# Coaching unemployed managers and professionals through the trauma of unemployment: Derailed or undaunted?*

**David E Gray**
University of Greenwich, UK

**Yiannis Gabriel**
University of Bath, UK

**Harshita Goregaokar**
University of Surrey, UK

## Abstract

The economic crisis of 2008/2009 has increased unemployment among managers, particularly older managers, a group under-researched empirically. This longitudinal study assesses the efficacy of executive coaching for a group of unemployed professionals who participated in an intensive coaching programme aimed at reintegrating them into the economy. Results suggest that the majority were positive about coaching, a process that helped them to reflect on and learn from their new circumstances. Findings also contradict other studies, indicating cautious, cool and even hostile responses to coaching. The study highlights the mental fragility of previously successful, now unemployed managers. From a policy perspective, interventions should start earlier (before employees leave an organisation) and finish later. From a social science perspective, executive coaching represents a modest but sometimes effective initiative to help unemployed professionals to re-write their life stories to make sense of their experiences.

## Introduction

The negative consequences of unemployment have been well documented, with studies showing that unemployed people experience diminished feelings of well-being (Warr, 1978), lowered

---

**Corresponding author:**
David E Gray, University of Greenwich, Park Row, London SE10 9LS, UK.
Email: d.e.gray@gre.ac.uk

self-esteem (Fink, 1967; McGreevy, 2010), loss of self-identity (Fineman, 1983) and a general deterioration in mental and physical health (Jahoda, 1982), particularly depression which might affect both the job seeker and their partner (Vinokur et al., 1996). People with psychological problems may be further hindered in their chances of finding a new job (Mastekaasa, 1996). However, Hartley's (1980) study suggests that the generalisation that unemployment leads to loss of self-esteem fails to take into account individual differences and responses. As will be seen, the study reported here also locates important individual differences and variations in response to job loss.

The study reports on a programme which used executive coaching as a means of helping a group of unemployed senior managers back into work. The originality of the study stems from three factors. First, while there have been numerous studies into why executives lose their jobs, there have been few studies on interventions for helping them back into employment. Second, executive coaching (the intervention used here) is under-researched in terms of its impact and efficacy (Joo, 2005; Passmore and Gibbs, 2007). Offering executive coaching to a group of people, unemployed managers, potentially facing severe financial and psychological challenge also provided an opportunity to give coaching the kind of robust examination, rarely accorded to it in previous empirical studies, most of which have been cross-sectional. This study is unique in being longitudinal. Third, there have been few, if any, studies on the impact of executive coaching on the employability of unemployed managers in general, and older unemployed managers in particular.

## Theoretical background

### The context and causes of job loss

Given that high levels of managerial and executive unemployment are a relatively new phenomenon, we felt it instructive to examine some of the studies conducted during the last economic downturn of the 1980s to see whether any lessons could be learned. The earliest study by McCall and Lombardo (1983) found that for executives who had been highly successful in the earlier part of their careers, some of their earlier strengths now appeared as weaknesses. The most common causes of derailment (plateauing, demotion or job loss) were insensitivity to others, failure to delegate or build a team and overdependence on a single advocate or mentor. A later study by Morrison et al. (1987) looked at derailment among women executives and found that once successful women derailed because they were unable to adapt to a boss or company culture, experienced performance problems or did not have the ability to lead subordinates or act strategically. A study by Lombardo et al. (1988) endorsed the findings of earlier studies, highlighting that derailed managers are more likely to be seen as lacking in skills in handling complex business ventures, strategic thinking and political skills, and were more likely to be seen as unstable, lacking drive, abrasive and untrustworthy. Although all derailed managers possessed considerable strengths, each one also exhibited one or more significant weakness. Unfortunately, managers perceive themselves as less likely to derail than others such as their peers or direct reports see them. Indeed, the higher up the management hierarchy, the larger the rating differences between self and others (Capretta et al., 2008; Gentry et al., 2007). 'In summary, everyone seems to know who will derail except the managers themselves' (Capretta et al., 2008: 50).

### Responses to job loss – riding the roller coaster

Another strand of literature has sought to identify the differential effects of job loss and managers' responses to the experience. One of the earliest studies into the psychological stress of 'termination' was reported by Louise (1970) who noted that executives who had once prided themselves on

their mature business judgement, sometimes behaved with childish immaturity when trying to deal with their own unemployment. As the months of unemployment wore on, depression set in. However, it was not until the mid-1970s that the psychological damage caused by executive redundancy was explored in depth. Levinson (1975) in an article on executive suicide noted that the most vulnerable managers manifested three common elements: high intelligence, driving ambition and extreme disappointment. Interestingly, one of Levinson's (1975) recommendations for preventing suicide is that executives should talk with others who can break down the components of the problem, so they can be tackled one at a time – very similar to the approach a coach would take (as in our study).

One important result of job loss is the emotional roller coaster that follows (Borgen and Amundson, 1987), when self-confidence falls, and there is a negative impact on identity (even for those people with many past successes). Professional workers in particular experience a 'harder-they-fall' effect (Latack et al., 1995). Indeed, some may subjectively maintain their former work roles, regarding themselves, say, as an accountant looking of a job, not someone who is unemployed. Drawing on former roles may help fight off what Garfinkel (1956) calls identity degradation (Berger, 2006). People often begin their job search with some enthusiasm believing they have a chance of a new beginning (although this optimism may contain seeds of delusion and unrealistic expectations). It does not take long, however, for the harsh realities of the situation to become evident and for a sense of hopelessness and stagnation to set in. However, while for some this new identity is very negative, for others, unemployment brings a process of renewal, a form of renegotiation of identity, reflecting a 'strong inner drive for survival' (Amundson, 1994: 99). This identity negotiation is an ongoing process but one that becomes particularly important during times of transition (such as being made unemployed) when boundaries are fluid (Amundson, 1994). Kovach (1989) argues that unemployment can sometimes lead to quite positive outcomes, with those who suffer it, using the disappointment to increase their awareness and to spend more time reflecting on both working and personal life including their partnerships.

## Offering a helping hand?

Following the post-2008 recession, as well as the more conventional outplacement assistance, an increasing number of organisations are introducing executive coaching to help terminated managers. This development, however, is relatively recent. In his longitudinal study of career and outplacement counselling in the United States from 1890 to 1989, Pope (2000) does not mention coaching in general, or executive coaching in particular, by name. Capretta et al. (2008), however, describe three case studies of senior managers at risk of termination, all of whom receive executive coaching as part of their assistance package. As part of this study, a search in Business Source Premier (a database of 1100 scholarly journals) was undertaken. This yielded 624 'hits' on the search terms 'coaching' and 'manager' and 262 'hits' for 'executive coaching' and 'manager'. However, when the terms 'coaching' or 'executive coaching' were combined with 'unemployed manager' the results were zero. It would appear, then, that the use of executive coaching with unemployed managers is currently seriously under-researched.

Coaching has been described as 'the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another' (Downey, 2003: 15) and the process of 'optimizing people's potential and performance' (Whitmore, 2002: 97). One branch of coaching, executive coaching (the intervention of this study), is more work-focused and has been defined as 'a form of tailored work-related development for senior and professional managers which spans business, functional and personal skills' (Carter, 2001: 15). Grant (2005) describes executive coaching as a helping arrangement between a client who has managerial responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide

variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals. While there are overlaps between the two, we distinguish executive coaching from career coaching since the latter involves 'aligning improved individual skills to the current or future strategic direction of the organization' (Hatala and Hisey, 2011: 103). Being unemployed, the managers in our study by definition do not, at the time of coaching, belong to an organisation. To make another distinction, although there are similarities and overlaps, coaching is not the same as mentoring; the latter is usually more long-term, often less structured and usually provided by a more senior or experienced person, often internal within the organisation, who passes on their knowledge (Connor and Pakora, 2007; Megginson and Clutterbuck, 1995). For the purposes of this study, we take executive coaching to be a non-directive and usually short-term relationship, based on trust, where a coach helps the executive achieve personal and professional goals.

Our research, then, aims to fill three gaps in the literature. First, we seek to contribute to the literature on executive job loss by exploring the depth of trauma felt by older managers, the fragmentation of their sense of self and the flexibility (or otherwise) that they were able to develop in response to their changed circumstances. Unlike many previous studies, our study is longitudinal. Second, we know of no studies that have addressed the influence and effectiveness of coaching when offered to unemployed managers and professionals. Third, our study seeks to generate a more complex image of what actually happens during coaching sessions, through a close examination of the stories that clients use to describe their experiences of coaching, including turning points. In particular, our study aims to identify the different stances adopted by unemployed managers and professionals towards their coaches, the nature of their expectations, and the types of relations they develop with their coaches (the working alliance) and the efficacy and impact of coaching.

## Method

Bruner (1996) contrasts two modes of cognitive functioning – the pragmatic or logico-scientific striving for explanations through the use of variables, causal links and hypotheses, and the narrative mode which strives for sensemaking through stories, dramas and believable (although not necessarily 'accurate' or generalisable) historical accounts. Our research firmly inhabits the latter. It examines how our respondents, through narrative constructions, sought to address challenges to identity and loss of direction their careers had suffered and how they experienced their coach's attempts to help them. But the theoretical contribution of our study also assumes a narrative character. The limited size of our sample does not allow for broad and reliable generalisations and causal links; however, the closeness of our observations and our prolonged exposure to the experiences of our respondents allows the identification of dominant patterns, dynamics and experiences that are liable to unfold in situations like those facing our respondents.

Our study took place on the back of a government-sponsored programme seeking to offer help to unemployed managers and professionals in their attempt to return to work. During the first phase of the study (2008–2009), 10 hours of one-to-one executive coaching was offered to 28 individuals aged 50 years or more, who had been terminated in mid-career and who had been unemployed for between six and 18 months. The locations for the coaching included hotel lobbies, cafes, restaurants and sometimes the coach's or coachee's home, with the sessions typically lasting between one and two hours. The programme provided funding to pay the coaches, but did not stipulate how or where the coaching should be delivered, this being left to contracting between the coach and coachee themselves. Coachees were given a free choice of coach, based upon their profiles (including coaching experience, coaching qualifications and philosophy) presented in a booklet. The faculty of nine highly experienced executive coaches were first recruited by the university in 2006 to

work on a UK government–sponsored project that had delivered coaching to 200 small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) managers. These coaches had between 10 and 26 years' experience of coaching. In the first phase of the study, we examined the responses of these unemployed professionals to being terminated. In addition, they attended a series of Enterprise and Employment Clubs (EECs) consisting of four workshops, each session lasting for approximately seven hours. The sessions aimed at training participants in peer mentoring, in supporting each other beyond the events, in curriculum vitae (CV) development, and interview and networking skills and provided an introduction in preparation for one-to-one executive coaching. The facilitator was not part of the coaching faculty or research team.

At the completion of the coaching, all 28 participants were sent invitations to take part in a focus group and individual interviews. Four coachees participated in two focus groups, after which all eight agreed to be interviewed, plus an additional 5 coaching participants, making 13 in all. Sample sizes should not be too large so that it is not difficult to extract thick, rich descriptions and not too small that it becomes difficult to achieve data saturation (Flick, 2009; Morse, 1991), theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) or informational redundancy (Lincoln and Guba, 1994). Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that between 4 and 10 cases usually works well. With fewer than four cases, it is often difficult to generate theory with much complexity and the empirical underpinning is likely to be unconvincing unless there are several sub-cases within them. With more than 10 cases, the volume of data can quickly become overwhelming. In this study, while 13 cases slightly exceed Eisenhardt's (1989) recommendation, it was felt prudent to err on the side additional cases, so that data saturation would be more easily reached. Each of the two focus groups lasted approximately two hours and was audio recorded. The interviews were in-depth, lasting between two and three hours.

In the second phase of the study, 12–24 months after the completion of Phase 1 interviews, we reinterviewed 11 of the 13 original participants (two did not respond to a number of requests) to explore the impact of the coaching sessions, the role played by the coach and the nature of the coach–coachee relationship (the working alliance). The time-lag between Phases 1 and 2 allowed respondents to develop a longer term perspective and reflect on the impact and experience of executive coaching. For the two respondents interviewed only as part of Phase 1, this was not the case, but we were still able to track their employment status longitudinally. In addition to finding out how the employment status of all respondents had evolved, we sought to assess four aspects of their experience that became narrated through the coaching conversation, namely,

- The depth of their trauma – how wounded they felt;
- The fragmentation of their working experience and their sense of self;
- The flexibility that they were able to develop in response to their changed circumstances;
- Their view of the efficacy and impact of executive coaching itself, including reflections on stumbling blocks and turning points.

All research interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed, generating in excess of 240,000 words of text. To address the issue of reliability within the analysis, all three members of the research team listened to the recordings more than once and then wrote extensive notes of their impressions of the spoken text. These notes were then compared and different interpretations and impressions triangulated (Gray, 2014). This allowed the researchers to reflect not only on specific features of the text, but also on the tone, the emotion and the personal changes undergone by respondents in the course of the coaching conversations. In addition to the formal interviews, two of the three researchers were actively involved in the delivery of the programme (one as an administrator and one as a coach) and held regular informal conversations with many of the participants and the coaches who they came to know well. The 'coach as researcher' allowed for an insider's

perspective on the programme (Gray et al., 2011), attuning researchers to emerging themes and issues. However, becoming too 'close' can generate bias and threats to validity. This was minimised by not including the coachees of this coach in the research sample. Avoiding bias was also aided by the fact that the third researcher came from a university that was independent of the design or delivery of the programme, his role being purely to collaborate on the research.

Our interview approach relied strongly on indirect questions and the elicitation of accounts which either described each interviewee's own experiences or could be of use to others in a similar situation. Our methodology was substantially based on Gabriel's (1995, 2000, 2004) research into organisational storytelling and McAdams' (1988, 1996; McAdams et al., 2006) work on life stories. Stories, in this line of inquiry, are seen as opening windows into the subjective experiences of individuals that side-step defensive and contrived positions that are triggered by direct or factual questions. They are part of a narrative methodology that is now fairly widely used in many areas of organisational research, including the study of unemployed people (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Ezzy, 2000, 2001; Russell, 2011; Willott and Griffin, 2004). Avoiding direct questions which may lead to stock answers, we reached out for stories and narratives which captured our participants' experiences at different points of their 'journey' through unemployment. In line with this narrative approach, data analysis utilised a narrative analysis methodology. In narrative analysis, the text is first viewed in the gestalt, that is, within the context and social situation in which it is created. The analysis of the text includes making distinctions between text that constitute narrative passages and other forms of text. Where researchers generally differ is in their attitude to the status of the text itself. While some take the 'truth' of the narrative at face value, others see narratives as a special way of constructing events, that is, they are 'social constructions located within power structures and social milieux' (Punch, 2005: 223). Our own approach was, in the first instance, to accept each coachee's account of his or her experience or life story at face value. Where, however, we detected discrepancies, tensions, hesitations or other discontinuities in the responses, or whenever we noticed intense expressions of emotion, we probed into the deeper meaning of the text.

## Results

### *The trauma of termination*

At two years after the original interviews, the mental scars of termination are still evident for many of our managers. Peter (biographical details are included in Table 1), for example, casts himself in the role of the victimised hero. He puts things back together for 'them' (employers, fellow workers), recovers situations that have arisen due to the incompetency of others – but is then 'got rid of'. He is not valued or listened to. A victim of broken promises, he has been made redundant nine times. Gerard rails against 'the system' which is 'mad' and 'perverted'. Britain is now a conflict society, a greed culture in which there is a lack of compassion. For Matthew, unemployment changes every aspect of your life and 'knocks your confidence', giving him moments of self-doubt during which he thinks he may never work again. Stanley wallows in negativity, angry at himself and his sense of worthlessness. But it is Heather who perhaps presents the saddest picture. Doing some part-time work for the Alzheimer's Society, she is now earning less as her hours have been cut. Her lifestyle has been reduced to food shopping and buying petrol. Her attitude to work has also changed – she does not have the same commitment to an organisation. At a personal level, she talks about being very lonely and isolated from other people. 'Nobody really knows me'.

Others, though, are more phlegmatic, resilient or at least realistic. In the main, they have adjusted to life outside the world of large corporations and corporate careers. They have reduced their consumption patterns, moderated their expectations and widened the range of work they are prepared

**Table 1.** Job status, characteristics, coaching category and view of coaching (those interviewed after Phase 1 only in italics).

| Name | Education qualification | Previous job | Job status – first interview | Job status – second interview | Characteristics | Coaching category | View of coaching |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Peter | Degree | Public service | Employed | Unemployed | Non-reflective: feels victimised, lonely, inflexible, cynical, ignored, sardonic | Critical | Jealous of coach, hostile: coaches are 'posh fishwives' |
| Matthew | Degree – MBA | Self-employed | Unemployed | Unemployed | Non-reflective: insecure, inflexible, lacks confidence | Critical | Coaching relevant for others but not for him: could not help with obsession with CV |
| Neil | A level | IT consultant | Unemployed | Unemployed | Non-reflective: defensive, sanguine, passive | Cool | Coaching is relevant and re-motivating but in the end just common sense |
| Robert | Degree | IT specialist | Unemployed | Employed (but downshift) | Non-reflective: rigid, inflexible. Sees himself as a failure | Cool | Coaching is 'quite useful' but wants coach to be more 'bossy', that is, confuses coaching for mentoring |
| Gerard | Postgraduate Diploma | Education | Employed (part-time) | Employed (part-time) | Reflective: flexible but lonely | Complimentary | Coaching helpful with career planning, objectives and skills set |
| Raymond | Diploma | Solicitor | Self-employed (voluntary work – no income) | Self-employed (same as before) | Non-reflective: but content. Fragile and vulnerable | Complimentary | Coaching useful for self-analysis. A relationship containing a spiritual quality |
| *Bill* | *Degree* | *Finance* | *Employed* | *Unemployed* | *Non-reflective. Fears not being in control. Lacks confidence* | *Complimentary* | *Narrow focus on interview technique* |

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued)

| Name | Education qualification | Previous job | Job status – first interview | Job status – second interview | Characteristics | Coaching category | View of coaching |
|------|------------------------|--------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|
| John | A level | IT consultant | Employed | Unemployed | Reflective: optimistic, sanguine | Committed | Coaching helped 'get rid of demons' and allowed him to let go of negative experiences |
| Mick | A level | Hospitality | Unemployed | Employed (well-paying job) | Reflective: flexible, self-critical | Committed | Coaching helped him to be more self-critical. Coaching process emotional at times. New lease of life |
| Michael | O level | Advertising | Unemployed | Self-employed (although business struggling) | Reflective: flexible – has done even white van driving | Committed | Coaching a mix of challenge and support. Contained a turning point. |
| Heather | Degree | Voluntary sector | Employed (part-time) | Employed (part-time) | Reflective but lonely. | Committed | Coaching a milestone and 'life-changing experience' |
| Gordon | Degree | Finance | Unemployed | Unemployed | Non-reflective: inflexible, angry | Committed | Used two coaches for personal, and for career and professional objectives |
| Stanley | Degree | Finance | Employed | Employed (same as before) | Reflective but wallows in self-doubt and blame | Committed | Provided direction, boosted confidence. Made him feel important |

CV: curriculum vitae; IT: information technology.

to do to include voluntary, part-time, self-employed and family work. The trauma of redundancy is no longer an open wound for them. Thus, for Michael, being made redundant has nothing to do with the person, it is a cost-cutting exercise; he has accepted that, at his age, few continue to work in advertising and has moved on. Neil comments that there is a fine line between being employed and unemployed – it can happen to anyone, regardless of age, background or education. Neil is still unemployed but doing some volunteering work. At the time of losing his job, he also went through a difficult divorce. But he is 'realistic' about his job direction and realises this may not be back into information technology (IT). One of the impacts of unemployment is that he realises he is never going to go back to the stress and pressure of the corporate world. John is optimistic about getting a job and has even delved (not very successfully) into day trading on the stock exchange. At one point, he planned to emigrate to Turkey but eventually drifted into semi-retirement, taking occasional contractual work and keeping his options open. Flexibility is not always a successful strategy. Raymond, for example, seems both content and resigned to unemployment – despite showing considerable flexibility in retraining and in his commitment as a voluntary mediator, his voluntary work has not led to paid employment. He has suffered three life-changing events: unemployment, the death of his brother and divorce – yet, he views losing his job in the construction industry as a blessing in disguise.

## Fragmentation of work and fragility of self

Only one of our coachees, Mick, is now earning more than before his job loss. For the others, there is the prospect of permanent unemployment, part-time employment, a business start-up or unpaid voluntary work. Peter is still unemployed and has had only a succession of short-term jobs – a fragmented work profile. He complains that you are hired to do one job but are given another; you are exploited – just covering for other people. This 'covering for others' epitomises a sense that these jobs are not his own. He cannot identify with them. Hence, there is not a hint of pleasure or satisfaction when Peter talks about work. He seems lonely, cynical, sardonic and sad. Matthew got a new job after his coaching but was soon made redundant again, since which his financial situation has worsened. He is applying for between 20 and 30 jobs each week but chooses to keep his unemployed situation a secret from his friends – 'it exposes you emotionally' to either sympathy or ridicule. Matthew's case provides support for Jahoda's (1982) assertion that repeated job applications may become a source of anger and frustration (undermining self-confidence). In Raymond, there is a fragility in his demeanour, suggested by his inflated, verbose use of language: 'reservoir of funding', 'diaried up', 'analytically identified', 'monetary commodities' and 'linguistic [sic] teachers'. Despite his best efforts (and numerous stories), he has never achieved payment for his volunteering; hence, coaching is 'my reward'. You 'learn to move on' even though unemployment damages your self-identity and people (your networks) move away from you. He comments that unemployment lowers peoples' self-esteem (although he carefully avoids saying whether this applied to himself). Heather also comments that her experiences (unemployment and difficult family relationships) had caused fragmentation in her life. But the coaching helped affirm her sense of identity and an endorsement that she is 'okay'. She knows she is different (raised as a Roman Catholic and now a Muslim), in her own words, a 'labradoodle'.

## The impact of coaching

Our respondents talked at length about relations with coaches and the impact of coaching on themselves. There was general agreement that being allowed to select the coach of their choice was empowering. The coaching sessions were not seen as receiving charity (or inferior social

services) but rather as the exercise of a sovereign consumer choice. As a result, respondents invested much effort in these sessions and tried to make the best of what was being offered. Reflecting on the types of coaching that they received and its effects on them, three types of effect were identified:

*Coaching restores faith in oneself and offers a reassurance of self-worth and social identity:*

It was actually a bit of a life changing experience to be honest because … it gave me a kind of an endorsement if you like that I'm OK. (Heather)

My coach said that we were brought together, I think it was more reassuring for me as well because we had a reciprocal set up. (Raymond)

I found the coaching very useful … it made you think well actually you're not a complete failure. (Nick)

*Coaching valorises life and work outside the 'corporates' and opens up new possibilities for work and living:*

[My coach] just made me think about what I could do, what I might consider other options [from corporate jobs] – I think what happens is when you lose your job … there's a sort of mental process which almost says you've got to go on doing what you did, which I actually ended up doing but I think [coaching] also gives you a lot of thought on … other things you could do so we talked quite widely about different opportunities and sort of different life styles and things like that. (Gerard)

[My coach] pointed out how more and more people are turning away from corporate life and doing that now. … The whole relationship with your employer has changed … jobs are not for life any more. I think that was good advice. (John)

*Coaching offers practical skills, such as CV writing and preparation for interviews, that can prove useful in job searches:*

I showed her my CV and she helped make a number of small modifications, not many but she was into detail very much and also helped me construct, well no I actually constructed it myself, a covering letter. (Neil)

I was going for an interview and he said to me, 'Next time we meet, come in dressed as an interviewee – for an interview'. I rolled up in a nice sports jacket, I thought nice jacket, wasn't a suit it was jacket, nice tie, shirt, shoes, nice trousers, pressed. Neat, looked good I think for an interview in my opinion. 'You need to change those shoes Gerard' –'What, what's wrong with them, they're clean?', 'Slip-ons, indicates laziness!' (Gerard)

Our respondents' overall judgements on the value and the efficacy of executive coaching were mixed, ranging from the very positive to that of cynical dismissal. Analysis of our data revealed four clusters of responses to the coaching experience which we refer to as committed, complimentary, cool and critical. Six of the respondents fell clearly in the committed category, five were complimentary or cool and two were critical.

- *Committed*. These coachees see coaching as creating real, discernable change. Sometimes this is gaining a more realistic perspective on life and their job situation. Sometimes it is the 'life-changing' personal insight and the creation of significant milestones or turning points

though opportunities for self-reflection. Some coachees may be successful in changing jobs, others are stuck in voluntary roles that act as substitutes for paid employment, but the coaching is important for maintaining self-identity and commitment.

- *Complimentary*. These people acknowledge the benefits of coaching as useful rather than life changing, often as a means of identifying skill sets needed for future employment. But their support for coaching is sometimes guarded seeing it as not going much beyond 'common sense'.
- *Cool*. These people see coaching as moving them in the right direction, but they need a longer engagement with it to feel the effect. Others acknowledge the benefits of coaching but still regard themselves as failures. They can see the benefits of coaching but then damn it with faint praise.
- *Critical*. This (minority) group is quite hostile to coaching and coaches or else they regard coaching as helpful 'for others' but not for themselves. They often seek advice and direction ('tell me how to do it'), failing to understand coaching as a non-directive supportive conversation. Some of their comments border on the delusional, seeing themselves in the role of coach or suggesting that the coach benefits as much (or more) from the relationship than themselves.

Consistent with other studies (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Gardiner et al., 2009; Lippman, 2008; Platman, 2004), we found a strong association between a coachee's flexibility and their success in locating some kind of paid employment or voluntary work and possessing a positive attitude to coaching. What we also found was that coaches could make a decisive intervention in helping unemployed managers and professionals reinvent and repackage themselves in ways that either helped them find new employment or at least cope more effectively with the loss of their earlier one. Coaching gave Mick a new lease of life and a new career direction. The coach was chosen because he had done some similar work in hospitality management – 'and had a nice smile [laughs]'. He was supportive and challenging by turning Mick's questions back on himself – helping him to become more self-sufficient. Overall, the whole experience was 'phenomenal'. The coach became almost a father figure ('you can say things to the coach that you can't say to your mother') and helped Mick make a decisive and successful move away from the hospitality industry into human resources.

Unlike Mick, Heather had been unable to reshape her life, living in virtual poverty and working part-time in a poorly paid, low-skill job. Yet, she too was enthusiastic about coaching in spite of the continuing crisis in her life. Coaching involved 'the longest conversation I've had with anyone in years'. It has been a milestone, 'a life-changing experience'. The coach was able to establish a strong rapport: 'At a certain level we did meet'. The coach sometimes talked about himself. As a (Christian) coach, and (Muslim) coachee, they seemed to meet on a spiritual level. Through this he was able to 'stretch' Heather's thinking and self-concept, 'to gather all the bits and pieces so there is some substance to it, rather than being fragmented by my life experiences'. The coaching appears to have had some long-lasting effects – it 'remains helpful to me'. So for some people like Heather, the coaching had not been instrumental in helping her find work but has been perhaps even more significant – it had been life- and identity-affirming. For Stanley, coaching allowed him to express his anguish and dejection but to also make him feel important – 'somebody felt you were worth coaching'.

For those in the complimentary/cool category, coaching was helpful rather than life changing. Gerard, for example, acknowledged that the coach helped him to identify new work objectives, recognising that he did not want to go back to full employment. Clearly, unemployment had damaged Gerard's self-confidence but coaching helped him to identify new skills and focus on the

future. Raymond too valued the coaching – it was helpful for self-analysis and '100 per cent a relationship'. There was even a spiritual quality ('a cosmic match') which had brought him and his coach together, rather than he choosing her. Indeed, he saw the coach as also benefiting; it was a 'reciprocal approach', although how the coach benefited is not disclosed. He looked forward to the coaching – it helped to reenergise his batteries. But coaches need to be careful when coaching the unemployed. Unemployed people may suffer from low self-esteem (although he does not say whether this applies to himself).

At the cynical extreme of the spectrum, Peter, dripping with irony, described coaches as middle-class 'do gooders' or even as 'posh fishwives'. There is something of the 'noblesse oblige' about them. Coaches are essentially shrewd people who, like him, had been unemployed but were now making a living by coaching the unemployed. As someone with a self-proclaimed working class background, he saw coaching in the same light as being given charity. Coaches are arrogant, thinking they know it all, he said. They go on about being positive, but there are more negatives to life – and that is not always a bad thing. Working with those who are 'out on a limb' (although this does not apply to himself), coaches can push people further into distress. The world is upside down – like the man buried at Box Hill,[1] Surrey, who asked to be buried head down.

Matthew too had a predominantly hostile attitude towards his coach, even though he acknowledged that coaching could be of benefit to others. Indeed, he saw himself as being able to help others (he once considered becoming a coach) – most people in his view do not know how to write a CV. Yet, a career in coaching was not for him – his education and experience, he felt, put him in a different category. An acutely frustrated and angry man who had tasted great successes earlier in life, Matthew seemed to be at war with his CV, writing it and rewriting it. Eventually, he had paid a specialist firm to re-write it. This had not met with the approval of the coach but she would not 'tell him' how to change it, whereupon he got very impatient with her for being unable to help him get a job. What good are mentors (coaches), he asked pointedly, if they cannot offer people like him practical advice on how to get a job? As a result of his seething frustration, Matthew misconstrues the role of a coach (which is understood to be non-directive) as someone who could wave a magic wand and fix things. He would like his coach to tell him what to do in order to get a job but, ironically, he ignored his coach's advice to engage in networking (including contacting his influential friends) as a way of locating employment opportunities, since he chooses to keep his unemployment a secret from them.

The powerful and mixed emotions experienced by unemployed professionals in their encounters with coaches are revealed in an incident involving Gordon, someone who had held a very senior position in a financial institution. Gordon was unusual in choosing to work with two different coaches reflecting his gender biases – a male coach to work on business issues and a female for emotional support (like several other respondents, he was going through a divorce). Gordon had been rather critical of the EECs. He recalled the sessions as being a waste of time, more appropriate for the 'mentally feeble'. He found his fellow-professionals attending these sessions to be bursting with negativism, a view shared by Matthew who referred to them as 'scarred'. Gordon and Matthew had detached themselves from the group, obviously believing themselves to be better than the rest and concluding that the EECs did not address their needs and their senior management status. During a session in a hotel lobby, his female coach had asked Gordon a challenging question, at which point he reached across the table and grabbed her by the throat. Later, the coach could not recall the question she had asked due the shock she had experienced. However, she had remained calm and Gordon had apologised, saying that it would not happen again. At a later stage, Gordon (unlike Matthew) declared himself satisfied and committed to the coach.

This incident along with the numerous other displays of powerful emotions the coachees exhibited during their research interviews with the authors give an insight of how demanding it is for

people who had once wielded much power and enjoyed high status to receive help. Encountering a person with a job as a researcher, an academic or a coach seems to exacerbate their plight, drawing from some of them overwhelming feelings of anxiety, shame, envy and anger which are hard to contain. Working with such feelings poses a formidable challenge to coaches charged with helping them.

## Discussion

Our study does not support Jahoda's (1982) speculation that better educated individuals may have developed inner resources and wider horizons that can mitigate some of the psychological damage of unemployment. Our respondents experienced the emotional roller coaster (Borgen and Amundson, 1987). Although generally highly educated, many of our coachees exhibit negative characteristics: Peter (lonely, cynical), Matthew (inflexible, obsessive), Gerard (bitter against 'the system'), Neil (defensive, sanguine), Robert (self-doubting), Raymond (fragile, vulnerable), Heather (depressed, isolated) and Gordon (raging, frustrated). Our study lends support to those who warn that unemployment can lead to loss of self-identity (Fineman, 1983), lower self-esteem (Fink, 1967; McGreevy, 2010) and depression (Jahoda, 1982; Vinokur et al., 1996). If anything, the four respondents without degrees seemed to have greater resources of inner strength, flexibility and canny ability to cope with the loss of status, wealth and power. In an indirect way, therefore, there is some support for Hartley's (1980) argument that unemployed managers who are over-confident or who are very depressed are likely to be less interested in training (or, as in our study, coaching). Somewhat disconcertingly, our study finds very few examples of the view (e.g. Kovach, 1989) that unemployment can be an opportunity for learning and personal growth. This was an issue on which we repeatedly prompted our respondents but only Mick, among them, saw losing his earlier job as a 'blessing in disguise', and it is worth remembering that he was the only one to have landed on his feet. The inflexibility of this older group of managers lends support to Lippman's (2008) concern that older workers may have greater difficulty in adjusting to unemployment and Levinson's (1975) warning about lower self-image and self-directed anger.

In line with studies of the effects of coaching in general (Gegner, 1997; Passmore, 2010) and executive coaching in particular (Feggetter, 2007; Hall et al., 1999), our study, based on unemployed managers and professionals, indicates a predominantly positive attitude among those who receive executive coaching. Like Passmore's (2010) study, coaching provided a safe place for coachees to unburden themselves. However, unlike earlier studies, our findings also reveal some cautious, cool, ambivalent and even hostile responses to coaching. Our study certainly suggests a need for caution in viewing human beings as 'self-organizing, self-directed, adaptive entities' (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: 5) who can right themselves from adversity if only they are offered adequate help. Nor did our study find evidence that traumatised managers and professionals can collectively face their predicament by forming 'positive communities and positive institutions' (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: 8) of self-help and support, no matter how much assistance they were offered in the form of coaching. Instead, the participants in our study were confronting life realistically (e.g. cutting back on expenditure as their domestic budgets became squeezed) but not necessarily happily. In spite of such similarities, our study supports Fineman's (1983) view that responses to unemployment tend to be highly individual as well as individualistic. However, we found some discernible patterns of responses to unemployment and to coaching, particularly between those managers who were able to reflect sincerely and even self-critically on their actions, and those who maintained a predominantly non-reflective and defensive attitude (Gray, 2007; Raelin, 2001). A consistent finding that emerged from this study was a relationship between each coachee's attitude towards coaching and their ability or failure to engage in

self-reflection, often as a source for renegotiating identity (Amundson et al., 1993). In the majority of cases, those who expressed a commitment or were complimentary to coaching were also able to reflect on, and learn from, their circumstances. For Mick, coaching taught him to 'be more analytical about [him]self, to listen to people more and to be more self-critical. Coaching gives you an objective view of yourself'. Coaching allowed John to 'get rid of some of his demons', helping him get things into perspective by thinking through earlier painful experiences. The importance of self-insight is supported by Wasylyshyn (2003), who suggests that this is one of the success factors for a positive outcome of executive coaching – an example of what Borgen and Amundson (1987) call the re-evaluation of self-worth.

The relationship between coaching and reflection is in even sharper focus when considering negative attitudes to executive coaching. Those who were hostile to this intervention were without exception non-reflective. Although made redundant nine times, not once did Peter reflect on the reasons for this, nor did he consider that his own actions might have contributed to it – a clear lack of self-examination and a failure to understand the workings of the labour market (Amundson et al., 1993). His chief concern was the inadequacies of others ('bitchy, competitive women') and an unending catalogue of incompetent or abusive managers, with himself always cast as the victim. Peter, as we saw earlier ('posh fishwives') was one of the most disparaging respondents towards coaching. Similarly, Matthew, rather than reflect on previous experience, became transfixed on the need to improve his CV – externalising and objectifying his 'problem' – a failure to engage in renegotiating self-identity and understanding his position in the jobs market (Amundson and Borgen, 1988). His inability to get a job had nothing to do with his own approach but is the result of failing to get the CV right. Unable to reflect on his own attitudes and behaviours, he transferred his anger and frustration onto his coach, dismissing the coaching as unworthy of him.

It is finally worth reflecting on the relative merits of individual executive coaching as against group activities, like self-help 'job clubs' or the EECs described earlier. Given the social isolation caused by unemployment, group-based supportive activities would seem to make sense both on economic and psychological grounds (Amundson and Borgen, 1988). Some research indicates that such activities stimulate solidarity, encourage a sense of accountability (to the group), enhance motivation and provide networking opportunities and referrals from other members (Kondo, 2009). Our study, however, indicates that creating solidarity among unemployed professionals is not easy in view of their highly individualistic outlooks and their readiness to disidentify from other members of such groups on any number of grounds.

Our study emphasises pointedly just how traumatic the experience of unemployment is for individuals who lose their job as they approach the culmination of what seemed like successful careers, many of whom are completely derailed by the experience. Yet, the study also supports the view that executive coaching can help many of them 'get back on the rails' (Gabriel et al., 2011), not necessarily by resuming their earlier careers but by reflecting on themselves and discovering that there is a worthwhile and productive life to be had outside the world of corporations and high-flying careers. From a policy perspective, this suggests that policymakers can play an active role by constructing legislative frameworks and providing resources that facilitate such interventions. These interventions also need to start earlier (before employees leave their organisations) and finish later. From a social science perspective, executive coaching represents a modest but sometimes effective initiative, helping unemployed professionals to re-write their life stories and make sense of their experiences. The study also offers some support for helping the unemployed by combining executive coaching with other interventions such as workshops and job clubs.

# Limitations and future research

One weakness was the absence of a significant cohort of women in the study which made it impossible to explore the effects of gender on job loss and subsequent coaching. Second, the coaching intervention, at 10 hours, was relatively short-lived; a longer intervention might have had a greater impact, particularly on those more cautious or cool towards executive coaching. Finally, and most importantly, we must acknowledge that our study presents only one-half of the picture, that of recipients of coaching, rather than that of the coaches themselves. It is not possible to assess, therefore, the extent to which each coach's own personality or his or her specific method and technique affected the coachee's experiences. Despite these limitations, our study (one of the few investigations into the efficacy of executive coaching and the first of its kind in exploring its impact with unemployed managers and professionals) allows us to give support for coaching as a helping intervention. Yet, it also offers caution since, unlike other studies of executive coaching, it also reveals a 'darker' side involving client scepticism, cynicism and, at times, patent delusion. Our study draws attention to the mental fragility of unemployed managers and professionals, indicating that executive coaching and other interventions (such as executive outplacement) need to go far beyond career counselling, CV development or putting people with very different emotional and other needs in a room together.

We recommend that further studies be conducted into coaching unemployed managers to broaden the sample base particularly in terms of coping strategies and the extent of job-seeking success. This under-researched group is worthy of a research focus, particularly given the large rise in managerial unemployment following the 2008 financial crisis. Is coaching merely a 'sticking plaster' with unemployed managers either failing to re-engage with the world of work or derailing quickly once re-employed? We also recommend that the impact of executive coaching is explored as a distinct intervention, and then compared with coaching when combined with group-based interventions such as workshops and action learning. This addresses the issue of whether the trauma and isolation of unemployment is best addressed by helping strategies that include collective activities. Finally, in agreement with De Haan et al. (2011, 2013), we recommend further studies on the nature and impact of the working alliance both from the perspective of the coachee (as in our study) but also from the viewpoint of the coach.

## Note

1.  Major Peter Labilliere (1726–1800) believed that since the world was topsy-turvy, and would be turned upside down on Judgement Day, buried upside down, he would be right at last.

## References

Ainsworth S and Hardy C (2009) Mind over body: Physical and psychotherapeutic discourses and the regulation of the older worker. *Human Relations* 62(8): 1199–1229.

Amundson NE (1994) Negotiating identity during unemployment. *Journal of Employment Counseling* 31(3): 98–104.

Amundson NE and Borgen WA (1988) Factors that help and hinder in group employment counseling. *Journal of Employment Counseling* 25: 104–114.

Amundson NE, Borgen WA and Westwood MJ (1993) *Accessing the Labor Market*. Ottawa, ON, Canada: Canada Employment and Immigration.

Berger ED (2006) 'Aging' identities: Degradation and negotiation in the search for employment. *Journal of Aging Studies* 20(4): 303–316.

Borgen WA and Amundson NE (1987) The dynamics of unemployment. *Journal of Counseling and Development* 66: 180–184.

Bruner JS (1996) *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Capretta C, Clark LP and Guangrong D (2008) Executive derailment: Three cases in point and how to prevent it. *Global Business and Organizational Excellence* 27(3): 48–56.

Carter A (2001) *Executive Coaching: Inspiring Performance at Work*. Brighton: IES.

Connor M and Pakora J (2007) *Coaching and Mentoring at Work: Developing Effective Practice*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.

De Haan E, Culpin V and Curd J (2011) Executive coaching in practice: What determines helpfulness for clients of coaching? *Personnel Review* 40(1): 24–44.

De Haan E, Duckworth A, Birch D, et al. (2013) Executive coaching outcomes research: The contribution of common factors such as relationship, personality match, and self-efficacy. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* 65(1): 40–57.

Downey M (2003) *Effective Coaching*. London: Texere.

Eisenhardt KM (1989) Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review* 14(4): 532–550.

Ezzy D (2000) Fate and agency in job loss narratives. *Qualitative Sociology* 23(1): 121–134.

Ezzy D (2001) *Narrating Unemployment*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Feggetter AJW (2007) A preliminary evaluation of executive coaching: Does executive coaching work for candidates on a high potential development scheme? *International Coaching Psychology Review* 2(2): 129–142.

Fineman S (1983) *White Collar Unemployment: Impact and Stress*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Fink SL (1967) Crisis and motivation: A theoretical model. *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabiliation* 32: 323–345.

Flick U (2009) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. 4th ed. London: SAGE.

Gabriel Y (1995) The unmanaged organization: Stories, fantasies and subjectivity. *Organization Studies* 16(3): 477–501.

Gabriel Y (2000) *Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, Fictions, Fantasies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gabriel Y (2004) Narratives, stories, texts. In: Grant D, Hardy C, Oswick C, et al. (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. London: Sage, pp. 61–79.

Gabriel Y, Gray DE and Goregaokar H (2011) Temporary derailment or the end of the line – Unemployed managers at 50. *Organization Studies* 31(12): 1687–1712.

Gardiner J, Stuart M, MacKenzie R, et al. (2009) Redundancy as a critical life event: Moving on from the Welsh steel industry through career change. *Work, Employment and Society* 23(4): 727–745.

Garfinkel H (1956) Conditions of successful degradation ceremonies. *American Journal of Sociology* 61(5): 420–424.

Gegner C (1997) *Coaching: Theory and practice*. Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA.

Gentry WA, Hannum KM, Ekelund BZ, et al. (2007) A study of the discrepancy between self- and observer-ratings on managerial derailment characteristics of European managers. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 16(3): 295–325.

Grant A (2005) What is evidence-based executive, workplace and life coaching? In: Cavanagh M, Grant AM and Kemp T (eds) *Evidence-Based Coaching Volume. 1: Theory, Research and Practice from the Behavioural Sciences*. Bowen Hills, QLD, Australia: Australian Academic Press, pp. 1–12.

Gray DE (2007) Facilitating management learning – Developing critical reflection through reflective tools. *Management Learning* 38(5): 495–513.

Gray DE (2014) *Doing Research in the Real World*. 3rd ed. London: SAGE.

Gray DE, Iles P and Watson S (2011) Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide: Bridging the gap through mode 2 research. *Journal of European Industrial Training* 35(3): 247–263.

Hall DT, Otazo KL and Hollenback GP (1999) Behind closed doors: What really happens in executive coaching. *Organizational Dynamics* 27(3): 39–53.

Hartley J (1980) The impact of unemployment upon the self-esteem of managers. *Journal of Occupational Psychology* 53(2): 147–155.

Hatala J-P and Hisey L (2011) Towards the development and validation of a career coach competency model. *Performance Improvement Quarterly* 24(3): 101–122.

Jahoda M (1982) *Employment and Unemployment: A Social-Psychological Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Joo B-K (2005) Executive coaching: A conceptual framework from an integrative review of practice and research. *Human Resource Development Review* 4(4): 462–488.

Kondo CT (2009) Benefits of job clubs for executive job seekers: A tale of hares and tortoises. *Journal of Employment Counseling* 46(1): 27–37.

Kovach BE (1989) Successful derailment: What fast-trackers can learn while they're off the track. *Organizational Dynamics* 18(2): 33–47.

Latack JC, Kinicki AJ and Prussia GE (1995) An integrative process model of coping with job loss. *Academy of Management Review* 20(2): 311–342.

Levinson H (1975) On executive suicide. *Harvard Business Review* 53(4): 118–122.

Lincoln YS and Guba EG (1994) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. 2nd ed. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Lippman S (2008) Rethinking risk in the new economy: Age and cohort effects on unemployment and re-employment. *Human Relations* 61(9): 1259–1292.

Lombardo MM, Ruderman MN and McCauley CD (1988) Explanations of success and derailment in upper-level management positions. *Journal of Business and Psychology* 2(3): 199–216.

Louise H (1970) The year of axing. *Fortune* 82: 142–145.

McAdams DP (1988) *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity*. New York: Guilford Press.

McAdams DP (1996) Personality, modernity, and the storied self: A contemporary framework for studying persons. *Psychological Inquiry* 7: 295–321.

McAdams DP, Josselson R and Lieblich A (2006) *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

McCall M and Lombardo M (1983) *Off the Track: Why and How Successful Executives Get Derailed (Technical report/Center for Creative Leadership, no. 21)*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

McGreevy M (2010) Do we reinvent ourselves actually? *Industrial and Commercial Training* 42(7): 366–378.

Mastekaasa A (1996) Unemployment and health: Selection effects. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 6(3): 189–205.

Megginson D and Clutterbuck D (1995) *Mentoring in Action*. London: Kogan Page.

Morrison AM, White RP and Van Velsor E (1987) *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America's Largest Corporations?* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Morse JM (1991) Approaches to qualitative-quantitative methodological triangulation. *Nursing Research* 40: 120–123.

Passmore J (2010) A grounded theory study of the coachee experience: The implications for training and practice in coaching psychology. *International Coaching Psychology Review* 5: 48–62.

Passmore J and Gibbs C (2007) The state of executive coaching research: What does the current literature tell us and what's next for coaching research. *International Coaching Psychology Review* 2(2): 116–127.

Platman K (2004) 'Portfolio careers' and the search for flexibility in later life. *Work, Employment and Society* 18(3): 573–599.

Pope M (2000) A brief history of career counseling in the United States. *Career Development Quarterly* 48: 194–211.

Punch KF (2005) *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE.

Raelin JA (2001) Public reflection as the basis of learning. *Management Learning* 32(1): 11–30.

Russell JC (2011) The use of narratives to contextualize the experiences and needs of unemployed, underemployed, and displaced workers. *Journal of Employment Counseling* 48(2): 50–62.

Seligman ME and Csikszentmihalyi M (2000) Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist* 55(1): 5–14.

Strauss AL and Corbin J (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Vinokur AD, Price RH and Caplan RD (1996) Hard times and hurtful partners: How financial strain affects depression and relationship satisfaction of unemployed persons and their spouses. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71(1): 166–179.

Warr PB (1978) A study of psychological well-being. *British Journal of Psychology* 69: 111–121.

Wasylyshyn KM (2003) Executive coaching: An outcome study. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* 55(2): 94–106.

Whitmore J (2002) *Coaching for Performance*. 3rd ed. London: Nicholas Brealey.

Willott S and Griffin C (2004) Redundant men: Constraints on identity change. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 14(2): 53–69.