Choosing an executive coach: The influence of gender on the coach-coachee matching process

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Abstract

Coaching has enjoyed substantial commercial growth, but empirical support for its effectiveness is limited. Nowhere is this more so than in the matching process between coach and coachee. This study describes the results from a coaching programme in which coachees were asked to reflect on and justify their choice of coach. Initial, qualitative results suggested that female coachees favoured the choice of female coaches, partly as a role model of business success. Male coachees tended to justify the selection of a female coach as more approachable for the discussion of sensitive, personal issues. A minority of male respondents also displayed sexist attitudes in their comments on the selection process. Subsequent quantitative analysis of the data, however, revealed no bias towards the choice of either female or male coaches. While the results show no statistical significance in gender choices, for a minority of coachees, gender is a rather surprising factor in the selection process.

Introduction

In the last 20 years, coaching has enjoyed an exponential growth. According to a global study conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007), amongst nearly 6000 coaches in 74 countries, coaching is now a US$1.5 billion industry worldwide. There are probably about 16,000 coaches operating in the United States (International Coach Federation (ICF), 2009), 4000 in the UK and a growing number in Europe and Australia (Jarvis, 2008). Yet despite this growth, our understanding of coaching lags behind its commercial expansion. In terms of research, for example, the first mention of workplace coaching in the peer-reviewed behavioural science literature came in an article by

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Gorby (1937). While over 130 coaching specific peer-reviewed papers have been published since that date, Grant (2005) contrasts this with the 620 papers which were published on trans-theoretical models of change. Hence, while growing amounts of money are being expended on coaching, it remains a relatively under-researched area.

It is also an area where a consensus on an accepted definition of coaching is lacking. Grant (2005) suggests there are three types of coaching. The first, *executive coaching,* he sees as a helping arrangement between a client who has managerial responsibility in an organization and a consultant [sic] who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals. Stern (2004) considers that executive coaching builds both short-term and long-term goals and must be based on mutual respect, while for Feldman (2001) it aims to improve managers' effectiveness in their current positions, and is usually a short- to medium-term relationship (Feldman and Lankau, 2005). Others suggest that executive coaching is a one-to-one relationship which facilitates an executive's desire to reach specific goals (Dingman, 2006; Hall et al., 1999). The second, *workplace coaching,* is often delivered by line managers and supervisors within workplace settings and involves non-executive employees (for example sales coaching and the development of communication skills). Finally, *life coaching* is predominantly about personal issues which can include work/life balance, managing finances and developing new career directions. The focus of this article is a study which utilised the services of executive coaches.

Within both executive and workplace coaching, the coaching intervention can be delivered by coaches who work in the organization either as line managers or human resource professionals (internal coaches) or by coaches/consultants brought in from the outside (external coaches). As Frisch (2001) points out, one of the advantages of using internal coaches is that they are often familiar with the internal culture and politics of the organization. However, many internal coaches, especially line managers, receive relatively limited training as coaches (sometimes just a few days). It is probably safe to say that such practitioners have acquired a minimum set of coaching skills, but are not qualified as fully-fledged coaches. In contrast, external coaches are more likely to have experience in a wide range of organizations, are more likely to be trained as coaches and are useful when confidentiality and anonymity are required (Hall et al., 1999). In this study, the intervention was provided by external coaches.

Where it exists, the coaching peer-reviewed literature has tended to focus on a range of themes, including: definitions of coaching and its distinctiveness from other interventions (Bachkirova and Cox, 2004; Clutterbuck, 2008; Griffiths and Campbell, 2008; Hart et al., 2001; Kilburg, 1996); the impact of coaching (Grant, 2003; Green et al., 2005; Spence and Grant, 2004; Wasylyshyn et al., 2006); the relationship between coaching and psychology (Gray, 2006; Kemp, 2005; Seligman, 2007); improving coaching interventions (Britton, 2008; Rock and Donde, 2008); coaching and management/leadership (Ellinger and Bostrom, 1999; Peterson, 1996); coaching and supervision (Clutterbuck, 2008; Gray, 2007; Mead et al., 1999), coaching as a function of human resource development (Hamlin et al., 2008) and the 'manager as coach' (Graham et al., 1993, 1994; Hamlin et al., 2006; McLean et al., 2005) With a few exceptions, relatively few of these studies have been critical of coaching or raised issues of concern (Berglass, 2002; Gray et al., in press; Hall et al., 1999).

Furthermore, the coaching literature has, to date, been silent on what must be an essential ingredient to coaching—the match between coach and coachee. This is surprising because in other fields, attention has been given to similar dyadic relationships, for example between students and supervisors (Armstrong et al., 2004), managers and subordinates (Allinson et al., 2001) and mentors and protégés (Armstrong et al., 2002). Even in the study of mentoring systems, where there has been some focus by scholars on the formation of dyads, researchers have failed to explore the factors that promote or hinder successful mentoring initiation, and specifically the role that personal

characteristics (such as race and gender) play in mentor initiation (Hu et al., 2008). To date, insights about the matching process between coaches and coachees have not been given attention within the general coaching literature. This study, then, sought to make an original contribution by exploring a range of issues arising from the coach-coachee matching process in an executive coaching intervention. As will be explained later, one unexpected yet compelling theme to emerge from the initial analysis was the relationship between matching and gender—the specific focus reported here.

One of the initial difficulties was the lack of previous empirical research into coaching in general (Stober and Parry, 2005) and executive coaching in particular (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Kilburg, 1996), particularly within the SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) context/setting (Peel, 2008), within which the research study was conducted. Feldman and Lankau (2005) for example, argue that there have been fewer than 20 empirical studies that have investigated executive coaching. Given, however, that quite a substantial body of literature on mentoring relationships and matching does exist, a decision was made to make use of this literature as a close proxy. The emphasis here is on formal rather than informal mentoring as it is the former that has greatest similarity to the formal coaching programme being studied. Formal mentoring is generally planned formally but conducted informally (for example, partners establish their own ground rules) (Garvey, 1994; Standing Committee on Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education (SCOPME), 1998). Ragins and Cotton (1999) comment that formal mentoring is characterized by some type of organizational matching process (as in our scheme) including suggested guidelines about how often dyads should meet and the duration of the relationship. Within formal mentoring programmes, protégés are generally encouraged to have specific developmental goals in mind (Wanberg et al., 2006). Wanberg et al. (2003) also suggest that protégés should have some level of choice within the formal matching process (as in our programme), and that the mentor should have at least a skill or background that complements the protégé's needs. Our coaching team offered a range of dimensions, including mixed genders, business experience (within corporates and SMEs) and skills in psychosocial support.

While the differences between coaching and mentoring have been noted (Garvey et al., 2009; Megginson and Clutterbuck, 1995; Shaw and Linnecar, 2007), there were grounds for regarding the mentoring literature as a sufficiently close alternative. First, like coaching, mentoring is usually a one-to-one, helping relationship providing psychosocial, as well as other support. Second, both processes often involve discussions around business and organizational issues, and both may (consciously or unconsciously) embrace wider personal or even emotional matters. Third, mentoring can involve a coaching component (Ragins, 1989). Furthermore, as noted by Zeus and Skiffington (2002), a coach who has worked with a coachee for some time may adopt a mentoring role once the coaching relationship comes to an end. The identified overlap and tension between mentoring and coaching allowed the study to explore these differences as one of the research outcomes.

The impact of gender on selection criteria for choosing mentors

Mentoring is considered to be one of the critical elements for the professional development of both male and female managers, serving two separate but not entirely distinct functions. Kram (1985) identifies two key functions: career development and psychosocial support. Career development functions include: nominating an individual for desirable lateral moves and promotions (sponsorship); providing protégés with assignments that increase their visibility to organizational decision makers (exposure and visibility); providing feedback and suggesting strategies for achieving work objectives (coaching); shielding the protégé from potentially damaging contacts within the organization (protection); and nominating the protégé for assignments that offer developmental

opportunities (challenging assignments). Psychosocial functions include: acting as a role model of appropriate values, attitudes and behaviour (role model); conveying unconditional positive regard (acceptance and confirmation); providing an environment in which the protégé can talk frankly and openly about their hopes and fears (counselling); interacting informally with the protégé at work (friendship) (Kram, 1985). It is worth noting, however, that sponsorship in mentoring is now shunned by many national and corporate cultures in favour of developmental mentoring which emphasizes mutuality of learning and helping the mentee to do things for themselves (Clutterbuck, 2008).

Many of the matching studies in the mentoring literature focus on the issue of gender. Women managers, for example, are often less successful at managing their career goals, are assigned less challenging jobs, or are placed in less visible positions. For instance, Berlin's (1988) study of large American companies showed only 2 percent of women in senior management roles. Similarly, a study by the Task Force on Barriers to Women in the Public Service (1990) found that of the 43 percent of women public servants, 14 percent were in senior management whereas only 10 percent were in executive positions. One plausible explanation for this is the lack of female role models contributing to the failure of women striving to succeed (Morrison et al., 1987) especially in male-dominated occupations (Noe, 1988). Furthermore, women are more reticent in talking about their own abilities and achievements than male managers, and in developing career plans needed to take into account life goals that encompass family and personal issues (Russell, 2006). Women also face more barriers to obtaining a mentor than men, irrespective of their age, seniority or length of tenure (O'Neil et al., 1999; Ragins and Cotton, 1989, 1991). First, given that there is a shortage of women occupying high organizational ranks, access to potential mentors is more limited. Second, women lack access to some of the formal and informal networks (clubs, societies and sports activities) that are more open to men (Ragins and Cotton, 1991). Third, women may be more reluctant to initiate a mentoring relationship due to the danger that this may be misconstrued as a sexual advance (Ragins, 1989). Female managers, then, are less likely to have a mentor than their male counterparts (Russell, 2006).

While women may lack sufficient access to female mentors, there is evidence to suggest that, when succeeding in finding a mentor-mentee match, same-gender matching for women may circumvent some of the potential sexual overtones of cross-gender mentoring. Tharenou's (2005) study, for example, reports that mentoring can help women's career advancement, especially when their mentors are women. Career support from female mentors can help because mentees gain from being sponsored, challenged or coached by someone who has incurred the kinds of difficulties women face. However, psychosocial support by female mentors did not help women's advancement and may even serve to reduce it, probably because it is inward looking rather than focusing on overcoming obstacles in the external environment.

Cross-gender relationships may bring with them specific difficulties, in particular a latent sexual theme which may be the cause of many problems, including office gossip and discrediting sexual innuendos (Ragins and McFarlin, 1990). Power can be sexy (Morgan and Davidson, 2008). Quinn and Lees (1984), for example, report that when romantic relationships do occur, in 74 percent of cases the male is more senior than the female, with in half of these cases the female being the male's secretary. They also identify three kinds of romantic relationship: the *fling*, a short-term relationship that ends quickly; a *utilitarian relationship*, a volatile exchange in which the female is viewed by others as being interested in advancement, security and power as much as she is in her male liaison; and *true love*, when two people become sincerely involved, the relationship usually ending in long-term commitment. Bennetts (1995, cited in Garvey, 2004) finds that mentoring often generates a strong emotional attraction, which can lead to a feeling of being 'in love'. Individuals differ in the way they deal with this emergent attraction. Some remain silent and never mention it to their mentors or mentees whereas some individuals make it explicitly known and the

relationship becomes sexual. However, in every case the relationship is conducted with integrity and is not based on the abuse of power. Clawson and Kram (1984), therefore, distinguish between productive and unproductive intimacy. In productive intimacy, the fact that the mentor gets 'close' to the protégé he or she is able to have a more powerful impact on their learning than someone who maintains a distance. In most cross-gender relationships the mentor is male and the protégé female, producing what Clawson and Kram term the 'developmental dilemma' (1984: 23). On the one hand, the desire to develop the protégé pulls the mentor closer to them; but on the other hand, a desire to avoid complications associated with sexual intimacy pushes the mentor away.

Bushardt et al. (1991) argue that, regardless of their gender, mentors utilize predominantly masculine sex-role behaviour and protégés, female sex-role behaviour. Arguing from a socio-biological perspective, they suggest that such sex-role behaviours underscore the often latent sexual themes that permeate the mentor/protégé relationship. While the moderating effect of feminism is noted, they posit that the matching process involves a 'mating dance', rooted in biological and cultural origins (Bushardt et al., 1991: 623). Mentors initiate the relationship and seek protégés who are receptive, loyal, dependable and supportive; protégés must project their receptiveness to mentoring and seek a mentor with power, resources and status. But whatever the power dynamics, it is primarily the responsibility of the person with greater power, the mentor, to take the initiative in managing the relationship—irrespective of the mentee's gender.

This analysis, however, focuses on the mentor's career development functions, whereas, for some relationships, it is the psychosocial functions that are paramount, particularly role modelling. Shapiro et al. (1978) define role models as individuals whose behaviours, personal styles and specific attributes are emulated by others. Possessing an adequate role model is one of the significant psychosocial functions of developmental relationships (Thomas, 1990). Female mentors may be seen as effective role models for women protégés, by exhibiting modelling behaviours needed to overcome barriers and career challenges faced by women (Ragins, 1989). Burke (1984), for example, found a significant preference amongst female protégés for female mentors. Ragins and McFarlin (1990) suggest that in pairings of female protégé with female mentor, the protégé was more likely to regard the mentor as a role model than were protégés in other gender combinations. Indeed, female protégés tended to engage in more social activities with female than with male mentors (Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Hence, it may be that cross-gender mentoring relationships may be of limited value because men are unlikely to provide adequate role models or because they lack empathy for the complexities that women face (Kram and Hall, 1996). However, female protégés with male mentors reported more career development functions than female protégés with female mentors (Sosik and Godshalk, 2000). Overall, however, results are inconclusive. For example, in their study of 145 banking industry managers, Olian et al. (1993) found no same-gender preference.

Allen et al. (2000) argue that one of the primary dynamics of the mentoring relationship is the provision of help and support, and that, furthermore, this role might be congruent with the role of women as nurturers. Their research study, however, found no statistical difference between male and female mentors on their selection of a protégé based upon their perceived need for help. Compared with men, female mentors provided more psychosocial support to their protégés (Allen and Eby, 2004; O'Brien et al., 2010), while Koberg et al. (1998) found that higher levels of such support were prominent in both male and female same-gender relationships. Burke (1984) found that female mentors performed more psychosocial functions, while Burke et al. (1990) report that female mentors offer both significantly more psychosocial and career development support than male mentors. Overall, however, it is probably safest to conclude that empirical evidence as to the benefits of same-gender versus cross-gender relationships is contradictory and inconclusive. The current study, therefore, seeks to add to the debate, but in this case, from the perspective of executive coaching rather than mentoring.

Methodology

The intervention

The study which this article describes is based on a coaching programme managed by the University of Surrey, and delivered by a team of 22 executive coaches who provided one-to-one coaching to 201 UK-based owner managers and directors of SMEs. Before the launch of the programme, the faculty of coaches was selected through an intensive assessment centre process. A total of 79 applications were shortlisted down to 30 by applying selection criteria such as length of coaching experience, coaching qualifications held, coaching methodology and outcomes expected from the coaching process. Shortlisted candidates were then 'interviewed' through a role play in which they had to coach an SME manager (one of the researchers) whose company was 'in trouble'. The role play was observed by a panel of experts (local business leaders and experienced coaches) and scored against a pre-selected set of criteria. A clear demarcation emerged between consultants, masquerading as coaches, who gave advice, and genuine coaches who offered empathy but also asked challenging, open questions. It was the intention to offer a coaching faculty with a diverse range of experience, coaching models and methodologies. For example, 13 of the 22 held qualifications in neuro-linguistic programming, while others clearly avoided this approach. Six of the faculty held postgraduate qualifications including MBAs, while others held a variety of practitioner qualifications for coaches.

The CVs of the successful coaches were imported into a booklet containing their photographs, qualifications (including specific coaching qualifications, if any), coaching experience (sectors and company size) coaching methods and philosophy. All coaches were required to have access to a supervisor with whom they could discuss and receive feedback on issues or challenges they faced with their professional practice. The faculty also met on four occasions as well as consulting each other as an informal community of practice to discuss progress and any arising professional development issues. During the three-year programme, the booklet was issued to all the SME directors and managers who had applied to engage with coaching through the programme. This commitment, which involved 10 hours of one-to-one coaching, was offered at zero cost to the beneficiary (apart from a nominal enrolment fee). As part of the selection process, coachees were asked to identify three potential coaches and to arrange either a one-to-one meeting with each of them, or at least a telephone discussion. From this selection process, coachees then informed the University of their choice, and were reminded that their commitment to this process included an agreement to be interviewed at the end of the project, and to respond to other data- gathering tools as necessary.

Research design

The research design adopted a pluralistic, mixed methods approach (Gray, 2009; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). Mixed methods comprise 'the collection or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of data at one or more stages in the process of research' (Creswell et al., 2003: 212). Mixed methods can contribute to methodological rigour (Patton, 2002), particularly where methodological triangulation encourages different aspects of empirical reality to emerge (Denzin, 1978). While quantitative research allows us to identify relationships between variables and to make generalizations, qualitative research is appropriate because it is capable of analysing concrete cases in their 'temporal and local particularity' (Flick, 2006: 13). However, irrespective of the stance adopted, what was important was the selection of research methods that were appropriate to the questions being asked (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003).

Greene et al. (1989) identify five alternative mixed methods designs: triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation and expansion. A triangulation design was chosen for this study

because it seeks convergence and corroboration of findings across the qualitative and quantitative stages, enhancing the validity of inquiry findings. Given the lack of previous research in this area, the initial, qualitative stages of the study were also exploratory, consisting of intensive, qualitative face-to-face interviews with a sample of coachees. These interviews addressed the following research questions:

- Why did the SME managers choose to take up the invitation to engage with coaching?
- What impact (if any) had the coaching made on themselves personally or on their businesses?
- How did the coaching compare with other developmental interventions they had tried (such as formal management training courses)?
- Did their experience of the programme encourage them to engage with coaching in the future, especially if they had to pay for it?
- What was their experience of the matching process?

After qualitative data analysis, the issue of gender in matching emerged as an intriguing but ambivalent theme, mentioned by 15 of the 46 interviewees. At this stage, two focus group meetings (of coaches who volunteered to attend) sought to validate the interview data by addressing the following research questions:

- What factors influenced the coach selection/matching process?
- To what extent was gender a factor in coach selection?

This methodological triangulation (the use of interviews and focus groups) helped to add to the credibility of the qualitative findings.

At the end of the programme, once all coachees had selected their coach, it then became possible to access programme records to identify the number of male and female coaches chosen by each gender of coach. This quantitative stage allowed for the verification or otherwise of the qualitative data and formed part of the overarching triangulated mixed methods design. The research question addressed here was:

- Was gender a factor in the coach selection process?

Hence, this quantitative stage of the research process was confirmatory of the qualitative results and contributed to the reliability of the findings.

Sampling procedure

The coachees came from a wide variety of sectors, organizations and businesses, including manufacturing companies, law firms and horticultural organizations. Funding criteria for the project stipulated that beneficiaries must be at managerial level, working in a SME and based in Surrey. Providing they met these criteria they were able to join the programme (there was no random selection of participants). Most were owner-managers or directors or managers at or just below board level. The gender breakdown was 65 percent male and 35 percent female, with an age range from 29 to 63 with a mean age of 47. Work experience in their sectors ranged from five to 38 years with a mean of 17. Some had just moved into a new role, while others had been in the same role for 37 years, with a mean time in the current work role of nearly 10 years. Thus, the coachees tended to be senior managers, owner managers and directors with considerable work experience, including experience in their current role (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant demographics

Gender	133 (65%) Male		71 (35%) Female
Age (Years: min/max/mean)	29	63	47
Work experience in sector (Years: min/max/mean)	5	38	17
Work experience in their role (Years: min/max/mean)	New	37	10

During a nine-month period, all beneficiaries completing their coaching programme were inter-viewed at the completion of their coaching experience, a total of 46 interviews. While Creswell et al. (2003) recommend between 20 and 30 interviews for a qualitative study, over-sampling and any resulting redundancy of information was considered preferable to under-sampling and missing essential data. Given that there was no control over which coachees finished first, this was in essence a random selection, with interviews and data analysis continuing until it was felt that data saturation had been reached.

Development of the data gathering approaches

The main qualitative data gathering tools comprised a set of interviews and two focus groups. For the interviews, a semi-structured interview schedule was drawn up, which asked about the respon-dent's choice of coach, the reasons for their choice, and any difficulties they had faced in making the decision. The questions within the schedule, however, were used largely as a framework, with supplementary probing questions being used to facilitate in-depth reflection and narrative. This is an approach that allows the 'voices' of actors to be surfaced, providing an account of how they construct their personal versions of reality (Jabri and Pounder, 2001). Before the interviews, the purpose and format were explained in a letter to all participants. This is what Lillis (1999: 80) calls a 'systematic field study protocol'. An interview protocol was also drawn up for the interviewer, which extended a guarantee of confidentiality, and a request that the interview be recorded. This was granted in all cases. The protocol was important for reducing the risk of the interviewer's expectations and opinions seeping into the interview process. The role of the researcher was that of 'sympathetic editor' assisting the respondent (author), to produce a fuller and deeper account (Polkinghorne, 2005). The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers either by tele-phone, face-to-face in a private office at the University or at the interviewee's workplace. Most interviews lasted approximately one hour. On completion of each interview, the tape was tran-scribed prior to data analysis.

For the focus group intervention, invitations were sent to all 22 members of the programme's coaching faculty, of whom 10 attended one of the two focus group sessions. These attendees rep-resented a purposive sample, in that only coaches were invited to attend. One of the difficulties in sampling for focus groups is minimizing sample bias, where participants are recruited from a lim-ited range of sources (Morgan, 1997). In this case, however, given the diversity of coaches' back-grounds, coaching methodologies and experience, there was confidence that a wide range of views would be expressed. The focus group sessions were held during the last three months of the pro-gramme, when some coaching was still taking place and therefore the themes emerging were still fresh in the minds of the coaches. Permission to tape record the sessions was requested and granted. To focus the discussion, some of the themes emerging from preliminary data analysis of the quali-tative interviews with coachees were presented, in order to stimulate discussion and cross-validate themes. These included:

- The skills coachees were looking for in choosing their coach;
- What coachees might do differently in the future in choosing their coach;
- Any negative issues emerging from the coach-coachee relationship (i.e. the quality of the match).

The session, however, was not prescriptive, with care being taken to listen for, and encourage, the coach's own perspectives.

The tapes were transcribed and two of the researchers, acting independently, analysed the transcripts for emerging themes. The two sets of themes were then compared, and a consolidated framework agreed.

Approach to data analysis

For the qualitative data a framework analysis approach was adopted (Bryman and Burgess, 1994; Richie and Spencer, 1994). This is a form of content analysis in which data are classified and summarized within what Jones (2000) calls a thematic framework. There are five stages in the process which comprise: familiarization (with the data), identifying a thematic framework (codes), indexing, charting and mapping, and interpretation. The key to framework analysis is the identification of recurring themes based upon a combination of a priori issues (typically identified in the literature), emergent themes and recurring attitudes or experiences (Llewellyn et al., 2005).

Given the exploratory and inductive nature of the study, data were gathered with few a priori notions of what to expect (see Stage 1, Figure 1). Subsequent data analysis of 10 interviews (Stage 2), however, revealed some unexpected themes, especially around how gender may have impacted on the coach selection process. At this point, the researchers felt that they needed to attune themselves more thoroughly to some of the issues at work, particularly the influence of gender on coach selection. Given the lack of secondary literature available, certainly in the coaching literature, as discussed above, the mentoring literature was accessed as the closest proxy (Stage 3). Having developed a thematic framework (based upon the mentoring functions above) and issues identified at Stage 2, the researchers then returned to the data more deductively (Stage 4), re-analysing the previous 10 studies and conducting preliminary analysis of the remaining 36 cases. Three researchers (two of the current authors, plus an independent researcher), each working independently, explored the data, in order to develop a draft analytical framework containing themes and sub-themes. These frameworks were then compared with each other to identify consistencies and differences. Recurring themes such as sexism and gender in coach selection and personal development issues were kept in the framework, while those that emerged in only one framework were discarded. These coachee themes were then matched against the focus group themes to produce a consolidated analytical framework. The adoption of multiple perspectives (of the three researchers) in the framework design, along with the synthesis and consolidation process that produced the framework, was used to enhance trustworthiness at the data analysis phase.

Qualitative data gathering and analysis took place iteratively, over a two-year period. Only at the very end of the project, once all coachees had chosen their coaches, was it possible to determine whether there was a statistically significant bias towards the selection of either female or male coaches. At this stage, to test whether two categorical variables were significantly associated, a chi-square test was chosen for the analysis (Saunders et al., 2009).
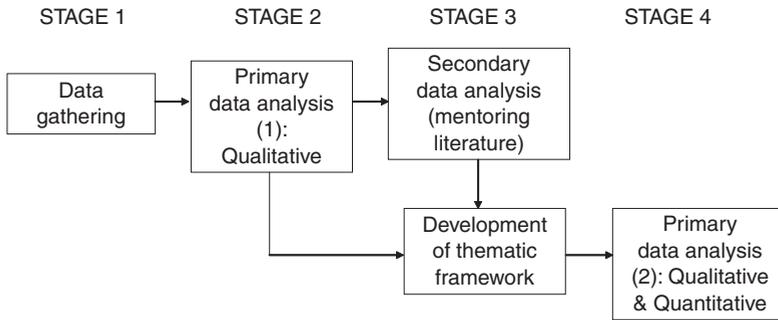
Figure 1. Stages in the data-gathering and analysis process.

Results

Qualitative analysis

Stage 2 qualitative data analysis prompted a number of related themes, the most prominent of which was that some coachees, both men and women, exhibited a preference for female coaches. We present here an exposition of these themes, along with some quotations that provide illustration and validation.

Women coachees, for example, were seen by some to offer more personal support, being 'easier to talk to from a personal point of view'. In one case, male coaches were rejected by a male coachee because they simply did not seem 'warming enough'. Women, on the other hand, had the ability to be a 'good listener' while being able to communicate 'on a fairly personal basis'. This view was supported by Mary:

> I guess you tend to gossip with the girls …, they feel more comfortable talking about those sorts of _personal issues_ [our emphasis] with someone they think will understand and one of the requirements is that they are the same sex.

Mary, then, assumed that men were more likely to 'chat' about personal issues with a male coach. In practice, however, of those male coachees who stressed the importance of being able to discuss personal issues, two chose female coaches, and two chose males. In the latter case, not only was the male coach able to engage with the beneficiaries on personal themes, 'his belief was almost evangelical'. So, being able to communicate on a personal level was important, but this was as likely to trigger the selection of a male as much as a female coach.

Given that the context in which the coaching was delivered was primarily to business leaders and managers (although a school and a number of not-for-profit organizations were included) some respondents chose female coaches because they were seen as being able to offer broader perspectives beyond organizational issues. Women were preferred (in the case of two male coachees) because of their ability to give 'a different aspect', 'different areas and fields'. This was important because some coachees realized that the coaching conversation could stretch beyond the business and into their personal lives. Since most had not engaged with coaching before, this often came as something of a revelation. Female coaches were seen as being able to flex their support into broader elements of life, in the words of one female coachee, women are able to offer 'Life-skills coaching— maybe females take to it more than males'. As Bethany, one of the women coaches commented,

> The port of call started with who they are, or in my language who do you 'be'. Are you who you say you are?

However, one of the male coaches argued that male coachees often do eventually get into the personal issues, but they have to be 'dressed up in a business context' before you can get down to them.

As indicated earlier, the mentoring literature had alerted us to the potential for coaches to act as role models for their coachees, particularly female coaches with female coachees. Indeed, the two coachees who specifically used the term role model in their responses were both women. One of the traits sought in a role model was that of assertiveness. However, one had chosen a female and one a male coach! For the same-gender pairing, the female coach was chosen because of her experience of working in a similar, male-dominated, work environment to the coachee:

> I am a woman … in a commercial setting which is predominantly male. So I wanted someone who would be a good role model for me. I wanted to choose somebody who had reached a reasonably senior level in commercial organizations because they're the people who I work with.

Ironically, the other female coachee chose a male coach for very similar reasons, being a female manager 'in a 98 per cent dominated male environment'. Both her coach and the other two potential coaches were male, so this was a clearly thought out strategy.

One of the benefits of adopting a qualitative design is the surprises it sometimes reveals. Unfortunately, not all of these surprises are welcome. Another theme to emerge from the data was that of male sexism. Bob, a coachee stated that he had chosen his female coach because 'she looked the most glamorous'. Another commented that he 'looked through (the booklet) for the tall good looking women, there weren't any'. He chose a male coach. While for another: 'Any negatives? She didn't buy me lunch. She could have worn shorter skirts'. The coach chosen and the two potential coaches were all women. These concerns are further reinforced by incidents that occurred during the matching process. Laura, one of the coaches asked to be withdrawn from her commitment to one, male, coachee after four hours of coaching.

> He has a real issue with respect for women which I find more difficult to cope with, especially when we are sitting in his office and he disrespects his female staff verbally and I have a naked woman calendar looking straight at me! Gordon (name changed) is a bit of a bully. He admits this himself.

The beneficiary was asked to choose another coach, but did not reply and hence took no further part in the programme. In contrast, another female coach, Sally, confronted sexist male attitudes directly.

> As I was leaving, he said something really sexist. And I said: 'You know, remember I'm here just as much to find out if I can work with you, and I feel it inconsiderate'. And he nearly fell off the top of the stair. He couldn't believe me, 'Gosh you're pretty strong with it', and I said, 'Maybe you need a strong coach'.

The outcome was that he chose this woman as his coach, and she reports that they 'did some very interesting work together'.

Table 2. Coach–coachee gender cross tabulation (original sample)

		Gender coach		Total
		Male	Female	
Gender coachee	Male	64	67	131
	Female	31	39	70
Total		95	106	201

Quantitative analysis

It was only possible to undertake the quantitative analysis towards the very end of the programme, once all 201 coachees had selected their coach. By this stage, virtually all the qualitative data had been gathered and a preliminary analysis completed. As we have seen, the results of this pointed to a bias towards the selection of female coaches. Records were therefore examined to identify the gender of coachees and their coach. Table 2 shows that 64 male coachees chose male (same gender) coaches, and a slightly larger number of female coaches (67). In the case of female coachees, a larger number of female coaches were chosen (39 female as against 31 male). These results, at first sight, tended to support the qualitative analysis, since women coaches were chosen by 106 coachees in comparison to only 95 males. Statistical analysis, however, revealed that none of these differences were significant (Pearson χ^2 = .38; sig = .54). The proposition that coachees have a propensity to choose same-gender coaches is therefore not supported by the quantitative data.

Discussion

The mentoring literature presents a paradox in the mentor selection process faced by women. On the one hand, some women favour same-gender mentoring relationships because of the ability of female mentors to act as role models. On the other hand, cross-gender mentoring relationships may be preferred because of the attribution of power to males in organizations (Ragins, 1997). For example, Brefach (1986 in Ragins, 1997) found that women rated male mentors as possessing more power in the workplace than female mentors. Our own study, however, found no statistically significant preference towards male or female coaches. This finding illustrates differences between the selection process in mentoring and coaching. While coaches may be able to deliver some or all of the psychosocial functions delivered by mentors (Kram, 1985), they do not have the power or influence to provide career functions such as sponsorship, exposure-and-visibility, protection and challenging assignments. However, our study made use of external coaches. Further research is needed to identify whether internal coaches would have greater success in providing career functions and guidance.

A lack of female role models has been identified as one of the main barriers to women's advancement (Catalyst, 2003). According to Ragins (1997: 494) in mentoring, the protégé's selection of a mentor is often based on their identification with the mentor and a perception of the mentor as a role model: 'the mentor identifies with the protégé as representative of his or her past, whereas the protégé identifies with the mentor as representative of his or her future'. These can be intense relationships with parallels between mentoring and parent-child relationships. Little is known, however, about how women actually choose such models (Singh et al., 2006), although a study reported

by Alleman and Newman (1984) suggests that mentees described their mentors as more similar to themselves than did non-mentees. The results of our study, however, suggest that while some female coachees clearly preferred a female coach as a role model, this trend was not general or borne out statistically. Indeed, most women respondents made no mention of gender when articulating their reasons for choosing a coach (although this does not mean they had no views on the matter). It is also worth noting that in answer to the initial research question about their experience of the matching process, coachees of both genders found the process difficult. In general, we conclude that, when making their selection, coachees tend to use criteria other than gender. This may be because of the lack of sex role stereotypes within coaching relationships. As Baumgarder et al. (1991) point out, sex role stereotypes are cognitive structures that influence behavioural expectations of both men and women. The coaches in this project were in all cases external to the coachee's organization and hence could not be viewed as part of the hosting organization's hierarchy or power structure. It seems, therefore, that coaches are generally chosen on the basis of criteria other than gender, including their skills and attributes (possibly including experience and qualifications). These criteria will be the subject of further analysis in a forthcoming quantitative survey.

The theme of personal support in coaching appears similar to the counselling function in mentoring in which the protégé talks frankly and openly about their hopes and fears (Kram, 1985), while the mentor provides counselling, acceptance and personal support. According to Ragins (1997) empirical evidence suggests that homogenous relationships (such as same-gender) provide more psychosocial support than heterogeneous relationships. This is important because, as the study by Siegel et al. (2001) suggests, women have higher personal needs than men, including the need for inclusion and warmth. Whether this is the case, or not, however, our own study found no gender difference when it came to selecting a coach on the basis of personal support.

While the mentoring literature suggests that women managers may have difficulty taking into account life goals that include family and personal issues (Russell, 2006), the same cannot be said of coaching. The female (and, indeed, the male) respondents, in our study moved quickly into a discussion of personal agendas. For some, this was the primary focus of their executive coaching experience. There is some suggestion in the findings that women coachees tended to choose same-gender coaches when they wanted to engage in this. The evidence on which this observation is based will require substantiation through further research. Male coachees were initially more reticent about broaching personal issues, and when they did, they had no particular bias towards using male or female coaches.

One of the problems in matching is that to be effective, both mentoring and coaching have to be intimate relationships that are characterised by mutual closeness, affection and trust (Lobel et al., 1994). Hurley and Fagenson-Eland (1996), however, suggest a continuum ranging from the positive role of non-sexual psychologically intimate relationships and the negative extreme of sexual harassment. In our study, the views and attitudes of a small minority of the male managers may fall short of direct harassment, but they are certainly towards the negative end of the spectrum. It would be naïve to shrug off these comments as being said 'tongue in cheek', in part because the interview data were supported by the negative experiences of two of the women coaches. Indeed, one could argue that the problem could be more widespread than these isolated (and minority) examples suggest. If the three individuals quoted had the temerity to articulate their views to a researcher, how many others gave silent voice to similar thoughts? As Archer et al. (1983) note, women are more likely than men to be judged by their physical appearance (particularly the body rather than the face) than for their intellectual capacity.

It seems, then, that mentoring and coaching share similar dilemmas when it comes to cross-gender matching. The difference between them is that intimacy problems in mentoring are more

common in situations when the mentor (with power) is male and the protégé, female. In coaching it is the other way round, with male coachees exhibiting sexist behaviour towards their female coaches. Another difference is that mentoring tends to be a longer-term relationship, where intimacy, including unproductive intimacy (Clawson and Kram, 1984), has more time and opportunity to develop. Executive coaching is generally more short term. In this study, the reaction of the female coaches confronted by male sexism could also hardly have been different. One chose to directly confront the sexism she faced and seems to have developed a productive coaching relationship. The other backed away. However, each situation involved different individuals and contexts. It is surely essential to give women coaches the flexibility (and support) they need when faced with similar circumstances.

Conclusions

This study has yielded a number of evidence-based outcomes that may be of value to both coaches and coachees. For coachees, the study has shown that organizations that sponsor or deliver executive coaching programmes need to provide a diversity of coaches for selection. Given that, at least for the majority, gender is not a factor in the coach selection process, information on coach attributes such as skills, competencies and qualifications needs to be provided. However, since, at least for a minority of coachees, gender is a very important factor, coaching teams must contain both male and female coaches.

Another outcome of the study is that executive coaches should be alerted to the potential for negative psychosocial intimacy in coaching. Coaches, and particularly women coaches need to be aware (if many are not already aware) of the potential for sexist attitudes and comments and even sexual harassment from male coachees. Coaches may wish to highlight their awareness of this as part of the contracting processes, indicating the circumstances in which they will terminate the contract. Coaches who experience sexual harassment also need to know who they should turn to for help. With the growth of coaching supervision, this is likely to be their supervisor. But if these events are part of a formal executive coaching programme, then programme managers need to be alerted to see if systemic changes are required, including getting all stakeholders (coaches, coachees, clients/sponsors) signed up to appropriate ethical codes of conduct. However, it should be noted that even where negative sexual stereotyping by male coachees occurred, this did not prevent most coaching partnerships settling down into a productive partnership. Coaches should be relieved that, for the majority of cases, coachees made choices based on the professional characteristics of the coach.

Some of the limitations of the study need to be acknowledged. First, in terms of research design and generalizability, respondents were drawn exclusively from small and medium-sized enterprises and may not be representative of other sectors such as large corporations, or the public or voluntary sectors. Furthermore, given that they chose to join the programme, they were also a volunteer sample, making the external validity of the study even more limited. Second, the use of mentoring as a proxy had its drawbacks. Most of the mentoring studies examine mentor-protégé relationships where both parties work within the same organization. This has implications for the kinds of judgements and selection criteria used. For example, Allen et al. (2000) found that mentors were likely to pick their protégés based upon the protégé's perceived ability and potential. In the case of the current study, executive coaches selected by the coachees were offering their services, largely on the basis of financial reward. Another limitation of using mentoring as a proxy is that some of the mentoring functions (for example, career development, exposure and visibility and challenging assignments) do not map comfortably onto the functions of coaching, at least when delivered by external coaches. Hence, adjustments had to be made to some of the measures used.

Following the above analysis, some suggestions are made for future research. First, while we have identified some differences in the matching process between coaching and mentoring, further studies are needed (with larger samples and within different organizational contexts, for example, large firms) to explore gender differences. Second, given the surprising findings about sexist attitudes amongst some male coachees, further research could seek to identify similar themes and responses. Third, as discussed, more needs to be understood about the different functions undertaken by external and internal coaches. Are internal coaches, for example, better placed to help with career functions than internal coaches? Finally, our study assisted in the development and validation of a measurement scale by including gender as a mediating factor between different coaching skills and attributes. This scale will be used as part of a future study.

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Appendix

No.	Dominant themes	Sub-themes	Description
1.	Personal support	Feeling comfortable Discussing personal issues 'Gossip' (with the girls) Good listening	Personal support meant being able to 'connect' and relax with the coach, such that the coachee became comfortable talking about more personal issues. Some respondents believed that women coaches tend to provide more personal and emotional guidance than male coaches.
2.	Offering broader perspectives	A different view point Flexibility	Choice of an opposite gender coach was based on the belief that the nature of advice would show alternative horizons and add to current perspectives.
3.	Role model	Masculine traits: Assertiveness Achieving a work-life balance Successfully surviving in a male-dominated environment (for female coachee)	Selection of the coach was determined by the commonality between the coach and the coachee. The coach was perceived as someone similar yet successful, someone to aspire to.
4.	Sexism	Superficial selection—using pictures of coaches Physical attributes alluded to, such as: 'tall', 'blonde', 'pretty faces' and 'glamorous'	This theme was characterized by selection by male coachees based on physical attractiveness of the female coach and much sexual innuendo.