Advancing the Science of Executive Coaching through Leader/ship Identity Work

Nelia Koroleva
London, United Kingdom

Abstract

This paper advances the theoretical foundations of executive coaching by focusing on Leader/ship identity work. While executive coaching is widely used for leadership development, its application through identity work is limited due to a lack of conceptual frameworks and evidence-based practices. The paper aims to integrate Leader/ship identity work into executive coaching, enhancing both theory and practice. Based on a qualitative doctoral study using Narrative Inquiry with 34 expert global coaches conducted between 2017 and 2024, it introduces the Mechanism of Executive Coaching for Leader/ship Identity Work and presents executive coaching as an Identity Enhancement Space, refining coaching concepts and practices.

Keywords: executive coaching, leader/ship identity work

Introduction

Executive coaching has become a critical tool for leadership development over the past three decades, with organizations worldwide investing heavily in the growth of their leaders (Corrie & Lawson, 2017). In 2020 alone, over $2.9 billion was spent on executive coaching (ICF, 2021). Traditionally, executive coaching has been viewed as a tool for improving performance and achieving specific business outcomes. Recently, both executive and leadership coaching are recognized for fostering agency in identity development by facilitating identity work (e.g., McInerney, Giga & Morris, 2021; Mosala & Bennett, 2024; Skinner, 2020a; Steyn & Barnard, 2024; Szekely et al., 2024).

While executive coaching in supporting identity work incorporates insights from systematic literature reviews (SLRs) by Szekely et al. (2024) and McInerney, Giga, and Morris (2021), a conceptual framework by Skinner (2000a), personal accounts (Freischlag, 2019; Rathmell et al., 2019), qualitative studies (Bennett, 2021; Mosala & Bennett, 2024; Skinner, 2014; Steyn & Barnard, 2024), and Skinner's (2000b) quantitative study, coaching theory and research remain inconsistent, particularly regarding their explicit role in leader, leadership development and identity work. This lack of clarity hinders academic progress and complicates the practical application of executive coaching interventions, limiting communication among researchers, practitioners, educators, organizations and leaders. This gap also reduces the value of executive coaching in leadership development and undermines the integration of identity work within executive coaching. Given the growing emphasis on identity as a central concept in leadership development (Day, 2024; Fox-Kirk & Egan, 2024), this vagueness presents a significant challenge for executive coaching.

As leadership becomes increasingly complex, with roles that are dynamic and ever-evolving (Clark & Harrison, 2018; Cox, Madison & Eva, 2022), integrating *Leader/ship identity work* into executive coaching is essential. By doing so, this paper aims to advance executive coaching by providing a comprehensive understanding of *Leader/ship identity work*, focusing not only on what leaders do but also on who they are, and how their self-perception shapes their decisions and actions. Framing executive coaching through the lens of *Leader/ship identity work* transforms it into a purposeful process that enables leaders to explore, understand, and evolve their identity, shifting coaching from a performance-enhancement tool to an identity-driven intervention.

Definitions

Leader identity refers to how individuals perceive themselves as leaders, shaping their behavior, motivations, and engagement with leadership tasks (Day, 2000; 2333; Miscenko, Guenter & Day, 2017). It is a deeply personal aspect of leadership, influencing individual development and leadership actions (Kragt & Day, 2020). Leadership identity encompasses relational, collective, and social aspects, extending beyond self-perception to include organizational roles, group cohesion, and others' perceptions (Day, 2000; Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Haslam et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012).

The concept of *Leader/ship identity* emerged from my doctoral study (2017-2024), which revealed that executive coaches often address both leader and leadership identity simultaneously, recognizing the deep connection between personal identity and leadership. Insights from 34 expert coaches across 10 countries highlighted how coaching explores these intertwined aspects, enabling leaders to better understand who they are and how they lead. This approach promotes a holistic view of leadership development, emphasizing the inseparable link between a leader's identity and their leadership, as discussed in Sunderman & Orsini (2024).

Identity work involves the continuous development and adaptation of self-concept in relation to personal experiences, organizational roles, and social expectations (Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018; Ibarra et al., 2014). This dynamic, relational process requires leaders to reconcile tensions arising from role changes, transitions, or conflicts (Brown, 2015; Dutton, Roberts & Bednar, 2010; Epitropaki et al., 2017). Leaders construct and negotiate their identities through interactions with followers and the organizational environment, engaging in activities to create, maintain, and revise their identities (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Limited Understanding of Leader/ship Identity Work in Coaching

The conceptualization of *Leader/ship identity work* in executive coaching is lacking, with research constrained by a lack of clarity and insufficient empirical evidence to fully capture its complexities. While executive coaching studies like Skinner (2014) and Bennett (2021) provide valuable insights on leader identity development, they focus on relatively narrow, specific contexts, such as executive coaching for women in senior roles or leaders facing organisational change. This narrow focus limits the generalizability of their findings and leaves gaps in understanding how *Leader/ship identity work* unfolds across different cultural, organisational, and gendered contexts. For instance, Bennett's (2021) study, while rich in its exploration of identity work and personal uncertainty, does not clarify the exact nature of the coaching process,

making it difficult to generalize the findings beyond its specific sample. Skinner's (2000b) work similarly faces challenges, as it overlooks the complexities of coaching in diverse organisational settings and its potential variations in leader identity development. Therefore, a broader understanding of *Leader/ship identity work* is needed, one that accounts for a wider range of leaders across different industries, backgrounds, and geographical locations.

Several qualitative studies (Bennett, 2021; Freischlag, 2019; Skinner, 2014; Steyn & Barnard, 2024; Rathmell, Brown & Kilburg, 2019) provide valuable insights into leader and leadership identity development. However, these studies primarily focus on the experiences of senior leaders and exclude the perspectives of executive coaches. By omitting coaches' insights, these studies overlook how coaching practices specifically support *Leader/ship identity work* across various contexts. To address this gap, it is crucial to integrate both the theoretical foundations of identity work and the practical insights of executive coaches, as their perspectives are key to understanding how coaching facilitates identity development in leaders.

Theoretical perspectives such as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner et al., 1987), and various identity work concepts (Caza & Posner, 2010; DeRue, Ashford & Cotton, 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010) provide scientific foundation for understanding *Leader/ship identity work* in executive coaching. These frameworks emphasize the personal, relational, and collective dimensions of identity development (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; DeRue, Ashford & Cotton, 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005). Concepts such as individualized internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement help illustrate the multifaceted nature of leadership identity (Caza & Posner, 2010). Additionally, identity work in leadership can be approached through socio-cognitive, discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, and psychodynamic perspectives, offering deeper insights into how leaders shape and maintain their self-concept (Brown, 2022).

Building on these theoretical foundations, I have developed a conceptual framework (see Figure 1 below) that integrates *Leader identity work*, *Leadership identity work*, and *Leader/ship identity work*, offering a comprehensive approach to understanding how executive coaching can support identity development in leaders.

The top section of the conceptual framework clarifies the "conceptual context": the distinction between leader development and leadership development (Day, 2000, p. 581), and presents a holistic view of *Leader/ship* by integrating both internal (leader) and external (leadership) dimensions (Koroleva, 2024; Sunderman & Orsini, 2024). It emphasizes the importance of understanding a leader's self-concept and how it interacts with their leadership role, wider contexts and perspectives, providing a comprehensive lens for exploring *Leader/ship identity*.

The middle section synthesizes key conceptual literature on leader and leadership identity work, emphasizing how identity construction is shaped by both individual and social processes. DeRue, Ashford, and Cotton (2009) conceptualize leader identity as a dynamic interplay of claiming and granting, where self-assertion and external validation are central to identity formation. This process is further nuanced by Hammond, Clapp-Smith, and Palanski's (2017) four dimensions: strength, integration, level, and meaning, which reveal how identities are not fixed but continuously negotiated across different phases such as conflict and interaction, as

Luhrmann and Eberl (2007) suggest. Brown (2022) extends this framework by identifying cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral approaches to identity, emphasizing the multifaceted ways individuals navigate and express their leadership roles. Additionally, Caza and Posner's (2010) three elements: individualized internalization, relational recognition and collective endorsement, focus on the interdependent nature of identity formation, wherein internal values, interpersonal acknowledgment and group affirmation work together to shape an individual's *leadership identity*. This synthesis reveals that leader identity is not only a personal construct but a relational and social process, influenced by interactions within organizational and societal contexts.
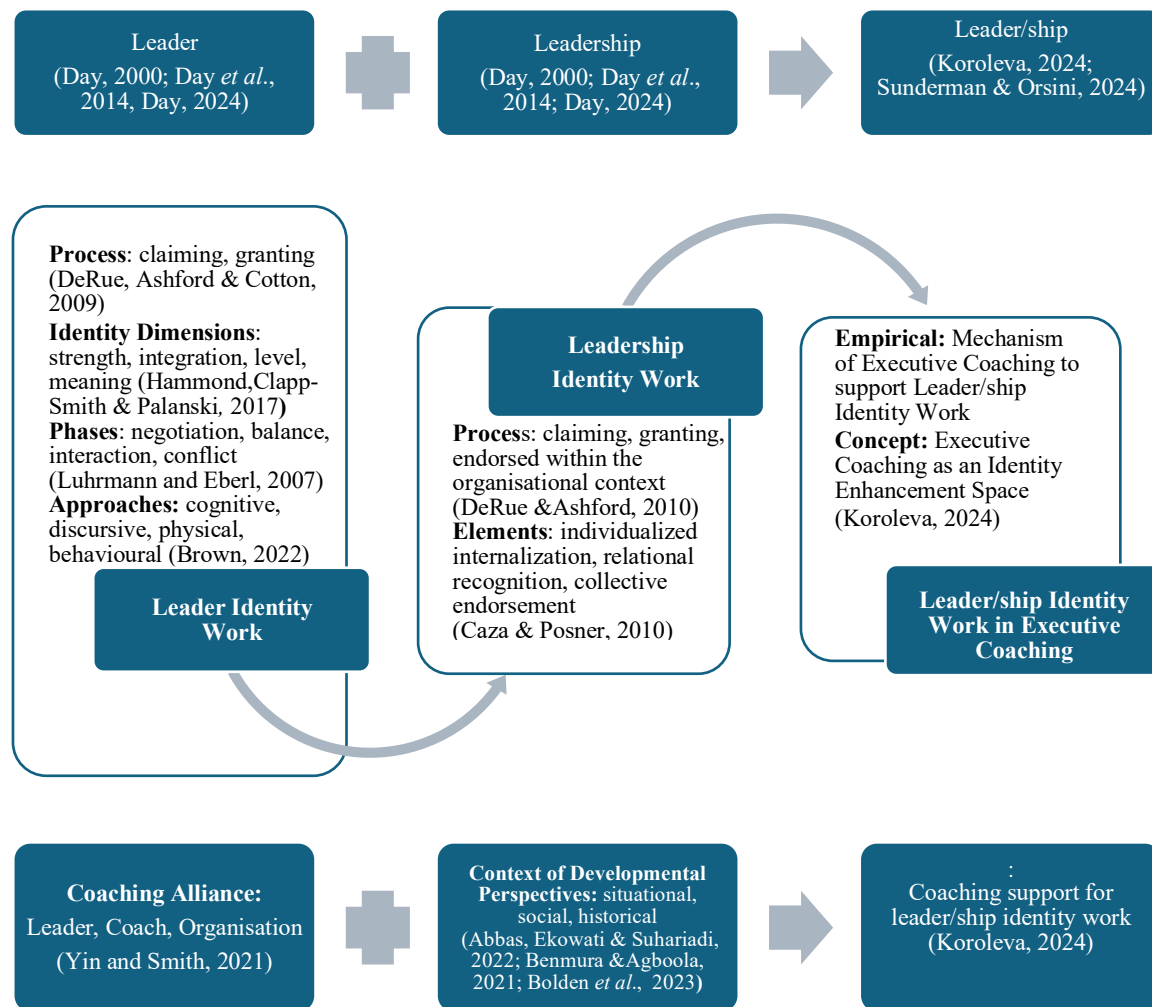

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of multiple domains of Leader identity work, Leadership identity work and Leader/ship identity work (developed by the author).

By integrating these perspectives, the framework offers a more nuanced understanding of the processes involved in Leader, Leadership and *Leader/ship identity work*. This synthesis provides a foundation for understanding how coaches can support the development, refinement, and adaptation of Leader/ship identity within the coaching context. It also incorporates *the Mechanism* of *executive coaching to support Leader/ship identity work*, which outlines the

coaching practices within the *Identity Enhancement Space* concept, highlighting how they work together to foster *Leader/ship identity work* in executive coaching (Koroleva, 2024).

The bottom section of the conceptual framework incorporates elements such as the *Coaching Alliance* (Lai & Smith, 2021) and *Context of Developmental Perspectives*, including situational, social, and historical dimensions (Abbas, Ekowati & Suhariadi, 2022; Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Bolden, Gosling & Hawkins, 2023). The *Coaching Alliance* emphasizes the collaborative relationship between the coach, coachee and organization, highlighting how power dynamics shape the coaching process. By recognizing these relational aspects, the framework fosters an ethical and effective coaching approach, acknowledging the complexities of the "triangular political space" (Lai & Smith, 2021, p. 488). It also integrates *Leadership Developmental Perspectives* to understand the external forces influencing *Leader/ship identity Work*, ensuring that coaching strategies remain responsive to a leader's evolving environment and external pressures. Additionally, it incorporates *Coaching Support for Leader/ship Identity Work* (Koroleva, 2024), reinforcing how coaching practices can intentionally support the development of *Leader/ship identity* within these dynamic contexts.

In summary, the conceptual framework provides clarity by defining leader identity, leadership identity, and *Leader/ship identity work*, offering valuable insights for executive coaching. The unified concept of *Leader/ship identity* captures the complexity of leadership, presenting a more adaptable and integrative approach to identity work by addressing the interconnectedness of both leader and leadership identities. Recognizing that a leader's personal identity and their leadership identity are deeply intertwined, this framework enables coaches to provide tailored support. By integrating these dimensions, coaches should acknowledge the fluidity and complexity of identity work, fostering deeper, long-term growth.

Next, I will present the self-developed *Mechanism of Executive Coaching to Support Leader/ship Identity Work*, grounded in empirical data from my doctoral research (Koroleva, 2024). The *Mechanism* outlines how globally based expert executive coaches support senior leaders and executives in navigating *Leader/ship identity work*. The 34 executive coaches involved in my doctoral research (2017-2024), held ICF Master Certified Coach (MCC) or Professional Certified Coach (PCC) credentials, ensuring a high level of expertise. These coaches, with an average tenure of 12.2 years and ranging from 4 to 30 years of experience, were based in Canada, France, Greece, Hong Kong, Indi, Italy, Malta, Spain, the United Kingdon and the United States. They provided coaching to senior leaders and executives across various sectors, including multinational companies, Fortune Global 500 firms, universities and government organizations.

The Empirical Mechanism of Executive Coaching to Support Leader/ship Identity Work

The *Mechanism of Executive Coaching to support Leader/ship identity work* (Figure 2) integrates three key themes derived from empirical data: *The holistic and dynamic leader/ship identity work; Contextual factors and intrinsic aspects, influencing leader/ship identity work; and The Coaches' role in supporting leader/ship identity work* (Koroleva, 2024). This mechanism highlights the integration of *Leader/ship identity work* in executive coaching, emphasizing the dynamic and ongoing interaction between leaders' identities and their leadership roles.
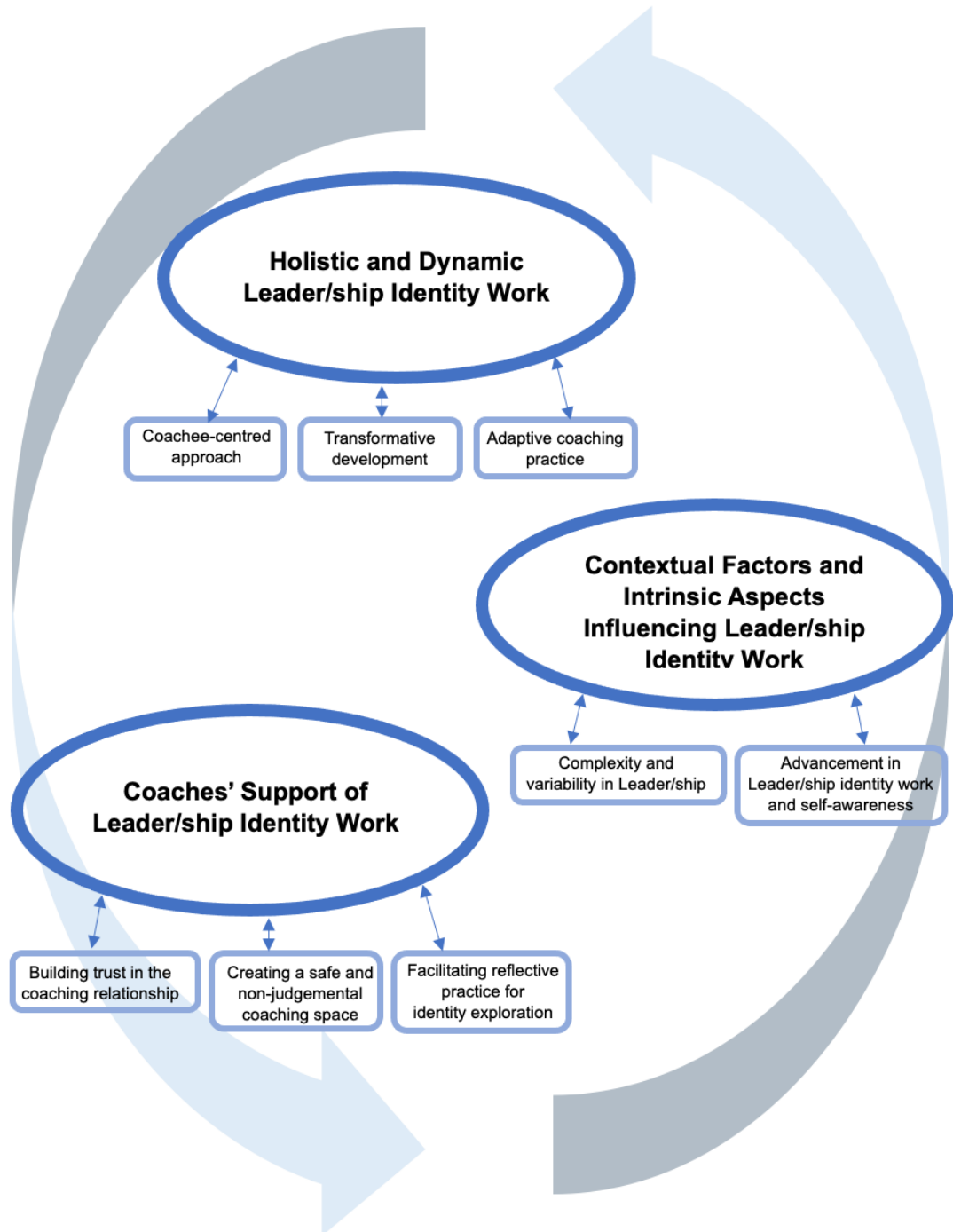
Figure 2. Mechanism of executive coaching to support Leader/ship identity work

The Holistic and Dynamic Leader/ship Identity Work

This mechanism includes the first theme, *Holistic and Dynamic Leader/ship Identity Work*, and explores three interconnected sub-themes: *Coachee-centred approach*, *Transformative development*, and *Adaptive coaching practice*. The exploration of coaches' experiences

highlights the comprehensive and adaptive nature of executive coaching in supporting *Leader/ship identity work*. The *Coachee-centred approach* emphasizes the importance of prioritizing the coachee's personal needs, goals, and development. Coaches create supportive, non-judgmental environments with clear boundaries, allowing leaders to define their own objectives and engage in meaningful self-reflection. This approach fosters deeper connections and ensures that coaching is tailored to the coachee's unique needs, underscoring the significance of honest dialogue, personal empowerment and alignment with *Leader/ship identity*.

The *Transformative development* sub-theme focuses on leveraging the coachee's inherent strengths to facilitate personal and professional transformation. Coaches adopt a holistic approach, integrating personal values with leadership goals, emphasizing self-awareness, overcoming limiting patterns, and identifying strengths. This process aligns personal growth with leadership roles, addressing evolving challenges while providing real-time support at the coachee's pace. The *Adaptive coaching practice* sub-theme highlights the importance of flexibility and adaptability in coaching. By focusing on personal issues such as self-confidence and self-awareness, coaches help leaders navigate challenges and enhance their effectiveness.

For example, Thomas's (a pseudonym) statement below suggests that focusing solely on the professional aspects of a leader without considering their personal context may lead to an incomplete understanding of their identity. This perspective advocates for a more holistic view that encompasses both personal and professional dimensions in executive coaching. He articulated:

> Focusing on a leader's professional role in executive coaching, not the person, we will miss the whole Universe. Without considering their personal context, we will miss the full spectrum of who they are.

Similarly, Paul (a pseudonym) shared:

> With any coachee I aim to understand their underlying intentions. When coaching senior leaders, such as MDs or CEOs, I focus on the person, rather than their job title, and then we address the broader organisational context and the system, as needed.

The research findings suggest that executive coaching should take a comprehensive view of leaders. Empirical data supports the idea that a holistic coaching approach, which integrates both personal values and professional goals, enables more meaningful development. Leaders should be encouraged to explore their personal experiences and how these shape their leadership decisions, ultimately leading to more authentic and effective leadership.

Contextual Factors and Intrinsic Aspects Influencing Leader/ship Identity Work

The second key element of the mechanism highlights the influence of Contextual Factors and Intrinsic Aspects on Leader/ship identity work, focusing on two sub-themes: the Complexity and variability in leader/ship identity, and Advancement in self-awareness and Leader/ship identity work.

The mechanism stresses that executive coaching must consider the broader environment in which leaders operate. For example, Sheena (a pseudonym) highlights that coaching encourages leaders to reassess their self-perspectives, integrate new insights, and align their self-view with

their authentic identity, building confidence and overcoming internal challenges, such as feelings of impostor syndrome. She expressed:

> Coaching challenges leaders to reassess their self-concepts and perspectives, encouraging them to integrate new insights for a more holistic view. It builds confidence by helping them recognise their true capabilities and overcome feelings of imposture. In coaching they shift their perceptions, aligning their self-view with their values and authentic identity.

The ability of coaches to understand the leader's specific organizational context ensures that coaching practices are relevant and impactful. McInerney, Giga, and Morris (2021) argue that coaching interventions are most effective when they consider the broader systems and environmental influences surrounding the leader. In addition to the external organizational context, empirical data reveals that intrinsic factors such as a leader's struggles with authenticity, lack of self-awareness, role and performance concerns, shift in leader/ship identity, leader/ship salience and effective leader/ship play a significant role in shaping *Leader/ship identity*. These intrinsic aspects are intertwined with the leader's sense of purpose, which are essential components of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014).

The interplay of *Contextual factors* and *Intrinsic aspects* requires coaches to adopt a dual focus: supporting leaders in navigating both their external environments and the internal challenges they face in their development. As Bennett (2021) emphasizes, resilience is key in leadership, with leaders needing to adapt quickly to external pressures while maintaining internal consistency. By fostering this balance between external adaptability and internal alignment, coaches support leaders in cultivating a sustainable approach to leadership that promotes long-term success, personal fulfilment and enhanced performance.

Coaches' Support of Leader/ship Identity Work

The final element of the mechanism is the Coaches' Support of Leader/ship Identity Work converging three sub-themes: Building trust in the coaching relationship, Creating a safe and non-judgemental coaching space, and Facilitating reflective practice for identity exploration. Coaches are not merely advisors or problem-solvers; they serve as guides who help leaders navigate the complex process of self-reflection and self-awareness. To be supportive, coaches must create an environment of trust, psychological safety and reflective practice, where leaders feel empowered to explore their thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities without fear of judgment.

Creating a psychologically safe space is crucial for deep, meaningful reflection, which is essential for Leader/ship identity work. Coaches encouraged leaders to engage in reflective practices that help them examine their experiences, behaviors, and leadership challenges. These reflective processes enabled leaders to confront and reconcile internal conflicts, such as the tension between their personal values and organizational expectations. Angelina (a pseudonym) highlights that such an environment is essential for encouraging dialogue about aspects of Leader/ship identity that may be hidden or uncomfortable. When leaders feel protected and supported, they are more likely to engage in honest self-reflection. She said:

> A secure and safe environment is crucial for opening dialogue about one's leader/ship identity. When clients feel protected and supported, they are more likely to engage in honest self-reflection and explore aspects of their identity that may be hidden or uncomfortable.

Nancy (a pseudonym) emphasizes this by stating that unwavering acceptance and a non-judgmental environment allow leaders to face and examine their identity without the fear of reproach, thereby fostering deeper self-reflection and genuine development. She informed:

> Unconditional acceptance and a judgment-free space are crucial for fostering leaders' development, as in a safe environment we can assist leaders to explore and confront aspects of their identity without fear of criticism. This safe space enables a deeper self-reflection.

According to Kahn (1990), psychological safety entails the ability to express oneself authentically without fear of negative impacts on self-image, status, or career, elements crucial for leaders as they navigate dilemmas and make decisions that align with their *Leader/ship identity*. The process of reflection is also key to enhancing leadership authenticity. As Freischlag (2019) and Rathmell, Brown, and Kilburg (2019) point out, authentic leadership arises when leaders can reconcile their self-concept with external demands. In this process, reflection helps leaders understand how their leadership behaviors align with their values and goals.

Moreover, the coach's support is critical in helping leaders refine their self-concept over time. As Skinner (2000a, 2000b) points out, *Leadership identity* is not fixed but rather a continuous process of adaptation and transformation. Coaches play a central role in helping leaders recognize when their identities need to evolve to meet new challenges and opportunities. They assist leaders in exploring their evolving roles, providing guidance and support as they shift their self-perceptions and refine their leadership behaviors in response to changing circumstances.

In conclusion, the *Mechanism of Executive Coaching to Support Leader/ship Identity Work* presents a comprehensive framework for understanding and facilitating *Leader/ship identity work* in executive coaching. This *Mechanism* integrates the holistic and dynamic nature of *Leader/ship identity work*, contextual factors, intrinsic aspects and the coach's role in supporting identity work, emphasizing the importance of trust, a safe space and reflective practices. By focusing on these three key themes, the *Mechanism* provides a structured approach to executive coaching that aligns with contemporary understandings of *Leader/ship identity work* and offers practical strategies for coaches to support leaders in developing a coherent and authentic *Leader/ship identity*. As executive coaches continue to support leaders in complex, dynamic environments, this framework offers valuable insights into how coaching can foster the *Leader/ship identity work* of more effective, resilient and authentic leaders.

Concept of Executive Coaching as an Identity Enhancement Space

Building on these empirical findings, I propose conceptualizing executive coaching as an *Identity Enhancement Space*. This approach aligns with Petriglieri's (2012) notion of identity workspaces for leadership development, encouraging leaders to explore the intersection of personal values and professional roles. By supporting leaders through the dynamic process of *Leader/ship identity work*, coaching fosters authenticity, adaptability, and resilience, helping leaders reflect on their values, experiences, and goals within specific organizational, social, and historical contexts; ultimately promoting alignment between leader identity and leadership identity.

Executive coaching as an *Identity Enhancement Space* also underscores the importance of reflection, a cornerstone in both identity enhancement space and coaching. As leaders navigate transitions or shift into new roles, coaching provides essential support, particularly during critical career shifts, enabling them to redefine and align their *Leader/ship identity* with personal aspirations, organizational expectations and wider contexts. This concept also addresses the complexities leaders face when balancing multiple roles and needs within organizations and stakeholders.

In summary, framing executive coaching as an *Identity Enhancement Space* emphasizes the importance of self-exploration, reflection, and alignment between leader and leadership identities. This approach supports leaders in enhancing their individual effectiveness, refining their leadership styles, and contributing to broader organizational goals. The synthesis of individual, relational and organizational influences highlights how coaches support for *Leader/ship identity work* in complex and dynamic environments.

Implications for Coaching Theory, Practice and Education

Implications for Coaching Theory

This paper challenges static theories of identity by presenting *Leader/ship identity work* as an evolving, relational, and socially constructed process; and represents the first comprehensive study on how executive coaches support *Leader/ship identity work* among senior leaders across diverse cultural and global contexts from the perspectives of 34 expert, globally based executive coaches. By prioritizing the perspectives and tacit knowledge of coaches, the findings from my doctoral study provide new insights that challenge traditional views in leadership and coaching literature. Specifically, the findings emphasize the interconnectedness of leader identity and leadership identity, advocating for a dynamic, fluid approach to leadership that reflects the complexity of *Leader/ship identity work*. This contributes to the expanding body of coaching literature that advocates for conceptual clarity in organizational coaching, as outlined in Bachkirova's papers (2024a, 2024b). It emphasizes the axiological dimension, which should define the purpose, values and impact of coaching on individuals, organizations and society.

Moreover, I extend theoretical discourse on *Leader/ship identity work* by proposing the concept of executive coaching as an *Identity Enhancement Space*. This proposition aligns with Petriglieri's (2012) view on leadership programmes as identity workplaces. By framing executive coaching as an *Identity Enhancement Space*, this paper introduces a more contemporary perspective on *Leader/ship identity work*. It clarifies and extends conceptual understandings of how coaching can shape and develop *Leader/ship identities*, providing a nuanced approach to leadership development. The paper highlights the importance of integrating *Leader/ship identity work* into executive coaching, emphasizing how this process supports leaders in aligning their internal values with external roles and expectations. Furthermore, it offers valuable implications for future coaching research by exploring the potential of *Leader/ship identity*-focused coaching practices to foster authentic leadership, resilience and long-term success.

Implication for Coaching Practice

This paper provides practical insights for executive coaches, presenting a concept of *Leader/ship identity work* along with both conceptual and empirical frameworks to align coaching practices with this integrated approach. By clarifying the relationship between leader identity (self-perception) and leadership identity (external perceptions and performance), the combined concept of *Leader/ship identity work* offers a cohesive method for navigating both internal and external leadership dynamics. The concept of executive coaching as an *Identity Enhancement Space* is especially valuable during career transitions, helping leaders redefine their identities in alignment with organizational goals and stakeholder expectations.

Implications for Stakeholders and Leaders

The findings of this research have significant implications for both stakeholders and leaders in executive coaching and *Leader/ship identity work*. For stakeholders, understanding how coaching supports *Leader/ship identity work* can guide more strategic investments in coaching programs and leadership development initiatives, enabling organizations to design more effective programs that enhance self-awareness and integrate leader and leadership identities. This approach strengthens *Leader/ship identity* while aligning development efforts with organizational goals, improving overall performance. For leaders, the research underscores the importance of self-awareness and reflection in navigating identity challenges, empowering them to actively engage in their identity work and foster coaching relationships that promote personal and professional growth.

Implications for Coach Expertise, Education and Training

This research highlights the importance for executive coaches to deepen their understanding of *Leader/ship identity work*, particularly the integration of leader and leadership identities. Coaches must develop advanced skills in identity theories and the dynamics of identity work to guide leaders through self-discovery and alignment. Coaching education programs should go beyond generic content, offering specialized modules on identity work and the interplay between leader, leadership and *Leader/ship* identities, equipping coaches to navigate complex leadership roles and tailor strategies to individual leaders and organizations. Ethical considerations (Iordanou, Iordanou & Hawley, 2016) must also be integral to training, ensuring coaches maintain professional boundaries while supporting identity work. Ongoing professional development should focus on integrating emerging research to help coaches adapt to evolving *Leader/ship identity* needs.

Conclusion

Advancing the science of executive coaching through *Leader/ship identity work* is essential as leadership roles continue to evolve in response to shifting organizational demands. *Leader/ship identities* are not fixed but are shaped by personal experiences, organizational roles and external expectations, all of which must be effectively integrated for authentic leadership. Executive coaching, grounded in *Leader/ship identity work*, offers a unique opportunity to support leaders in the ongoing process of identity construction and refinement, helping them align their personal self-concept with their leadership roles and stakeholders' expectations.

The growing complexity of organizations calls for a more holistic approach to leadership development, addressing both the personal and relational dimensions of leadership. Integrating *Leader/ship identity work* into executive coaching enables leaders to navigate not only their own sense of self but also their interactions with others, including followers, peers, and stakeholders. This dual focus enriches the coaching process, fostering long-term success. By advancing executive coaching through *Leader/ship identity work*, executive coaches can create interventions that promote sustainable leadership growth, offering a comprehensive framework for supporting leaders through current challenges and future opportunities.

In sum, supporting *Leader/ship identity work* through executive coaching is essential, as it enhances leaders' self-awareness, aligns their personal values with organizational goals, and helps them adapt their leadership styles to meet evolving challenges. Ibarra et al. (2014) underscore that identity is a powerful force in shaping leadership, and just as understanding one's leadership identity is critical for growth in student leadership development (Komives et al., 2005, 2006), executive coaching accelerates this process in the complex, real-world context of leadership practice, empowering leaders to lead with authenticity, purpose and impact.

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Author Contact

Dr Nelia Koroleva
University of Westminster, 35 Marylebone Road, London, NW1 5LS, United Kingdom
Email: n.koroleva@westminster.ac.uk