CHAPTER 9
DISCUSSION AND NOTES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this chapter, I will present my overall conclusions from the research I have conducted in the field. I will also provide some pointers for future research for those who wish to pursue studies in this area. Moreover, I will provide pointers for practitioners and present implications for individuals who may wish to experience this intervention.

9.1 Conclusions

In this dissertation I have walked a well-trodden road in my methodological approach by breaking psychodynamic group-coaching for executives into three large silos: Theory of the underlying components pieces and literature review of those pieces from an empirical perspective; practice of the process by explanation of how it is enacted in a very specific and controlled setting; and technique, in the sense of a scientific investigation to obtain information around the intervention, by use of qualitative interviewing of both practitioners and past participants. By combining these three approaches, using a grounded theory methodology, I hoped to evince a theory by inductive reasoning. I set out earlier the limitations of such an approach and these warrant no further repetition here. In any case, this dissertation is one of the first building blocks in the social sciences of this particular approach to executive change. Those limitations will undoubtedly diminish as the field is explored further. Some pointers for this future research appear later in this chapter.

This dissertation contributes to coaching literature in the social sciences. As coaching in groups becomes more prevalent, both in executive educational establishments and in the broader world, practitioners will need to understand the conditions, environment, and cultural settings in which it works. Moreover, it will be relevant to understand the underlying theory and practice if outcomes are to be optimized. The specific contribution this research makes is purposefully narrow but concrete. Because our observations at INSEAD Business School over time suggested that there was very real efficacy in this intervention, it was compelling to understand its internal mechanisms. There are few analogs in the executive arena which is why I turned to the medical science annals to examine outcome studies of what I deemed the key ingredients. The key ingredients of the coaching intervention I hypothesized are the psychodynamic approach, the group approach and a coaching methodology applied as an overlay to these two disciplines. What I drew from the literature was that the three approaches in isolation had a positive effect. This positive effect was corroborated by referencing the available meta analyses of the three disciplines. This choice was driven by two things. The need for parsimony was essential given the hundred years of theoretical discourse on psychodynamic interventions. Moreover, without wanting to get drawn into argumentation over which aspects of which sub-discipline (the cognitive behavioral approach being one such) worked better, I decided to look at the meta-analyses of patient outcomes. This proved fruitful. It was clear that psychodynamic interventions work: that is, patients’ lives improve after interventions that are reflective and cause them to look back in their lives. Group therapy works, in that people going through a group process typically show improvement on their symptoms. I also discovered that notwithstanding the meagre availability of coaching outcome research, what was available indeed demonstrated that its wide use is
substantiated by the fact that it clearly helps executives to move forward in their lives and careers. This, while interesting, proves nothing. While three separate interventions in isolation work on three different constituencies of patients/clients, it is dangerous to infer that when combined they will have a positive effect on a fourth constituency. The associated syllogism runs thus: If three types of intervention in the social sciences for certain types of people have individual efficacy, the combination when applied in a single application is also efficacious, for different types of people. This is a challenging proposition, and one that would be unlikely to withstand much scrutiny if, for example it were utilized in a medical setting, and therefore any theory would require a great deal more research.

It is for this reason that having reviewed the literature, I interviewed the participants. I decided, having reviewed the post-program self-reported results, which were toward the top of the range, to effectively disregard them. My suspicion was that there were factors that biased self-reported evaluations. So while the results indicated satisfaction, I decided that it was reasonable to allow a year to elapse and then try to discover what people felt had happened and how effective it had been, using the three ingredients as a proxy. When juxtaposed with the empirical studies, what started to emerge was similar expression of positive effect. The group process, the psychodynamic aspects of the intervention, and the tangible coaching outcome (an action plan) led to self-reported positive regard. I deduced that indeed, these three ingredients when combined in a structured intervention could produce a positive effect with a fourth constituency. These two things, however, were not enough.

My research was drawn toward underlying theory. If the three ingredients worked, and when combined participants still reported improvement in professional and personal aspects of their lives, it was important to try to discover what theoretical underpinnings might be relevant to that. What became evident was that Winnicott’s theories around transition were especially relevant. Executives, when taken out of their normal environments and exposed to this type of work, by being put slightly “off-balance” and yet contained, can experiment and play with other aspects of behavior and indeed aspects of “self” quite capably. What also emerged was that a transfer of the psychotherapeutic notion of the working alliance was quite important. To quickly build trust, containment, and safety, with the coach/facilitator playing a central role was critical. Three other aspects in the theory of psychotherapeutic interventions registered strongly with me as a practitioner. The similarity between Yalom’s levers of change and the general utility of them in group-coaching was striking. I described in detail these correlations in the chapter on theory and will not revisit them here. However, I now began to realize that the theories that sat underneath the empirical studies showed up in the executive groups in which I had worked. Similarly, an evaluation of primary defenses in the psychotherapeutic area demonstrated to me that again there was overlap. What was becoming clear, was that the forces at work in these individual separate interventions were also showing up in the combined intervention. This led me to a new area of investigation, which seemed obvious. By talking with practitioners in the field, I could evaluate how they conducted their work with an eye on these different aspects as described. By iteration, I was able to begin to piece together an emerging theory.

This theory was composed by looking in detail at three elements that often comprise social scientific research: theory, technique, and practice. Indeed these were the key signposts throughout the research and guided my methodology. The technique was broadly explained in an earlier paper (Ward, 2008). It appears in full here in Chapter
3. This decomposition of the technique and consequent scrutiny facilitated the proposition that there were key ingredients that had been bundled into this intervention. These ingredients showed up in relief. What also became apparent was that there was some intangible “glue” that allowed these three ingredients to interact dynamically. It was only by looking in detail at underlying small group theory, psychodynamic practice, group facilitation technique, and coaching technique that this intangible material became easier to understand. I would analogize it with current physical theory of the universe: Physicists know the universe is expanding but also know that for it to be able to happen, there must exist something that is hitherto unseen. In physical terms it is known as dark energy and is reputed to account for 73% of the mass-energy of the universe. We know it is there but we cannot see it. When I looked, I found theories of transitional space. Containment was a critical element in group-coaching work. Dynamic administration was evident in group therapy sessions. Defenses and working alliance was critical in individual therapy. These and the many other elements I have written about, combined in these sessions. If technique was the procedure, then practice was how that procedure was deployed. The interviews with the practitioners corroborated what I thought was happening: By iteration, and by referencing their professional training, they were combining many of these elements to produce very successful coaching outcomes.

This dissertation contributes to the research on executive small-group development. Aside from the flurry of studies on T-groups in the mid-20th century, group executive work seems to have undergone a lull. As coaching emerged as a powerful human development intervention, its application was almost solely individual. From this individual coaching came rather predictable streams of practitioners drawn from, on one side, the psychologically oriented and on the other, those with business experience. Between these two constituencies sat the academic caucus. There exists tension between the two main constituencies and this intervention is likely to court rather than assuage controversy. This is partly because, generally, highly trained clinical practitioners are rightly protective of untrained or lesser trained professionals straying into their territory. Nevertheless, since the intervention seemed to work, and both practitioners and participants seemed happy with outcomes, it seems appropriate to put these concerns aside. In talking to the participants it was clear that the benefits far outweighed any negative effects. People had valued the experience, made changes, felt safe and even stimulated and there was a corollary that the groups had in some cases maintained contact after the program had finished.

9.1.1 Final propositions

The research assumed from the outset that the intervention works. I set out to investigate why. It seems from the investigation that there are some necessary but not sufficient individual ingredients that when combined create a successful intervention. Winnicott’s notion of transitional space is the first of those. While to some it may seem like an abstraction, I conclude that the creation of this “space” is highly important. What does that mean in practical terms? It means taking the executive away from their usual environment in some way. It means dealing with them in a way they are not used to, to put them slightly off balance but not to the extent that they are disoriented. It means to give them an opportunity to play and experiment in a safely contained environment where they feel that ultimately the stakes are low.

Part of the reason to create these conditions, I would argue, is to make the intervention a learning opportunity not a training session. The intervention is intended
as a space for adults to learn and develop. It is not, contrary to the expectations of some participants, a place where you will be handed a new “armory” of leadership skills to go and practice. It is more that you will experience what it is like to be led by you, the effect you have on others around you both in the organization and the group, and how it feels to lead in your environment. That knowledge if properly revealed can be both threatening and enlightening. It requires a special environment to manage it. Imagine if you conducted this intervention in a participant’s offices. How great might the desire be to flee back to one’s “very important client call” when the going got tough? It is for this reason that it is set up the way I described, away from home, away from work, often at the Business School campus or a conference center and in a relaxed environment. Given these conditions, it is clear that the executives in this group were able to use the environment usefully to think through, integrate, and implement behavioral change.

The psychodynamic approach is useful in executive development. A striking comment from one executive as he was asked to relate his feelings when describing his past sums it up:

“I felt I would just tell my story. Then it turned out there were issues I didn’t know about. People asked questions, and I had some insights as I told my story.”

One of the ambitions of the process is to offer people some insight they did not have previously. This comment is heartening. Executives in today’s busy world rarely have the opportunity to think about themselves deeply. That they would have this opportunity in a setting while unfamiliar, is neither stigmatizing (as psychotherapy is sometimes purported to be) nor lacking in challenge as leadership development training can be, is beneficial. What I have observed is that the process is exhausting for participants. I often hear comments at the end of the day like, “I just need to go back to my room and think about all of this, I am completely beat.” Working on something entirely new can be both stimulating and exhausting at the same time. The participants are rarely downbeat, however. They often use adjectives like “powerful” and “intense” to describe their experiences. It depends on the perspective of the reader whether these are positive or negative descriptors. It certainly points to the need for the coach to take full responsibility for how each person is left at the end of the session. Coaching practitioners may ask what the value is of delving into this past material. After all, many coaching practitioners are typically advocates of looking forward not backward. My conclusion is that after hundreds of hours of conducting these interventions, it is this investigation of previous experience when combined with the very practical objectives of executive coaching that can provide a well-rounded perspective, with which the executive can work. I reflect on the comment, “It is rare to see forty years (of life) hanging on a flip chart. To go abstract gives you distance from your own world” and wonder how that must have felt for the speaker. I wonder why some participants draw a picture of their life and then begin to tear up as they describe it. I speculate that whatever the reason that these reactions occur, they are in some way meaning-making or at least value accretive in some way to the person’s life.

The essence of the process is that it takes place in a group. This setting puts a lot more at stake. They are not doing coaching alone with a coach. It is harder to hide in a group. However, if the process is set up appropriately they will feel safe. This safety combined with four or five other real world perspectives is where the real power lies. Difficult stories, often told in this setting, elicit empathy. In that there is benefit for
both parties. It is important for people to understand they are not alone, that others have faced or continue to face similar or even greater challenges. The commentary provided earlier from the participants attests to that. Group members learn coaching skills during the process, carefully exploring the boundaries of care and challenge. Many people in this setting have not experienced coaching, less still attempted to coach. Yet coaching is one of the hallmark skills of the modern leader. The intervention provides a good place to hone and practice this skill. The group in most cases is able to provide some psychological support for each of the individuals not only through the shared experience described above but also through committing to support each other beyond the program. This normally takes the form of pairing up with a “buddy.” Sometimes this happens naturally but it can be implemented by the coach. It adds an extra dimension not usually found in the dyadic setting.

As many coaches have discovered during the process, participants can unwittingly take on specific group roles: Leader, follower, court jester, agent provocateur are a few examples. The skilled facilitator will pick up on these manifested behaviors and work with them at the same time as working with the group as a whole and the individual participant cases. This is complicated and challenging but adds extra dimensions to coaching. At times these roles take on a similar shape to the roles they play at work and for which they may have been critiqued. Often they discover they have been playing these roles, albeit in different forms, all their lives. The skilled group coach reveals these insights. Taking this a level further, they may begin to understand how their reactions to certain personality types elicit certain behaviors in themselves. A normally garrulous person may become quiet when faced with a hostile interchange within the room. Extroverted types may exhibit boredom when introverts take too long to answer a direct question. These roles if picked up by the coach can highlight behaviors that may not be desirable when transferred to the professional setting. I believe this raising of awareness not only contributes to the insights the person takes away from the process, but helps them to identify similar role taking in others around them. In other words it help the participants to start to understand the complicated dynamics at play in human groups.

One of the many benefits of going through coaching in this setting is the need to listen. Often the group will spend eight or more hours in session. Only a couple of those hours are devoted to each individual participant, where the focus is entirely on them. For the most part the group members will need to tune in to each other and attentively. They not only learn by listening to others stories, but they learn to improve their listening skills. It is this listening that in all likelihood binds them together as people and as a group. It harks back to Rogers’ notion that by listening attentively you form the basis of a meaningful relationship. For example, I discovered that the groups had maintained contact beyond the program, even beyond the final conference call where their action plans were measured. There was even some testimony that the groups were still in contact, eighteen months after they should have disbanded. This phenomenon is worth investigating. After all, they were only together in the group-coaching session for a day. What had happened clearly affected them and created deep personal associations. I believe that it is the combination of the psychodynamic (looking backward and telling stories), the group-as a-whole experience (we are in this together however tough it is), and the mutual support that we task them to do (learning partner) that creates this sense of kinship. What is more, the group had a utility. It had not maintained its existence solely as a small social network. The testimony suggested that they found it useful to bounce ideas and
feedback off each other and solicit suggestions for the future. Organizational consultants and leaders will easily infer the accreted value of such an outcome. Not only did each of these executives have an outlet for the ongoing questions and challenges they faced but they had created and maintained a support network to provide answers. I am not suggesting that every group will have such a powerful experience and outcome. Nor am I saying that this support network replaces coaching where needed. However, my experience as a coach, especially with senior executives has revealed that many of them bottle up their anxieties and have little relief from that pressure. This ongoing group experience was clearly a benefit to the participants and the organizations concerned.

The coach will find him or herself dealing not only with cognitive issues but also examining affect, or what has recently been called triggering stimuli. Executives who are cognizant of affect as well as cognitive impulses, I believe, re-enter the working environment in a better informed state of mind, and with greater self-awareness.

9.1.2 Drivers for change

So as not to forget the point of these sessions, with all the discussion of by-products swirling around, executives need to look at ways of making changes. As I have discussed these changes take the form of written and shared commitments, shared with the coach and the group. Often they are also shared with an individual “buddy.” All participants make an action plan. And all participants share that plan with the group and with the coach and their buddy. This action plan is stated as a commitment. I hypothesize that making a commitment to a group of people with whom you have shared a deeply intense personal experience is the likely driver to improve the probability that change will happen. It is for this reason that the psychodynamic aspects of the intervention add extra value. Without that, the experience may be simply experienced as perfunctory. Participants share a common journey both practical and emotional. I have come to believe based on the evidence from the participants that storytelling in groups is a key element in facilitating change. It appears that participants gain insight from their own storytelling partly by readying them for interpersonal learning. It paves the way to work through internal conflicts. Finally it seems to help them, through a process of restructuring to arrive at meaningful life integration. Moreover, by listening they clearly get perspective on their own issues, feel less isolated and empathize.

This research study helps to facilitate a gradual shift taking place in the coaching area. Most coaching is still done in the traditional one-to-one form. That is likely to continue. But as psychotherapy evolved over the 20th century, coaching is likely to follow a similar path. Different streams of coaching are already showing up and have their adherents. Behavioral coaching, cognitive behavioral coaching and developmental coaching were noted early in the 21st century (Laske, 2000; Neenan Dryden, 2002; Zeus & Skiffington, 2002). More recently, coaches are referring to the work of Seligman’s positive psychology and applying it through a framework is now known as strength based coaching. Group-coaching is another addition to this suite of different coaching applications. Practitioners who deliver their coaching in any of the above forms may take elements of the intervention described here and utilize it in their own work.

As I have said it is not a discussion about what works best. It is more the practitioners prerogative to try to assess what will work. What seems clear is the group intervention method has some clear distinguishing features which can never be found in dyadic
coaching. In dyadic coaching there will never be a relationship beyond the formal coaching contract. In group-coaching there is a possibility that group members will keep working together. Indeed this was seen to have happened. There can never be a diversity of perspectives in dyadic coaching, only a series of individual perspectives brought by the coach and coachee. Moreover, the pressure built into the system to change is entirely different in group-coaching and comes mainly from the peers. From an organizational perspective, there are economies of scale not found in dyadic coaching and also speed of result (with the caveat that the intervention demands follow-up.) More broadly, this intervention is another small iteration and a step forward in the whole field of adult development. I have heard may people come into a group-coaching session stating “I know what my issues are, I have always done this, and it’s too late too try to change now.” These participants eventually do make changes. It may be that the intervention has an even bigger utility in cracking the harder nuts. Only more research will confirm that.

In organizational life most feedback is given to employees in annual reviews by a manager. Here is a classic paradigm. There is plenty of scope here for disagreement and opposing views, and the situation is polluted further by the subordinate/superior relationship. In group-coaching, the feedback is dealt with by peers. The opportunity to argue is limited if the group in general support the views in the feedback. Generally even the most stubborn participants give ground.

I alluded above, in the section on future research, to a possible study conducted without the psychodynamic element. In this, storytelling would be removed and replaced with case study vignettes of behavioral challenges. Life-history would be ignored as the orientation would be to the future only and of course the present. The ability to make links or interpretations around both personal and professional characteristics would be lost. While as a practitioner it would be of no interest to me to work in that manner, I do not doubt its efficacy. Driving a Volvo still gets you down the road as well as an Aston Martin. The experience, however, is markedly different.

9.1.3 Making sense of the material

In the course of this dissertation, I have made a number of statements about how this process worked. It is necessary, in order to substantiate the theory to bring those together, along with the inferences one can plausibly make from the other investigations. Our starting point was that the process seemed to work. The self-reported scores demonstrated that people who underwent this process valued it. The process was then described and by looking at it in close detail, I revealed three core elements. These core elements interact with each other dynamically to produce the final results. However, it was necessary to investigate them in turn to understand their effects when put under clinical scrutiny. The evidence from the literature, given our methodology of searching for real efficacy, as opposed to theory, strongly suggests that each of these different critical components, when applied in their “usual” environments, also has a favorable outcome. Psychotherapy helps people, group therapy has a positive effect, and coaching is an effective intervention with executives. Indeed, what was also discovered was that in the case of psychotherapies, the specific discipline was not very material to the outcome. Looking into the theory of each of these components, I discovered a number of relevant and supporting facts.

In the area of psychodynamics, it became a stated theoretical perspective that unearthing both positive and negative early life experiences was beneficial to patients.
According to practitioners and participants, this was also seen to be the case in psychodynamic group-coaching. The links that were made, the interpretations offered, and the opportunity to reflect was deemed helpful by both constituencies.

There is clearly an overlap and when interpreted correctly, participants were able to see palpable connections between, for example, power relationships in the family and at work, or sibling rivalry and competitive behavior. I hypothesized that the success factors in psychotherapy were equally true in psychodynamic group-coaching. This was corroborated by practitioners and participants. It seems therefore that psychodynamics and coaching dynamically interact, with the caveat that leadership coaching assumes that strengths outweigh dysfunction. This is not, however, always the case in psychotherapy. The other striking notion that I conclude is of utmost importance in this work, is to create an appropriate holding environment. The theory supports that this is important if growth is to take place. The practice is in fact more subtle and relies on the skill of the coach to create just enough room for freedom of expression and experimentation, yet enough constraints so that the group feels secure. Here again there is a dynamic interaction between the psychodynamic aspects of the intervention, transitional space, and the other key ingredients. One tentative conclusion I make from the evidence I have collected is that in the absence of the psychodynamic material, the holding environment is less relevant. I sense that the very presence of such delicate and personal material that comes up in this space demands careful control, management, and an attention from the facilitator to take care of each individual, otherwise harm may come. If one were dealing with purely behavioral material this would hardly arise. In other words, it is the psychodynamic approach which lends itself to the specific analogs of group psychotherapy and the overall psychotherapeutic environment. Feasibly, feedback sessions around management behavior could be conducted in the surroundings of a traditional management offsite. The essence of combining both psychodynamics and coaching will be not only to focus on the development of managerial skills and even personal growth, but also to work on repetitive behaviors and issues of character, more usually the concern of the psychotherapeutic community.

9.1.4 The integrated model

In Fig. 24 I have combined two psychoanalytic models, the first three aspects of which come from Greenson and the rest from Rutan and Stone, which when integrated form a neat model and can be effectively transposed from the group-therapy to the group-coaching environment (Greenson, 1967; Rutan & Stone, 1984).
This linear model imbued with sensible logic is not a match for the extraordinarily difficulties associated with working with real people. It is my hypothesis that to a great degree, this model represents much of what happens in the process I am studying. Confrontation occurs at two levels: the participants confront the feedback, and they also confront each other. The coach at times plays a role in confronting the coachee, encouraging what might be termed courageous conversations. It is the job of the coach also to clarify both feedback and errant behavior. The group plays a part with differing opinions and highlighting options and making suggestions. However, it should always be the ambition of the coach to ensure that no participant leaves feeling insecure or confused about what they need to do. Hence often the coach will interpret what is happening, making links to the portrait, the life story as described, and other highlights or lowlights from the person’s past that seem to be resonating in the present. It is important to state that this is not therapy. The interpretations are often framed as questions: “Could it be that…?” Or as loose statements: “I wonder if…” as if to give the participant that opportunity to consider an insight they may not have hitherto heard. The group can also be useful in making interpretations. A powerful question is often simply: “What do you all think is going on here?” Typically we give the participants room to work through what they have heard. On the TGM program they do this overnight and often have dinner without the coach, as a group. Many participants in my observation leave the room on the first day without a clear idea of how to proceed. Often they have been bombarded with suggestions and ideas. They are instructed to sort through what they have learned and present an action plan the following morning, when we meet for one-to-one coaching. This invariably happens. I conclude that this working through takes place rapidly, partly because the issues are
not pathological, although they are often deep-seated. I believe this happens again because they do not want to differentiate themselves by not having some kind of action plan to which they are going to commit. At the same time as this working through process is taking place other things are sometimes afoot. Participants imitate, or seek to imitate each other’s behaviors, picking up on better ideas and using modeling and role-play to fully understand how others operate. Identification takes place both at a personal and group level. The participant identifies with individuals and the group as a whole. What is different in psychodynamic group-coaching with executives is that the commonality is found in the context: They are all senior executives and therefore some peer pressure can be expected. Internalization takes place as the groups discuss issues, during breaks, in one-to-one conversations, overnight and sometimes as early as during the session as the participant gives advice to others and realizes that the advice also applies to him or herself.

The final figure depicts a model for the change process in psychodynamic group-coaching referencing the arc of the psychological journey undertaken. Different concepts described throughout this dissertation come into play. By now the model should be self-explanatory. We can see that the transitional space begins as the participant begins the program. They probably have an unconscious concern about how the feedback will be dealt with. The beginning of that transitional time throws up
uncertainty, resistance, and maybe anxiety. Each group will experience this differently depending on the level of trust, insight, and concern they have for each other. The job of the coach is to support each individual and each group as they experience this transition and to pay particular attention to the environment. It is my hypothesis that only after the group-coaching and one-to-one coaching has ended that the real power of what has transpired begins to truly sink in. The post-intervention time is one of further reflection and the beginning of action. It is here that the participant will dare to practice new behaviors and original ways of thinking, and attempt to solve problems differently. They do this with the background knowledge that a group of like minded supporters is there as a safety net. The memory of the commitments made publicly is still strongly registering. There may be a sense of stepping into the unknown and that may be combined with a renewed vigor or energy. The participant is still technically in a transitional space even though the intervention itself is receding.

Arguably the transitional space exists right up to the time when the group reconnects on the conference call. I have experienced a sense of excitement from the group members when they reconnect virtually to talk about their experiences. This usually takes place within one or two months of the end of the program. It is a time for sharing one’s triumphs, challenges, and failures. Moreover, at the end of these calls there is often a sense of regret, of anxiety about the group splitting up. It is as if they have unconsciously relied on each other, even if there has been limited contact. Almost invariably an attempt is made to prolong the group connection. Invitations are made to re-establish the group via telephone conferences, video conferences, or even trying to organize a physical meeting. This can be quite impractical given the global nature of the group composition. Nevertheless it is a testament to the sense of belonging, reliance and trust imbued in the group.

The models demonstrate both the practical pathway followed by the participants and the psychological journey. If conducted well, psychodynamic group-coaching has the possibility to be a major development factor in the maturing executive. Adults are sometimes stuck, often without knowing. My observations over the years and the data collected from this research lead me to propose that this intervention can, and often does, provide a powerful release valve. Whether psychological, behavioral, or a combination of both, executives who undertake this journey experience an emotional connection to their fellow participants, a common purpose of change and growth, and an improved confidence of their capability to enact it.

Of the many different interventions in the social sciences this only numbers one. I feel as this thesis concludes that I can now self-disclose. When I first became a practitioner of this intervention I was a stern critic. It seemed to me that to attempt extraordinarily challenging change work in groups as opposed to individuals could only result in a diluted outcome. What I observed was, in fact, a sort of multiplier effect. I also sensed a decreased dependency on the coach/facilitator and by implication an improved sense of self-efficacy in the individuals and a self-supporting group. It is these facts that engaged me in this study and it is the corroboration of many of them that recommends further investigation into this dynamic process. As Shakespeare said, “Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.” Psychodynamic group-coaching allows executives to walk toward new futures with greater surety and mitigated doubts, with a group of good people alongside them—supporters, cheerleaders, and often lifelong friends.
9.1.5 Future research

To conclude let me make some recommendations to those researchers who may find interest in exploring this field further, and in the light of some thoughts that arose during the course of this investigation. The psychodynamic group-coaching intervention has been practised now for over ten years with literally thousands of participants taking part. While the set-up in each case may have been marginally different, the core of the intervention is described in detail as part of this research. When one looks at the broad self-reported ratings for individuals who have participated one notices a strongly favorable outcome. In this research, for the purposes of scientific rigor, I chose to look at a narrow group of people on a single executive program, to guarantee that I was reporting on a similar experience. I conjecture that this singular IEP program experience reflects the larger population who have participated over the ten years of delivery of this particular intervention. As a starting point it would be of interest to study two or three different cohorts from the TGM program, given that we know they are similarly positioned in age and organizational maturity and experience the same program in similar settings. A logical second step would be to look at two programs with the same course material and construct but delivered in different cultural locations. An example might be the Executive MBA delivered in France and Singapore.

Future researchers may, however, wish to examine different outcomes with different program groups. For example, the Management Acceleration Program at INSEAD typically attracts participants who are five years out of MBA or grad schools. They are younger, and may utilize group-coaching in a different way. Their reactions and implementation may also differ. I consider from experience that the older the participant and the wider range of life experiences he or she has had, the richer this process becomes. It is worth investigating that from a number of perspectives: What elements were most helpful? For example, the private and personal aspects or the organizational? What did the different action plans comprise in the different age groups? How much change can older people expect to make, when their behaviors are likely to be more ingrained, than the younger group? Even though the themes may differ, as I stated above, different program cohorts seem to recognize value in the intervention but have differing views as to why.

Another possible area of interest is the implementation of the process with intact teams, in other words, those that work together regularly. Again, the dynamics are markedly different in this set-up, yet from a self-reported scoring perspective, it is successful. What may be of particular interest is how to quickly build trust in such a team so that the participants are comfortable opening up on the private side. Furthermore, staying with intact teams, it may be of interest to examine how the coach manages the challenge of the giving and receiving of feedback between people who know each other well and see each other daily. How is trust built and maintained when such delicate material is unearthed publicly?

Continuing the theme of different interest groups, it would be useful to investigate the views and responses of people from different cultures. Here the list could be extensive but a few obvious examples come to mind: How would group-coaching work in a Far Eastern society where it is generally important to save face? How would the intervention work in post-Soviet economies where it has been noted, trust is often low and hard to build? What are the generalized responses of participants from the Middle East where leadership is still largely exercised in a command and control style rather
than a coaching style? Finally, it may be of interest to study the generalized responses of female only groups, male only groups and mixed cultural and/or gender groups, with a view to openness, emotional intelligence and vision.

Researchers may be interested to explore those that did not or were not able to make changes as a result of the intervention. As stated, most emerge with an action plan and most make some change, but why not everyone? Maybe the group did not gel, maybe the coach did not resonate well enough or get to the heart of the issue. To improve the process one could explore this subset. Within that subset are the people who, when interviewed, made negative comments or felt rather ambivalent about the process. It would be interesting to go into greater detail to find out why. Again, there is a fair degree of pressure from the group not only to participate but also to create an action plan. Do people feel co-opted into the process and then rebel by not following up? It would be interesting to talk with those who were never happy about participating in group-coaching, probably because of feeling exposed or vulnerable and ascertaining how the process could have been made more psychologically available to them.

For those who did change it would be useful to find out not only to what extent different constituencies did so, but also to what extent it was sustainable. This would involve longitudinal research. Moreover, I suspect that those who not only change but sustain the change, go on to make further developmental changes or seek them out, thus instigating a rolling process. What percentage of “changers” revert to type after the three month check-in, as if unconsciously to please teacher and then go back to their real selves?

Finally, a large scale quantitative study involving empirical testing and control groups would likely definitively prove the efficacy of this theory. That may involve any number of the above measures. Of interest to this researcher (and the other practitioners I work alongside) would be to measure the efficacy of the intervention if the psychodynamic aspects were removed. This goes along the same lines as many of the empirical studies conducted in psychotherapy and was discussed in the review of literature. If those results are anything to go by, the intervention would work just as well without it. However, here I would issue one caveat: While people may make change with or without the psychodynamic portion, one wonders what they would miss, in spite of that being a counterfactual.

For my part, I will continue to explore the intervention from some of these perspectives. We are only beginning to understand how this intervention works. A deeper and wider exploration, using some of the angles provided, will help us to truly gain an insight into how and where to apply this process to maximize the effects and facilitate change optimally.