). Instead of being a separate, isolated and independent individual entity, through coaching, the sense of self becomes an integral part of a larger system, merging with and relating to everything in the larger system (Elmer et al., 2003; Law, 2017; Vaughan, 1979, 1985, 2010).

## Implications

The findings have implications for theorising about identity work as a key process outcome in coaching, as well as for theorising about the value of using metaphor in coaching practice and research.

### Theorising about identity work as a process outcome in coaching

As individuals navigate their way through work-life experiences, they are invariably faced with the questions 'Who am I?', 'What do I stand for?' and 'How should I act?' (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). Such existential identity questions are fundamental to human life (Brygola, 2011; Tateo & Marsico, 2013; Wilber, 1979) and are a key dynamic in the coaching process (Bennett, 2021; Butcher, 2012; Snape, 2021). Consistent effort to answer these questions represents identity work to resolve the ongoing striving to create a coherent sense of self (Brown, 2015; Kreiner et al., 2006a, 2006b; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Similarly, in this study, participants experienced that making sense of self was consistently and fundamentally facilitated through the coaching process. The metaphors used by participants to reflect on their coaching experience demonstrated their identity work as self-processing along four evolving dual identity work elements. As depicted in Figure 1, across the four dual identity work elements, two types of identity work

can be recognised, namely transactional and transformational identity work. Although each identity work element involves a dual self-processing activity (as reflected in each of the themes in the findings), each part of every dual element relates to either transactional or transformational identity work. Identity work is thus proposed to be a process outcome of coaching, because it entails iterative self-processing elements that continue to develop and build on one another to transform the self.

Transactional coaching is concerned with personal change through developing competencies and skills (Fielden, 2005) in the context of a contractual relationship, where the coach applies methods to help the client achieve predefined personal improvement goals (Krausz, 2005). It fits the notion of developing an *independent* self – one who is autonomous, self-sufficient and self-contained (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), thus focusing on the uniqueness and well-being of the individual (Kurman & Sriram, 2002). It relates to what Cook-Greuter (2004) refers to as lateral, or horizontal, development of the self. Horizontal development is about accumulated knowledge and skills and a linear expansion of ways of meaning-making (Brown, 2012). It is a content-driven development process (Cook-Greuter, 2004; Gauthier, 2010; Kam & Bellehumeur, 2021; Odendaal, 2017; Petrie, 2014) facilitated by the interpersonal transactions in the coaching relationship, with outcomes demonstrated in the coaching client practising self-exploration and having enhanced self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-actualisation. These are process outcomes that reflect identity work as expanded ways of making sense of the self that build on one another, and it is thus referred to as transactional identity work.

By contrast, transformational coaching is concerned with personal change by creating fundamental shifts in the coaching client's way of thinking, feeling and behaving in relation to others (Hawkins & Smith, 2018). Transformational coaching fits the notion of developing an *interdependent* self, a perspective of self as an integral and reciprocating part of a social system, maintaining a relational and systemic understanding of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It relates to what Cook-Greuter (2004) refers to as vertical development, which entails a fundamental change in one's sensemaking capacity. Vertical development is a process of deep transformation, evident in shifting one's world view to experience new ways of making sense of one's internal and external world (Brown, 2012). Through it one develops a more integrated perspective of meaning-making and being in the world (Cook-Greuter, 2004; Odendaal, 2017; Petrie, 2014). Vertical development in the coaching context relates to transforming human consciousness (Cook-Greuter, 2004; Gauthier, 2010), or existential transformation that results in authenticity, a strengthened identity, broader spirituality and improved resilience (Ren et al., 2018). According to Stoetzel and Taylor-Marshall (2021), being coached holds the potential for transformational change, by allowing critical identity work. In the context of this study, critical identity

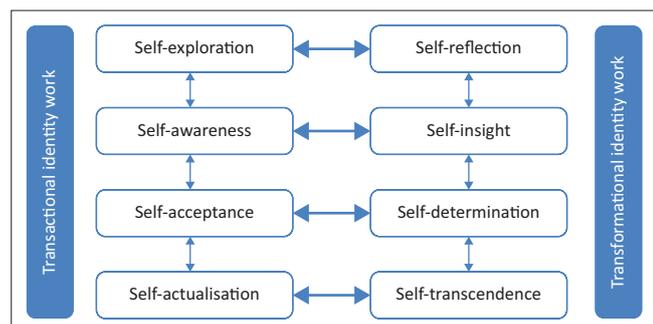


FIGURE 1: Identity work as a process outcome of coaching.

work manifested when coaching clients' transactional self-processing matured into transformational self-processing outcomes, namely practising self-reflection, developing self-insight and self-determination, and demonstrating self-transcending thoughts and behaviour.

Both horizontal development and vertical development are essential for personal growth (Brown, 2012; Cook-Greuter, 2004), and coaching should stimulate both incremental change and transformative change (De Haan et al., 2010). Unique to our study is the integration of transactional and transformational coaching into one framework. For coaching to achieve personal transformation, we suggest that both transactional and transformational identity work are needed and should be facilitated in the coaching journey. Our study demonstrates the inextricable relevance of identity work in coaching and isolates self-reflexivity as a key capacity to be developed in coaching in order to achieve the transformative benefits that coaching literature claims. We thus suggest that coaching should ultimately aim to develop the coaching client's enduring capacity for self-reflexivity. In this context, self-reflexivity entails an iterative self-processing – moving from and between horizontal and vertical identity work processes to develop both an independent and an interdependent self. Coaching holds an agentic opportunity for the coaching client to move the self from dependence through independence to interdependence (Vaughan, 1985, 2010). An enduring self-reflexive competence achieves deep personal transformation, which reflects not only a change in perspective during a coaching session but also a sustained capacity to broaden, change and adjust the self, long after coaching has been concluded (Hawkins & Smith, 2018). In this sense, as coaches, we should aspire to transformational coaching as not only encompassing but also transcending transactional coaching, to facilitate coaching clients' capacity to constantly develop new ways of sensemaking, to improve their personal and collective well-being.

### **Theorising about the value of metaphor in coaching practice and research**

In reflecting on their coaching experiences, participants used metaphors that were personal, imaginative and creative, and that allowed for a new understanding of their coaching experience. Articulating experience in the form of metaphors enables new realisations or insights (De Haan et al., 2010), because it draws clients' unconscious sensemaking into conscious awareness and facilitates the interpretation of new experiences (Emson, 2016; Prince & Forr, 2021). Metaphors also allow one to convey an embodied experience and articulate new meanings (Emson, 2016; Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006; Kozak, 1992; Thompson, 2021). In the context of this study, metaphors articulated the coaching experience as a process of identity work. Through metaphors, participants described how they made sense of self, and how their capacity to self-reflect grew during and even after coaching. Metaphors were thus used by participants as a self-reflective

sensemaking tool to make sense of their coaching experience. Metaphors played a pivotal role in making sense of self – they were used not only to reflect on identity work but also as a mechanism for continued identity work. Participants' use of metaphors to reflect on their coaching experience shows that metaphors are a potential catalytic tool in personal change and transformation (see Emson, 2016; Keizer & Post, 1996). This emphasises the value of using metaphors in the coaching context.

### **Limitations and recommendations**

A limitation of the study is that interpretations were influenced by a specific theoretical framework, and they therefore offer only one perspective of the research phenomenon in contributing to the existing body of knowledge. The possibility of alternative interpretations provides scope for continued research that could adopt different theoretical perspectives. Further research could also explore the different levels of identity in identity work, namely intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal identity.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to explore coaching clients' coaching experience as expressed through metaphors, from an identity work perspective. Analysis of the data reveals that metaphors were effectively used as a self-reflective sensemaking tool that enabled articulation of how being coached facilitates identity work. This is similar to findings in other studies emphasising the value of metaphor in coaching (Emson, 2016; Passmore, 2022). The findings describe identity work as a multidimensional process outcome of coaching, and they suggest that transactional and transformational identity work should be integrated in coaching. The study also implicitly revealed the use of metaphor in expressing the personal transformational value of coaching for the coaching client. The transformational value of coaching is evident in transformational identity work, which describes the enduring competence for self-processing that being coached develops in the coaching client. This confirms the value of being coached as a processual mechanism to activate and develop important self-processing competence that involves iterative cycles of self-exploration and self-reflection, self-awareness and self-insight, self-acceptance and self-determination, and self-actualisation and self-transcendence. Being coached activates these cycles of identity work processes towards constructing an independent and interdependent self. The evolving identity work processes are proposed as a potential tool for coaches to reflect on the progress of their coaching relationship, as well as the personal transformational value thereof for their clients. Finally, the findings may inspire coaches to make use of metaphors in coaching for their sensemaking role and their contribution to identity work.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

L.S. conducted the field work and preliminary manuscript layout. Both L.S. and A.B. contributed equally to all further aspects of the study from conceptualisation, including the literature review, research design, data analysis, constructing the themes, implications and recommendations, and the final writing up of the article.

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## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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