CHAPTER 1
ORGANIZATION OF RESEARCH AND QUESTION ADDRESSED IN MY RESEARCH

1.1 Introduction

In this dissertation I am developing a theory of a psychodynamic group-coaching intervention. As will be discussed later in Chapter 5 Toward a theory of group psychodynamic coaching: A review of the literature, very little academic research has so far been produced on this subject. It is worth exploring from the outset the relevance of researching this intervention. This I have done below from a number of perspectives. The hope would be that in reading this research, a prospective practitioner might understand how the intervention works, its theoretical components, on what basis in social science it works, how participants experience it from an efficacy and process perspective, and some of the techniques practitioners use to enact it.

1.1.1 Why research this question?

Anecdotally, I sensed that after years of working in the group-coaching arena, the intervention itself was broadly well received. A good starting point would be to qualify that and understand from the point of view of participants, exactly what had happened and why. At INSEAD Global Leadership Centre we have methodically stored the data from all the programs over 20 years in which the group-coaching intervention has been deployed. The first program that pioneered this methodology was the Challenge of Leadership, a program designed for and attended by CEOs. Moreover, I have access to these participants as faculty at the school. Therefore, it was relatively straightforward to construct an idea for a qualitative study. I have chosen to look at the data from the “International Executive Program,” recently renamed the “Transition to General Management.” The “International Executive Program” prepared senior functional managers for general management roles. It filled gaps in their knowledge of essential management disciplines, broadening their general management skills. Through lectures, 360-degree feedback, action learning, and coaching, it set out to build personal, team, and organizational leadership skills. Typical participants were senior managers who reported to the C-suite executives at the helm of large companies who are moving or just moving into senior leadership roles. The coaching on this program is still a combination of group and one-to-one coaching (sometimes referred to as dyadic coaching,) but contains all the elements of the group-coaching intervention that I wanted to look at in greater detail and with a group of seasoned executives, the average age of which is generally early forties.

1.1.2 Relevance of the research

The lack of material about group-coaching, and in particular psychodynamic group-coaching, raises the question of what relevance this research has to the social sciences, its practical managerial application, and its scientific basis. If it turns out to be true that any developed theory has real managerial application, it may also be true that it is replicable across disciplines in the social sciences and even in the more general human realm. If it has scientific foundations all of these may prove to be true. We need to ask whether leadership development programs have a real scientific basis for research and, if so, to what extent?

Although a large body of work exists around human resource management, little has been written about the impact of leadership development (Burgoyne, Hirsh, & Williams, 2004). One of the key components in the fully developed theory therefore will be to test, albeit in a limited way, the effect of the intervention and if it has sustainability. This I have done through participant interviews.
1.1.3 Scientific utility of the study

Harrison and Armenakis wrote extensively about evaluation measures and their pitfalls in management science (Armenakis, Bedeian, & Pond, 1983; Harrison, 1971). One of the common criticisms of studies around the impact of leadership training is that the association of factors does not necessarily prove causality. Put simply, leaders who are selected to attend leadership programs (or who elect to do so) may change because they were selected or elected, not because the intervention caused them to change. In order to prove this empirically one would need to conduct a larger scale study introducing control factors, standardization, repeat experiments and elimination of variables to mitigate the argument. While this may be of interest to those who wish to validate the theory it does impose limits, to the extent the developed theory can be described as fully reliable. Qualitative data explore the how and why, which is what I have set out to do. Future research may be needed to deliver substantiated results findings.

Moreover, scientific impact studies around management and leadership development from the private sector are sadly lacking. Public sector studies are available but less relevant given the different incentives. Voller and Hayward recently concluded in a review of leadership impact studies that 1) substantial evidence exists that leadership development makes a positive impact; and 2) appreciative and case based inquiry studies are growing in popularity because of the reflection generated in both participants and program designers (Hayward & Voller, 2010). I will in Chapter 5, however, review the available literature around executive group-coaching.

There are, nonetheless, large-scale studies conducted by interest groups and companies. The Hay Group study, last published in 2011, looks at a broad range of companies and gives access to an understanding of which companies are best for leadership and the key characteristics that denote that leadership (The Hay Group, 2011). The 2010 survey included responses from 3,769 individuals and 1,827 organizations worldwide. The survey was based on the organization’s response to an online questionnaire and peer nominations. Respondents that completed the survey were from 96 countries, with 26.6% from North America, 23.4% from Europe, 3.6% from the Middle East, 19.7% from Asia, 23.7% from South America, 2.6% from the Pacific, and .5% from Africa.

One final paradox exists. In order to prove the scientific efficacy of the leadership development program studied it would be necessary in part to conduct longitudinal research, since a short-term improvement in an individual’s leadership skills will be unlikely to make a significant impact on organizational performance. Unfortunately, such performance impact in a longitudinal study would be likely to be offset by the reasonable argument that there is a less than justifiable link in performance back to the development itself.

1.1.4 Social utility of the study

The most cited study of management development effectiveness was the meta-analysis by Burke and Day (1986). Collins and Holton (2004) and an industry publication from the Chartered Management Institute in 2005 have recently complemented this (Mabey, 2005). These all point to the conclusion that there is evidence of a link between leadership development and organizational performance, albeit that the seminal study is 25 years old. We are informed that some leadership development interventions work and that those that work have a benefit for their organizations. The benefits are typical greater profitability, employee engagement, and higher productivity (Huselid, 1995). We may deduce, therefore, that there is real social benefit to effective leadership development.

1.1.5 Managerial utility of the study
What we also know is that psychological approaches create developmental impact at both organizational and individual level (Burke and Day, 1986; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Valiquet, 1968). In 1997, Daiy and Johnson positively correlated leadership with profitability, influencing margins by up to 47% (Daiy & Johnson, 1997). For what it is worth to company leaders, the Csoka study also reported that those companies that reported leadership development programs were 1.5 times more likely to find themselves at the top of Fortune magazine’s most admired companies list (Csoka, 1997). Goleman (1998) stated that while only 20% of variance of productivity can be accounted for by technical skills, 80% can be accounted for by emotional and interpersonal skills. These two components are key ingredients of the specific intervention I am studying. Specific benefits to managers and organizations by providing a leadership development intervention include increased productivity, increased sales, and decreased employee turnover (Kelloway, 2000; Porras & Anderson, 1981; Spencer, 2001). According to Olivero, Bane, and Kopelman (1997) and D.B. Peterson (2002), inclusion of executive coaching into leadership development programs produced larger performance gains, with Fisher going so far as to state that the return on investment of the coaching portion was estimated (on a non-empirical basis) to be six times the cost of the coaching itself (Fisher, 2001; Olivero et al., 1997; D.B. Peterson, 2002).

1.2 Theory, practice and technique: Key concepts

Three major themes that are explored in detail and deconstructed run through this research: Executive coaching is, in this intervention, the practice used to effect change. Psychodynamic group-coaching is the technique in question. Various existent psychoanalytic psychology concepts are invoked to support the developing new theory, for example Jungian theory, the theory of transitional space, and object relations theory. The notions of theory, practice, and technique may be useful signposts for the reader to navigate the research.

1.2.1 Technique: Coaching

Coaching executives in groups is a relatively new development in the overall paradigm of executive coaching. According to Kilburg (2000), the conceptual basis for the development of organizational coaching stems from general systems theory as applied to human organizations and behavior. That said, much of the coaching undertaken is with individuals. As the popularity of coaching has grown and any associated stigma declined, coaching has proliferated and is no longer confined to remedial work but falls into many categories: Performance coaching, life coaching, remedial coaching, on-boarding (when the participant requires help as he or she embarks on a new position), and leadership coaching are some of the labels attached to the different types of coaching available to executives in the marketplace. In this thesis I will concentrate on the branch of coaching known as executive coaching.

1.2.2 Technique: Executive coaching

Executive coaching is the practice of providing support and occasional advice to an individual or group in order to help them recognize ways in which they can improve the effectiveness of their business. Business coaches work to improve leadership, employee accountability, teamwork, sales, communication, goal setting, strategic planning, and more. It can be provided in a number of ways, including one-on-one dyadic work, group-coaching sessions and large-scale seminars. While executive coaches are often called in when a business is perceived to be performing badly, many businesses recognize the benefits of business coaching even when the organization is successful. Executive coaching often takes place in a series of one hour or two hour sessions, in person or by phone. It is usually time limited (an executive may book 16 hours of coaching for example) since it is generally goal focused and therefore not open ended.
At least two organizations, the International Coaching Council (ICC) and the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (WABC), provide a membership-based association for professionals involved in business coaching. The ICC and WABC also provide an accrediting system for business coach training programs. The ICC currently has over 1,500 members from over 50 countries.

Executive coaching is not the same as mentoring. Mentoring involves a developmental relationship between a more experienced “mentor” and a less experienced partner, and typically involves sharing of advice. A business coach can act as a mentor given that he or she has adequate expertise and experience. However, mentoring is not a form of executive coaching. A good executive coach need not have specific business expertise and experience in the same field as the person receiving the coaching in order to provide quality executive coaching services. Executive coaching needs to be more structured and formal than mentoring.

Executive coaches often help businesses grow by creating and following a structured, strategic plan to achieve agreed goals. Coaching is not a practice restricted to external experts. Many organizations expect their senior leaders and middle managers to coach their team members toward higher levels of performance, increased job satisfaction, personal growth, and career development. Those that do, back up their expectations with training in coaching skills, access to feedback tools, and/or specific coaching behaviors described in their leadership competency models. One of the important by-products of the interventions I am researching is that managers are not only exposed to coaching but practice coaching skills on each other and thereby acquire skills in giving and receiving feedback.

Executive coaching practitioners emanate from the fields of psychology, psychoanalysis, business executives, HR specialists, and even physiotherapists who have discerned an interest from their clients seeking more than just physical progress. As stated above, the field is fragmented, since it is relatively new. Unlike the clinical fields of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and clinical psychology, however, no specific qualification is required to call oneself a coach. This leads on the one hand to problematic choices for the executive when choosing a coach but on the other hand to a broad spectrum of possible types of interventions.

I have reviewed the literature on coaching and make comments throughout this research on the links between the psychological theory above and its application in the coaching setting. In essence I am examining how group theory and psychodynamic theory fit with a coaching modality, if at all. Therefore, an outright study of coaching in this context is unwarranted. The reader will need to assume that coaching in an executive setting works. A full bibliography of scholarly articles, which can substantiate that position, exists in Stober and Grant (2006).

1.2.3 Theory and technique: Psychodynamics and psychodynamic coaching

Moving into a narrower area, the availability of executive coaches who have had both experience in business and exposure to psychodynamic training is sparse. Psychodynamics is the systematized study and theory of the psychological forces that underlie human behavior, emphasizing the interplay between unconscious and conscious motivation. It is usually understood fully by those who have practiced or been trained in psychology. In the intervention I am studying, the coaches are trained in the psychodynamic method at INSEAD but have also had business experience. This will be discussed later.

The original concept of “psychodynamics” was developed by Sigmund Freud, who suggested that psychological processes are flows of psychological energy. It established “psychodynamics” on the basis of psychological energy (Bowlby, 1999).
How does that in any way relate to the very modern practice of executive coaching? Coaching, with a professional coach, is the practice of supporting an individual, referred to as a participant, through the process of achieving a specific personal or professional result. The UK’s Chartered Institute of Personnel Management (2009) reports in “Taking the Temperature of Coaching” that 51% of companies (sample size of 500) “consider coaching as a key part of learning development and crucial to their strategy”; with 90% reporting that they “use coaching.” The basic skills of coaching are often being developed in managers within organizations specifically to improve their managing and leadership abilities, rather than to apply in formal one-to-one coaching sessions. These skills can also be applied within team meetings and are akin then to the more traditional skills of group facilitation. Most literature on the subject can be broken broadly into three groups: Methodology and techniques of the intervention, research studies, and expanding the manager’s repertoire to include that of coaching (Kilburg, 2000).

Coaching has a number of streams, one of which is psychodynamic. Many practitioners in the field find the use of psychodynamics useful in helping participants to understand underlying unconscious motivation in order to help them change the way it plays out in their lives. The field of psychodynamic coaching has been explored in depth by a number of scholars (Baum, 1987; Brunning, 2006; Czander, 1993; Diamond, 1993; Hirschorn, 1988; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987; Kilburg, 1997; Levinson, 1972, 1981, 1991). In this thesis I will concentrate on the application of psychodynamics in a group setting using executive coaching as the technique.

1.2.4 The origins of group-coaching

Group-coaching, as the name suggests, is not a one-to-one intervention but one that involves a group of executives. It is not clear how this intervention emerged but it seems to have been a naturally occurring phenomenon in business settings as providers sought economies of scale and time-savings.

In 2000, Manfred Kets de Vries and Elisabet Engellau were working on programs at the school known as the Challenge of Leadership (COL) and Advanced Management Program (AMP) respectively. One module of the AMP was devoted to a Leadership Development Process (LDP), a process that was later applied to a number of other programs including the IEP that I am researching. Kets de Vries and Engellau were tasked to coach the executives on this program using feedback material from their places of work. This was challenging as they had 60 participants, two days and only two coaches. Kets de Vries and Engellau hit upon the idea that instead of scrambling to provide a solid intervention to all participants, why not get them to coach each other. As Kets de Vries said when I interviewed him:

“I started this but it has evolved. In the beginning I struggled with 360-degree feedback. I started by using leadership practices, for example a Posner instrument to do this kind of work (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). I experimented with it. It was unsatisfactory. I was using it on executive programs but it was too US-centric and overly simplistic. Then, working across cultures it became even more complicated. I tried to put people in groups and then move from group to group. It became frustrating. I finally asked (INSEAD) if I could have some coaches. It was at that time that INSEAD put leadership on the agenda. I started to experiment with group-coaching on the COL program. This produced the ideas for the Consulting and Coaching for Change (CCC) and beyond. Originally for reasons of confidentiality, I took one person per company. Subsequently, I started doing it with Executive Boards and it worked. Then we went to Goldman Sachs and asked people to go beyond simply looking at the 360-degree feedback data and to tell something about themselves to arrive at a richer understanding of the person. The facilitator was expected to stimulate this process. It was a way to create a safe transitional space for the participants. And although an understanding of the past and future is important, I try to go beyond the clinical process. It is a broad net that I use in trying to pick up the salient
elements of a person’s life. I view the way I work as an iterative, exploratory and working through process.”

As a practitioner in psychoanalysis as well as carrying out executive coaching, Kets de Vries was undoubtedly aware of the availability and utilization of group-therapy as an intervention when he introduced the notion of group-coaching at INSEAD.

1.2.5 Why coach in groups at all?

One needs to try to get to the heart of why one would attempt to effect change in a demonstrably more difficult situation than the usual dyadic coaching setup. Partly this can be depicted by context. Kets de Vries explains further as follows:

“Group experiences...are journeys of self-discovery. If done in a safe environment, telling stories about significant events and situations...helps an individual work through internal conflicts and crises and arrive at meaningful, personal life integration. The acceptance and support given by other members of the group helps instill a sense of hope and change for the future. Listening...to others’ stories of their dysfunctional patterns helps participants recognize and arrive at greater clarity about their own issues. This, combined with the pressures from the other participants to make constructive life changes, paves the way for cognitive and emotional restructuring.” Kets de Vries, 2007, p298

Typically, I have observed group members providing their own examples of similar workplace issues. They are often able to provide alternative solutions or coping strategies. They form alliances and networks so that transformation transcends the physical group process. Moreover, they often coach each other after the event, supplying simultaneous pressure and support. Groups often take on a life of their own during and after group-coaching sessions. Participants challenge each other, provide context in the form of their own experiences and make suggestions for change and improvement under the watchful eye of the facilitator. Most importantly, they share each other’s journey. From unearthing old scars and histories of aberrant behaviors publicly, to thinking about issues and committing to change, they are all witnesses to the transformative process. Thus, from the moment that change becomes requisite, there are stakeholders attendant who start to become psychologically “bought in” to each other, the process, and the outcome.

1.2.6 Theory: Group processes, group-therapy, and group dynamics

This may be defined as a psychotherapeutic intervention in groups, and is also a general term for group processes. Groups are distinct from teams that are usually internally organized, have a group responsibility and accountability for outcomes, and normally have specific goals and tasks. Relevant to the fields of psychology, sociology, and communication studies, a group is two or more individuals who are connected to each other by social relationships (Forsyth, 2006). Because they interact and influence each other, groups develop a number of dynamic processes that separate them from a random collection of individuals. These processes include norms, roles, relations, development, need to belong, social influence, and effects on behavior. The field of group dynamics is primarily concerned with small group behavior. Groups may be classified as aggregate, primary, secondary, and category groups.

In organizational development (OD), the phrase “group process” refers to the understanding of the behavior of people in groups, such as task groups, that are trying to solve a problem or make a decision. An individual with expertise in the group process, such as a trained OD facilitator, can assist a group in accomplishing its objective by diagnosing how well the group is functioning as a problem-solving or decision-making entity and intervening to alter the group’s operating behavior.
Because people gather in groups for reasons other than task accomplishment, group process occurs in other types of groups such as personal growth groups (e.g., encounter groups, study groups, prayer groups). In such cases, an individual with expertise in the group process can be helpful in the role of facilitator.

Well researched, but rarely mentioned by professional group workers, is the social status of people within the group (i.e., senior or junior). The group leader (or facilitator) will usually have a strong influence on the group due to his or her role of shaping the group’s outcomes. This influence will also be affected by the leader’s gender, race, relative age, income, appearance, and personality, as well as organizational structures and many other factors. I will discuss the role of the facilitator in several contexts throughout this research.

1.2.7 Theory: Transitional space

The notion of transitional space was mentioned above by Kets de Vries and requires some attention. Drawn from the work of Winnicott around transitional objects and transitional phenomena, transitional space is akin to the holding environment experienced by infants and provided by their mothers to which Winnicott describes as an evolving tension between mother and infant. At first there is an illusion which correlates directly with the infant’s experience, namely that his mother is “good enough”. As the infant demands, the mother appears. As the weaning process begins, disappointment sets in. This complex process as the infant begins to face a new reality is replaced often with a transitional object, sometimes a teddy bear, or a piece of blanket for example. He hypothesizes ultimately that transitional phenomena belong to the realm of illusion, which is “at the basis of initiation of experience” p97 (Winnicott, 1953). The mother’s ability to manage this holding environment well forms the basis for a healthy transition.

The challenge for the group-coaching practitioner is to produce a consistent and effective holding environment wherein the executive can experiment with change and at the same time feel safe and contained. Winnicott (1971) explains that if the environment for the infant is not contained then the child may become traumatized. Our application of a safe environment in the group-coaching context assumes the same for the executive. Against what kind of trauma are we seeking to protect the executive? As discussed in Chapter 3, working through feedback in a group environment is potentially anxiety provoking. Moreover, for some, even admitting that there are professional challenges is problematic. Also discussed in Chapter 4 is the consequent surfacing of some of the classic defenses found in therapeutic settings. These need to be managed carefully in order to protect the executive from harm. That harm can take the form of feeling insecure, worthless, inferior to his or her peers in the room, and maybe even acting out in a way he or she may come to regret.

Lewin founded the movement to study groups scientifically but Bion was the founding father of the movement to study groups from a psychoanalytic perspective (Lewin, 1947, Bion, 1961). Known as group dynamics, its application again is generally used as a therapeutic intervention. According to Behr and Hearst, Foulkes saw the group as a matrix or transpersonal network, reacting and responding as a whole, an interactive and reactive organism within which there was a constantly changing constellation of figure ground configurations (Behr and Hearst, 2006). Importantly, a group can provide what Winnicott (1949) called the environmental essentials of healthy development. In short, a group may sometimes do what an individual coach cannot.

The role of the coach as “leader” in a group process is one to be dealt with and disarmed early. T.W. Adorno, a leading social theorist, preferred the term conductor and in our workshops we use the term facilitator in the sense of facilitating a group discussion (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). If this position is not clearly expressed there can be a
tendency for the group to observe while each participant is publicly coached, with the group as witnesses. This leads to the group looking to the coach as source of wisdom and advice. Individual members can become disengaged from the process and from investing in each other. In fact what is desirable is for the group to become the containing environment wherein the group encompasses both physical and psychological space and is bounded by the members of the group (Pine, 1985). The work of Foulkes had a great impact on the theory around groups and group-therapy (Foulkes, 1948, 1957, 1961) A key Foulksian view, a view that I share, is of a group interacting as a whole, a network of influences and influencers embodied in each group member, with many of the underlying psychoanalytic concepts such as transference, the unconscious, and projection still in evidence.

1.2.8 Practice: T-groups and group work with executives

Lewin also pioneered T-groups or action learning groups which, according to Yalom (1995), are noteworthy by the following criteria:

1. Feedback (an important tenet of which is when the feedback comes from “here and now observations” around performance).
2. Unfreezing, (from Lewin’s change theory: “Motivation for change must be generated before change can occur. One must be helped to re-examine many of one’s cherished assumptions about oneself and relations to others (Lewin, 1951).
3. Participant observation, the essential task of which is to connect concrete experience and analytical detachment.
4. Cognitive aids, e.g. models, brief lectures, and handouts connecting participants in a way that the group’s primary task is to facilitate learning for its members.

For group-coaching to function well, the four principles of the T-group should be in place. Finally, the coaching group set up borrows heavily from what Lewin termed action research. Namely, that the approach has to be collaborative, yet the research of the group is only achieved through the critically examined action of the group members (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

1.2.9 Practice: Intensive short-term dynamic therapy as a subset of psychodynamic psychotherapy

As discussed earlier, traditionally coaching is in general conducted dyadically over several sessions usually ranging between one and two hours. Hence an executive who embarks on an executive coaching program can expect between 10 and 16 hours of coaching focused solely on him or herself. The group-coaching explored in this study does not seek to provide this level of individual focus. The intervention usually takes place over one full day with a follow-up session the following morning. It is quite unlike psychotherapy. However, one narrow but useful form of psychotherapy exists which is well researched and provides an interesting analog, known as Intensive Short-term Dynamic Psychotherapy (ISTDP). I will now look at this in some detail.

ISTDP’s primary goal is to help the patient overcome internal resistance to experiencing true feelings about the present and past that have been warded off because they are either too frightening or too painful. The technique is intensive in that it aims to help the patient experience these warded-off feelings to the maximum degree possible; it is short-term in that it tries to achieve this experience as quickly as possible; it is dynamic because it involves working with unconscious forces and transference feelings. It quickly establishes the salient issues the patient has to work on.

The therapy itself was developed during the 1960s to 1990s by Dr. Habib Davanloo, although Balint’s focal psychotherapy has been accredited with shortening time frames, and the work of
Mann, Sifneos, and Malan, who will be discussed later, was highly influential in changing the paradigm. Davanloo was a psychiatrist who grew frustrated with the long duration and relatively limited efficacy of psychoanalysis. He began video recording patient interviews and watching the recordings in minute detail to determine as precisely as possible what sorts of interventions were most effective in overcoming resistance (Davanloo, 1978, 1980). Later, in Chapter 6, I will discuss the results of this particular therapy and elaborate further how it is used.

1.3 Research question

The core intervention at the heart of this study, however, psychodynamic group-coaching has not been widely researched. It is based on three previously researched building blocks:

1. Group-therapy
2. Short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy
3. Executive coaching

As we will see in Table 3 below, the intervention works at some level, in that there is a high degree of self reported satisfaction. I was curious, however, to explore why and how it worked so consistently. Consequently, there were a number of possible themes for exploration utilizing what Ragin (1994) suggested is a fluid analytic frame; namely, limiting the influence of more researched and tested theories and switching between them in order to create a new one. I tried to condense this frame into two areas:

Setup: How does a practitioner in the field create the circumstances for change in a group-coaching setting? What is the effectiveness of the three cornerstones of the process when isolated and can we deduce from the result that when amalgamated they are effective, as a sole intervention?

Process: What happens during the process itself? What are the component parts?

Result: Once the intervention has taken place, what were the experiences of the participants and practitioners of the process? Were they able to make changes at the time? What aspects of the process facilitated change?

The three building blocks I have mentioned earlier are at the core of the research: We put executives in groups. We use a psychodynamic approach. They receive executive coaching in an abbreviated and bounded session. While there may be other extraneous factors that come into play, I have focused the research on these three areas initially. By a process of clinical induction, outlining the intervention and all its components end to end, by conducting structured interviews with participants and practitioners, and by reviewing the literature of the three core processes I hope to demonstrate that blending the three core processes into a single intervention is valid, effective, and replicable not only in the executive sphere but also has possibilities in other social environments.

I have relied on extensive qualitative data, interviewing participants for their assessments on the intervention and its usefulness. The rationale for this is explained later. To date, after extensive searching, I have found a very limited number of other studies on group executive coaching from the field. Moreover, I saw no particular relevance in creating a theory of group-coaching methodology if the effects were immaterial or short lived. I have explained further in Chapter 4 in the section on Methodology how I went about interviewing participants from past programs in order to check this.

1.4 Critical factors of the initial survey
In order to find out what the participants thought about group-coaching I decided to look back over a number of years to see what the results had been and what had been said. These data are laid out below. They provided the platform for my research. If the intervention was deemed mediocre or of little value I would not have taken it further. I was fortunate to have the relevant data available. I have set out below what I discovered and the limitations of it.

1.4.1 Data quality of the initial survey

Participants on the “International Executive Program” experience a psychodynamic group-coaching intervention in week two of the six-week program, explained in detail in Chapter 3. After this experience they are invited to evaluate the process from four different perspectives using a questionnaire. An analysis of the responses to this questionnaire appear in Table 3. The IEP ran three times in a calendar year. I looked at the responses from 12 separate programs from the beginning of 2006 to the end of 2009. (Note there are 13 unique data points as in June 2007 the cohort was sufficiently large that it could be split in two.) In all I analyzed data from 414 respondents. The total number of participants invited to respond was 430. On average 0.8% participants failed to respond to the questionnaire on each program, or less than 3%. This could be attributed to absence through sickness, early departure or displeasure with the program. The questionnaire was given to the participants at the end of the coaching for years 2006–2008 and at the end of the six week program in 2009. Although one might reasonably expect the evaluation to drop after a time lapse, in fact in 2009 the results improved by a factor of around 10%, disproving this. The scaling for the evaluation uses five points:

1=Poor, 2=Satisfactory, 3=Good, 4=Very good, 5=Excellent.

There are de facto problems with evaluating a leadership development intervention. For a rigorous scientific result, one might suggest the need for a control group running in parallel to the study group and measuring various KPIs like employee satisfaction, improved productivity or retention. There are, therefore, even problems with evaluating an evaluation. Participants are likely to be experiencing a “feelgood” factor either at the end of coaching or at the end of the program itself when graduating. They may experience unconscious pressure from peers or from professors to score toward the higher end of the scale. A fairer way to evaluate might be to have them return the questionnaires after they have left campus to avoid these potential biases. It is with these imperfections in mind that I have analysed the raw data.

1.4.2 Results

Overall the results of all programs over a four year period for the coaching intervention averaged 4.49 (around midway between Very good and Excellent.) Three questions were posed to the participants that relate to the development of the theory. The first question asks the participants if the group-coaching successfully provided an opportunity for self-assessment and leadership development. The second specifically deals with the aspect of the group environment. The way that it is phrased should lead the participants to consider the alternative, i.e undergoing coaching individually. The third question is related to the coach’s ability to manage the session (using the psychodynamic approach).

1.4.3 Evaluation ranges

One can see from Table 3 that the average coaching evaluation results for each of the 12 programs range between 4.3 at the lower end and 4.63 at the upper end. In other words, the intervention was evaluated as between very good and excellent on all programs.
On the individual questions the lowest recorded average was on the June and April programs in 2006 where 4.1 was assessed in terms of expectation matching. At the higher end a score of 4.8 was recorded in November 2009 for satisfaction with coaching in the group setting.

It is not easy to extrapolate much more from these numbers without looking at the qualitative remarks that accompanied them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 Analysis of participant responses from psychodynamic group-coaching 2006–2009, International Executive Programme INSEAD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Using the model in Fig. 4, presented to the participants before the intervention, provides a logical system for analyzing this qualitative data above in more detail. The model details the whole process experienced by a participant. To outline, the participant receives input from the group generating deeper insight and understanding, thereafter plans objectives and actions for change, and takes action to practice them. Beyond the scope of the questionnaire, the follow-up process checks progress and re-establishes the group support network after the program has finished.
The psychodynamic group executive coaching intervention is unique to INSEAD, although the intervention technique has spread around the globe, and the participants are not primed to experience development in this context. However, they are aware before the course begins that they will receive coaching on their feedback. In what follows, I have selected some of the remarks from the comments of the 414 participants over several years that triggered the interest in this research and decoded into a number of salient themes I deemed worthy of investigation.

1.5.1 Comments about the group, group dynamics and group process

“**Group dynamics were excellent**, very frank and with openness, increasing exchange of ideas and suggestions.”

“**Excellent input from colleagues** and ‘best practices approach.’ Fair process and group shows great respect and no judgement.”

“**Really important to have quick feedback from person from different culture** with (sic) any ‘a priori’ judgement.”

“**Very effective, possibility to listen and discuss the feedback of the other group members**, gave me even more value than my own feedback report.”

These sample comments, which are fairly typical, point to a number of different positive aspects. If the dynamics are good then the exchange of ideas is helpful. Creating a good dynamic will be an important part of the theory. Different cultural inputs are appreciated. This again is thematic and culture, as alluded to in the remarks, is often as much about different industries, or position as it is about geographical cultural diversity.

“**Group setting-good to receive feedback from international peers who may have been in the same position previously.**”

Finally, the fact that giving feedback to others can in and of itself be helpful to the development of each individual reveals more about the extra development that can materialize in a group environment that is de facto precluded by dyadic coaching.

While for most, as elucidated by the scores and the commentary, it is a powerful experience:

“**This session was one of the best I had so far for 360 feedback. It gave me the chance to have 5 coaches at the same time when every one contributed from his heart to the feedback.**”

—for others it can be the wrong setting, unpleasant or threatening:

“**Slightly scary to start with. One to one seemed a more secure approach at the first stage...**”

“**I am not sure the group had enough insight to give very valuable feedback.**”

“**This is tough, like torture, but you have to go through it to improve.**”

1.5.2 Inferences about the psychodynamic approach

It is clear from many of the remarks made over four years that participants gained clarity and insight from the experience. In the absence of a control group it is difficult to speculate whether or not this would have occurred if the participants had experienced dyadic coaching. Nevertheless, I am not attempting to prove the efficacy of one over the other. I seek to understand the theory behind an intervention which, based on the comments, seems to work:
“Areas of need for development were clarified. Direction for future has been clarified based on former thought processes.”

“The 360-degree process was fantastic. It gave honest feedback which helped with my development. It helped me take stock of my performance and clarify the challenges.”

“Helped me get a better understanding of underlying reasons for my weak points.”

“I gained insight into my drives and also the obstacles I create. Important self learning that provides the potential for personal growth and new direction.”

This clarity would seem to be an important stepping stone for the change process. Participants arriving with an array of feedback, some of which will have been surprising, need help to work through the defenses that can be erected:

“I read my feedback and felt uncomfortable/dismissive of it. But the session enabled me to see a lot more than I could have hoped. This also provided good learning points and action.”

To provide clarity on what needs to be done, and underpinning it with the clinical perspective—the underlying motivation for the behavior—leads to the participant leaving the session with new insights:

“There is a lot of work to be done in order to develop myself but I could never imagine how effective this session could be in terms of learning about yourself deeply.”

As I begin to develop the theory, I am reminded of the Galilean axiom “You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him discover it in himself.” It is clear from the comments above that participants derive great benefit from moving away from the didactic method (which forms the bulk of many executive programs) to the experiential and self-revelatory.

1.5.3 Coaching outcomes

Beyond gathering insights, participants are encouraged to synthesize the information and turn it into a plan for action. Toward the end of the sessions other group members make concrete suggestions for change in the form of advice based on what they have heard:

“Group-coaching allows other people’s perspective and gets them involved in the action plan.”

In the end it is the choice of the participant him or herself as to what they will address. There is nevertheless an element of group pressure, combined with the promise of support to make some change. This leads to a hard copy of a plan that is shared within the group. There follows a few reflections on participants’ experience of this:

“Gave me a lot of insight as to how to develop my development areas. Especially nailing it down to the essence.”

“Good insight. Action plan and peer-to-peer coaching facilitates behavioral change and anchoring this change.”

“Extremely intense self-reflection exercise. Action plan for improvement has been set quite accurately.”

“The coaching helped me to understand the interpretation of the 360-degree feedback and inspired me to making a development plan.”

1.5.4 Beyond the program: Building confidence for future change

Armed with an action plan the participants leave the program some time later. It seems that they leave with a sense of self-confidence and that they have something tangible and achievable:
“Gave me a basis for starting a process of leadership development.”
“Gave me a good basis for further needed improvements.”
“Needs a lot of effort on my part. Good framework for my development.”

The program closes but the leadership development plan extends beyond that. As will be explained in Chapter 3, the group is aware of the date set for reconnection and follow-up. This creates impetus to do something concrete with the action plan. Hence the reference to a framework (above). Finally, it orientates the participant to the future:

“Excellent approach. The group angle added a lot. A recipe for success.”
“I have previously gone through 360 evaluation. The long-term benefit of the process lies in the coaching and the team participation which is what I gained.”

1.6 Organization of the research

In Fig. 5 I have displayed graphically how this dissertation has been organized and executed for the purposes of the reader’s understanding.

Fig. 5 Organization of the thesis

Having introduced the research question, I undertook to review the available literature considered relevant to the field, namely psychodynamic theory, group theory, and coaching theory. As a result of this literature review I deemed it necessary to utilize grounded theory as a methodology given the lack of availability of data. Subsequently I have undertaken a more detailed examination of the key theories annotated above which I think contribute to the overall functioning group-coaching environment. In the following chapters, I qualify this by interviewing a number of senior practitioners in the field, using their commentary to broaden the
techniques that are used in the intervention and adding extra dimensions that the theory does not cover since it is limited to the psychological fields and not usually applied in executive settings. Following on from that in what may be seen as the key chapter, I interviewed 14 participants from a previous program. These data elucidated what practitioners will most want to understand. Does this type of intervention create the change that is intended and is there sustainability to that change? Finally, I make some conclusions not only for practitioners in this emerging field to consider but also areas that may be deemed worthy of further investigation to test the efficacy of the intervention as against other counseling techniques.

Overall the 13 cohorts of the 12 programs in the table above generated 907 comments with less than 1% of those being deemed negative. The qualitative comments are invited but not mandatory whereas the quantitative scoring is obligatory. Thus each questionnaire generated 2.1 unsolicited comments per participant that were positive about the process. It is the accumulation of these data from this program that has spurred me to dig further into the process of psychodynamic group-coaching on order to develop a theory. The way that theory is developed required a robust methodology in order for it to have scientific credentials. I will therefore proceed by explaining the methodology I used in order to construct the research.