

Becoming a ‘Social Work Coach’: How Practising Coaching Creates Beneficial Agility in Social Work Identity

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Abstract

This article explores how social workers experienced the intersection of social work and coaching roles, and the impact that incorporating dual roles within a child protection context has on social work identity. It discusses the themes from a ‘real-world’ qualitative study conducted in a local authority family support and child protection service in the North of England. Thematic analysis was used to interpret data from focus groups and semi-structured interviews with seven social workers, and semi-structured interviews with six service users. The findings reveal that social work identities initially become disrupted through using coaching, before a more flexible, enriched professional identity is fashioned which is congruent with both the social work persona and coaching attitudes and behaviours. Service users appeared to intuit this shift in professional identity when comparing their received experiences of social work and coaching. They responded by compartmentalising their hostile associations towards their social worker identity and recast them positively as ‘coaches’. The study findings infer significant applied implications for social work practice, education and continuing professional development that includes coaching knowledge and skills training.

Keywords: coaching, professional identity, social work, social work coach, social work identity

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Introduction

This article discusses themes from a ‘real-world’ study which explored children’s social workers’ experiences of delivering coaching to service users and service users’ experiences of receiving coaching from them. It will firstly set out what a coach does and what to expect in a coaching relationship, the literature on the use of coaching in social work, synergies between coaching and strengths and relationship-based practices, followed by the details of the research and its findings.

The role of a coach

Although the choice of coaching technique and tools may differ according to the underpinning theory of a specific school of coaching, the role of a coach is to work with a client or ‘coachee’ in a deeply relational, collaborative and egalitarian way, which both confers trust to the relationship and is ‘co-active’ in constructing it as a vehicle for making meaning, transformation, change and action (Stober and Grant, 2006; Kimsey-House *et al.*, 2018). The fundamental basis of the coaching relationship is one of trying to elicit the coachee’s ‘best self’ by conveying optimism and confidence that they have the resources within them to change or to fulfil their potential, thus animating their self-belief (Gallwey, 1977). The coaching relationship is widely thought to be critical to the success of the coachee achieving their outcomes (Bluckert, 2005; Boyce *et al.*, 2010; de Haan *et al.*, 2013; Sonesh *et al.*, 2015):

regardless of preferred theoretical perspective, the foundation of effective coaching is the successful formation of a collaborative relationship (Stober, 2008, p. 295).

The coachee is perceived by the coach as being inherently resourceful and as having the capability to grow and change. Thus, the coachee is viewed as holding the answers to their issue, which the coach, as a ‘thought partner’, will help to uncover within the safe space of the confidential coaching relationship (Newnham-Kanas *et al.*, 2011). The coachee is therefore the initiator of the agenda and the role of the coach is to hold and concentrate exclusively on that agenda (Edleson, 2010; Passmore, 2010).

Key to the role of a coach is what both Rogers (2016) and Whitmore (2017) call 'ways of being' with coachees. This starts with establishing rapport, which involves a relationship based on acceptance (rather than professional judgement or an expert stance) and a heightened awareness of the micro-processes of communication by becoming attuned to a coachee's: 'body, voice volume, breathing, gesture, space, language, pace and energy' (Rogers, 2016, p. 34). This produces strong feelings of congruence, authentic connection and 'Aha' moments of critical insight that can help move coachees beyond the limitations of their existing mindset to be more inclined to take risks to initiate change (Bluckert, 2005; Longhurst, 2006; de Haan *et al.*, 2010; de Haan and Nieß, 2015). This is cemented by deep listening, paraphrasing, clarifying and summarising the coachee's words and the use of powerful, challenging and open questions, such as 'what would make it 1% better?' or 'what will you do?' (Whitmore, 2017) to prompt a novel conversation about the topic they have brought to the coaching encounter. It is viewed as particularly useful for people at transition points in their lives, when faced with a lack in motivation, conflict, dilemmas, puzzles or when they feel stuck (Driver, 2011).

Synergies and differences with existing strengths and relationship-based practices

A coaching approach can initially sound very similar to some of the relationship and strengths-based approaches which have emerged in the last decade that break away from risk-averse models of practice (Featherstone *et al.*, 2016). For example, the restorative approach is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of family-centred models of practice premised on the ethos of reducing conflict and repairing harm through improved collaborative relationships and a focus on the problem as opposed to the person. The popular 'Signs of Safety' (SoS) Strengths-Based Child Protection model (Turnell and Edwards, 1999) focuses on mobilising client strengths within a purposeful, collaborative and goal-focused mandated relationship that can elicit solutions to problems that endanger or harm children, with a view to re-establishing safety in the home. The literature surrounding these interventions is, I would argue, somewhat divorced from the micromanaged and audit shaped reality of much social work practice, where the language of such interventions is common but the deeper honed *skills* to support them is often less so (Oliver, 2012).

Coaching does have clear synergies with such approaches, and one can theorise that gaining coaching knowledge could not only enhance their implementation but support social worker's identities as strength and relationship-based practitioners. However, this article contends that

practising coaching provides something more than just transferrable skills—it extends the social work mindset and behavioural repertoire. Specifically, the ability to hold slower, more attuned conversations based on exploring change potential which energise and instil confidence—whilst simultaneously accepting a loss of power (Triggs, 2021) and control over the agenda and outcome (Bungay Stanier, 2016). Knowing how to leverage values-based goal setting and creating awareness of behavioural and attitudinal choices in given scenarios without arousing psychological resistance and reactance (Rosenberg & Siegel, 2017) is also key. And fundamental to the voluntary nature of the coaching relationship (it is not possible to coach someone against their will): the ability to amplify agency, personal responsibility, and harness commitment to (coachee defined) actions.

The rise of dual trained practitioners

There are some recent signs that coaching approaches have begun to gain traction in organisations who work with people who experience oppressive social structures and economic disadvantage. A recent article in *Therapy Today* outlines that ‘Coaching has joined the fight for social justice’ (Mumby, 2020, p. 32) and a new wave of dual trained practitioners are utilising their coaching skills for the social good (BACP, 2022). There is some evidence of this movement towards a hybrid practice which incorporates a coaching approach within social work. For example, the government-backed, independent social work charity ‘Frontline’ promotes peer and one-to-one coaching to accelerate professional development during the second year of its programme to social work trainees and to consultant social workers based in child protection services (Grant, 2017; Rice, 2017). Kinman and Grant (2016), and Barker and Jones (2014), cite ‘peer coaching’ as a support to build resilience and identify the strengths of social workers in statutory children’s services. Grant *et al.* (2015) also argue for the use of peer coaching within social work education, as part of a proposed emotional curriculum designed to support emotional resilience and enhance the well-being of social work students.

Situating coaching approaches in the social work discourse

There is a considerable empirical gap in the scholarship on the use of coaching *within* social work beyond the author’s own two papers. One argues that helping people access their personal power is fundamental to transforming dynamics in the social work encounter (Triggs, 2021), the

other outlines how coaching can reconnect social workers with their vocational aspirations to 'make a difference' (Triggs, 2020). Coaching is slowly starting to be recommended in occasional social work texts and papers to develop practitioners (see McCarthy (2015) and Noble Perkins and Fatout (2000)), although to the author's knowledge there is only one book on the use of coaching in social work to date (Edleson, 2010), which serves as a basic introduction and contains some specific examples of how coaching has been used in non-profit, family support and community development services in the USA.

An individual small-scale study found that using life coaching with service users' in a UK family support service can have beneficial effects on their self-efficacy (Moran and Brady, 2010). There is also evidence of the burgeoning use of the term 'coaching' being cited to enhance the social work supervisory relationship (Harlow, 2013; Tsui *et al.*, 2017) or to increase training transfer and consolidate learning (Perrault and Coleman, 2004; Health and Social Care Board, 2014). Moreover, Burroughs *et al.* (2017) surveyed social workers in the USA (who had no formal coaching training) and found that approximately half identified as 'coaches' as they felt they used coaching skills regularly as part of their practice repertoire.

The research study

This study formed the basis of a doctoral research project, which was inspired by my own transformative experience of becoming a coach whilst working in a social work practice improvement role in a local authority, and subsequently coaching front line social work workers and managers working in children's statutory social care. As a pre-condition for taking part in this research, all the social workers undertook a one-off, foundation level certified coaching training course (accredited by the Association for Coaching), which took approximately six months to complete. Only social workers not in their 'Assessed and Supported Year of Employment' (the first year after qualifying as a social worker) were asked to take part in the training. After training was completed, the social work coaches were matched to service users (already in receipt of social work interventions) not on their caseload, whom they had no case knowledge of. The service user participants volunteered to try coaching and self-selected to take part in the study based on research leaflets shared by their social workers or during first-hand meetings with the researcher.

An average of four coaching sessions took place. The study was fully approved by a University Research Ethics Panel. It was agreed with the local authority and explained to service users that no formal digital record was to be made of what had been discussed in coaching sessions on

the parent or child's file beyond 'is receiving coaching'. Consent forms were signed by social workers on the final day of coaching training prior to the first focus group taking place. Written informed consent was obtained in person by the researcher with service users as well as from the parent, carer or social worker (if a looked after child) of each participant under 18.

Research procedure

The study had two elements: focus groups followed by semi-structured interviews. All focus group and interview conversations were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The coaching sessions themselves were not recorded due to their confidential nature. The social work participants took part in nine focus groups over a ten-month period whilst coaching was taking place, which captured how they used coaching in their practice over time. Both social workers and service users took part in individual semi-structured interviews when coaching was completed.

Participants

The study involved two different sets of UK participants, which made up a purposive sample of a population of interest. The sample comprised of seven experienced social workers (five female, two male, who had over seven years of experience of direct practice in the social work field) and six service users (parents and young people over the age of 11; six female, one male) took part in the study. All were employed in different teams or using services in a family support and child protection service in a local authority in the North of England. Pseudonyms have been given to each participant.

Analysis: Theming the data

The interpretative scheme for the data employed a social constructionist and critical realist lens to illuminate how participants contextualised and shaped their experience of coaching within their socio-cultural environments. An immersive, six-stage sequential process of Thematic Analysis was used to identify, develop and actively interpret the key concepts and search for patterns of meaning within the data generated by the research ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). Final themes were devised by reviewing not only the frequency and extensiveness of concepts that surfaced but also the importance participants attached to them and the intensity with which they were expressed.

Findings

The following themes set out a compelling and original account of how using coaching shaped the practice of children's workers and the adaptive challenge it provided to their professional identities.

Two worlds and two heads: Compartmentalising social work and coaching

The social workers spoke frequently of having a 'coaching head' and a 'social work head', which suggested that two very different mindsets were required to accommodate the difference in roles as a social worker and as a social work *coach*. Parallels with this experience were regularly drawn between them and an old children's TV character who they were all familiar with called Worzel Gummidge, who was a scarecrow who swapped heads for different occasions:

Ben: It's about switching off from what I've been doing, to, almost putting a—it's like Worzel Gummidge isn't it when he puts a different head on—get my coaching head out and pop it on. And I think for me sometimes I have to sort of flick a little switch to say 'right coaching mode now'.

This metaphorical 'head swapping' from being a social worker to a social work coach required a temporary identity shift that was sometimes unsettling and difficult for the participants as it required them not only to behave differently but to actively put aside and separate from the pressures of their circumscribed roles:

Esme: *It was almost like two worlds*, so for an hour, 'oh, here I am, I'm coaching, you know, this is nice, I'm listening, doing all that'. *Bang* as soon as I'm out of the door, I'm back in another world *and that's forgotten*. You know, I'm back in—I'm back to my job, back to the chaos, back to being a social worker.

One social worker spoke of a time when their internal 'social work head' could not be switched off as she needed to impart some information to the service user vital to their welfare. She informed the service user that she was temporarily stepping out of the coaching role to do this, but she experienced this interruption as very dislocating. All the social workers spoke of experiencing a more elevated internal self-monitoring of their thoughts and use of language during coaching sessions. One even spoke openly to the service user she was coaching about the internal conflict she was experiencing with her different 'heads' in the moment:

Megan: I kind of said ‘I need to just have a minute ... my social work head’s kicking in, I’m wanting to give you advice and that’s not what I’m here to do. I want to help you find your own.’

Moving from social worker to coach: flexing and merging personas

As coaching sessions progressed, the social workers employed deliberate psychological and practical strategies to enable them to flex their identity more easily. These included clearly separating the parts of their days dedicated to coaching from their social work roles by walking to coaching sessions instead of driving, allocating time to sit in their car or in a café beforehand to prepare, and seeing service user coachees at the end of the day when they could take more time and slow down the pace of the encounter.

These strategies helped them to flip their personas and to tolerate and align the contradictions in them more easily in one composite identity. The data revealed that towards the end of the research most of the social workers had a greater confidence and poise in using a coaching approach, and this became evident in their everyday practice:

Jane: I’m thinking about coaching people all the time... it’s like a natural thing, I don’t have to think about it! ... Whereas, I did have to think about it. I used to have to think about it all the time.

Sophie: I find myself doing it—I like all the empathic listening stuff, the feeding back ‘it sounds like what you’re saying to me is ...’ I find I use it a lot in my personal life, ‘So what would it look like if you had a little bit more of that?’ is my favourite type of question ... it’s made quite a big difference professionally and personally—I do it with people in my [laughs] personal life now! So yeah, so that was really—quite—profound. And realizing that ... it can take the pressure off that doing to—to people.

This suggests that the coaching mindset had become internalised by them as they customised elements of coaching attitudes and behaviours, honed through coaching interactions, into their social work identity.

Have you had a head transplant or something?

According to the reports of some of the social workers, integrating coaching into their social work role was perceived by some colleagues not only as a fundamental change in the way they approached things but in *who they were as people*. This was most pronounced for one social

worker Jane, whose new passion for using coaching in all her working relationships rattled a colleague who questioned what she perceived as an about-face to their usual like-minded way of interacting and accused her of having a 'head transplant'. The head transplant analogy is very close to the analogy of head swapping used by the social workers themselves. This suggests that using coaching not only influenced how the social workers experienced their self-identity, but it also affected how their identity was perceived by others.

For Jane, transplanting her old mindset meant she no longer felt the same degree of anger and frustration with the bureaucratic system and started to challenge the idea that she and others had no control within it. She did this by reframing the discourse in her team through the regular use of coaching language and active questions such as 'what do you want?'. This placed the onus on the coachee to name action that was the *positive opposite* of complaining, which shifted the focus from passively waiting for the environment to change. Bucking the trend of cultural negativity caused some team members to look at her cynically and critically, but to others, she reported, she gained a new reputation of being 'serene' and supportively challenging. This offers an insight into the impact of a coaching mindset on professional relationships when that mindset represents an alien way of thinking and acting.

I Don't Look at Her as a Social Worker: recasting social workers as coaches

Interestingly, the data indicated that the service users were able to reconstruct their antipathy towards social workers at speed when describing their experiences of being coached. The social work coaches were described by the service users in positive terms, such as 'nice', 'lovely' and being personable and relatable. Their dislike of social workers and the likeability of social work *coaches* were based on differences in their communication styles, the language they used as well as the attitude they conveyed:

Daisy: Like the way like she was speaking and—it didn't feel, and it didn't sound like she was a social worker.

These perceived differences in the tone, atmosphere and quality of interactions with social workers and social work *coaches* were intuited by all the service users. This was articulated through a compelling sense of being heard and understood, which led to the social work coaches being seen as 'non-social workers', in spite of knowing that this was their primary identity. This connection was particularly important for Daisy, who was at high risk of child sexual exploitation and had a history of

non-engagement with services, violence towards staff and going missing. Suspending the social work identity of her coach meant that she could set her apart from the negative associations she had with the other professionals in her life. This motivated her to show up and commit to coaching in ways that she would not commit to with other interventions.

Woven into the accounts of service users is also the sense that, as *coaches*, a more egalitarian, less superior bearing was communicated in their approach compared with social workers. This was founded on a refreshing feeling of being accepted and not being judged by their coaches, which led to greater openness:

Emma: She didn't have the social worker, attitude. She hasn't got that stance about her, as a social worker . . . I know she were a social worker. But, she was completely different to any other social worker I've ever met, and I've been through a lot of social workers! She's completely—it's two different people to me.

Interestingly, Emma expressed that just the title of 'social worker' was enough to trigger bad memories and a bristling defensiveness towards anyone with that designation. Immediately distinguishing and defining the identity of the person in front of them as a 'coach' was therefore an important part of a recasting process where their social work persona was willingly suspended—which was then reinforced by the social worker's coaching stance and behaviours. This is an exciting finding as it suggests that any enduring rancour towards social workers, based on negative lived experiences, can seemingly disappear if coaching skills are utilised and being a 'coach' is an obvious and named part of their role.

The study findings indicate that using coaching broke the conventions and rhythm of the social work encounters service users and social workers were used to which caused the social work coaches' identity to be re-arranged inwardly and outwardly. The different persona they presented were quickly intuited by service users and altered how they were perceived, accepted, and treated. This reciprocal effect is encapsulated in this response from social worker Esme:

Esme: It's different. It's a different way of doing things and it's a different way of them seeing you.

The comparisons service users made between the quality of social work and coaching encounters were unambiguous in the findings and demonstrate a philosophical gulf in approach. Coaching conversations provided a move away from being *told* what to do to being empowered to *choose* what to do. They prompted reflection, self-awareness and opportunities for the service users to explore and tune into themselves psychologically. In contrast, conversations with social workers implied judgement, a close oversight of practical tasks and a predictable, bureaucratic rigidity.

Discussion

In this discussion, the findings are situated alongside the literature on the construction of professional identity, which argues that it is an evolving, dynamic entity.

The social work coach identity: conflicted, agile and enriched

For the social work participants in the study, shifts in their identity were at the forefront of their experience of the intersection of social work and coaching practices. Conceptual frameworks relating to the construction of professional identity and transformation have therefore provided an important theoretical lens to examine the research findings. It is commonly understood that social identity is not a static, mono-faceted entity. It is dynamic, constructed through interaction with others (Giddens, 1991; Burr, 2015) and is in an ever-evolving state of becoming (Jenkins, 2014). As such, individuals are not limited to one core identity but have a repertoire of multiple identities available to them:

We occupy multiple subject positions and shift, manoeuvre and negotiate within and across these... the discursive subject is riven with contradictory pressures, contingencies and contested representations. Identity is neither stable, nor a final achievement (Dent and Whitehead, 2002, p. 11).

It follows that professional identity is also not fixed (Harlow, 2017), it is provisional and is subject to a continuous process of individual and collective customisation and reproduction through interaction with the workplace (Dent, 2017; Webb, 2017). There is a distinction between how identity is thought to evolve through relational, social and cultural factors, which make up a process of professional socialisation *for work*, for example, whilst undertaking qualifying education, and the contextual influences and experiences *by work*, when we are situated in the work environment (Cohen-Scali, 2003; Webb, 2017). Leigh (2017) suggests that social workers' identities can become unsettled and conflicted when performing roles where there is some discrepancy between the collective social work identity and an individual's identity. The current findings, which highlight issues of identity conflict for the social work participants, align with Leigh's interpretation—as a 'social work coach' their collective identity was interrupted and held in tension.

There are synergies here with Goffman's concept of 'role distance', wherein we actively create space between one identity whilst we improvise and perform another identity according to our particular audience (Goffman, 1972; Chriss, 1999). Drawing further on Goffman's identity

theory, the temporary coaching situations can be likened to a live ‘impression management’ strategy (Goffman, 1959), where their professional identity was being reflexively negotiated in the moment by social workers (Webb, 2017) to give the temporary impression of being a coach, whilst simultaneously suspending their social work identity.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) propose that active and self-conscious identity work is necessary when routines are interrupted, or challenging situations transpire that disrupt or contradict our sense of who we are. According to their ‘identity regulation, identity work and self-identity’ model, identity work is an interpretive activity that repairs, augments and ultimately transforms our self-identity into a more coherent entity. In the current study, much of this identity work was done in the focus groups, when social workers talked frequently about the destabilising effect of coaching on their identity as it made competing claims on their attention (Figure 1, ‘Head Swapping’, presents a model of some the key role conflicts that required identity work).

In Leigh’s (2014) study of the professionalisation of child protection social workers some of the social workers talked of flipping their professional and personal identities to separate the pressures in their practice from their personal lives. The differing identity strategies evident in Leigh’s research resonate with the current study, where social workers initially compartmentalised their ‘social work head’ from their ‘coaching head’ as a means for them to co-exist. These makeshift early constructions were refined during coaching interactions until a congruent hybrid professional identity and mindset took shape and they consciously *became* social work coaches. That some colleagues described a social worker as having ‘a head transplant’ also gives currency to the notion that professional identity is self—and other—interpreted and is a dialectical construction (Emprechtinger and Voll, 2017) shaped by institutional relationships.

Co-constructing social workers as coaches

Leigh (2014, 2016) contends that the denigrated reputation of the profession in the media is likely to distort the way social workers’ identities are constructed. She argues that hostile public perceptions of social workers and the fear of incompetence being exposed create risk averse and oppressive practices that can penetrate and spoil professional identity. Parton (2014) has identified two contradictory social work stereotypes that exist in the media; ineffectual ‘fools and wimps’ who fail to intervene in time to protect children from abuse or ‘villains and bullies’, over-zealous, State-sanctioned child snatchers (Warner, 2013) who groundlessly interfere in families’ lives and invade their privacy (Van der Gaag *et al.*, 2017). This provocatively destructive discourse is thought to

Head Swapping Model: Professional Identity Conflict & Agility

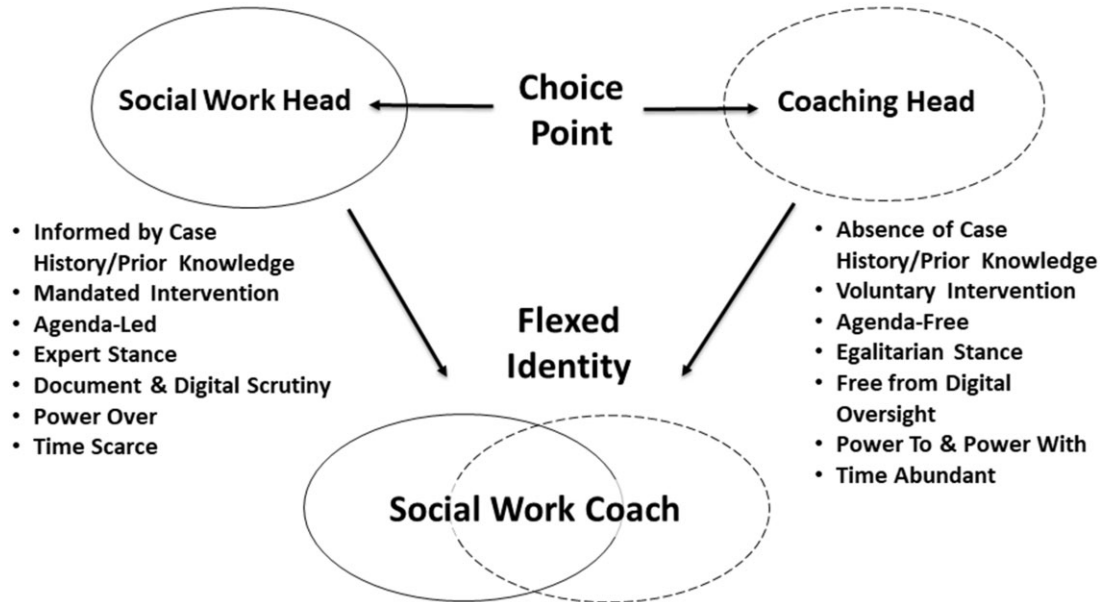


Figure 1: Diagram of the head swapping model: professional identity conflict and agility. The model outlines identity conflicts or distinctly different ‘heads’ that are activated according to whether a social work or coaching approach is taken. These parts are initially held in tension and conflict but then rapidly come to represent a more flexible and expanded professional identity as a ‘social work coach’.

shore up public ambivalence and confusion about what social workers do and entrenches a distance between service user and social worker (Leigh, 2016).

The service users in this study appeared to be attuned to this negative discourse, they highlighted their dislike of the way they perceived social workers collectively communicated, including their tone, the language they used, their attitude, their judgemental stance and the patronising way they looked at them. More specifically, they highlighted social workers' dominance in setting the conversational agenda, their insistence on there being a 'right way' of doing things and the inflexibility and formality of their encounters with them. This echoes the research of Penhale and Young (2015) who found that service users who have had direct experience of social workers often feel stigmatised by their involvement and complain of their problem-focused approach. In a study of social workers' experience of public perceptions, just the title of 'social worker' was said to be associated with significant and enduring negativity and historic stigma (Legood *et al.*, 2016).

This is underscored by service users in this study who also described feelings of resistance being activated in them just by their social work title. Strikingly, social workers introducing themselves in the role of 'coach' (whilst confirming their social work identity outside of the coaching encounter) and behaving *as a coach* from the outset were enough for the service users to instantly suspend any enduring negativity towards them as social workers and to reconstruct their identity accordingly. This research suggests, then, that engaging a coaching mindset interrupted and stirred up the 'available vocabulary' (White *et al.*, 2006) of how social workers and service users can behave towards one another. The brief relationships they formed indicated accelerated rapport and ironically seemed to be more aligned with those qualities service users *do* value in social work relationships, those that:

Inspire confidence, are empowering, enable choice and control, are non-discriminatory and non-judgmental and offer informality and flexibility (Penhale and Young, 2015, p. 14).

This study suggests that in identifying as coaches the social workers were able to connect with and communicate with service users uncontaminated by their professional discourse. Service users experienced this shift intuitively and subjectively and were mobilised to make positive changes on their own terms with little ambivalence or resistance. Whilst the findings do not imply a means to repair the reputation of social workers in the minds of service users (Webb, 2017), they do indicate a way for social workers and service users to circumvent and tune out the discourse in individual short-term relationships. It is conceivable that utilising a coaching discourse within social work has the potential to be both identity enhancing and a means for service users to mobilise beneficial change.

However, the weak evidence base and literature in this area must be strengthened by much more comprehensive research before this can be claimed with any certainty.

Limitations

This research will inevitably have blind spots that it needs to address into order to improve and it is important to recognise that its claims are limited. First, the results of the study must be considered within the unique practice context in which the research took place. The social work identity portrayed here may not be recognisable in the professional identity of workers in progressive services where the ideal of empowering, strengths-based practice is an effective reality and role. The differences between coaching and social work identities in such services would be harder to delineate, and it remains to be seen whether coaching would have the same transformational effect on social workers identities in other authorities.

The themes developed are the story of *my* subjective constructions, derived organically from my interaction with the data which also limits its applicability. Since the completion of this study the social workers and service users who took part have moved on and changed. Therefore, the effects of coaching that participants described may have been short-lived and without a follow-up study a more sober view may need to be taken of the sustainability of the findings.

Conclusion

This enquiry explored the experience of incorporating a coaching persona within the social work identity and questioned if and how both roles can coexist in a social work context. It proposes that social workers' professional identities become conflicted when they use coaching until they are able to construct a more agile, hybrid 'social work coach' identity. On becoming coaches, social workers in this study were perceived by service users as having a different 'way-of-being' to other social workers. Harnessing the coaching 'way of being' within social work therefore has the possibility of increasing these valuable encounters with service users that help them to determine and deliver their own solutions.

This study infers significant applied implications for a new, hybrid coaching social work practice and points strongly to coaching as an identity enriching experience that has applications for social work education, readiness for practice and continuing professional development. It has demonstrated that providing social workers with coaching skills not only enables social workers to have a more dynamic range of behaviours to

draw upon but holds the possibility of bringing a different atmosphere to social work that is experienced as more humane by those on its receiving end. This research addresses gaps in the literature and signals a recognition that coaching *does* have a place within the social work profession, which is not yet readily apparent in the empirical literature. It highlights the positive synergies of utilising coaching to create fluidity in the social work identity and expand the lexicon, and is a daring move towards realising coaching's innovative potential within social work:

'I think I can be a better social worker. Still with that bottom line. And kind of a better human being almost alongside it. If there's the coaching approach integrated into it'. Sophie, social work coach.

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