The Politics of Work Coaching -

Between Impairing Vision and Creating Visions

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ABSTRACT
Coaching has become a frequently used Human Resource Management intervention, but has hardly been empirically researched. Coaching is commonly legitimated by drawing upon HRMs notion of enhancing performance and stands especially close to the Human Potential Movement and its aims to free the untapped potential of individuals. While the positive effects of coaching have been extensively discussed in the literature, critical reflections of this emerging field are rare. In this paper I therefore investigate coachings’ political nature and suggest to understand coaching as a social, rather than an individual, practice. Such a perspective lets us consider possible adverse effects of organizational coaching and I will consider three: when coaching is instrumentalized as a disciplinary practice; when coaching individualizes organizational conflicts; when coaching intensifies the internal constraints by propagating emotional regulation and self-management. These critical considerations are linked to an illustrative case example and excerpts from narrative research interviews. A critical deconstruction of coaching allows us to move on and look for alternative ways of reading this organizational practice. We might thus consider coaching as a reflective practice, which, in a modest way, enables emancipation and the emergence of alternative visions of organizational life. In sum, this paper seeks to make a contribution by deepening the perspective on the political dimension of the use of coaching, as well as its in organizational settings.
Introduction

In this paper I propose to understand coaching as a social practice, in which multiple stakeholders are involved in the negotiation of coachings’ vision. The question is then: *Whose visions are enacted in organizational coaching?* In the attempt to find an answer to this question we might enquire the processes which shape the coaching practice: different forms of participation, political motives, individual and organizational identities. Generally, coaching can have a wide range of aims, but in organizational settings it is dominated by the idea of producing the “happy-productive worker”. This dominant discourse impairs the field of vision as it marginalizes other perspectives. On the other hand, coaching might also act as a reflective space in which employees are able to discover alternative visions to organizational life and are empowered to find forms of micro-emancipation. I argue, that it is this ambivalent tension between impairing vision and creating visions that coaching, as a social practice, falls into. Aim of this paper is to contribute to the critical organizational studies and Human Resource Management literature on coaching and deepen the understanding of coachings political momentum.

In a first step I will contextualize the coaching practice and show its historical development, its prevalence in the work world, its struggle for identity and describe the logics coaching practitioners preferably draw upon. In a second step I will then try to deconstruct the common understanding of coaching with the help of empirical interview material. Finally I will sketch a first and unfinished picture how coaching might act as a reflective practice within the organizational context.
Mapping the Coaching Practice

“We have witnessed the birth of a new form of expertise, an expertise of subjectivity. A whole family of new professional groups has propagated itself, each asserting its virtuosity in respect of the self, in classifying and measuring the psyche, in predicting its vicissitudes, in diagnosing the causes of its troubles and prescribing remedies. Not just psychologists - clinical, occupational, educational - but also social workers, personnel managers, probation officers, counsellors and therapists of different schools and allegiances have based their claim to social authority upon their capacity to understand the psychological aspects of the person and to act upon them, or to advise others what to do” (Rose, 1990, p. 2).

Had Nicolas Rose written the above in the year 2010 he might have added coaches as one of the newly born professional groups which claim “authority upon their capacity to understand the psychological aspects of the person and to act upon them, or to advise others what to do” (idem., p. 2). Today a large number of people are showing interest in coaching practices, in private as well as in work contexts. This is mirrored by the establishment of a large coaching industry, a flood of best-selling coaching books as well as the broad incorporation of the term into everyday language. Over the last twenty years coaching has especially established itself as an organizational practice and can be found in many forms of business and work contexts. Coaching is increasingly considered a core activity of Human Resource Management and its sub-discipline human resource development. Still, when asked most people will admit that they do not have a clear understanding of what coach-
ing is. This circumstance is mirrored when Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger (2007) introduce their findings on the coaching industry in Australia as follows:

“We uncovered coaches whose definition of their organizational selves included (a) executive coaches, (b) therapists who use Buddhist philosophy, (c) just a web site, (d) facilitators, (e) entrepreneurs with franchising systems, (f) mixed forms, (g) public speakers, (h) emotional therapists, (i) institutionalized schools, (j) global corporations, (k) business planners, (l) and many more, (m) with money back guarantees” (2007, p. 495).

Coaching is de facto a fuzzy practice and its diversity is mirrored in the historical development of the term. In the attempt to better comprehend coaching I propose to turn to a narrative reconstruction of its history to shed some light into the matter. The following is a, surely incomplete and somewhat too linear, collage of the development of the term.

THE GENESIS OF COACHING

Several authors assume that the heredity of the modern word coaching goes back into the fifteenth century were its roots seem to lie in a small town called Kocsi Szekér, a place located in the northern parts of today’s Republic of Hungary. In medieval times the people of Kocsi where known as talented craftspeople, who made excellent horse wagons. The wagons where called the wagons from Kocs. The wagons from Kocs became fame and were well known across the Hungarian speaking regions, but soon also within other parts of Europe (Pitsis, 2008). By the sixteenth century variations of the word had trickled into some of the other European languages, like English, where the word was linguistically modified into coach (Hartmann, 2004; Kubowitsch, 1995). It was then in England that a
new meaning was attached to the word, namely the act of instructing a horse into pulling a coach. This was to coach a horse. The person coaching the horse then became known as the coach (Bayer, 2000, as cited in Hartmann, 2004).

A possible next development of the term may have occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century, when English university students started to mock their tutors by calling them coaches. We can imagine that this mockery was partly due to the circumstance that preparing for university exams meant long hours of hard and monotonous learning and tutors were to coach students into learning. In this picture, students probably identified more with the horses than with the wagons (Palmer & Whybrow, 2006). Coaching had found its way onto campus and it did not take much for the term to also find its way into sports as students began to call their sports instructors coaches. This seemed to have first happened with the rowing instructors of students at Oxford (Everend & Selman, 1989). The meaning of the word had now underwent another transformation, linking it also to sports. In this context sports instructors began to identify themselves as coaches and thus the sports coach was born (Brock, 2008).

At this point of our story we might have to consider the turbulent dynamics that the sports sector was undergoing in the twentieth century. As we move into the modern era, the role of sports in society drastically changed. As sports championships became mass events with a high involvement of media the field drastically professionalized. Sports was paired with industrial interests and lead to the commercialization of various disciplines, enabling people to live from sponsorship contracts and connecting achievements in sports to financial gratification. This not only lead to the professionalization of the athletes and
their routines, but also to the professionalization of coaches, whose job it was to guarantee the success of the sportspeople. In the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century sports coaches started to consider psychological models of learning and motivation (Gordon, 2007). Sports coaching received a new function, which was about motivating people, instead of only teaching them the right techniques or movements. In effect coaches no longer only technically instructed the athletes, they also began feel responsible for their mental training and psychological motivation. Often through media these approaches to coaching were transported into the public awareness. Everyday people began to perceive coaches as motivational trainers who supported athletes to perform at their best. An early example of this fusion is Gallwey’s (1974) best-selling book The Inner Game of Tennis, which in its 2008 update edition holds the subtitle The classical guide to the mental side to top performance.

From within sports coaching the term began to spread onto other disciplines and contexts. In the 1980s came a phase of chaotic development, during which coaching began to be associated with psychological, management, spiritual and philosophical ideas. The term became popular in mainstream culture, leading to its exponential use as well as the acceleration of its mutation. The effect was that the act of coaching was paired with different motivational and learning models of change (Grant, 2004; Rauen, 2005). In present times coaching is omnipresent and has found its way into all realms of life, especially into the working world (Falla, 2006). Especially influenced by systemic thinking, "to coach" in work contexts is increasingly associated with ideas of "second order management", non-directive conversation and "enabling a systematic and intensive problem- and self-reflective process" (Greif, 2008, own translation).
I would like to highlight the three meanings of the verb “to coach” within the narration. A first meaning is connected to a practice of external discipline (breaking a horse's will), a second is associated with a practice of self-management / self-discipline (coaching athletes and managers to top performance) and a third is linked to intensive self-reflection. There is another aspect of the story I would like to stress: the term coaching is infused with multiple, historically formed meanings. These meanings are linked to interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), which inform the doing of coaching. They predefine the implicit and explicit theories of change and to which cause change can and should be directed.

**Forms of Coaching**

In the following I will differentiate between three prototypical forms of coaching for reasons of clarity: life coaching, organizational coaching and coaching as a communication theory in management. Life coaching includes subforms like health coaching, spiritual coaching, personal coaching and dating coaching. Organizational coaching summarizes forms of coaching within organizational boundaries, sometimes called work coaching, business coaching or executive coaching (Pitsis, 2008). When a coaching stance is used in management the context is less formalized and can be understood as a way of managing employees in everyday interaction through non-directive communication. While life and organizational coachings are often facilitated by “professional” coaches within formalized
settings, coaching as a management tool is often not even referred to as being coaching (Clegg, Rhodes, Kornberger, & Stilin, 2005).

Further, the question of contracting is essential for the organization of the coaching process. The flow of money somewhat predefines how, where and when coaching sessions take place and who is involved in the process. The sponsor can implement a dominant way of reading the coaching practice and its aims. Schmid (2008) distinguishes five business models for coaching: (a) coach to client, (b) coach to business, (c) business to business, (d) coach via intermediate to client and (e) internal coach to internal client (idem., p. 47ff.). Generally, the coachee pays for life coaching (model a), the organization pays for organizational coaching (models b to e) and no one pays for coaching as a management tool, because it is part of everyday management activities. By understanding who funds the coaching sessions, we can also better understand the dependencies and power structures into which this practice is placed. As coaches are paid for by the organization, and not by the coachee, a triangulation of interests is preassigned (Sherman & Freas, 2004; Orenstein, 2002). While the literature often stresses the intimate relationship between the coach and the coachee, the influence of the organization on the coaching process is seldom discussed.

This paper is exclusively concerned with organizational coaching as a personal development interventions, placed within the Human Resource Management agenda and (Cummings & Worley, 2008) in which “professional” external or in-house coaches are involved.
Is coaching a relevant organizational phenomenon?

Organizational coaching has considerably grown in size - as a HRM trend in organizations but also as a service industry. The coaching market has rapidly expanded within only a few years (Kampa-Kokesch & M. Anderson, 2001). For example, a 2009 UK-survey (Bresser, 2009) reported that of 859 questioned organizations, 2/3 stated that they make use of business coaching. Other surveys indicate that the coaching trend has not reached its full zenith. For "almost half (46%) of organizations, the major organisational change affecting learning and talent development in the next five years will be a greater integration between coaching, organisational development and performance management to drive organisational change" (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2009, p. 3).

The growth of coaching is also visible in the establishment of training infrastructures and the formation of coaching associations. We can identify the formation of a new profession (Fietze, 2010). The International Coach Federation, as one example of one of many coaching associations, has recently doubled in size and currently has around 12000 members in 34 countries (International Coach Federation, 2009). The strong presence of coaching within the media is another sign which indicates its viral development. Finally, the growing numbers of people who professionally do coaching speaks for itself as "[t]here are about 43,000-44,000 business coaches minimum operating in the world" (Bresser, 2009, p.
7). Given the large number of coaches and the finance power of this emerging field one might ask how coaching presents and legitimates itself.

**Legitimation and Identity of Coaching**

The coaching field “is ill-defined, contradictory and ambiguous” (Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007, p. 510). As the profession lacks inner cohesion it makes all the more effort to distinguish itself from disciplines that it stands near to - foremost psychotherapy (Hart, Blattner, & Leipsic, 2001; Price, 2009; Clutterbuck, 2009) on the one side and counseling on the other. In order to distance itself from psychotherapy the sports coaching metaphor is regularly drawn upon (Gordon, 2007). It has been argued that the close connection between top performance and sports coaching enabled the term coaching to transcend into the realm of management. Professional athletes and managers to share similar priorities oriented around the theme of top performance. The term coaching is an outstanding rhetorical vehicle to transport individual centered interventions into the business context and as Peltier (2001) has remarked: "The main reason that coaching is called ‘coaching’ and not executive counseling or workplace psychotherapy is that hard-charging corporate types, especially men, are likely to be happy to have a coach, but unwilling to enter therapy. Most identify with sports and would love to see themselves as athletes, or at least, high performers. Counseling is associated with weakness and inadequacy, while coaching is identified with successful sports figures and winning teams" (p. 170).
The boundaries towards consulting are mainly established through describing consulting as a somewhat ridged, answer-orientated practice that avoids the emotional side to business, while coaching is described as a flexible, process-orientated intervention that embraces the emotional side to business (Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger, 2007; Bjorkeng, Clegg, Pitsis, & Rhodes, 2008).

Preferred Logics of Work Coaching

We may now move on to ask what visions guide coaching and what "preferred realities" coaching aims to create? To address these questions a literature review using best-selling Amazon books as well as coaching journals was preformed. While the list is surely not extensive, the following logics of coaching do seem to be dominant in the literature:

- Coaching as a means of improving personal attributes. The logic behind this vision is that individual growth leads to organizational growth. By optimizing self-management and communication skills and heightening motivation the overall job performance is improved. Personal attributes act as mediators for organizational effectiveness.

- Coaching as a means for improving coping strategies. Coaching deals with issues of work-life balance, stress reduction and work-load. By improving coping skills physical and mental health is secured. Healthy worker are happy workers are productive workers. This correlated with less turnover and sick days.

- Coaching as a means to catalyst learning and adaptation in new situations. Here coaching is used as a pedagogical custom-made intervention, which is to enable fast learning. Such a learning situation might be the coaching of a young top-performer, who is promoted into a management position for the first time. Other topics might include the
training of intercultural behaviors or practical skills needed within a specific industry or context. This is to produce an adaptive advantage.

In total coaching especially draws on the Human Potential Movement and its inherent idea of the happy-productive worker theme - coaching is believed to increase organizational productivity and at the same time boost individual happiness (Kinloch, 2004; Linley, 2006; Peterson & Millier, 2005; Wales, 2001). One of the premises is "that individuals have vast reservoirs of untapped potential within them and are naturally inclined towards developing that potential" (Spence, 2007, p. 257). Coaching unleashes his potential and thus enables "getting the best out of every employee" (Fournies & Fournies, 1999). Within such a model the function of coaches is to master "the skills needed to help people unlock their potential and maximize their performance" (Whitmore, 2009). The assumption that organizational and individuals can be directed towards the mutual goal of high performance, and that this is good for both parties alike, is somewhat taken for granted here (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009). In consequence the other visions are seldom explored.

Summarizing we find the preponderance of functionalist logics that underlie the coaching practice. Such an understanding, we might suspect, would predefine how coaching is organized in organizational settings and thus influence the effects of the intervention. The following shall be a first attempt to diversify our understanding of coaching's political nature guided by the question: “Who gets coaching from whom, when and why”. 
Towards a Critical-Interpretative Understanding of Coaching

While alternative paradigms to coaching are rare a number of authors can be named. Amado and Fatien for example (2009) discuss coaching from a Lacanian perspective and consider coaching to be an “ambiguous tool rather than either detrimental or efficient per se -and this ambiguity may well be a reason for its success today” (p. 16; see also Arnaud, 2003). Also in the line of psychoanalytical thinking Newton, Long and Sievers (2006) stress the importance to relate roles, not individuals, to organizations in coaching and consider the enactment of organizational (psycho-)dynamics within the coaching process. Both Drake (2008) and Stelter (2009) make an argument for a narrative take on coaching. While Drake draws upon the works of poststructural narrative psychology, Stelter (2009) takes on a dialogical approach and sees coaching as a reflective space.

Still, critical accounts of coaching are few and it has not yet been discussed which role and function it takes within a wider social and organizational development. Also vacant, to my understanding, is a critical discussion of the role coaching plays in organizational politics (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Grey, 2009) and in the enforcement of managerial control. As coaching can be understood as a HRM-practice we can immediately connect to a large body of Critical Management Studies literature which tries to understand the effects of managerial control (Townley, 1993; McKenna, Garcia-Lorenzo, & Bridgman, 2010). Following Karreman and Alvesson (2004) we can differentiate between two forms of managerial control: socio-ideological control which “attempts to control worker beliefs” and technocratic control which “attempts to directly control worker behavior” (idem, p. 152). In the
following I will try to show how coaching might be used as an instrumental tool for organizational politics, as a method of socio-ideological and technocratic control.

As the story of coaching at the beginning of this paper demonstrates, coaching holds multiple meanings. Therefore multiple meanings can also be projected onto the doing of coaching. The ground assumption here is that coaching’s visions are not fixed, but variable. The aims and visions of this practice are socially constructed and have to be negotiated. Often multiple agents are involved in determining preferred outcomes of a coaching process. In order to explore the use of coaching in organizations and to better understand the social dynamics involved, twenty-five interviews with coaches, coachees and HR-managers were conducted.

The following case example shall illustrate how coaching is discursively constructed in a larger organizational context. Currently data is being processed and this paper draws upon the preliminary analysis. The following case example shall illustrative that organizational coaching is often a multi-stakeholder process.

CASE EXAMPLE

The following is an excerpt of a research interview (Coach 7, 2010) conducted with an external Coach [C] of the German branch of a large multinational COMPANY in the finance sector. This narration describes the contents of the first coaching session as well as the processes leading to the first session. I have highlighted the different actors to show the diversity of agents who actively co-construct the coaching process.
[I]: How did it come to the first contact between you and the employee?

[C]: The employee participated in an Employee Development Program [EDP]. This was a workshop within the Organizational Development Program of the Company. At the end of the program the employee received a personal feedback, which suggested that she has issues with “being emotionally responsive to criticism” and “distancing herself from decisions”. Colleagues notice instantly when the employee disagrees with something ... I have to admit that I already know the employee, because I did a coaching with her some time ago. Her old boss organized the coaching back then, because he said that you notice immediately, when she does not agree with something. I asked the employee what happened to that issue. The employee used to have a problem with another colleague, because she told him plain spoken when she disagreed with him, but she doesn’t consider this to be a problem anymore. Now she gets along fine with people, but she has problems with decisions (...) The employee had her difficulties with the EDP feedback, because she says she wanted to discuss certain issues but the external trainer didn’t agree to that. I don’t know... The employee doesn’t see criticism as a problem and I also don’t see her as someone who can’t take critical comments either. (...) Altogether the employee clearly describes her main motivation for coaching: She knows how things are and that they restrain her career development and she doesn't want that.

[I]: What position does the employee have within the company?

[C]: She is a team leader, but she doesn't have a disciplinary function at the moment... She has a new boss and she hasn't figured him out yet. We worked on this specific circum-
stance within the coaching session. The employee is a bit tough on this new boss, because she is on edge due to the new management style of this new boss. She gets under considerable strain, because she has a lot of pressure at work. When the new boss comes around with a new assignment, which the employee does not consider to be important, and which can not be resolved easily or quickly and the new boss puts pressure on her to resolve the problem, then the employee becomes crabby. (…) What also adds up for the employee is that she has a lot stress in her PRIVATE LIFE and she says this adds up.

[I]: Is the employees emotional behavior ever seen in a more positive light? I mean that she is what you might call "an honest soul"?

[C]: No, they don’t appreciate that at the COMPANY. They very much emphasize harmony and emotional reactions like that don’t fit in there - especially when they are of negative nature. They don’t allow themselves to be emotional, but they do contract me, because I am particularly emotional. I give very explicit and honest feedback and they tolerate that. But the employee is an employee and that’s not possible for her at all. (…) Yes, and that’s why the employee chose me. She said that she fought to get me as a coach, because she knows that I am emotional and also navigate within this environment, however in a different role...

**Critical Considerations on Coaching**

A single narration of the coaching process can merely give one interesting account of a coaching process. Still, the example makes visible that multiple voices may surround
coaching and lead to a polyphony of visions (Bakhtin, 1982). The process of negotiating the preferred visions of the coaching process might already be seen as a central part of doing coaching. A naïve handling of this politically laden dynamic process may miss a central point in understanding the effects of this intervention in its organizational context (Arnaud, 2003). The following three critical hypotheses shall underline this.

**Technocratic Control: Coaching by Prescription**

The literature on coaching agrees that one of the success factors for a positive outcome of the coaching process is the voluntariness of the coachee (Bluckert, 2005). On the other hand little has been said about the frequency and effects when coaching is subscribed to employees. Currently we can only indirectly conclude the number of forced coaching sessions. An example is Judge and Cowell (1997) study of mid-level senior managers. The authors reported that half of the study population was required to seek coaching. Even when coaching is not directly subscribed social pressure to use coaching as a means of fixing personal deficits can still be high. As in the case example the coach summarizes: “Altogether the employee clearly describes her main motivation for coaching: She knows how things are and that they restrain her career development and she doesn’t want that” (Coach 7, 2010). Within the interviews I have conducted, several coaches, depending of the industry they operate work in, have reported that coaching is used as a last resource to manage the productivity of employees. Within the interviews two coaches reported of cases where the coachee was given an official reprimand and advise to take coaching, due his inability to fulfill the demanded sales numbers.
This use of coaching often contradicts the intentions of the coaches and their ethical agenda to help the coachee as best as (s)he can. Since internal and external coaches are mostly contracted by the organization this is a strong dilemma, without an easy solution. It is not my intention to state that coaching is always involuntary, nor that such coaching must always be harmful for the coachee. The point I would like to stress is that coaching is far from being innocent, when used in organizational contexts.

**Political Instrumentalization: Coaching as Conflict Deflector**

From a macro-perspective there might be another function within coaching that makes it an attractive practice for organizations. Kühl (2007, 2008) grounding his line of argumentation on Luhmann’s system theory, arguments that coaching may also act as a deflector for organizational tension. The central argument here is that coaching limits conflicts that span over a larger subsystem to the individual subsystem, thus individualizing the conflict. In other words, the problem is interpreted and narrated as being an individual problem, although other interpretations would also be possible on a non-individual level. In our case example this might be reflected in the way the coach narrates the specific politics of emotion within the organization: “No, they don’t appreciate that [=straightforward emotional reactions from the coachee] at the COMPANY. They very much emphasize harmony and emotional reactions like that don’t fit in there - especially when they are of negative nature” (Coach 7, 2010). In this logic we can come to see coaching as a practice to avoid the dispute of negative emotions in the organization.
Maybe, an even better example is given by a former internal coach of a large multinational organization in the technology industry: “The organization sent me a lot of employees, during the course of a big business restructuring process. I got all the hot potatoes from the Human Relations Department. Directors and senior directors, who didn't have a place in the future of the organization any more. They were around 55 years old and their career were going to an end. Not yet in pension age, out of a job or potentially out of a job at the organization. They told them to go talk to me. Professional assessment was the topic of our sessions. (...) They weren't fired yet, but they knew that the restructuring process would probably flush them out.” (Coach 1, 2009)

Both short narratives show how specific events can either be interpreted and potentially dealt with on an individual or an organizational level. If the situation of the employee is seen as a personal problem and related to his character, then it will be dealt with individually. If the assessment is that the situation is highly interrelated with the organizational structures a dissenting reading of the situation is triggered. In the light of organizational dynamics, coaching is tempted to take the edges of political power play out of daily routine by making individuals deal with their frustrations and resistance in the coziness of a confidential space. In consequence, organizational problems are individualized and coaching augments the organizational denial of political dynamics, turning potential 'blind spots' into 'dark spots'?
**Socio-technical Control: Coaching and Techniques of the Self**

Within this last argument I would like to move into the realm of emotion, which I understand to be subject to social construction (Fineman, 2005; Harre, 1986). As such emotions are not objects, but highly related to interpretation and sense making of actions. The effects of a gradual psychologizing of the social world have been discussed by a number of prominent authors like Foucault (Foucault, 1979, 1988), Ellias (Elias, 1987) and lately by Rose (Rose, 1999) and Illouz (Illouz, 2007). Hence, I can only begin to scratch the surface this relevant theme in this contribution.

Asked about the reasons what legitimizes coaching within the organization one HR-manager stated: "I think that in a lot of heads the idea still exists that we can trim people by coaching them. We’ll coach people to make them more efficient" (HR-Manager 2; 2010). The hypothesis is that coaching places a subtle pressure, through specific forms of interpretation, onto the coachee and thus enhances forms of self-discipline. To make this illustrate, the case example can be recapitulate in the following way: "The coachee reacts unprofessionally when dealing with colleagues and decisions. Aim of the coaching is to resolve this behavior so he can further develop his career within the organization.” What is reflected in the remark “she is unprofessional” also reflects the way out language frames professionalism and emotion. This remark does not state that she doesn't do an efficient job, but that she is too emotional while doing her job. Professionalism in this sense is considered as a synonym for emotionally controlled (Illouz, 2007).
As it becomes the common assumption that emotions are a part of work performance and need to be regulated, the pressure to adjust emotional displays becomes stronger. The thrive towards greater performance is then the central vision that is to be inscribed into the personal identity. When techniques that have been developed for the modification of depression, anxiety disorders or traumata are used in the work context, we might be looking at a new layer to the formation of emotional labor (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). Is the modern soul under pressure as employees are not only to show norm-adequate emotions but also identify with them and make them to their own?

All speaks for an increase of what has been called a “therapeutic habitus” (Costea, Crump, & Amiridis, 2008) in the dominion of work which diminishes the borders between self-identity and work-identity. As personal attributes become increasingly linked to work features it is expected to manage oneself and one's emotions and thus “intense regimes of self-discipline” (Costea et al., 2008, p. 991) are installed. Coaching in this light is a disciplinary practice such that "[i]n compelling, persuading and inciting subjects to disclose themselves, finer and more intimate regions of the personal and interpersonal life come under surveillance and are opened up for expert judgment, normative evaluation classification and correction" (Rose, 1999, p. 240).

COACHING AS A REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The critical reading of coaching lets us gain insight into the political nature of coaching and its social dimension. This form of critical deconstruction allows us to re-search new positions, which are not naive to the installments of power and (mechanisms of self-) control in organizations. Within this last section I would like to attempt a reconstruction of
coaching and suggest to consider coaching as a reflective practice (Reynolds & Vince, 2004) and “believe that reflexivity is inherently connected to learning to use tensions among different perspectives to expose and connect different assumptions and to open up new ways of thinking” (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009, p 152). When seen in such a light, coaching may allow the reflection of dominant organizational discourses. It may house spaces for resistance in which emancipation and the creation of alternative visions are enabled. To do so coaching needs to overcome its individual-centered HRM thinking and wake its curiosity for the processes of organizing which shape organizational life. It also needs to distance itself from its sole alignment to enhance economic performance in organizations. Such form of reflexivity will call upon reflection at the organizational level and contextualize individual experiences, including their emotions, within the specific cultures - it will try to understand how organizational routines are dominated and re-enacted in the day-to-day practices and question their underlying premises.

Given such a framework the obvious next question is then, if coaching, whose setting is individual centered, can at all contribute to this form of reflexivity. I would like to give a moderate positive reply to this question by arguing that coaching allows individuals to develop and probe narrations of organizational life that might otherwise not be detected. The underlying idea to this is one that emanates out of a critical-interpretative narrative theory (Boje, 1995). Grounding on ideas from Bakhtin (1982) narrative theory perceives life to hold more complexity than what is narrated and that narratives of life always have the possibility of being multifaceted and multivocal (Hermans, 2003). When one voice gains interpretative authority over the others, life is marginalized to one perspective; one way of feeling, behaving and thinking. When new voices and new interpretations are articulated
within this context we might understand this as a form of micro-emancipation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002); a shift from one dominate narration towards multiple narrations of life’s complexity. Coaching may be understood as a space in which these narrations are probed and articulated for a first time.

While group-based reflection methods allow a wider range of people to share different version of organizational reality with each other, it is not said that alternative narrations are more likely emerge in such a setting. Group pressure to subscribe to the dominant interpretations will often block the explorative and innovative processes. It is here that the confidential space of coaching may provide the secure ground, a playful space in which individual reactions are de-individualized and read as text within the greater organizational context. Instead of looking to explore the hearts and souls of their coachees, coaches might critically challenge the premises of the organizational culture. I suggest to study and envision such forms of reflexive coaching in future research.
**L I T E R A T U R E**


HR Manager in Organization 2. (2010, June 1). Interview. (F. Schulz, Tran.).


