Tying leaders' identity work and executive coaching research together: an overview of systematic reviews and agenda for research

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite the interest in leaders' identity work as a framework for leadership development, coaching psychology has yet to expose its active ingredients and outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – To do so, the authors reconcile published systematic literature reviews (SLRs) in the field to arrive at a more thorough understanding of the role of identity work in coaching. A total of 60 eligible SLRs on identity work and coaching were identified between 2010 and 2022. Four were included in the data extraction after selecting and screening, and the full texts of 196 primary studies reported therein were analysed.

Findings – Amongst the coachee-related factors of effective coaching, the coachee's motivation, general self-efficacy beliefs, personality traits and goal orientation were the most frequently reported active ingredients, and performance improvement, self-awareness and goal specificity were the most frequently supported outcomes. The analysis indicates that leaders' identity work, as an active ingredient, can be a moderator variable for transformative coaching interventions, while strengthening leadership role identity could be one of the lasting outcomes because coaching interventions facilitate, deconstruct and enhance leaders' identity work. Further research is needed to explore the characteristics of these individual, relational and collective processes.

Originality/value – This study adds value by synthesising SLRs that report coachee-related active ingredients and outcomes of executive coaching research. It demonstrates that the role of leaders' identity work is a neglected factor affecting coaching results and encourages coaching psychologists to apply identity framework in their executive coaching practice.

Keywords Leadership, Identity work, Executive coaching, Systematic literature review

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Good leaders can lead an organisation to success or contribute to its downfall; they can inspire their subordinates, instigate transformational change or fail to make an impact. It has been posited that the more a person thinks of themselves as a leader, the more committed they are to developing their leadership mindsets and competencies. Such leadership identity is a "sub-component of one's identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as

a leader" (Day and Harrison, 2007, p. 365), which provides a framework for existing perspectives in leadership development (Day and Dragoni, 2015). Day *et al.* (2005) claimed that a strong leadership identity is a prerequisite for leadership behaviour and commitment to leadership development experiences and activities. In their leadership development model, leaders' self-view, which contains self-awareness, leadership identity and self-efficacy, mediates between leadership capabilities and distal, individual-level outcomes of the leadership development intervention (Day and Dragoni, 2015).

Identity work, however, is not a static concept but is "constantly in flux" (Brown, 2022 p. 1213) and a metaphor for how people frame, shape, maintain or change constructions of their self-concept (Sveningsson *et al.*, 2021). Given such perspectives of identity work, we might assume that facilitating leaders' identity work is also a critical ingredient of executive coaching interventions, which is a contemporary development activity of choice in many organisations and, in turn, is reflected and closely related to executive coaching research. From a coaching psychology perspective, identity work is a self-reflective and continuous process in which a person actively forms and transforms their identity by giving meaning to their experiences. However, identity work does not happen in a vacuum – a leader's identity is also an "object" of environmental (e.g. cultural) influences.

A coachee's core self-evaluations predict leadership after coaching (MacKie, 2015), and the process of leadership identity formation and change could enhance individual coaching outcomes. However, the relationship between identity work and executive coaching outcomes is not necessarily reciprocal (Miscenko, 2017). A strong leadership identity can hinder the effectiveness of executive coaching, which may lead to the deconstruction of the existing identity. At the same time, Miscenko (2017) declared that executive coaching could be appropriate for supporting leaders' identity work. It gives a safe space for reflecting on and understanding the potential controversies between the leadership role's individually and organisationally constructed meaning.

The support of identity work has recently appeared in executive coaching. For example, Skinner (2020) claimed powerful sense-making opportunities for individuals to personalise their leadership narratives. Petrie, 2014 distinguished horizontal leadership development. As a result of vertical development, leaders become more independent and achieve a self-authoring developmental level, which enhances the development of a leadership self and identity. Furthermore, Day *et al.* (2009) described three developmental layers of interventions in their integrative approach to leader development. The surface level represents the behaviours and skills, the meso-level represents the leader's identity and self-regulation and the fundamental level represents the leader's adult development processes. These levels are strongly interrelated. Thus, a leader's identity is essential for competency development and vice versa; improving competencies enhances leadership identity. Similarly, a leader's cognitive developmental stage strongly influences leadership identity formation. However, further research is needed to support any such assertions that facilitating leadership identity work leads to improved engagement in leadership development activities and executive coaching outcomes. Our paper addresses this area of further research by exploring for whom, when and how identity work contributes to executive coaching outcomes. We do so by synthesising relevant reviews on the topic in the field of coaching psychology.

1.1 Coaching and identity work: active ingredients and outcomes

Executive coaching research documents the efficacy of executive coaching in leadership development as an evidence-based intervention. It informs theoretical and methodological development by identifying a successful coaching engagement's active ingredients and outcomes. We use the term *active ingredient* as an umbrella term that refers to antecedents,

moderators and mediator variables of executive coaching outcomes. De Haan *et al.* (2013) highlighted the importance of identifying these variables and determining their differences in predicting the outcome of coaching. Existing meta-analytic research documents suggest that coaching is linked to several positive outcomes, such as goal attainment and behavioural and attitude change (Sonesh *et al.*, 2015). A recent meta-analysis (De Haan and Nilsson, 2023) also supported the positive impact of coaching intervention. However, the overall effect was lower when the coachee was a leader or manager. Indeed, there are already several SLRs in the field (e.g. Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018; Bozer and Jones, 2018; De Haan, 2019; Grover and Furnham, 2016; Lai and Palmer, 2019; McInerney *et al.*, 2021; Pandolfi, 2020) that lend support to the premise that executive coaching facilitates positive changes and goal achievements, yet none have, to our knowledge, consolidated emergent knowledge vis-a-vis coaching, identity work and leadership.

In our review, we offer a comprehensive review of SLRs and, in doing so, consolidate the rapidly emerging knowledge in the field of coaching psychology by presenting the active ingredients and outcomes of executive coaching interventions for coachees with leadership roles guided by the research question: "What do we know and not know about leaders' identity work and how this has been documented in executive coaching psychology research?".

2. Methodology
We selected, reviewed and analysed published executive coaching SLRs using the methodology and process of Cochrane Overview of Reviews (COR; Pollock *et al.*, 2020). COR is akin to a systematic review applied to identifying and synthesising existing SLRs rather than primary studies through a systematic, transparent and replicable process.

2.1 Collecting, selecting and screening eligible SLRs
Eligible studies were SLRs that included primary studies of executive (or leadership, workplace or business) coaching active ingredients and outcomes. The present study only included SLRs that synthesised studies where coachees had a leadership or managerial role, and a professional coach delivered the one-to-one intervention from 2010 to 2022. All included articles were in English in peer-reviewed journals.

The PRISMA 2020 (Page *et al.*, 2021) guidelines were adopted to guide the present study (Figure 1). Specifically, two methods were applied to identify eligible SLRs. The first was an extensive search of academic research databases, including Epistemonikos, EBSCO (ASC, BSP, APA PsychArticles and PsychINFO) and Scopus, as well as Google Scholar. The second supplementary search reviewed the references section of five recent publications on executive coaching, coaching and coaching psychology research (i.e. Cotterill and Passmore, 2019; de Haan, 2021; Lai and Palmer, 2019; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Passmore and Theeboom, 2016). Following title and abstract screening, the full text of nine studies was screened. A checklist of inclusion and exclusion criteria for the full-text search was developed (supplementary material 1) based on the COR (Pollock *et al.*, 2020) and the population, intervention, comparator, output, study (PICOS) design framework of systematic reviews (Daniels, 2018).

Four SLRs were included in the quality and relevance assessment phase – an integral element of the systematic review method, as it can mitigate the biases of primary studies and the risk of false generalisation (i.e. Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018; Bozer and Jones, 2018; Grover and Furnham, 2016; McInerney *et al.*, 2021).

The Risk of Biases Assessment (ROBIS, Whiting *et al.*, 2016, p. 232) tool was adopted in the present study to assess the quality of final eligible SLRs. The outcomes of the ROBIS are
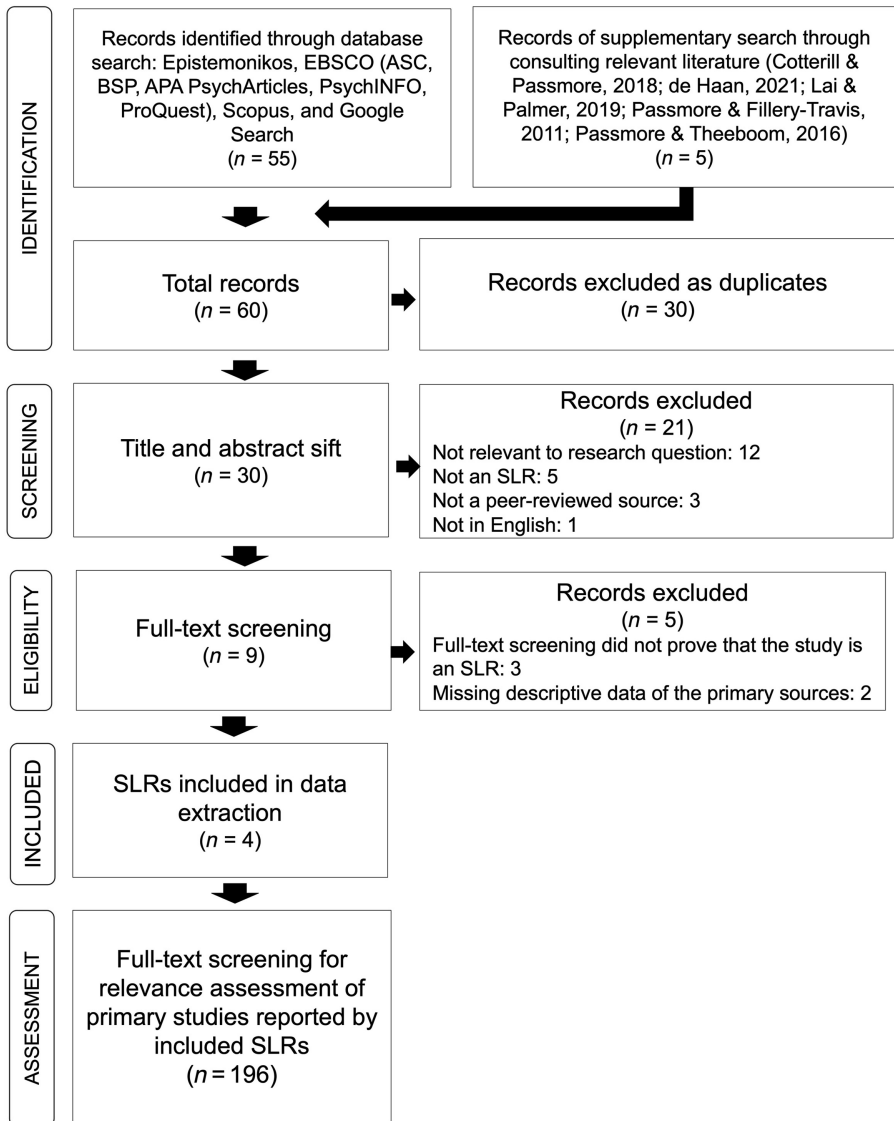
Figure 1.
Study selection, quality and relevance assessment diagram

IDENTIFICATION

Records identified through database search: Epistemonikos, EBSCO (ASC, BSP, APA PsychArticles, PsychINFO, ProQuest), Scopus, and Google Search
(*n* = 55)

Records of supplementary search through consulting relevant literature (Cotterill & Passmore, 2018; de Haan, 2021; Lai & Palmer, 2019; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Passmore & Theeboom, 2016)
(*n* = 5)

Total records
(*n* = 60)

Records excluded as duplicates
(*n* = 30)

SCREENING

Title and abstract sift
(*n* = 30)

Records excluded
(*n* = 21)
Not relevant to research question: 12
Not an SLR: 5
Not a peer-reviewed source: 3
Not in English: 1

ELIGIBILITY

Full-text screening
(*n* = 9)

Records excluded
(*n* = 5)
Full-text screening did not prove that the study is an SLR: 3
Missing descriptive data of the primary sources: 2

INCLUDED

SLRs included in data extraction
(*n* = 4)

ASSESSMENT

Full-text screening for relevance assessment of primary studies reported by included SLRs
(*n* = 196)

Source(s): Developed for this paper based on Page *et al.* (2021)

presented in supplementary material 2. We applied the following criteria for quality assessment:

(1) Did the SLR present information related to the selection and eligibility criteria of primary studies?

(2) Data extraction and integration methods were clearly explained in the SLR?

(3) Did the SLR assess the potential risk of biases in the included primary studies?

The relevance of the SLRs was assessed by screening the full text of the included primary studies ($n = 295$ before removing duplicates, $n = 196$ thereafter). Three criteria were applied to assess relevance: the role of the coachee, coach status and the type of intervention. Studies that met our eligibility criteria were as follows: the intervention was coaching (not mentoring, training or feedback), the coachee held a leadership role (executive, manager or supervisor), and the coaching was delivered by a professional coach (not by peers or managers).

Next, we mapped SLRs according to the COR guidelines for data extraction (Table 1). In the next step, we examined coachee-related data relevant to the active ingredients and the outcomes of executive coaching. In line with COR guidance (Pollock *et al.*, 2020), we also screened the primary studies where primary data was not reported in the SLR.

2.2 Data extraction

2.2.1 Active ingredients of executive coaching. Bozer and Jones (2018) reported 19, and Grover and Furnham (2016) observed 12 coachee-related active ingredients. Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) only published their interpretative meta-synthesis that developed six categories for coachee-related active ingredients: coachee personal attributes, expectations of outcomes, sensemaking of intervention, learning style, pre-, during and post-coaching motivation, and the job rank of the coachee. McInerney *et al.* (2021) did not identify active ingredients of executive coaching. Reported active ingredients are summarised in supplementary material 3.

2.2.2 Executive coaching outcomes. Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) reported only coachee-related executive coaching outcome categories in their SLR. They clustered coaching outcomes into three major categories: positive changes in personal development, behavioural changes concerning others and positive outcomes related to the coachee and their work. Bozer and Jones (2018) reported 68 coachee-related executive coaching outcomes, including affective (e.g. self-efficacy, self-confidence, perceived coaching effectiveness) and skill-based (e.g. self-reported performance and leadership skills) outcome domains. They reported only three cognitive outcomes (learning, solution-focussed thinking and problem-solving) and four types of objective results (goal achievement, promotion, retention and sickness records). Grover and Furnham (2016) reported 36 coachee-related outcomes, including a change in transformational leadership style as a longitudinal effect. McInerney *et al.* (2021) grouped coachee-level outcomes into two general categories: changed behaviour and cognitive and affective outcomes and reported 18 lasting outcomes of executive coaching. Supplementary material 4 illustrates the full list of the coachee-related outcomes.

2.3 Data transformation

Our study followed the process of data-based convergent synthesis design (Hong *et al.*, 2017, Figure 2). In step one, we summarised all coachee-related active ingredients and outcomes reported in SLRs. In step two, we re-read primary studies to understand the context of the reported data and transformed the quantitative data into textual, qualitative data. In the third step, we applied Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report on patterns related to our research aims.

First, we created two data tables, one for reported active ingredients with 23 citations and one for coaching outcomes with 46 citations from the primary coaching studies. Next, we coded the textual data. Since our research goal was to find major themes related to the leader's identity work, we applied a deductive approach to code creation and categorised related themes by applying established psychological constructs (e.g. personality traits or self-efficacy). Following the coding, we reviewed the themes of SLRs related to active ingredients and outcomes and redefined the themes.

First author	Year	No of studies included in SLR	Databases searched in SLR	Date ranges of SLR	Research question and Objective(s)	Method of synthesis	Authors' comments on limitations, risks of biases
Athanasopoulou	2018	110	PsycINFO, Business Source Complete; Annotated bibliography (Grant, 2017)	1996–2016	RQ1: "How are EC outcomes researched and what are the strengths and weaknesses of their research designs? Objective 1a: Present and evaluate how these studies are designed and researched. Objective 1b: Discuss the strengths and weaknesses from the use of different research methods or designs in future EC outcome studies and associated implications." (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018, p. 8) RQ2: "What do we know about EC outcomes and how and why do contextual factors affect these outcomes? Objective 2a: Examine what evidence exists within the EC research regarding the outcomes of EC and the factors that affect these outcomes as well as identify gaps in reported evidence. Objective 2b: Explore the implications on research and practice based on this evidence." (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018, p. 8)	Interpretation meta-synthesis (Hoon, 2013)	The qualities of including research vary. Including single method and self-report studies could be questionable

Table 1.
Data extraction table according to the COR guidelines

First author	Year	No of studies included in SLR	Databases searched in SLR	Date ranges of SLR	Research question and Objective(s)	Method of synthesis	Authors' comments on limitations, risks of biases
Bozer	2018	117	ProQuest, EBSCO, Emerald Full Text, JSTOR Business, SAGE Journals Online, Science Direct, Taylor and Francis, Emerald Journals, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library and Oxford Journals, Google Scholar	1993–2017	RG1: "to examine critically the theoretical constructs operationalised in past coaching research to provide a deeper understanding of why these factors are important in understanding what determines coaching effectiveness." (Bozer and Jones, 2021, p. 342) RG2: "to identify and discuss fundamental questions to be answered and appropriate research methodologies that can advance workplace coaching research and practice." (Bozer and Jones, 2021, p. 342)	Inductive identification of themes (theoretical constructs)	The very strict eligibility conditions may lead to a narrow review of AI and outcomes of coaching Focussing on the seven theoretical constructs might be a limitation, however, inductive coding mitigated this risk
Grover	2016	52	PsycINFO, Scopus and Google Scholar and reference lists	2003–2015	RG1: "To examine whether coaching interventions are effective" (Grover and Furnham, 2016, p. 8) RG2: "to understand the mechanisms that have been explored to potentially explain that effectiveness." (Grover and Furnham, 2016, p. 2)	A critical summary of the results of included primary studies, without synthetising them	Raised several methodological and quality issues with included studies
McInerney	2021	16	Scopus, ABI/INFORM Global, Social Sciences Citation Index and PsycARTICLES	2003–2019	RG: "to explore the individual effects of EC on managers where outcome data were collected at least one month after the end of the coaching." (McInerney et al., 2021, p. 24)	Interpretation meta-synthesis (Hoon, 2013)	The low number of primary studies did not provide strong evidence for persistent effect of EC. Self-reported improvements might be a risk of biases

Source(s): Developed for this paper based on Pollock et al. (2020)
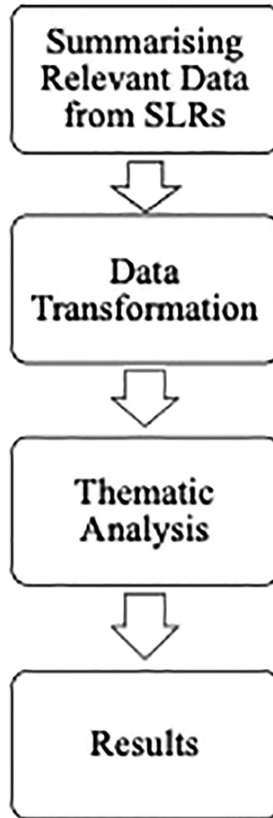
Table 1.

Source(s): Developed for this paper based on Hong *et al.* (2017)

3. Findings

3.1 Most frequently reported active ingredients and coaching outcomes

3.1.1 Coachee-related active ingredients. The total number of coachee's active ingredients reported by overviewed SLRs was 27. Coachee motivation, general self-efficacy, personality traits and learning goal orientation were the four most frequently reported.

Coachee motivation was operationalised differently across SLRs; Sonesh *et al.* (2015) examined the relationship between the coachee's intrinsic motivation and coaching outcomes, while Bozer and Sarros (2012) studied coachee pre-training motivation. Moreover, the construct of motivation itself differed across SLRs, ranging from buy-in (Bowles *et al.*, 2007) to commitment (Gan and Chong, 2015).

Low-risk studies strongly support coachee general-self efficacy as coachee-related active ingredients. De Haan *et al.* (2013) found a strong relationship between coaching outcome and coachee self-efficacy, mediated by the quality of coaching alliance. All SLRs reported this personality characteristic of the coachee as an active ingredient.

Coachee personality traits, typically consciousness, openness and emotional stability, were reported in all overviewed SLRs. However, Grover and Furnham (2016) noted that the

reported studies' results are mixed, while Stewart *et al*. (2008) found that only consciousness contributed statistically uniquely to coaching outcomes.

Learning goal orientation was also a frequently reported active ingredient. Bozer *et al*. (2013) studied the effect of this coachee characteristic on coaching outcomes. They found a positive relationship with self-reported performance moderated by coachee pre-training motivation.

Grover and Furnham (2016) pointed out that the reported variables of the coachee had a different relationship with different coaching outcomes. For example, coachee motivation is positively related to developing coachee self-awareness as an individual outcome of executive coaching. However, it has no significant relationship with improving the job performance of the coachee rated by others (Grover and Furnham, 2016, p. 20).

In conclusion, leadership identity work was not examined as an active ingredient in the 295 primary studies reviewed.

3.1.2 Coachee-related outcomes. The reviewed SLRs reported a total of 104 positive coachee-related outcomes of executive coaching. Three of them, such as improved coachee performance, self-awareness and ability to set specific goals (goal specificity), were identified by all SLRs. As McInerney *et al*. (2021) looked for the lasting effects of executive coaching, it can be assumed that these outcomes are somewhat persistent results of the coaching interventions across time. However, they cannot be considered as an undoubtedly vertical development outcome (Petrie, 2014; Day *et al*., 2009).

As coaching is a result-oriented approach, it is not surprising that the improvement of the coachee's performance is the most frequently investigated outcome. However, performance is a distal outcome (Day and Dragoni, 2015), and so far, it is not specified what proximal outcomes led to improved leadership performance due to executive coaching.

Self-insight, reducing stress and improving well-being were identified by three SLRs. Sonesh *et al*. (2015) conceptualise self-insights as a coachee's precise knowledge of behaviour change that needs to occur to achieve goal attainment (p. 196). Reducing stress and improving well-being as an outcome of coaching have been investigated in several studies. Some found a significant positive relationship between coaching and stress reduction (e.g. Gyllensten and Palmer, 2005), while others found none (McInerney *et al*., 2021).

Only McInerney *et al*. (2021) reported leadership identity change as an individual outcome of executive coaching intervention. They identified three primary studies (Skinner, 2014; Freischlag, 2019; Rathmell *et al*., 2019) that found a positive relationship between executive coaching and identity work. No other overviewed systemic study reported a direct positive outcome of the coaching on coachee leadership identity.

3.2 Re-synthesising extracted and collected data
3.2.1 Re-synthesised themes of coachee-related active ingredients. There are existing attempts at categorising coachee-related active ingredients: Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) clustered them into six groups, while Pandolfi (2020) divided them into ten groups, but none included leadership identity work.

In our study, we coded 14 coachee-related active ingredients that might influence coaching effectiveness as antecedent, mediator or moderator variables. These constructs were clustered into four subthemes and finally into two themes, as presented in Figure 3.

The first and most prominent theme identified was trait-like characteristics of the coachee. This theme includes all the relatively stable dispositions (Bozer and Jones, 2021) the coachee "brings" into the coaching, such as the coachee's personality traits and self-beliefs. The role of coachee personality, as an active ingredient of coaching was a noted topic (De Haan *et al*., 2016); specifically, Stewart *et al*. (2008) found a positive relationship between coaching transfer and consciousness, openness to experience and emotional stability. Self-beliefs

Source(s): Developed for this paper

(Bandura, 1993) are the coachee's core self-evaluation, general self-efficacy beliefs and trait learning goal orientation. The significant role of general self-efficacy beliefs in the positive outcome of coaching was supported (Stewart *et al.*, 2008; De Haan *et al.*, 2013). Learning goal orientation (Payne *et al.*, 2007) positively correlates with self-rated job performance (Bozer *et al.*, 2013). Reported primary studies conceptualised goal orientation as a dispositional, trait-like factor (Bozer *et al.*, 2013).

The state-like characteristic theme included the coachee's self-coaching capabilities and engagement. Although these variables are strongly associated with the coachee, they are influenced by contextual factors (e.g. pre-coaching interventions, coaching relationships and the organisational contexts of the coaching), and importantly, these characteristics can be developed (DeShon and Gillespie, 2005). The first subtheme of state-like characteristics is the coachee's coaching capabilities, which contain six components strongly associated with the coachee's self-regulation. Preparedness (understanding the essence of coaching and the specific role and responsibilities of the coachee) can contribute to goal achievement and development, leading to better outcomes (Bush, 2004). The positive relationship between

coaching outcomes and developmental self-efficacy (Bozer *et al.*, 2013) and feedback receptivity (Alvey and Barclay, 2007; Bozer *et al.*, 2013; Bush, 2004) are strongly supported by primary studies, but self-reflection (Tamir and Finfer, 2016) and willingness to learn and change (Alvey and Barclay, 2007) require further research.

Finally, coachee's engagement is a significant ingredient of coaching outcomes since coaching intervention demands a high activity level from the coachee: trying new behaviours and doing "homework". We identified three subthemes related to engagement: the perceived timeliness of coaching, pre-coaching motivation and coaching buy-in. Both Bush (2004) and Hill (2010) found that coachees' remarkable life or career period showed a higher engagement and openness towards coaching. The "right time for coaching" can result from a recent promotion, career dissatisfaction, or leadership disruption and can trigger openness towards coaching. Bozer *et al.* (2013) explored the relationship between pre-training motivation (as a mediator) and reported a positive interaction between pre-training motivation, self-reported performance and improved self-awareness. Coaching buy-in as a predictor variable of coaching outcomes was supported by Bowles *et al.* (2007). They monitored the coachee's buy-in (overall coaching engagement) and found that the pre-session and general level of coaching buy-in positively predicted performance and competency development.

3.2.2 Re-synthesised themes of coachee-related coaching outcomes. The reviewed SLRs reported several outcomes that showed the positive impact of executive coaching on a leader's behaviour, skills and role identity. This study identified 28 executive coaching coachee-related outcomes. Two main themes emerged through the thematic analysis process, as demonstrated in Figure 4. The first theme is *"forming"*. Executive coaching has a lasting, positive impact on leadership performance, skills, behaviour and leadership style. This theme could be interpreted as an outcome of horizontal (Petrie, 2014) or surface-level (Day *et al.*, 2009) interventions.

However, reported outcomes of the executive coaching support the idea that the coaching intervention could have a transformative impact on the coachee's mindset, ability to adapt to change and leadership role identity. In our synthesis, the "transforming" theme contains all outcomes that represent a deeper level of vertical (Petrie, 2014) development of the coachee. For example, Grant (2017) reported that coachees associated their improvement in solution-focussed thinking and viewing work relationships in a new perspective with coaching. Also, Trevillion (2018) found that both coachees and their managers reported a growth mindset as a common outcome of the coaching intervention.

In the next part, we present a detailed qualitative account of how our findings address our research questions.

Leadership identity-related themes. McInerney *et al.* (2021) reported only leadership identity themes when they investigated the lasting effects of executive coaching. They showed that leader identity formation was one of the dominant dimensions of analysed studies. Reviewed research works included interview studies (Skinner, 2014; Trevillion, 2018) and personal accounts (Freischlag, 2019; Rathmell *et al.*, 2019). We found four reported outcomes that could be directly associated with leadership identity work and linked to executive coaching: internalised leadership identity, the authenticity of identity work, the pivotal moment for the identity transformation and strengthened leadership presence.

Internalised leadership identity. DeRue and Ashford (2010) emphasised the importance of fully internalising leadership (role) identity. Leaders who regard their leadership role as an integrated part of their identity are recognised by their followers and endorsed by their organisation. This beneficial cycle further enhances their leadership status and provides additional gratification for their internalised leadership identity, continuing the cycle. Internalisation is indeed a central concept of the identity work framework. When individuals claim an identity and others affirm this identity, this forms the crux by which leaders' and

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Forming	Leadership skills and behaviour	Task management skills
		Functional leadership
		Leadership style
		Interpersonal skills and communication
		Managing upwards
		Managing stress and anxiety
		Changing destructive habit
	Leadership performance	Individual performance
Transforming	Leadership thinking and mindset	Mindset
		Solution-focused thinking
		Perspective taking
		Personal responsibility
		Proactivity
		Casual attribution of performance problems
	Change and learning agility	Developmental goal setting and planning
		Experiencing developmental support
		Openness to new behaviours
		Improving resilience
		Self-awareness
		Change readiness
		Motivation to change
		Tolerance of ambiguity
		Flexibility
	Leadership identity	Internalised leadership identity
		Authenticity of identity work
		Pivotal moment for identity transformation
		Strengthened leadership presence

Figure 4.
Re-synthesised
coachee-related
outcomes of executive
coaching

Source(s): Developed for this paper

followers' identities are interdependently socially co-constructed (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). We can observe this aptly manifested in Skinner's (2014) work, where the author explored the coaching experiences of senior women executives; a participant described

> Before I did the coaching, leadership was not really something that I would associate with myself . . . but through coaching, I started to think in terms of having leadership as an aspect of myself (Skinner, 2014, p. 106).

Internalising one's leadership identity transforms abstract identity (i.e. leader) into a component of self-identity (i.e. I am a leader). Moreover, we also observe how the coaching provided the coachee with a zone for proximal development (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978), precipitating identity development. Another important aspect of coaching towards a leadership identity is understanding the leadership role and making it clear to others:

> I needed to be clear about what my role was, and I needed to be able to express that clearly to senior people: 'This is me, and this is what I do.' I had never focused very much on that thought process before. Skinner (2014) (p. 106)

Indeed, coachees must also communicate their newly acknowledged leader identity to others; perceiving oneself as a leader is followed by presenting oneself as one (and being accepted as one).

The authenticity of identity work. The second identity-related executive coaching outcome is being authentic in identity work. The personal account of Freischlag (2019) and the qualitative study of Skinner (2014) supported that the authentic internalisation of leadership identity was a common personal experience for the coachees:

> their executive coaching experience helped them to define their personalised approach to leadership rather than internalising prevailing male norms of leading. (Skinner, 2014, p. 107).

Here, the coachee experienced a dialogic and non-directive approach that respects the coachee's autonomy and holds the coachee as the most competent and responsible person for achieving their goals. Skinner (2014) proposed the self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) as a framework for explaining the difference between a fully integrated, owned and authentic leadership identity and an introjected, false and inauthentic role identity. Freischlag (2019) shared a highly similar personal coaching experience in her account of

> Staying 'true to myself' while embracing a new role. (Cited by McInerney *et al.*, 2021, p. 172).

Hence, the nuanced interplay of accepting a new identity and recognising that identity as a part of oneself is important for perceiving and presenting oneself authentically. Of course, this realisation does not happen immediately, and many studies have hinted at a 'pivotal' moment of transformation.

The pivotal moment for identity transformation. Although leadership identity work is an ongoing, iterative process (Caza *et al.*, 2018; DeRue and Ashford, 2010), pivotal moments can lead to "profound leadership identity change" (Spence *et al.*, 2019, p. 12). Spence *et al.* (2019) argued that the perspective of the punctuated equilibrium theory, together with the transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997), can explain the coachee's experiences of identity change during and after the coaching intervention. According to the punctuated equilibrium theory, there is a relatively stable phase in which learning is slow and a punctuated phase with rapid changes, which leads to a fundamental alteration in the coachee's deep structure (for example, beliefs and attitudes). These critical moments of realisation can occur during coaching. A well-formulated coaching question, asked at the right time, initiates a gradual transformation process. It can also have a "delayed effect" and happen after the coaching sessions have ended, for example:

> That really started changing my perspective on my confidence and my skills, and that has been something that has stayed with me for a very long time. [But] . . . human beings don't just turn on a dime, they take time to absorb lessons and take that on board, and develop and change and grow. (Spence *et al.*, 2019, p. 12).

It may be that coachees need an incubation period to internalise and integrate the impact of these critical realisations emerging from transformative coaching questions. Indeed,

transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) suggests that a person must undergo the necessary transition phases before the fundamental transformation happens.

Strengthened leadership presence. The final identity-related outcome is leadership presence that supports the positive result of strengthened, authentic leadership identity in relationships and communication. Leadership presence is still a nebulous concept. O'Neil *et al.* (2015) define leadership presence as "a combination of a unique voice, style of engagement, and positive contributions" (p. 2). They identified four essential components for developing presence: self-confidence, self-efficacy, influence and authenticity. Could leadership presence be a projection of internalised leadership identity? Leaders who think of themselves as leaders may exert a more substantial impact on their audience. Trevillion (2018, p. 33) studied the effectiveness of an early talent leadership programme, including coaching, and found that improvement of impactful presentation and presence (i.e. "high impact with presence: influencing and inspiring") was one of the critical outcomes. Certainly, executive presence, charisma and influence are frequently conceptualised as leadership traits.

4. Discussion and implications

4.1 What do we know about the relationship between leaders' identity work and executive coaching research?

Our synthesis of SLRs provides a comprehensive snapshot of the last decade's coaching research vis-à-vis leadership identity. Primarily, studies that explored the lasting effect of coaching reported that coaching affects the identity work of leaders and enhances the integration and embodiment of leadership identity authentically (McInerney *et al.*, 2021). We also know that executive coaching improves the coachee's self-awareness, leadership self-efficacy, openness and ability to change. These competencies might support identity transition.

We identified a research gap concerning the potential effect of leaders' identity work (as a coachee-related active ingredient) on executive coaching outcomes. Only a few investigated this subject (Miscenko, 2017; Middleton *et al.*, 2019) and overviewed SLRs did not find related primary studies. Nevertheless, the extracted data and the re-synthesis of the reported findings provide directions for tying identity work to executive coaching research.

4.1.1 Leaders' identity work as active ingredients of executive coaching research. Firstly, we posit that if coachees regard themselves as leaders, they will be more motivated in executive coaching. Coaching demands deeper involvement and pre-intervention motivation than other leadership development methods, such as training. We can assume that the motivation to develop as a leader is higher when a coachee internalises the leadership role identity than when a coachee does not. Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) and Reichard and Walker's (2016, p. 17) leader developmental model support this assumption; for instance, the "development of leader identity and motivation to lead" is an antecedent of motivation to develop.

Further research can help better understand how identity work relates to pre-coaching motivation. Coaching can be a relationship that enhances leadership identity instead of being identity-threatening. As identity work is a multilevel process (individual, relational and collective, Day and Harrison, 2007), further research must address the effect of each level of identity work on pre-coaching motivation and engagement.

Secondly, although some authors appear to suggest that today's leaders' identity work is an ongoing process, other scholars argue that identity work involves a relatively stable and more fluid transition period triggered by environmental challenges that "can initiate more intense identity work" (Caza *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, it can be assumed that coachees will be more engaged in coaching during these intense stages. Indeed, developmental approaches (e.g. Kegan, 2009) suggest that successful transitions between the different developmental

stages impact individual personal and social identity, including different role identities, such as leadership identity.

Thirdly, the coachee's cognitive developmental level might support or limit the outcome of transformative executive coaching. Kegan (2009) argued that transformative learning can be conceptualised as a development of the meaning-making complexity of the individual. Kegan's model of self-development could be applied to a leader's identity work (Lewin *et al.*, 2019). Cognitive complexity might be an essential variable of the coachee's self-coaching capability in our clusters of coachee-related active ingredients.

4.1.2 Linking leaders' identity work and research of executive coaching outcomes. McInerney *et al.* (2021) reported several identity-related outcomes of executive coaching. Four themes emerged from these results: the internalised leadership identity, the authenticity of identity work, the pivotal moment for the identity transformation and the strengthened leadership presence. Besides the directly identity-related outcomes, all reviewed SLRs reported enhancing self-efficacy and self-awareness. Thompson (2016) found a positive relationship between leadership self-efficacy and leadership identity development amongst student leaders. Self-reflection is a crucial mechanism for developing self-understanding and identity work. In conclusion, the SLRs supported enhancing leaders' identity as one executive coaching proximal outcome. However, the primary studies' research methods (personal accounts and case studies) substantially limited the generalisability of these findings, raising the need for further research. Indeed, leadership identity work is a complex and highly subjective psychological process that takes longer to unfold, and to this end, we also recommend longitudinal research designs with large samples.

4.2 Implications
Despite the rapid expansion of coaching over the last five years, we echo Trevillion (2018) that much more research is needed to explore the "transformational impacts of coaching at the deep emotional level" (p. 21). To support this, we propose a leadership identity framework for executive coaching psychology research.

According to our tentative conceptualisation, identity work influences and is influenced by executive coaching. In this model, the leader's identity work is an active ingredient and proximal outcome of executive coaching intervention. Identity work could be conceptualised as an antecedent of coaching engagement or pre-coaching motivation, and improved leadership identity is also a valuable outcome of executive coaching.

Pre-coaching motivation will be low if a formally appointed leader has an ambivalent or negative (rejected) leadership identity. We suggest that in these cases, executive coaches must be focussed on facilitating identity work and set a contract to identity work with the coachee and the sponsor. The output of the coaching here is the level of acceptance of leadership identity (rejected, ambivalent, accepted or identified). Executive coaching is a challenging and safe context for identity work, including self-reflection, meaning-making of experiences and developing the narrative of leadership identity. The coaching intervention facilitates the deconstruction of an existing leader's identity and enhances the emergence of a new identity. The field of coaching psychology needs further studies to describe these processes. Popular models for appraising coaching readiness focus on the coachee's openness and personal responsibility but rarely explore role identity. We propose that executive coaches and sponsors of coaching should be more aware of leaders' identity work, reflect on leadership identity and examine the relationship between the self and leadership role identity. In evaluating coaching outcomes, the enhancement of leadership identity, self-efficacy and self-awareness should be included.

Identity work as a proximal outcome can be conceptualised and measured as a salience of leadership identity (Stryker and Serpe, 1982), which focusses on the performance and

enactment of leadership identity. We contend that the positive impact of executive coaching is due not only to the development of leadership skills and mindset, but the enhancement of the application of these new competencies through a more salient leadership role identity. Again, further research is needed to describe the specific psychological components and mechanism of executive coaching that may have a positive impact on identity salience.

5. Conclusions and limitations

While some countries have established professional standards for coaching psychology (e.g. England, BPS Division of Coaching Psychology), others are less well-regulated. Coaching identity work is a promising practice area for coaching psychologists. Leaders' identity work is not a well-defined concept yet, but is a rapidly growing research area. Our results support the idea that executive coaching enhances the identity work of leaders. The direct and positive effect on internalising leadership role identity is partly supported by a few qualitative studies exploring the lasting impact of executive coaching. However, identity work was not reported as coachee-related active ingredients (i.e. antecedent, predictive, mediator or moderator variable).

Our study has several limitations. Firstly, it was challenging to categorise such closely interrelated research variables as personality, self and identity to understand how identity work is linked to executive coaching. In our deductive thematic analysis, we narrowly looked for coachees' self-view (self-concept) and identity narrative as active ingredients and outcomes of executive coaching. However, there are other ways of categorising the SLRs' findings. Secondly, conceptualising identity work as an active ingredient and outcome of coaching can lead to circular reasoning. We attempted to mitigate this by emphasising the different roles identity work plays before and after the coaching engagement in our tentative model. Finally, a critical analysis of the classifications used in prior SLRs would also be a good avenue for further research.

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Supplementary Material
The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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