Potential Identities: A Case Study of Professional Coach-Client Communication

*Honors Thesis Project by Scott Shank*
What is Coaching

- $2 billion industry
- 60% of US companies hire coaches
- Training, leader development, etc.
- Coach approach to managing
Why study coaching from a communication perspective?

The International Coaching Federation defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.”
Literature

- Symbolic Interactionism
- Dramaturgical Performance
- Role Theory

- Social Identity Theory
- Identity Negotiation
- Communication as Identity
Communication Theoretical Lenses

Goffman’s Dramaturgical Approach
• Identity as enacted performance
• Regions and regional behavior

Hecht’s Communication Theory of Identity
• Four frames: Personal, relational, communal, & enacted
• Interpenetration and identity gaps
Research Questions

RQ1: What are the perceptions of coaches regarding the role coaching plays in facilitating client identity?

RQ2: What role does the coaching process play in facilitating coach identity?
Method

Participants
• Three coaches
• PCC credentials with ICF
• 20+ yrs experience prior to coaching
• Diversity in coach background

Research Process
• Qualitative interviews
• Grounded approach based on Tracy (2013)
• Coding in NVIVO 10
• Codebook and analytic memos (Tracy)
Results and Interpretations – 4 Themes

- Stories of identity transformation
- The backstage dressing room
- Identity gaps and communication strategies
- Hat-switching as coach identity work
Results and Interpretations

Theme 1: Stories of Identity Transformation
- I guess I can smile at three people today
- Laying an old identity to rest
Results and Interpretations

Theme 2: The Backstage Dressing Room
• It’s a safe place to be vulnerable
• Be prepared to actively engage
Results and Interpretations

Theme 3: Identity Gaps and Creative Solutions
- Complex self with multiple identities
- Exploration of overlapping frames
Results and Interpretations

Theme 4: Hat-switching as coach identity work
• Clients know what to expect
• Helps coaches navigate various roles and expectations
Practical Take-a-ways

- Framing identity around communication
- Recognition of impact of coaching on identity
- Value of backstage dressing room metaphor
- Value of Communication Theory of Identity
Limitations

- Sample size and diversity
- Similarity of coach philosophy due to coach training
- Mixed-method research would enhance future studies
Potential Topics for Future Research

• How does coach background influence their definition of coaching and communication during coaching sessions?

• In what ways might the identity work that happens in coaching be used by organizations as a tool for control?
Questions & Feedback
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