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Cycle XXXVII

VOCE

***Valuable Observations on Critical Elements in Entrepreneurial
Coaching***

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial coaching (EC) is a developmental intervention aimed at entrepreneurs who are facing particularly delicate stages of the entrepreneurial process, such as the creation of a new business (Audet & Couteret, 2012) or failure (Schermyly et al., 2021). The ultimate goal of coaching is to help entrepreneurs achieve specific outcomes, particularly the skills and abilities needed to find solutions to problems, making them self-reliant (Audet & Couteret, 2012). This thesis is dedicated to qualitatively clarifying how EC demonstrates its effectiveness. To this end, it highlights the importance of giving voice to the perspectives of those personally involved in the coaching experience, namely professional coaches who systematically work with entrepreneurs, and the entrepreneurs themselves, particularly those facing the early stages of the new venture creation process. These individuals are more exposed to the risks of project abandonment or failure (Diller et al., 2022), and coaching could enhance their development both individually and organizationally (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Bergman & McMullen, 2021).

Despite the practical relevance of coaching, theory still needs to make efforts to explain what coaching entails and how it creates greater value for entrepreneurs. During the course of the doctoral research, the author identified two main issues that make EC a phenomenon requiring further investigation and clarification. First, EC presents weaknesses on a conceptual level. Despite the efforts of numerous scholars (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Klostén & Öberg, 2012), coaching continues to be used interchangeably with other support interventions, particularly mentoring (Kotte et al., 2021). This is because coaching is shaped by theoretical models related to mentoring

(e.g., Azizi et al., 2023), even though there are significant differences in relational dynamics and the objectives they aim to achieve (Klofsten & Öberg, 2012)

Second, EC also lacks strong empirical substance. Indeed, there are still few studies that have addressed the perspectives of both coaches and entrepreneurs, leaving numerous doubts on several fronts. For instance, while key elements for success are identified in the coach's skills, relational dynamics, and the entrepreneur's attitude (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021; Sonesh et al., 2015), the literature does not account for the nuances these factors present and how they interact, which are crucial steps in defining the effectiveness of the intervention and identifying new potential outcomes which have not been related to EC intervention yet (Grover & Furnham, 2016). Moreover, the effectiveness of coaching has been studied with reference to the outcomes achieved (e.g., Wang et al., 2022), without considering how entrepreneurs believe they have attained such results and benefits. Indeed, a purely descriptive analysis of coaching outcomes does not capture the connections between key factors and results (Kotte et al., 2021).

In light of these issues, this thesis seeks to grant EC greater empirical substance and conceptual identity. This general objective is pursued through the observation and in-depth analysis of the interactions between the various critical success factors and outcomes, employing a pragmatic lens (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019), that is, through an examination based on the perceptions of real-world experiences from professional coaches and start-up entrepreneurs. In doing so, this thesis contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation by providing a conceptual overview of how EC has been studied and enhancing the understanding of its effectiveness dynamics, offering insights into the characteristics of professional coaches, relational dynamics, critical factors for effectiveness, and the barriers that hinder the perception of benefits.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In the literature on support interventions in organizations, many developmental services, such as mentoring, have developed a strong theoretical identity (Bergman & McMullen, 2021; Burke, 1984; Burke & McKeen, 1990; Burke et al., 1994; Ivey & Dupré, 2022), sparking a debate in which mentoring is often used as a point of reference to define other support and development constructs (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Klofsten & Öberg, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021). In contrast, although part of the same discourse, EC has remained relatively underexplored, especially when compared to mentoring, which has gained significant popularity in research and is now considered one of the most important support interventions in entrepreneurship. In this regard, the goal of this thesis is to amplify the voice of EC. In other words, it aims to provide a tool for initiating the process of defining its conceptual identity, overcoming analogical comparisons with mentoring, and, consequently, gaining a better understanding of the dynamics through which its effectiveness manifests, which still remain particularly descriptive and are studied in isolation, lacking an integration logic (Grover & Furnham, 2016).

More specifically, this thesis aims to build a theoretical framework that considers three fundamental aspects. First, it includes the key dimensions we use to conceptually describe EC. These dimensions are: the stage of the entrepreneurial process in which the coach intervenes, the target audience that defines the type of coachee, the type of context in which the coaching takes place, and the objectives of the intervention. These dimensions, drawn from Gartner's (1985) theory for studying entrepreneurship, will be used to examine how EC has been studied to date, determining the conceptual scope of this work.

Second, the theoretical framework includes the critical factors that determine the effectiveness of EC, which in this work has been understood as the ability to generate positive

outcomes for the entrepreneur, in light of the numerous studies on coaching outcomes (e.g., Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Jones et al., 2016).

Moreover, this framework focuses on the characteristics of these key factors, organized into sub-dimensions, highlighting how their interactions shape a path toward achieving the objectives. Finally, this theoretical framework provides an understanding of how these factors, in detail, are connected to the outcomes of EC, thus identifying not only the enabling factors but also the deterring ones that compromise perceived effectiveness.

This theoretical framework is the result of adopting a multi-perspective approach, as the empirical part of this thesis considers the perceptions of professional coaches who systematically support entrepreneurs in combination with the perceptions of start-up entrepreneurs who have received coaching support within incubators and accelerators. By considering these perspectives, this thesis aligns with the theoretical lens of philosophical pragmatism, developed as the basis for theorizing coaching in organizations in a recent study by Bachkirova & Borrington (2019). The pragmatic lens emphasizes the need to theoretically ground coaching based on the real experiences of the actors involved in the process, who in our case are the coaches and start-up entrepreneurs. Understanding coaching through their experiences and perceptions will allow us to conceptualize the construct by anchoring it to a mechanism of *action* (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019), aligning it with reality without over-constructing it through theories derived from other types of support services.

This goal is the result of the learning process and experience gained by the author during the doctoral journey. The PhD program began in October 2021 and lasted three years. The first year is entirely dedicated to acquiring the tools necessary to conduct research, through lectures, seminars, and exams. The second and third years are focused on empirical research. During these two years, approaching the topic of EC triggered a series of iterations related to the examination of its

complexity and multiple facets. These numerous iterations involved have enriched the understanding of coaching and heightened awareness of the many ways to observe it. As a result, the objectives set for this doctoral thesis have undergone several evolutions, which have now found a coherent and logical thread, presented in this final dissertation. Initially, the focus was on *what* coaching is, which evolved into understanding *how* it operates and functions. Finally, while the initial intent was to measure the effects of coaching, it was deemed more appropriate to investigate the determinants of its benefits, with the ultimate goal of deepening knowledge related to the phenomenon.

FRAME OF REFERENCE

This section presents a summary of the history of coaching and how the discussion around coaching in entrepreneurship emerged, the issue of its effectiveness, and subsequently, how the lens of philosophical pragmatism can represent an appropriate approach to bridging knowledge gaps regarding the effects of coaching for entrepreneurs. In doing so, the main theoretical references are clarified to define the debates to which this work aims to contribute.

Coaching and the origin of Entrepreneurial Coaching

Coaching originated in the realm of sports during the 1970s (Gaylord, 1967; Law, 2013), where it was initially focused on helping athletes improve their performance and reach their full potential through tailored guidance, motivation, and skill development. The success of these methods in enhancing athletic performance led to growing interest in applying similar approaches in other domains. Around the same time, there were significant advancements in psychology, particularly in the areas of human motivation, behavior change, and performance enhancement, which laid the theoretical foundation for coaching practices to evolve beyond the sports field.

In 1969, Schein built on these developments by introducing the concept of "process

consultation" to describe coaching within the business environment (Koopman et al., 2021). Schein's approach focused on helping organizations and individuals to improve their effectiveness by engaging in a collaborative process that encourages self-discovery and problem-solving. His work bridged the gap between psychological theory and practical application, emphasizing the role of coaching in fostering leadership skills, enhancing communication, and promoting personal development in the corporate world.

In the years that followed, coaching began to gain traction in corporate settings, particularly among executives and human resources professionals (Brock, 2009). Companies started to recognize the value of coaching as a tool for enhancing leadership, driving employee engagement, and fostering organizational growth. As a result, coaching became increasingly integrated into leadership development programs, with organizations adopting it as a strategy to support executives in navigating complex challenges, making strategic decisions, and achieving professional and personal growth. By the 1980s, coaching had become a widely recognized and standard practice in management (Crompton et al., 2012). In parallel to its growth in corporate environments, new forms of coaching emerged, including the role of the life coach, which extended the practice beyond the workplace. Life coaching offered a more holistic approach, addressing personal fulfillment, work-life balance, and general well-being, making coaching accessible to a broader audience. This period also saw the rise of more informal coaching practices, where individuals sought coaching for a variety of personal and professional goals. These developments contributed to the rapid expansion of coaching as a popular and versatile profession, allowing it to adapt to diverse needs across different sectors (Koopman et al., 2021).

As coaching practices gained prominence in corporate and leadership settings, their application in the entrepreneurial domain began to take shape as well. Entrepreneurs, unlike traditional employees or executives, face unique challenges that often require tailored guidance

and support. In this context, EC emerged as a distinct practice, addressing the specific needs of entrepreneurs as they navigate the complexities of founding, growing, and managing their ventures. Entrepreneurs typically have a more profound attachment to their organizations compared to other actors within established companies, as they often own, create, and take on multiple roles within their businesses (Diller et al., 2022). This deep connection and the multifaceted nature of their responsibilities lead to a more intricate and personal set of challenges. EC, therefore, evolved to provide customized support for these individuals, helping them to manage the diverse aspects of their roles, from strategic decision-making to personal development (Kotte et al., 2021; Müller et al., 2022). EC began to be seen as a valuable intervention for helping entrepreneurs develop critical skills, adapt to rapidly changing environments, and achieve their goals. Unlike traditional business coaching, which may focus on leadership or management within established organizations, EC addresses the entrepreneurial journey's dynamic and often unpredictable nature (Clausen, 2020). Entrepreneurs, especially in the early stages of their ventures, frequently face issues such as resource constraints, market uncertainty, and personal isolation, making coaching a valuable resource for navigating these challenges (Diller et al., 2022).

Challenges in Measuring the Effectiveness of Entrepreneurial Coaching

The most critical issue in the ongoing debate about coaching is undoubtedly the assessment of its effectiveness. This challenge adversely impacts the perception of coaching's true value within organizations (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2018). Effectiveness in coaching is often defined by its ability to produce specific outcomes, which can include improvements in the entrepreneur's personal attributes, such as self-efficacy (Saadaoui & Affess, 2015), as well as enhancements in performance metrics, such as increased productivity (Jones et al., 2006).

Over time, considerable data have been collected demonstrating that coaching can indeed

be effective (Schermuly et al., 2021). For instance, businesses that engaged in coaching during periods of crisis have shown signs of recovery and growth compared to those that did not receive such support (Mohamed et al., 2024). Despite these positive outcomes, the mere existence of beneficial results is not sufficient to fully define the effectiveness of coaching. This is particularly true in the context of research that relies on cross-sectional studies, which often offer limited generalizability (Kotte et al., 2021). Coaching is inherently a process (Diermann et al., 2021) that is closely linked to the specific context in which it occurs, with various factors influencing the outcomes of the intervention. Consequently, it is essential to understand how these outcomes are generated and to identify the key determinants of success. The literature provides several studies that explore the factors contributing to successful coaching (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016). Key dimensions include the role of the coach (e.g., Azizi et al., 2023) and the nature of the coaching relationship (Diller et al., 2022), both of which are identified as critical factors influencing the success of the coaching intervention. Additionally, client motivation and expectations are recognized as important dimensions to monitor for successful outcomes (Grover & Furnham, 2016).

However, many studies on success factors adopt a descriptive approach (Mohamed et al., 2024), which can be limiting. Such approaches often provide lists of factors without delving into the relationships between these factors that define a truly effective coaching process. For example, understanding the specific components of a positive coaching relationship and how these components contribute to effective outcomes is crucial but often overlooked (Grover & Furnham, 2016).

Therefore, there is a need for research designs that go beyond descriptive analysis to explore and detail these aspects more thoroughly. This includes considering the role of contextual factors and providing a systemic view of coaching effectiveness, because “the research cannot yet provide

a comprehensive picture of EC and its outcomes” (Kotte et al., 2021, p.524). Such research is vital to address the current gaps in understanding and to enhance the overall effectiveness of coaching interventions.

A Pragmatic Lens for Entrepreneurial Coaching Effectiveness

Theoretical fragmentation, conceptual confusion, and a lack of understanding of the dynamics through which success is manifested are the three main problem areas in EC that this thesis has identified and, therefore, aims to reflect upon and address. Among the authors who have brought these issues to light (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021), Bachkirova & Borrington (2019) have offered a perspective that allows for concrete intervention to develop a more cohesive theory around coaching. In their study, the authors state that although coaching has become an established practice within organizations, its theoretical understanding remains underdeveloped. The reasons for this underdevelopment lie in the lack of dialogue between the various paradigms on which coaching is based, leading to a failure to understand its practical contribution. The authors, therefore, propose the lens of philosophical Pragmatism, developed by Dewey (1916), which seems well-suited for observing coaching dynamics, as it emphasizes learning through experience and joint inquiry, described as a collaborative process in which the coach and coachee explore complex problems together (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019).

Our research objectives align with the key point of philosophical Pragmatism, as they are sought to understand which elements characterize the effectiveness of EC - that have been underexplored in the literature - and can only be defined through the exploration of the actors’ experience and perceptions. In fact, this perspective emphasizes the need to understand coaching not through abstract theories or rigid models, but through how it truly functions in practice, as experienced by coaches and entrepreneurs. Since knowledge and learning derive from interaction

and direct experience, the empirical involvement of these dimensions becomes crucial. Therefore, in this thesis, this perspective is applied with the goal of moving beyond models based on practical approaches without empirical support or rigorous conceptual analysis, such as the GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, and Will) model by Whitmore (2010). While widely adopted for its simplicity and practicality, the model has been considered reductive and overly schematic (Grant, 2022).

RESEARCH APPROACH

With reference to the empirical part of this thesis, an inductive approach is adopted to investigate the dynamics of EC effectiveness. Consistent with what generally occurs in the field of entrepreneurship research, most studies aimed at understanding the effectiveness of coaching have tested theoretical models borrowed from other disciplines (Grant & Perren, 2002). In particular, the understanding of coaching effectiveness has been based on testing the validity of outcomes on large samples of participants, solely with the purpose of empirically supporting the construct based only on the need for generalization (Grover & Furnham, 2016). This has led to the issue of having a series of outcomes that suggest the benefits of coaching (Schermuly et al., 2021), but which are of little substantive significance since they remain isolated and are not studied in their potential interactions (Kotte et al., 2021). Our approach to EC effectiveness is not based on understanding how many outcomes it can generate, whether positive or negative, but rather on comprehending how these outcomes may emerge and how they connect to specific factors characterizing the coaching process, in line with the need, highlighted by recent studies, for a more extensive use of inductive perspectives for theory-building in entrepreneurship as an autonomous field of study (Hlady-Rispal et al., 2021; Javadian et al., 2020; Van-Burg et al., 2020). Therefore, it is evident that this thesis needs to explore dimensions that cannot be investigated through other approaches, particularly when there is a requirement for deep exploration and detailed research, as can be found in the

listening to personal experiences and perceptions (Neergard & Uihøi, 2007). Consequently, the choice of an inductive and qualitative approach accompanies this need in order to achieve the objectives of this thesis. In line with the chosen approach, the data collection techniques are tailored to the need to listen to the participants' perspectives, namely those of the coaches (Chapter 3) and start-up entrepreneurs (Chapter 4), and to explore emerging issues derived from their perceptions. To maintain consistency in both empirical studies and to have a multi-perspective view of the phenomenon, the technique of semi-structured interviews was adopted. This technique strikes a good balance between allowing the interviewees to express themselves freely and thematic control by the interviewer, who guides the conversation based on the research objectives (Barribal & While, 1994). However, the technique was not applied uniformly. In the case of the coaches, a more narrative approach was used (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016), allowing the interviewee to share the evolution of their thoughts and perceptions on the subject, seeking to capture specific details related to their professional journey, which in some cases included many years of experience. With the entrepreneurs, the interviews focused more on the factors they considered to have influenced their perceived effectiveness, giving the interview a more direct tone and focusing on the coaching experience, also due to the limited time available granted by the participants.

A GENERAL OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

This thesis is composed of five chapters. It opens with Chapter 1, the one we are currently reading, which provides a general introduction to the research objectives, a summary of the literature and the relevant theoretical aspects, and the methodological approach. In Chapter 2, a conceptual study is presented, characterized by a systematic literature review (SLR), published in February 2024 in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, within the special issue titled “Mentoring

and Coaching in the Workplace”¹. This study explores the concept of EC with the intent to reduce the theoretical fragmentation that characterizes the field of research. To this end, the studies selected according to specific inclusion criteria were organized into a framework consisting of four dimensions: the phase of the entrepreneurial process in which the coach intervened, the target audience, the context in which the coaching took place, and the outcomes generated. This allowed us to extend previous definitions of the construct and to identify five types of coaching for entrepreneurs, conceptualizing the intervention as broad and multifunctional.

Chapter 3 presents the first empirical study, which aims to understand the key success factors of coaching from the perspective of 30 professional coaches. Their perceptions revealed that effective communication shapes expectations, enhancing coachability and trust. Trust, reinforced by the coach’s expertise and deep listening, enables a co-construction process in which coach and entrepreneur collaboratively tailor the intervention, resulting in a high-quality relationship and successful outcomes.

Chapter 4 considers the perceptions of 10 start-up entrepreneurs who experienced coaching within incubators or accelerators with the aim to understand which characteristics of key success factors are linked to the perception of positive outcomes. From their perspective, enabling and deterring factors for perceived effectiveness emerge. Additionally, the study highlights the outcomes that are most at risk due to these existing deterring factors.

Finally, Chapter 5 concludes this thesis with a general discussion of the results obtained from the three studies, then presenting the theoretical framework. Finally, the chapter highlights the theoretical implications and the contribution of the thesis to the literature on EC and its

¹ [Marras, G., Opizzi, M.](#) and [Loi, M.](#) (2024), "Understanding the multifunctional role of entrepreneurial coaching through a systematic review of the literature", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 39 No. 6, pp. 795-814. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-01-2023-0070>

effectiveness.

Overall, One of the main challenges encountered during this research journey was finding coaches who had genuinely worked as entrepreneurial coaches and entrepreneurs who had truly followed an EC path. This difficulty made participant recruitment particularly complex, highlighting how EC remains a relatively underexplored and practiced field, despite its increasing recognition in the literature.

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CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL COACHING THROUGH A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to systematize the entrepreneurial coaching literature by understanding how the phenomenon has been investigated along four dimensions inspired by Gartner's (1985) conceptualization of entrepreneurship: entrepreneurial process, context, target and outcomes. In so doing, this study will provide a frame of its multifunctional role and identify relevant gaps and suggestions for future research.

We conducted a systematic literature review to collect existing works on entrepreneurial coaching. We analyzed 85 selected papers with a qualitative content analysis that allowed us to highlight relevant research themes for the entrepreneurial process, context, outcomes and target.

Our results demonstrate that entrepreneurial coaching has a multifunctional role in entrepreneurship that can be summarized in five different typologies, depending on the stage of the entrepreneurial process in which it is applied, the context, the target, and the outcomes.

As one of the first attempts to systematize studies on entrepreneurial coaching, this work extends previous conceptualization of entrepreneurial coaching by detailing different typologies of this intervention, thereby contributing to reduce fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial coaching; Systematic literature review; Qualitative content analysis; Entrepreneurial coaching typologies.

INTRODUCTION

EC is a developmental intervention for entrepreneurs facing different stages of the entrepreneurial process based on a collaborative relationship with a professional coach (Kotte et al., 2021). Entrepreneurs face many obstacles during their journey and need specific support for each stage of the process (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2018; Kotte et al., 2021; ; Saadoui & Affess, 2015); this has made EC a key tool in supporting entrepreneurship with a growing scientific interest for the phenomenon (e.g., Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2018; Mansoori et al., 2019).

EC literature is currently characterized by heterogeneous perspectives and multidisciplinary contributions (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019) which have caused fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity (Kotte et al., 2021). This is why the term “EC” is often used interchangeably with other similar developmental interventions, such as mentoring (Audet & Couteret, 2012). Fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity make EC a concept with a fuzzy meaning and it is not possible to correctly distinguish EC from other interventions and understand its functions. This could be problematic, if we are to develop efficacious EC support services within incubators or entrepreneurship education programs.

To address these issues, in this chapter we conducted a SLR of existing EC studies. We investigated how EC has been studied along four dimensions derived from the conceptualization of entrepreneurship developed by Gartner (1985), namely entrepreneurial process, context, target and outcomes. In doing so, we respond to the fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity by systematizing previous studies within an organizing framework which details the multifunctional role of EC. Finally, we set a research agenda to highlight relevant gaps and possible lines of future research.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, the theoretical background is presented. The procedures followed in conducting the SLR are then explained, and the qualitative content analysis (QCA) to identify the main research themes are illustrated. Finally, we present the results and the discussion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Coaching is a partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential (International Coaching Federation)², and it has been increasingly adopted in entrepreneurship. According to one of the most extensive definition of EC, this intervention is "a custom-tailored, reflective, and results-oriented development intervention that is directed towards entrepreneurs with different levels of experience and across different phases of the entrepreneurial process [...] based on a collaborative relationship between a professional coach (who may or may not have personal entrepreneurial experience) and an entrepreneur" (Kotte et al., 2021, p. 548). As a planned intervention (see Klofsten & Öberg, 2012), EC is developed as a process with several stages, such as contracting, assessment, intervention, and evaluation (Diermann et al., 2021).

EC becomes relevant in entrepreneurship training programs and incubators, because it enables them to support entrepreneurs dealing with high job demands that are typical of each stage of the entrepreneurial journey (Kotte et al., 2021; Kutzhanova et al., 2009). For this reason, EC is provided independently of the person's request and is increasingly being incorporated into entrepreneurial training and education programs (European Commission, 2018).

² <https://coachingfederation.org> (visited on January 2023)

Past research on EC has often reiterated how fragmented this phenomenon is (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012;; Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019; Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2018; Kotte et al., 2021) and that it is characterized by a narrow selective focus on a few aspects of the phenomenon (e.g., Diller et al., 2022; Mohamed & Zouaoui, 2021). Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of how coaching works alongside the entrepreneurial process is still missing (Kotte et al., 2021). All these aspects make it challenging to understand EC dynamics, so they remain a wall that blocks the advancement of inquiry on this topic (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019).

EC literature is also plagued by conceptual ambiguity, which has blurred its conceptual boundaries. This means that other developmental interventions, such as mentoring and start-up consultancy, have been used as synonyms (Audet & Couteret, 2012). Table 1 shows the labels most commonly used as synonyms to refer to EC. These labels come from most entrepreneurship studies, some particularly recent (e.g., Na et al., 2022; Babcock, 2021; Kurakto et al., 2021). Business coaching (e.g., Crompton et al., 2012; Cheah, 2012; Dobrea & Maiorescu, 2015; Schutte, 2019; Ben Ahmed, 2020; Idris & Abu Bakar, 2020; Pocek et al., 2021; Na et al., 2022) and mentoring (e.g., Hancox et al., 2015; Heikkinen & Stevenson, 2016; Kubberod et al., 2018; Kurakto et al., 2021) are the terms that are most often used interchangeably with EC. Business coaching is a construct defined as “a formal relationship in which a coach and a coachee collaborate to assess the coachee’s leadership developmental tasks, to challenge current constraints exploring new possibilities, and to ensure accountability and support for reaching goals” (Blackman et al., 2016, p.460). Considering the differences between coaching and mentoring, the coaching relationship is to a large extent a planned intervention with specific activities, methods, and objectives. Mentorship, on the other hand, is demand-driven. Moreover, coaching concerns general competence, whereas mentoring is a specialist task (Klofsten & Öberg, 2012) involving a relationship with a more experienced individual (Weinberg & Lankau, 2011).

In this regard, one of the works that have contributed to overcoming conceptual ambiguity is that of Kotte et al. (2021). Their empirical observation aimed to provide positioning for EC concerning classic workplace coaching, executive coaching, entrepreneurial mentoring, and start-up consultancy to identify its conceptual boundaries. They have placed these constructs within a two-dimensional framework, considering approaches (process consultation and expert consultation) and the focus (individual, work, venture). Meaningful results emerged from this work, as they stated that a key distinguishing characteristic of EC is the higher proportion of expert-consultation, i.e., “a consultant possessing a high level of content expertise and providing expert information, advice, and solutions to clients” (Kotte et al., 2021, p. 521) remarkably like executive coaching.

Table 1:

Most common synonyms used for Entrepreneurial Coaching

N	Terms	Research field	Authors	Definition of the construct
1	Business coaching	Entrepreneurship, Business Management	Crompton , Smyrnios & Bi, 2012; Cheah, 2012; Dobrea & Maiorescu, 2015; Schutte, 2019; Ben Ahmed, 2020; Idris & Abu Bakar, 2020;	A means of individual development, allowing, on the one hand, the increase of managerial performances and, on the other hand, the increase of competitiveness between corporations (Dobrea & Maiorescu, 2015).
2	Psychological coaching	Entrepreneurship, education, and training	Galvão & Pinheiro, 2019	A driver for positive change and improvement of several of the required skills for successful entrepreneurship.

3	Wellness coaching	Health and wellness	Babcock, 2021	A means for helping patients to manage chronic diseases like diabetes and hypertension or achieve a variety of personal health goals.
4	Incubator coaching	Entrepreneurship	Schutte & Direng, 2019	A tool to support entrepreneurs during start-up.
5	Peer group coaching	Economics	Kutzhano va, Lyons & Lichtenst ein, 2009	Coaching in the business world is represented most often by executive coaching that attempts to align individual performance and organisational goals.
6	Mentoring	Entrepreneurship, innovation and learning, education, and training	Hancox, Heron & Klucznik- Toro, 2015; Heikkinen & Stevenso n, 2016; Kubberod , Fosstenlo kken & Erstad, 2018; Kurakto, Neubert & Marvel, 2021	A special help entrepreneurs receive from a mentor in the early stages of their venture [...] supporting opportunity recognition (Kuratko, Neubert & Marvel, 2021).

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The fact that different labels have been used to refer to EC has led to a broad conceptualization of the construct, thereby blurring its conceptual boundaries and activating substantial debate in the literature regarding the differences and similarities, thereof, particularly between coaching and mentoring (Kotte et al., 2021). In entrepreneurship, these two interventions

share a trustful relationship (El Hallam & St-Jean, 2016); while the greatest difference is that the mentor's experience is at the heart of the intervention (Kotte et al., 2021). Conversely, coaching puts at the center of its action the coachee's specific objective or need (Audet & Couteret, 2012). Despite efforts to identify a demarcation of these two constructs, the conceptual ambiguity thereof is still present in both research and practice. Addressing conceptual ambiguity referred to in EC literature is relevant, because study fragmentation and conceptual confusion are both detrimental to advancement and practice in this field (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021).

In light of this, this chapter has three objectives. (i) To address the fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity by recomposing the literature on EC along four entrepreneurial dimensions: entrepreneurial process, context, target and outcomes; in doing so, we develop an organizing framework inspired by the conceptualization of entrepreneurship developed by Gartner (1985), who pointed out that entrepreneurship is a processual phenomenon in which individuals, emerging organizations, and context are iteratively interplaying. (ii) To understanding the multifunctional role of EC by shedding light on its operating mechanisms. (iii) To develop a research agenda to guide future research.

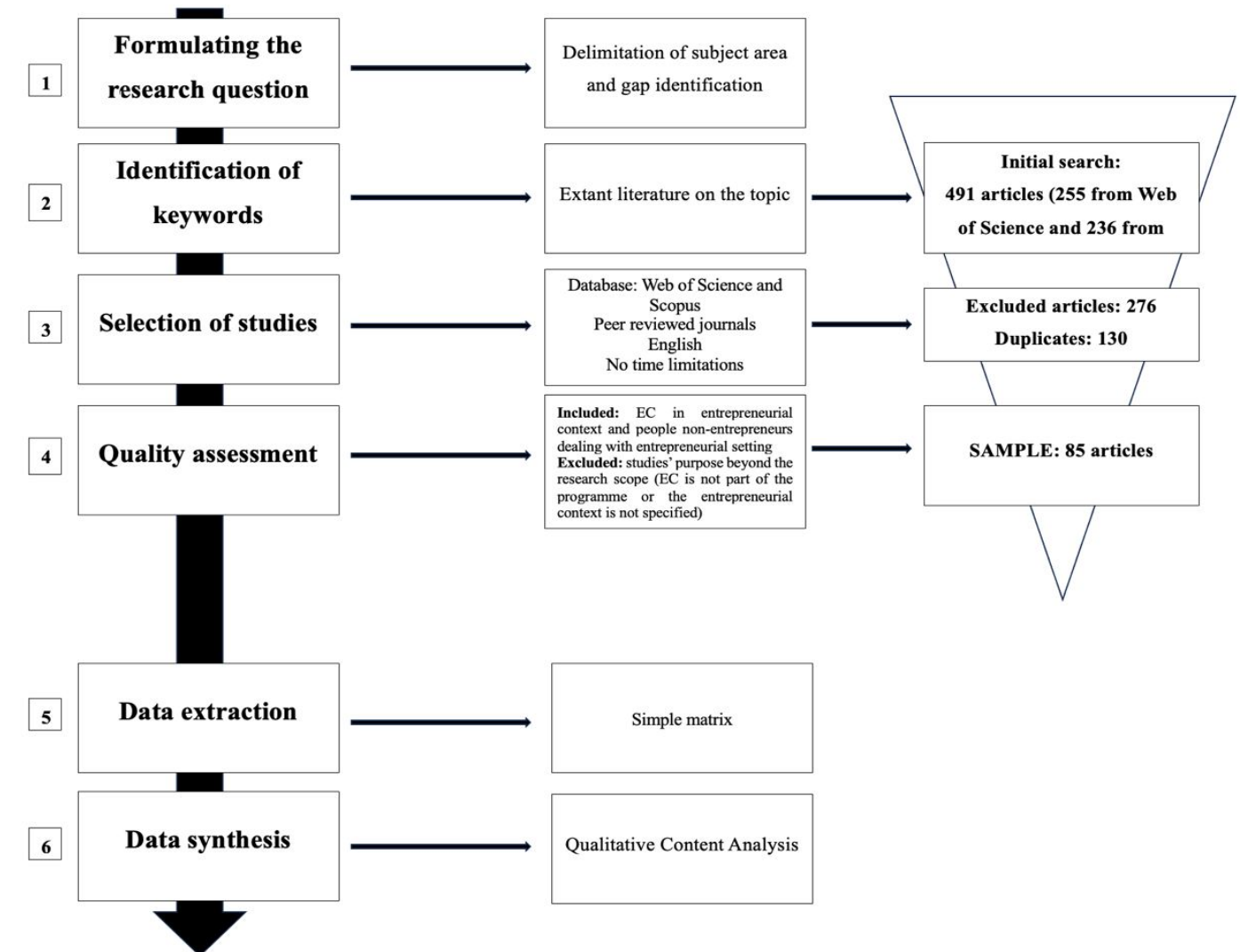
METHOD

Research Design

We conducted a SLR following the procedure suggested by Tranfield et al. (2003) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Shamseer et al., 2015). The procedure for the SLR (Figure 1) consists of: (i) identification of keywords; (ii) selection of studies and quality assessment; (iii) data extraction; and (iv) data synthesis.

Figure 1:

Flowchart of the Procedure for the Review



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Identification of Keywords

We used ("entrepreneur* coach*" OR coach*) AND entrepreneur*, to capture the multitudes of labels used to refer to EC. For this reason, an extensive search for journal articles was conducted on Web of Science® (WoS) and Scopus®. Due to the novelty of the topic under

investigation (Kotte et al., 2021); no limitations in terms of the time were imposed. The first search returned 491 articles: 255 from WoS and 236 from Scopus. After eliminating the duplicates, a total of 361 articles were obtained.

Selection of Studies and Quality Assessment

Given that EC is an emerging field of research, we decided to include both quantitative and qualitative papers (Schermyly et al., 2021). In our case, for quality assessment, we (i) only considered articles from peer-reviewed journals, to attain results with high accuracy (Grégoire et al., 2019); and (ii) specified precise inclusion criteria.

To be considered as part of the sample, studies needed to investigate coaching intervention within specific contexts aimed at providing individuals with entrepreneurial outcomes and skills. We kept a broad lens (i) due to the fragmentation around the phenomenon; and (ii) because coaching is not only provided independently or within organizations but is an increasingly present component in training or education programs (Kotte et al., 2021). We excluded articles that did not consider the entrepreneurial context or coaching as an entrepreneurial support tool or that did not consider it to be part of a specific program.

Some examples of excluded articles were the study by Horne et al. (2022), because they did not consider an entrepreneurial context, only mentioning the "entrepreneurial marketplace" without further specifications; and studies in which EC was only marginally addressed (e.g., Svetek, 2022) or was related to other constructs similar to EC such as mentoring (e.g., Kubberod et al., 2018). In other cases, no clear identification of the entrepreneurial contexts and dynamics was examined (e.g., Ribeiro et al., 2020). At the end of this analysis, the final sample was comprised of 85 papers.

Data Extraction

Drawing on Torraco's (2016) methodological indications, we built a matrix to synthesize information for each paper (Appendix 1).

Data Synthesis

Data were analyzed through a QCA, a technique for analyzing textual data into inductive categories (Forman & Damschroder, 2007). This is recommended when there is a significant knowledge gap in a topic or when the existing body of knowledge is inadequately grounded in theory, as in the case of EC (Armat et al., 2018). The first author of the present SLR conducted the analysis by filling out four different deductive categories: the stage of the entrepreneurial process to which the coaching refers (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021); the context (e.g., Diermann et al., 2021); the outcomes (e.g., Theeboom et al., 2014); and the target (e.g., Kotte et al., 2021). During the analysis of the papers, we codified each element referring to the four categories, and identified different sub-categories. The inter-rater agreement coefficient (Daniels, 2019) among the author and three external researchers was equal to 72%, which is considered acceptable to ensure the reliability of our study (Schreier, 2012).

RESULTS

We present the descriptive results and then we delineate the organizing framework in the following text.

Descriptive Analysis of the Reviewed Papers

Published studies on EC are mostly empirical works (N=75 out of 85), the majority of which adopt a qualitative (N=38, 45% of the empirical papers) rather than a quantitative approach (N=32, 38% of the empirical papers). Finally, only 5 works (6% of the empirical papers) used a mixed-method approach. Furthermore, most empirical papers adopt a cross-sectional design (N=55, 73% of the empirical papers) compared to a longitudinal one (N=20, 27% of the empirical papers). Table 2 summarizes the aforementioned descriptive statistics.

Table 2:

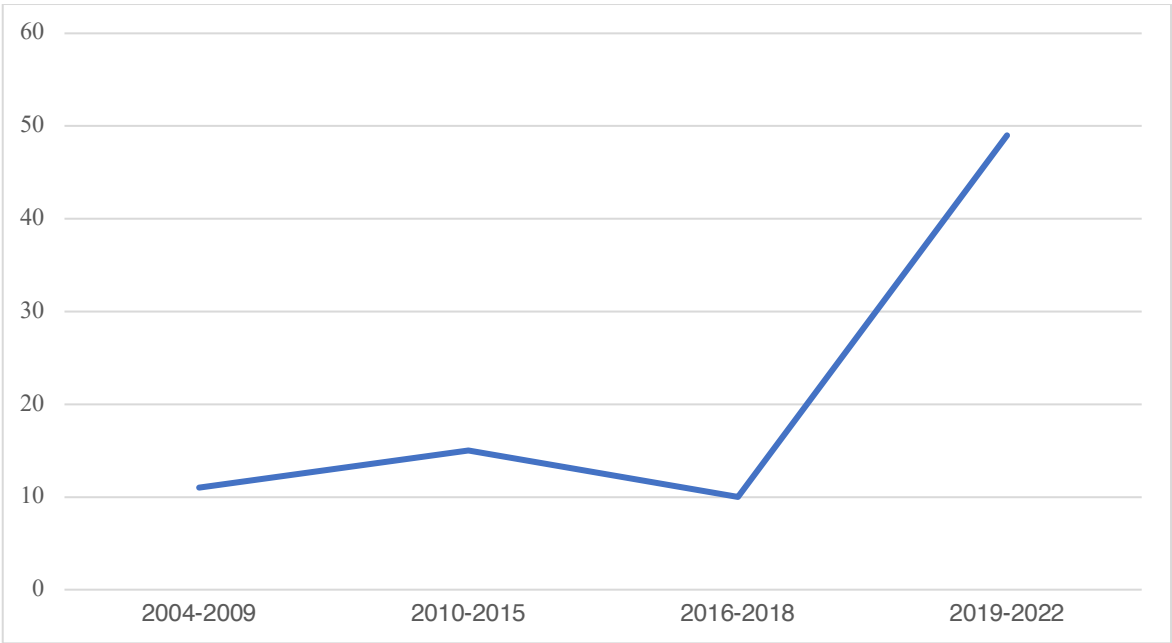
Description of collected papers: Approach and Research Design

			N	%
Approach	Empirical	Qualitative	38	45%
		Quantitative	32	38%
		Mixed methods	5	6%
	Theoretical		10	11%
TOTAL			85	100%
Research design	Empirical	Longitudinal	20	24%
		Cross-sectional	55	64%
	Theoretical		10	12%
TOTAL			85	100%

Source: Authors' own elaboration

By looking at the journals, our data show that the 85 papers composing our unit of analysis were published in 74 different journals from different disciplines, including psychology, sports, management, and public health, indicating an increment of attention to EC, especially after the 2016 year, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2:
Publication Time Trend

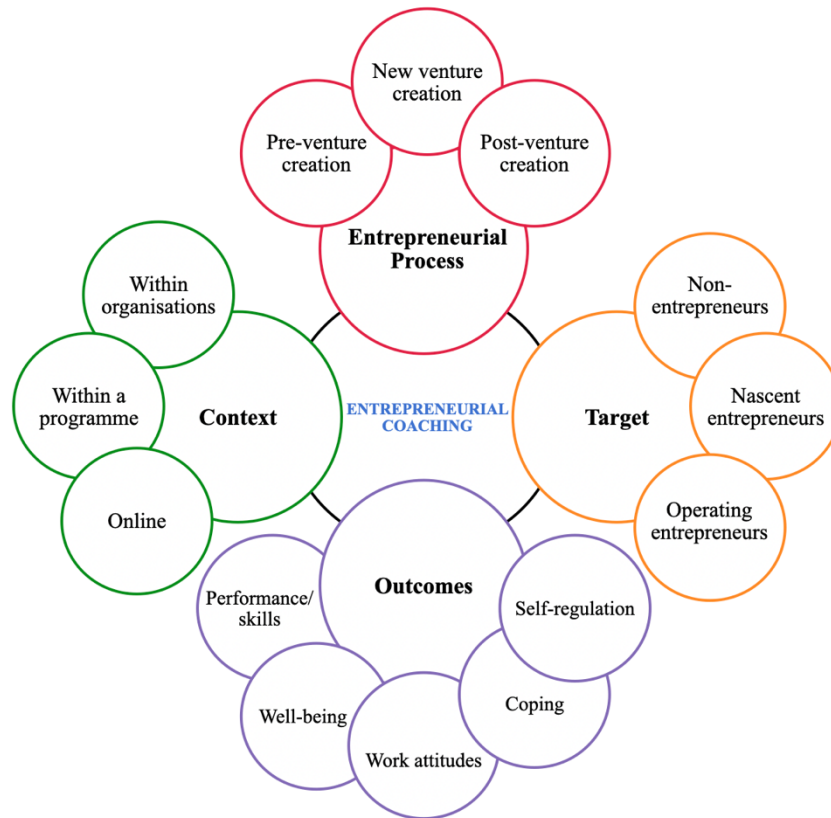


Source: Authors' own elaboration

Organizing Framework

Figure 3 presents the organizing framework of EC resulting from our SLR.

Figure 3:
Organizing Framework for Defining Dimensions of Entrepreneurial Coaching



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Target: For whom is Entrepreneurial Coaching adopted?

The target defines the recipients of the intervention. We found three sub-dimensions of targets: operating entrepreneurs (N=36, 38% of the reviewed articles), nascent entrepreneurs (N=31, 33% of the reviewed articles), and non-entrepreneurs (N=28, 29% of the reviewed articles).

Operating entrepreneurs are individuals who own their enterprise and are faced with dynamics related to the development and growth of their own business (e.g., Kotha et al., 2022; Nicholls-Nixon & Maxheimer, 2022) or are coping with crisis or business failure (e.g., Na et al., 2022; Schermuly et al., 2021).

Nascent entrepreneurs are individuals who have taken “steps to found a new business but who have not yet succeeded in making the transition to new business owner” (Carter et al., 1996, p. 151). This dimension includes pre-incubatees (e.g., Heikkinen & Stevenson, 2016); incubatees and start-uppers (e.g., Bergmann & Utikal, 2021; Nair & Blomquist, 2021); business project leaders (e.g., Laaraj & Ferhane, 2019); entrepreneurs within accelerators (e.g., Mansoori et al., 2019); and aspiring entrepreneurs (e.g., Barrell et al., 2021).

Finally, non-entrepreneurs are individuals who do not own a business, such as managers or employees. In some cases, they are not even employed and do not know whether they intend to become entrepreneurs, such as undergraduate and graduate students. These individuals are nonetheless involved in entrepreneurial dynamics: for students, there are entrepreneurship education programs in which EC sessions are included (e.g., Elenurm & Moisala, 2008; Vural & Çoruh, 2019). For managers and employees, there are intrapreneurship programs (e.g., Fey et al., 2022; Helman, 2019; Wakkee et al., 2010); which have been conceptualized as “encompassing organizational sanctions and resource commitments to generate, develop and implementing innovative ideas and activities in the form of product, process and organizational innovations” (Wakkee et al., 2010, p.3).

Outcomes: Which outcomes are associated with Entrepreneurial Coaching?

Several EC studies have focused on understanding coaching interventions outcomes, thereby creating a heterogeneous and unsystematic body of knowledge. To categorize these outcomes, we

considered the subdivision provided by Theeboom et al. (2014) as part of their study on coaching effectiveness; the categories are performance/skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes, and goal-directed self-regulation.

The “performance/skills” category (N=41, 34% of the reviewed articles) concerns subjective and objective outcomes reflecting performance or demonstrating behaviors needed for an organization to be effective. Examples we found included entrepreneurial skills from a specific program (e.g., Suharnomo & Wahyudi, 2021); innovative work behaviors (e.g., Na et al., 2022); leadership (e.g., Åstebro & Hoos, 2020); venture growth (e.g., Kotha et al., 2022); internationalization (e.g., Gao et al., 2021); and increasing sales (e.g., Mukata et al., 2018).

The “well-being” category (N=10, 8% of the reviewed articles) concerns subjective and objective outcomes representing people’s well-being, health, need fulfilment and affective response. Examples we found included psychological well-being (e.g., Galvão & Pinheiro, 2019) and reduce emotional exhaustion (i.e., burnout) (e.g., Busch et al., 2021).

The “coping” category (N=7, 6% of the reviewed articles) concerns the ability to face present and future jobs and stressors. Examples include entrepreneurial self-efficacy (e.g., Maxheimer & Nicholls-Nixon, 2022) and reduced stress hormone levels (e.g., Schermuly et al., 2021).

The “work attitudes” category (N=37, 31% of the reviewed articles) concerns cognitive, affective and behavioral responses towards work and career. Examples of outcome measures within this category are relationship building (e.g., Bin Idris & Abu Bakar, 2020); encouragement to create a new business (e.g., Hua, 2021); and satisfaction with the coaching relationship (e.g., Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2020).

The “Goal-directed self-regulation” category (N=24, 20% of the reviewed articles) concerns the level of goal achievements (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012), goal attainment (e.g., Busch et al., 2021); and “the processes involved in attaining and maintaining goals, where goals are internally

represented desired states” (Vancouver & Day 2005, p. 158). In this regard, examples may be developing a vision (e.g., Freeman & Siegfried, 2015) and improving strategic decision-making (e.g., Fielden & Hunt, 2011; Nujiten et al., 2020).

Entrepreneurial process: In which entrepreneurial phases has Entrepreneurial Coaching been investigated?

EC has been studied during the pre-venture creation, new venture creation, and post-venture creation phases.

Studies in pre-venture creation (N=40, 47% of the reviewed articles) focus on the activities preceding the founding of a new company and have primarily examined the role of coaching at the pre-founding phase (N=27, 38% of the reviewed articles). These studies have specifically shown how coaches can support coachees embarked on a learning path to develop competencies and skills in entrepreneurship (e.g., Premand et al., 2016) or assist the embryonic activities related to the development of the new business idea (e.g., Marvel et al., 2020).

Other studies have specifically looked at the incubation phase (N=13, 15% of the reviewed articles) by showing how the coach might help aspiring entrepreneurs to “materialize a business idea into a legally constituted enterprise with a marketable product/service” (Fernández et al., p.785); and cope with the uncertain phases of the entrepreneurial process (e.g., Maxheimer & Nicholls-Nixon, 2022; Nair & Blomquist, 2021).

As far as the new venture creation is concerned (N=22, 26% of the reviewed articles), studies have investigated the dynamics between the coach and nascent entrepreneurs (e.g., Mansoori et al., 2019); the impact of a start-up training program (e.g., Ramirez-Pérez et al., 2015); and to understand how coaches can improve the functioning of the new venture and support the founders’ innovative behavior (e.g., Gao et al., 2021).

Finally, studies on post-venture creation (N=23, 27% of the reviewed articles) address the issue of EC after the phase of venture creation, by focusing attention on scale-up, succession and critical events.

During the scale-up phase (N=18 out of 23, 78%), entrepreneurs need to be coached to improve specific individual or organisational outcomes, such as the construction and change of entrepreneurial identity and increase the effectiveness of their business (e.g., Valencia, 2020). Succession is the dynamic in which the business is transferred to the heir after a specific event; it includes cases where the process has been managed by a coach or where the entrepreneur has undergone preparatory programs for such an eventuality. Finally, critical events are difficult situations for which the coach organizationally and psychologically intervenes. In particular, studies have examined the COVID-19 pandemic emergency (e.g., Na et al., 2022) and the business failure (e.g., Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2018; Schermuly et al., 2021).

Context: In which settings and situations has Entrepreneurial Coaching been adopted?

Context is the place where EC is implemented. It is important to consider this dimension, as it has recently been argued that workplace coaching needs to be seen as a contextualized, rather than dyadic, intervention embedded in its social and organisational context (Diermann et al., 2021).

Based on the design adopted by the selected articles, we found that EC either takes place within organizations (N=22, 26% of the reviewed papers) or within a program (N=53, 62% of the reviewed papers). Examples of EC within organizations, are established organizations (e.g., Ahmed, 2020); fast-growth firms (e.g., Crompton et al., 2012); and family businesses (e.g., Valencia, 2020). Papers concerning EC within a program, refer to entrepreneurship support programs (e.g., Van Coller-Peter & Cronjé, 2020); leadership development programs (Ulvenblad & Björklund, 2018); and entrepreneurship education programs attended by students (e.g., Tunstall & Neergaard, 2022).

Finally, we found studies in which EC is virtually implemented by using an online platform (N=3, 4% of the reviewed papers), such as those of Hunt et al. (2019) and Fielden et al. (2011). The remaining papers (N=7) did not specify a context.

DISCUSSION

In the present chapter, we conducted a SLR to reorganize the fragmented, ambiguous literature on EC. Specifically, we reviewed articles to understand how EC has been studied along the four dimensions that characterize entrepreneurship as a processual phenomenon (Gartner, 1985), namely entrepreneurial process, context, target and outcomes. Moreover, through this framework, we attempted to understand how EC works within each dimension, by detailing its multifunctional role. Finally, we identified suggestions for future research.

Overall, a key result of this SLR is that EC can be considered to be a broad and multifunctional supportive intervention. We found that EC has been investigated along different targeted individuals, in different phases of the entrepreneurial process, in different contexts and with different expected outcomes.

Considering the aforementioned results, we developed an organizing framework that allowed us to systematize the fragmented EC literature, so we could address recent suggestions for a lens to better conceptualize this phenomenon (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2018; Kotte et al., 2021) in order to theorize by proposing well-distinguished, manageable categories that can support the scholar community by reducing fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity (Kotte et al., 2021; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021).

Theoretical Implications

Based on the aforementioned organizing framework, we extend the EC definition provided by Kotte et al. (2021). Specifically, we can define EC as a **multifunctional** custom-tailored, reflective, and results-oriented development intervention that is directed towards **non-entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs** with different levels of experience and across different stages of the entrepreneurial process. It can be part of **entrepreneurship education programs, training programs** or conducted as a stand-alone intervention. It is implemented to achieve **multi-outcomes**, both individual and organizational.³

Given the multifunctional traits of the intervention, we theorize five different EC typologies that emerged from our organisational framework, shown in Figure 4.

³ We used bold text to highlight the extension elements deriving from our study.

Figure 4:

Entrepreneurial Coaching Typologies

Entrepreneurial Coaching typologies		
EC1	When: pre-venture creation To: students, managers, employees	Embedded in entrepreneurship education programmes or training programmes Acquisition of entrepreneurial skills, entrepreneurial ideas, encouragement
EC2	When: pre-venture creation To: aspiring entrepreneurs	Embedded in entrepreneurship education programmes To guide aspiring entrepreneurs towards skills for their future venture creation
EC3	When: new venture creation To: nascent entrepreneurs	Within business incubators or accelerators Improving work attitudes and self-regulation. Skills for the development of their start-up
EC4	When: post-venture creation To: established entrepreneurs	Within organisation as a stand-alone intervention Skills and knowledge to face problems, achieve goals (scaling-up, improve venture development)
EC5	When: during business failure To: insolvent entrepreneurs	Within organisation as a stand-alone intervention or specific programmes Coping resources, well-being

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The first EC typology concerns the pre-venture creation phase. This intervention is aimed at non-entrepreneurs, of whom it is unclear whether they will accrue interest in becoming entrepreneurs, such as students, managers, and employees. These individuals attend entrepreneurship education or training programs in which EC is designed in order to transfer general

entrepreneurial knowledge and functional entrepreneurial skills. In other cases, the role of EC is to encourage and stimulate participants to develop new business ideas.

The second EC typology concerns the pre-venture creation phase. In this case, however, EC interventions are directed towards individuals who intend to become entrepreneurs who attend entrepreneurship education programs to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to establish businesses and develop entrepreneurial projects. In this case, EC is targeted at nurturing the capability to develop a business vision or improve the initial business idea.

The third EC typology refers to the business creation phase; this intervention is aimed at nascent entrepreneurs. The EC implemented in a dyadic form or in group, is applied within incubators or accelerators to acquire the necessary skills to develop the new enterprise and improve the individual's entrepreneurial attitudes. By following these objectives, EC is designed in such a way that nascent entrepreneurs become prepared to face the challenging phases of scaling-up.

The fourth EC typology concerns the post-venture creation phase. In this case, the intervention is considered stand-alone and is aimed at established entrepreneurs who need specific support at individual and organisational performance levels. In these cases, EC interventions are designed to improve strategic competency, organizing competency and technical competency.

The fifth and last EC typology is related to the post-venture creation phase. However, the aim of this specific typology is to support insolvent entrepreneurs during business failure. In this case, EC can either be stand-alone or embedded in specific programs, and the session can either be executed in person or virtually. The aim of this intervention is to improve entrepreneurs' perception of coping resources and well-being at a critical and stressful moment in the entrepreneurial process.

With this theorization (see Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021), we thus contribute to the problem of conceptual ambiguity in the EC literature. These five typologies demonstrate how EC is a broad, multi-functional support intervention and, may therefore, overlaps with other forms of support; this

overlap is thus a natural consequence of the complexity associated with EC, which is characterized in the content, methods, context and subjects it addresses. By identifying these five EC typologies, we can make this complexity known and legitimize ambiguity as an identity trait of EC. This conceptualization will help scholars to explore the overlap more systematically with other forms of intervention such as mentoring.

Research Agenda

To address the third objective of this work, a research agenda is proposed. Assisted by the organizing framework, this agenda should guide future inquiry by highlighting the gaps worth studying to advance the field of research, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3:

Research Agenda and Suggestions for Future Research

Dimension	Gap	Research suggestion
Entrepreneurial process	Business failure	Coaching relationship between the coach and the entrepreneurs
Context	EC within incubators	Contents and operating mechanisms
Target	Entrepreneurial teams	Entrepreneurial Team Coaching
Outcomes	Outcomes' dynamic model	Outcomes integration and longitudinal approach
EC and mentoring	Overlapping interventions	Integrate EC and mentoring within the organizing framework

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Entrepreneurial process. Few studies strive to shed light on how EC might support entrepreneurs facing highly stressful situations, such as business failure (Anis et al., 2018; Schermuly et al., 2021);

this is because a common assumption has been that EC is mainly targeted at entrepreneurs in the early stage of their journey (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021). Beyond the more technical and financial definition of business failure (e.g., Anis et al., 2018) and given the significant results already obtained by scholars on the effects of coaching on health and coping resources (e.g., Schermuly et al., 2021), we suggest to adequate consideration of the defining aspects of the relationship between coaches and entrepreneurs during this challenging phase. Focusing on the relationship between the coach and the entrepreneurs is one way to deepen the question of treatment effectiveness (e.g., Baron & Morin, 2009); and doing so at this specific stage where the human aspect is preponderant (e.g., Anis et al., 2018) can provide meaningful results about other operating mechanisms concerning EC in this less common studied phase.

Context. One of the context in which EC requires further study is business incubators. This is because research has focused on the processes and operations of the supporting organization without adequately considering the content of the interventions. Within incubator programs, EC is referred to in different terms, such as mentoring or business coaching (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Schutte, 2019); and is placed as a constant ingredient without knowing what precisely it consists of. Investigating EC within incubators is relevant as they support nascent entrepreneurs at a stage where the probability of failure is exceptionally high (Gozali et al., 2015). By knowing the content of the intervention, incubators will be more adept at choosing and planning activities.

Target. EC devoted to supporting entrepreneurial teams still lacks adequate studies. We suggest investigating how coaching works for entrepreneurial teams to identify (i) elements that differentiate it from the traditional dyadic and, thus, one-to-one coaching form; and (ii) how this type of intervention has been shown to be effective. Understanding entrepreneurial phenomena at the team level is currently of paramount importance. Indeed, teams have “a greater potential than individuals to rise to the growing challenges facing organizations” (Widdowson et al., 2020; p.1;

Hawkins, 2017); and thus arises the need to provide a better understanding of how to improve the support of entrepreneurial teams. In this case, we refer to entrepreneurial team coaching, which we defined as a developmental intervention to support learning capabilities and dynamics of the group as a whole, with possible benefits in learning and increased performance and well-being for individual and team members (Dassen, 2015).

Outcomes. Much must be done to understand how the studied outcomes can provide meaningful information about coaching effectiveness. Considering previous studies on the topic, Schermuly et al. (2021) indicated that these works ignore essential situational moderators; indeed, these outcomes need to be more connected to the coaching context. We propose that these outcomes should be placed within a dynamic model. The model's dynamism lies in the fact that it must adequately consider the context, the stage of the entrepreneurial process, and the temporal issue, especially for organisational outcomes. To methodologically capture this complexity, we suggest adopting longitudinal designs to monitor the evolution of outcomes and the relationship between them over time.

EC and mentoring. EC is often confused with other support interventions, particularly mentoring. Although past studies have attempted to demarcate the conceptual boundaries between the two interventions, this confusion persists in theory and practice. Through our work, we defined EC as a broad intervention, and as a consequence, it may overlap with mentoring in some cases. Future research should investigate the differences between these two interventions in entrepreneurship by reading both constructs with the processual lens we proposed, which considers process phases, target, context and outcomes. In this way, it will be possible to identify the singular and common features of these two interventions and understand when and how they overlap within the entrepreneurial domain.

Contribution

This SLR contributes to the literature on EC in three ways. First, we extended the definition of EC devised by Kotte et al. (2021) and provided further details concerning the target of the intervention, the types of programs in which EC can be embedded, and the wide spectrum of outcomes.

Second, we identified the complexity of EC, which has already been mentioned by previous studies (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019; Kotte et al., 2021). We provided a systematization of these factors within four known entrepreneurial dimensions (Gartner, 1985), from which theorizing on the different functioning of EC emerged. In so doing, we contributed to the problem of conceptual ambiguity, specifically between EC and mentoring.

Finally, from our organizing framework, we provided a line of research that will lead future studies to investigate specific aspects of EC in a systematic manner.

Practical Implications

This chapter has practical implications for entrepreneurship support organizations. Incubators, accelerators, and other training programs can benefit from a more orderly conceptualization of coaching when defining its role within the program. Specifically, not only can the coach's intervention be structured in a precise manner according to the target group or stage of the entrepreneurial process, but content, tools, and methods can be defined according to the needs of the coachees.

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APPENDIX 1

To view the matrix used for data extraction, access the following link:

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1YXgyPi9hht5yZUvylB2JqL6 -
ztULbJQ/edit?gid=656144709#gid=656144709](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1YXgyPi9hht5yZUvylB2JqL6-ztULbJQ/edit?gid=656144709#gid=656144709)

CHAPTER 3

WHAT DOES THE COACH SAY? KEY SUCCESS FACTORS OF ENTREPRENEURIAL COACHING

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to deepen the understanding of key factors for successful entrepreneurial coaching interventions. It explores how these factors interact to influence the generation of positive coaching outcomes according to the professional coaches' perspective.

We adopt an inductive approach and a qualitative research design to investigate the perceptions of coaches. Based on 30 semi-structured narrative interviews, it emerges that the success of entrepreneurial coaching hinges on the coach's expertise, the entrepreneur's cognitive engagement, the nature of the coaching intervention, and the quality of the coaching relationship.

Effective communication shapes expectations, enhancing coachability and trust. Trust, reinforced by the coach's expertise and deep listening, enables a co-construction process in which coach and entrepreneur collaboratively tailor the intervention, resulting in a high-quality relationship and successful outcomes.

This chapter contributes to the literature on entrepreneurial coaching effectiveness by providing insights from coaches who professionally and systematically support entrepreneurs. It enhances understanding of the key success factors providing a more detailed perspective about the coach's expertise and levers that the coach can use to ensure that entrepreneurs' expectations are aligned with the type of intervention they will receive, with the aim of increasing their motivation and levels of coachability. Finally, this chapter highlights the conditions for a high-quality coaching relationship, while illustrating how these dimensions interact to determine the success of the intervention.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial coaching effectiveness; Coach's perspective; Qualitative study; Success factors.

INTRODUCTION

The entrepreneurial process entails a myriad of challenges that can lead to severe consequences, such as project failure and business abandonment, particularly in the early stages of the start-up journey (Kotashev, 2022)⁵. Consequently, numerous support organizations—such as incubators, accelerators (Bergman & McMullen, 2021), and entrepreneurship education programs (European Commission, 2018)—aim to assist entrepreneurs in navigating this complex process (Clausen, 2020) by providing a diverse portfolio of developmental interventions. Within this context, EC is increasingly recognized as instrumental in offering tailored support to nascent entrepreneurs. EC is gaining traction both scientifically and professionally, evidenced by a notable rise in the number of professional coaches, which now exceeds 20,000 worldwide (International Coaching Federation)⁶. This growth is paralleled by an increase in academic publications on the subject, indicating that the debate surrounding coaching—characterized by numerous attempts to conceptualize it in relation to other types of interventions and to understand the elements that determine its effectiveness—is becoming vibrant (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021).

Research on coaching effectiveness has highlighted various key aspects. Particularly in organizational and entrepreneurial contexts (Grover & Furnham, 2016; Kotte et al., 2021), studies have explored different approaches to measuring effectiveness, demonstrating that coaching produces both professional outcomes, such as improved performance and skill acquisition (Kutzhanova et al., 2009), and personal outcomes, including well-being and resilience (Theeboom et al., 2014; Grant et al., 2017). Furthermore, the literature has also focused on identifying the key success factors of coaching, suggesting that the success of the intervention depends on a combination of factors, including the relationship between coach and coachee and the coachee's

⁵ <https://www.failory.com/blog/startup-failure-rate> viewed on 6 December 2023

⁶ <https://coachingfederation.org/> viewed on 6 December 2023

individual characteristics, such as motivation and openness to change (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Grover & Furnham, 2016).

However, despite revealing significant findings, scholars emphasize that evaluating how coaching works remains challenging, noting that "the variety of studied goals are intrinsically incompatible as outcome measures" (Grover & Furnham, 2016, p. 4). This disparity in outcome measures arises from the complex nature of coaching, which involves numerous factors contributing to success. Consequently, it remains unclear how these factors interact and influence outcomes (Bozer & Jones, 2018). Therefore, studying coaching effectiveness must adopt approaches that allow for an exploration of the key success factors by delving into the direct experiences of the individuals involved in the coaching process (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019).

By employing a qualitative research design, this study addresses this gap by identifying and deepening the understanding of the key success factors in EC, based on the perspectives of 30 coaches who professionally and systematically support entrepreneurs. Focusing on their perspective is essential, as they initiate the coaching process and are responsible for the structures and methodologies employed as qualified experts (Azizi et al., 2023). A better understanding of the details surrounding these success factors will enable the identification of potential relationships among them, thereby elucidating how they collectively influence the outcomes generated by the intervention.

This chapter contributes to the literature on EC effectiveness by focusing on coaches who support entrepreneurs, a perspective that has been under-researched (Cox et al., 2023). In so doing, it completes the understanding of the dynamics through which EC effectiveness manifests, based on the real experiences of the coaches. It offers in-depth insights into the key success factors, providing a more detailed perspective about the coach's expertise, the levers that the coach can use to ensure that entrepreneurs' expectations are aligned with the type of intervention they will

receive, with the aim of increasing their motivation and levels of coachability, and conditions for a high-quality coaching relationship (Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016). Additionally, it presents an integrated view of EC success, illustrating how the interaction of various dimensions—communication, expectations, and trust—leads to the development of a strong coaching relationship, ultimately driving successful outcomes.

This chapter is structured as follows: the next section presents the theoretical background, exploring the key points of the debate on coaching effectiveness. Subsequently, the methodology adopted is described, followed by the presentation and discussion of the results. Finally, practical implications are defined, limitations of this work are highlighted, and suggestions for future research are offered.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Key Themes in Coaching Effectiveness Literature

In this section, we present the studies that characterize the debate on coaching effectiveness. After specifying the key themes, we will address the debate concerning coaching specifically for entrepreneurs. In Appendix 2, we include a summary matrix reporting an overview of the studies that we have been scrutinized to elaborate our arguments.

Among the various aspects that characterize the debate on coaching, such as its historical evolution (e.g., Koopman et al., 2021) and challenges regarding its definition (e.g., Kotte et al., 2021), the issue of its effectiveness has captured the attention of the majority of scholars. This interest is evidenced by the growing number of publications in recent years focusing on understanding the mechanisms behind coaching effectiveness in organizational contexts. Indeed, data from research

databases such as Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus show a significant increase in indexed studies published between 2016 and 2021.⁷

Several approaches have been used to observe and measure coaching effectiveness. Researchers have sought to deepen their understanding by examining the types of outcomes generated, identifying key success factors, and establishing criteria for standardizing and generalizing the measurement of coaching effects. The most common studies conceptualize coaching effectiveness based on its ability to produce specific categories of outcomes, aiming to empirically support the notion that coaching interventions lead to predictable results. It has been shown that coaching has a significant impact not only on professional outcomes, such as improved performance, the acquisition of task-specific skills, or strengthened work attitudes, but also on personal dimensions like self-regulation and enhanced well-being (Theeboom et al., 2014). As such, coaching is increasingly viewed as a support system that adds value to individuals, improving personal growth before professional performance, particularly when dealing with complex tasks (Jones et al., 2016). For this reason, research has increasingly focused on the personal aspects of the coachee, emphasizing outcomes like self-efficacy (Grant et al., 2017; McCarthy, 2010; Saadoui & Affess, 2015), improved relational management (McCarthy, 2014), perspective-taking, resilience, reduced stress and anxiety (Grant et al., 2017), heightened awareness, and more effective change management (Gray, 2011). Given this trend, coaching is now entering the realm of psychological studies, examining its influence on the coachee's psychological well-being and cognitive performance, with positive outcomes (Schermuly et al., 2021). Studies focused on identifying specific outcomes and testing how coaching interventions influence their emergence have compiled comprehensive lists of results associated with coaching, without fully addressing how these

⁷ Data emerging from the keyword search "Workplace Coaching Effectiveness" based on publication years.

outcomes are generated, leaving questions about the mechanisms behind coaching effectiveness (Kotte et al., 2021). To bridge this gap, other studies have begun to focus on the identification of the factors that determine coaching success (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Rekalde et al., 2015).

Key insights from this line of research conceptualize coaching success as the result of a set of favorable conditions (Audet & Couteret, 2012) viewed from different perspectives: the coachee, the coach, and their relationship (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Bergman & McMullen, 2021; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Gan & Chong, 2015; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Kotte et al., 2021; Sonesh et al., 2015). The coaching relationship, especially when built on mutual trust, is widely considered the most critical factor for a successful intervention. A common conceptual framework for analyzing the coaching relationship is the working alliance (Diller et al., 2022; Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015; Baron & Morin, 2009; Kotte et al., 2021), which involves mutual agreement on goals, tasks to achieve these goals (Baron & Morin, 2009), and the bond between coach and coachee (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015). This relationship is essential for success, enabling coachees to focus on their goals and turn aspirations into actions (Diller et al., 2022). A relationship-centered approach is suggested as the most effective foundation for professional support (Bergman & McMullen, 2021), as it significantly increases the likelihood of rapid skill transfer in the workplace (Sonesh et al., 2015).

From the coachee's perspective, motivation and openness to receiving support have been identified as crucial factors (Grover & Furnham, 2016), leading to greater commitment to building a high-quality coaching relationship (Rekalde et al., 2015). This commitment and motivation are encapsulated in the concept of coachability, reflecting the coachee's willingness to step back, challenge the status quo, and be open to external guidance (Ciuchta et al., 2018). This is particularly relevant given the ongoing perception barriers among managers, executives, and entrepreneurs, who sometimes view coaches as lacking practical solutions (Zinger et al., 1996) or even as incompetent (Curran & Blackburn, 2000).

From the coach's perspective, numerous studies have shown that their behavior and methodology are crucial to the success of the intervention (e.g., Birknerova et al., 2022; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Boyatzis et al., 2024; Kotte et al., 2021; Lawley, 2016; Mansoori et al., 2019). Kotte et al. (2021) identified seven key coaching functions, each reflecting specific behaviors: supportive, reflective, skill development, optimization, educational, implementation, and connective behaviors. These behaviors highlight the coach's role in aligning the coaching process with the coachee's needs. These behaviors align with the International Coaching Federation (ICF) guidelines, which emphasize building a strong coaching relationship, adhering to ethical standards, effective communication, and fostering learning and growth. Adherence to these professional standards is a key factor in achieving success (Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2018). Moreover, the coach is tasked with setting clear goals, creating intellectual challenges, and stimulating critical thinking (Azizi et al., 2023; Birknerova et al., 2022). A coach's skills are also reflected in the selection of innovative methodologies. In entrepreneurial contexts, for instance, coaches who incorporated Lean methodologies into acceleration programs, aimed at optimizing processes and co-creating value with the target market (Bortolini et al., 2021), observed shifts in relational dynamics, facilitating learning, critical reflection, and evolutionary changes in practice (Mansoori et al., 2019). Other authors suggest approaches to enhance communication between coach and coachee, such as Clean Language (Lawley, 2016), which allows coachees to explore and modify their internal metaphors, promoting a deeper self-understanding and lasting behavioral change. Ultimately, the coach's goal in effective coaching is to foster behavioral change in coachees (Boyatzis et al., 2024), facilitated by active listening and emotional intelligence.

Finally, a segment of the literature has focused on developing a standardized scale for measuring coaching outcomes across different contexts. Azizi et al. (2023) identified five key dimensions for measuring coaching effectiveness in small and medium-sized enterprises: setting

clear goals, creating intellectual challenges, developing relational skills, enhancing creativity, and adopting an innovative mindset.

Entrepreneurial Coaching Effectiveness

Compared to studies that have sought to understand the effectiveness of workplace coaching or similar forms of support, such as executive coaching or business coaching, empirical substance for EC is significantly lower. The reasons for this lie primarily in how EC originated in academic research: lacking a theoretical framework or reference model, scholars began measuring the effectiveness of coaching support for entrepreneurs by referring to existing models developed for other interventions, such as mentoring. Although similar in methodology and approach (Audet & Couteret, 2012), coaching assumes different connotations, starting with the nature of the relationship - as the coach, unlike the mentor, is an external professional - and in the role of the coach compared to the mentor, as the coach does not transfer their own experience (Kotte et al., 2021). Evidence of this theoretical extension by analogy emerges from Audet & Couteret's (2012, p.517) reflections, which state: "The books and papers on the subject of coaching are often normative and have been produced mainly by consultants to promote their own recipes, rather than by researchers taking a more objective view. As a result, the review was extended to include the academic literature on mentoring and entrepreneurial consulting, due to its similarities with the concept under study in terms of processes." Furthermore, in a recent study by Azizi et al. (2023) aimed at developing a scale to measure EC and its effects on innovation attitudes in small and medium-sized enterprises, the researchers defined a set of typical coach competencies by referring to McKevitt & Marshall's (2015) model, which was originally developed for mentoring. In entrepreneurship, it is common to borrow models from other disciplines and adapt them to the phenomena under study (Grant & Perren, 2002). However, for coaching, this *modus operandi* has

led to a conflation of the two disciplines, making it difficult to distinguish them even in the methods used to understand their effects. For this reason, significant differences between the key success factors of mentoring and EC have not yet emerged.

In this regard, Kotte et al.'s (2021) study offers a fundamental contribution by providing a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of coaching. According to their study, EC differs from other forms like workplace coaching, executive coaching, and entrepreneurial mentoring in several key ways. Unlike workplace coaching, which focuses on reflection and process, EC blends process and expert consultation, offering both reflective support and practical advice, similar to executive coaching. EC also has a broader focus, targeting the individual, their work, and their venture, whereas workplace coaching emphasizes only the individual's professional development. Moreover, EC often involves directive guidance—providing tools and strategies—unlike the non-directive approach of workplace coaching. While sharing elements with entrepreneurial mentoring, such as a broad scope, EC is less centered on role-modeling and knowledge transfer. This blend of reflective and directive elements makes EC a hybrid approach tailored to the specific challenges entrepreneurs face.

The positioning of EC as described by Kotte et al. (2021) reveals the need for further investigation into the effectiveness of this intervention. Given the significant differences highlighted by the study in relation to the entrepreneurial target group, it is not possible to rely on reflections concerning outcomes and key success factors derived from non-entrepreneurial targets. Diller et al. (2022) confirm this observation, asserting that entrepreneurs require a support relationship that goes beyond the traditional working alliance, precisely because entrepreneurs have a much deeper and more complex connection with their business reality (Jayaraman et al., 2000; St-Jean, 2011). This implies the need to explore in detail what characteristics a coaching intervention must possess

in order to best support entrepreneurs, identifying elements related to the coach, the entrepreneur, and the contextual environment (Grover & Furnham, 2016).

Providing details on the characteristics of the intervention means considering the perspective of professional coaches who systematically work with entrepreneurs. This is because they are responsible for designing the interventions, collecting statistics on critical factors, and explaining, based on their career experiences, how to define the active ingredients for success. This approach is functional for a better understanding of EC effectiveness, as it does not aim to isolate individual success factors, but rather to investigate how these factors, in relation to one another, define the pathways of effectiveness and benefit for the entrepreneur. Therefore, this chapter aims to address the following research question: *What, according to coaches, are the critical success factors of EC, and how do they interact with each other to ensure the success of the intervention?*

METHOD

Research Design

To address the research question, we employ a qualitative research design that allows for a deep exploration of coaches' perceptions concerning the critical factors for successful EC. This methodology not only enables us to understand the significance that coaches place on effective coaching within the context of their professional experiences but also provides a thorough insight into their views shaped by their careers in coaching entrepreneurs (Neergard & Uihøi, 2007). Additionally, we opted for a qualitative design as it is essential for developing theoretical insights into areas that are still underexplored or have not yet been addressed in the EC literature (Van Burg et al., 2020).

Participants⁸

The sampling process commenced with direct outreach to coaches through websites or social networking pages. Our objective was to extend invitations to certified coaches (such as International Coaching Federation certification, ACC coaches) or those with specialized training in coaching (such as master's degrees, coaching schools). After browsing their personal websites and LinkedIn pages, coaches were approached via either email or telephone. In a second phase, in order to expand the pool of coaches for interviews, we employed the snowball sampling technique (Parker et al., 2019). At the conclusion of each interview, we sought suggestions for contacting other coaches in the field of entrepreneurship. Following these procedures, our sample is consisting of 30 coaches specialized in supporting entrepreneurs, of which 40% identified as male, while 60% identified as female. The average age of the sample is 51 years, with an average of 12 years of coaching experience. Finally, 70% percent of the participants work in Italy, 20% percent in France. Only one participant comes from Spain, as well as one from Germany and one from Switzerland. Table 1 delineates the participants of this study along with their demographic information.

⁸ The sampling procedure has been clarified following the reviewers' comments.

Table 1:
Participants' Demographic Information

ID	Gender	Age	Work Location	Education	Years of experience
C1	Male	35	Italy	Master's degree	8
C2	Male	67	Italy	Degree in Psychology	12
C3	Male	51	Italy	Degree in Philosophy	10
C4	Female	68	Italy	Degree in Psychology	13
C5	Female	48	Italy	Degree	4
C6	Female	39	Italy	Degree	8
C7	Female	48	Italy	Degree	14
C8	Female	62	Italy	Degree	12
C9	Female	49	Italy	Degree	15
C10	Female	n/a	France	PhD in Entrepreneurship	15
C11	Male	55	Italy	Degree in Economics	20
C12	Male	57	Italy	Degree in Sociology	23
C13	Female	56	Italy	Degree	6
C14	Male	59	France	BA Administration Public Accounting	20
C15	Male	40	Germany	Bachelor in Journalism	5
C16	Female	53	Italy	Executive Master INSEAD	15
C17	Female	50	Italy	Degree in Political Sciences	17
C18	Female	47	Spain	Master's degree	14
C19	Male	51	Italy	Degree in Economics	8
C20	Female	49	Italy	Degree in Economics	3
C21	Female	52	Italy	Degree in Economics	10
C22	Female	41	Italy	Degree in Law	2
C23	Female	46	Italy	Degree in Sociology	7
C24	Male	47	Italy	Degree in Economics	10
C25	Female	50	Switzerland	Master's degree	14
C26	Male	67	France	MBA	30
C27	Male	53	France	Engineering and MBA	5
C28	Female	68	France	DESS in Clinical Psychology	24
C29	Female	45	France	PhD	13
C30	Male	41	Italy	Degree	10

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Data Collection

Data were collected through online semi-structured narrative interviews, a type of interview that collects personal stories related to the experiences of the interviewees. These interviews place the interviewee at the center of the study, allowing researchers to better understand the context and integrity of people's experiences (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). This method facilitates the comparison of individual cases while allowing the emergence of new issues (Louis & Fatien-Diochon, 2014), and recollects the many shades of a complex phenomenon, while guarantying the informants the possibility to share their experience without any pre-established limit (Barribal & While, 1994). Aligned with the explorative aims of this study, the interview protocol remains open and flexible. It comprises a narrative segment, where the interviewee's story unfolds from broad questions, and a more specific part targeting issues pertinent to the research objectives. Specifically, the questions seek insights into how the coach perceived their support for entrepreneurs and achieved success in their career. To gather additional elements, coaches were prompted to provide anecdotes and metaphors describing their work as coaches. Throughout each interview, the researcher diligently recorded notes on the insights gleaned from the conversation with the coach. Subsequently, at the conclusion of each interview, the audio recording was revisited, accompanied by the researcher's annotations, in order to compile thorough and comprehensive field notes. On average, the interviews had a duration of 37 minutes, ranging from a minimum of 27 minutes to a maximum of 53 minutes. In Appendix I we present the interview's protocol with the list of questions we asked to our respondents.

Data Analysis

Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed. We analyzed semi-structured interviews using QCA (Mayring, 2015; Schreier, 2012), performed with Nvivo14 software. Adopting

an inductive approach, we engaged in a systematic process of reading the transcripts alongside the field notes and initiated coding. Data analysis was articulated around the following steps:

1. *Selecting*: Since QCA focuses on analyzing specific content that addresses the research question and objectives, the initial stage involved thoroughly reading the transcribed interviews to identify and select relevant participant responses related to their perceptions of the key success factors in EC.
2. *Structuring and Generating*: In this phase, we developed our coding framework, which included dimensions and subdimensions identified inductively through a data-driven approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By applying open coding, we pinpointed coding units within the responses and extracted relevant concepts. This approach helped us to better conceptualize the dimensions. We applied this process across all interviews, iteratively grouping the relevant concepts into dimensions and subdimensions to capture subtle nuances in meaning.
3. *Defining*: After determining the primary dimensions and subdimensions, we provided clear definitions for each to ensure consistent application. We assigned a name to each dimension, outlined its meaning, gave examples, and established decision rules to clarify the criteria for assigning specific coding units to each dimension.
4. *Revising*: This stage involved revisiting the interview transcripts and reviewing our coding framework (Mayring, 2015). This allowed us to refine the identified dimensions based on new insights that emerged during the review process.

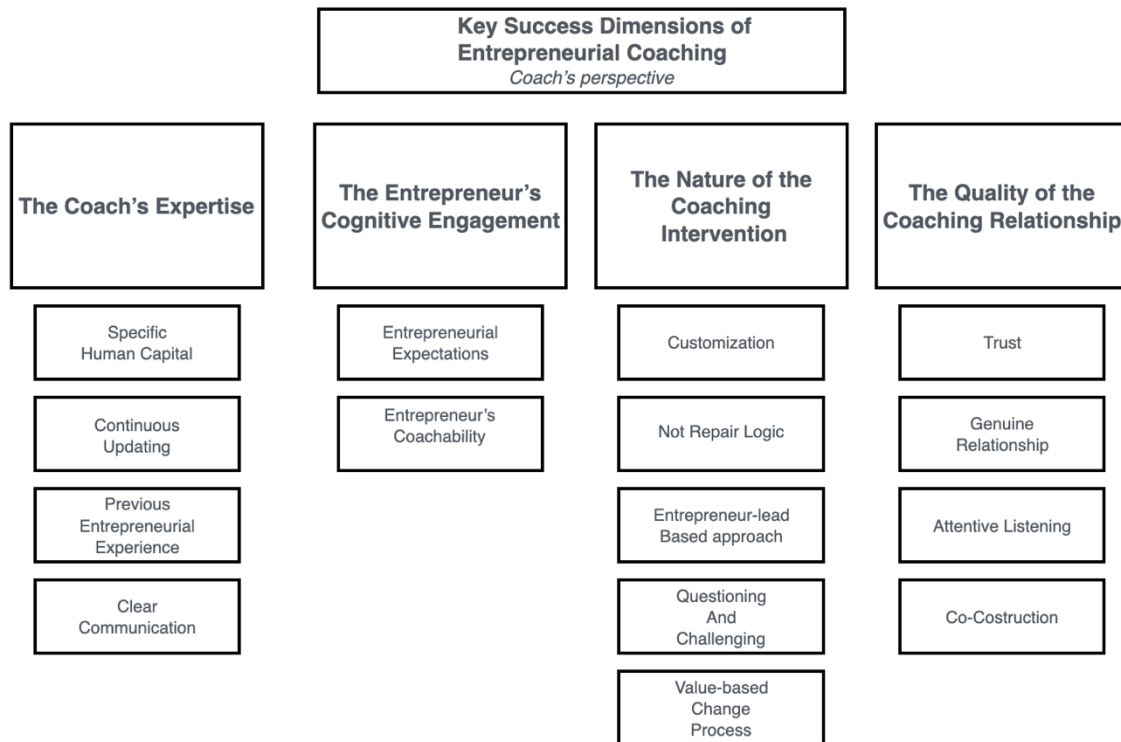
RESULTS

In this section we present the results of our study. Below, we describe the four dimensions of EC success that emerged from the interviews with the coaches, further elaborated into sub-

dimensions. Figure 1 provides a summary of the dimensions and sub-dimensions we identified. Table 2, on the other hand, aims to highlight the most significant quotes from the coaches related to each sub-dimension.

Figure 1:

Dimensions and Sub-dimensions for Entrepreneurial Coaching Effectiveness



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Entrepreneurial Coaching Success

The interviewed coaches expressed hesitation and difficulty in providing a clear definition of "success." This challenge arises from the near impossibility of generalizing the success of coaching, as countless factors interact during the support process, and each case maintains a distinct identity, with traits that are not always consistently observable. However, there is general agreement in defining coaching success as the achievement of the objectives agreed upon with the entrepreneur, facilitated in part by various session monitoring systems employed by some coaches. Additionally, the entrepreneur's satisfaction, particularly in response to perceived changes, is also seen as an indicator of coaching success. Regardless of their personal definitions of success, the coaches were able to identify a set of active ingredients they recognized in their own experiences as effective and positive. The dimensions of effectiveness they identified relate to the coach, the entrepreneur, the characteristics of the coaching intervention, and the relational aspects between the coach and the entrepreneur.

The Coach's Expertise

The coach's contribution to the success of the intervention is characterized by their overall level of expertise, defined by their specific human capital, their commitment to continuous learning, prior entrepreneurial or business experience, and the adoption of a clear and direct communication style. However, these sub-dimensions impact the success of coaching in different ways.

The coach's specific human capital refers to their education and training as a professional coach. The interviewees emphasized the necessity, particularly in today's context—where coaching as a profession is unregulated and may involve diverse educational backgrounds and career choices—of holding recognized national and international credentials, such as ICF accreditation and the ACC (Associate Certified Coach) certification. These qualifications signal that a coach has met

specific standards of competence and professionalism. Nevertheless, specific human capital is not solely determined by certifications; it also includes training received from institutions that develop a coach's skills across multiple dimensions, such as humanistic coaching schools or Marina Osnaghi's business coaching institute. Specific human capital contributes to EC success by equipping the coach with tools, skills, and competencies necessary to operate according to professional standards, ensuring the coachee's satisfaction and the achievement of their goals. Moreover, it is essential that the coach demonstrates a strong commitment to continuous learning, even in areas seemingly unrelated to their expertise. This curiosity allows them to internalize and apply insights from the constantly evolving world, enabling them to offer the entrepreneur innovative, creative support that is better adapted to emerging and increasingly complex needs.

With regard to the coach's prior experience in fields analogous to that of the coachee—in this case, entrepreneurship and business—it emerged that such experience does not necessarily determine the effectiveness of the intervention. A coach with prior entrepreneurial experience may simply better understand the coachee's context, particularly in terms of communication (e.g., greater ease in comprehending technical jargon). However, based on the insights from the interviewed coaches, coaching does not involve the direct transfer of experience to the coachee. The coach operates within a framework of professional boundaries that dictate their conduct, thus limiting the direct influence of their personal business experience. Finally, the coach's expertise is defined by their communication skills. A skilled coach must establish a dialogue with the entrepreneur that is characterized by clarity, particularly in relation to the coaching process and the coach's role. According to the coaches interviewed, this is crucial because coaching is often mistakenly perceived as an intervention that provides concrete solutions to the entrepreneur's problems. The coach must clarify that their role is to guide the entrepreneur in cultivating an

environment that enables them to identify their own solutions independently. In Table 2 we present the most significant quotes from coaches for the coach's expertise dimension.

Table 2: Quotes from Coaches for Coach's Expertise– Source: Authors' own elaboration		
Meaningful Quote	Sub-dimension	Dimension
"So I decided to do a very important school in business coaching. That was just a very clear input that I gave to my management; so, from 2021 I am registered with ICF, so, I am an ACC coach and I work with individuals and businesses." "The effectiveness of coaching undoubtedly comes from the figure of the coach, his or her experience and training." "I became a master coach of the International Coaching Federation and started doing coaching assessments around the world. I developed an important network that allowed me to enter a global market and brought the U.S. coaching school where I had studied to Italy and Spain." "I decided to do the coaching school in Rome in 2016. Then, from 2016 I started my coaching activity with different working groups and at the individual level." "I took a graduate course at the University of Florence on psychological interviewing in the work context that included counselling, coaching and skills assessment." "For me the in-depth study part is a constant of my profession because I think you need high level preparation always. So, for me, study is a constant of my activity" "I received my education at this school in this school where I work now that is called the humanistic coaching school."	Specific Human Capital of the coach	The Coach's Expertise
"The curiosity of the coaches who want to understand where they are placed, so they want to understand the world, i.e., an up-to-date coach, is crucial. They have to know what is happening in the world, what is happening in the relationships between countries, what is happening in world economies, what are the trends in certain sectors..." "I coped well with each case because I never stopped studying. Studying, growing, I attended three coaching schools, four coaching paths, two mentoring paths, supervision..." "I follow this up with a series of studies on neuroscience, behavioral science, brain functioning, which go along with further specialization courses on coaching, which go to work on and refine my ability to be present with people and responsive to people, on the one hand and on the other hand that also go to enrich the system, the set of tools, processes and techniques that I have at my disposal." "Because of my prior entrepreneurial experience, I can understand the context better and it helps me in communication. Okay. That's one aspect of it. The other aspect is a systemic aspect, meaning you understand the variables that are involved. So in my opinion having an experience that has taught you to think a certain way helps. Compared to the coaching methodology there is nothing more, that is standard." "With the understanding that coaching is not an intervention that solves someone's problems or gives you advice, the coach is a subject matter expert. However, having prior knowledge of business and entrepreneurship has helped me in connecting with the entrepreneur." "The coach doesn't have to have that kind of experience, although having it in my opinion speeds you up perhaps in 'intercepting the right stimulus that you can give the client.'"	Continuous updating	
"An important part of coaching with these entrepreneurs is related to the issue of clarity, that is, exactly what a person wants. People are very clear about what they are doing, often what they are not clear about is their mission, i.e., why they are doing it, and this is important because helping them to ground, to verbalize." "So it's about courage, it's about clarity. And it's about being aware of the important paths and methodologies you need to have in order to create a great environment to make a great coaching process." "Clarifying my role as a coach concerning to other interventions is essential because it helps to set the expectations of the pathway and comes back to a term you use but that is the term of success. Success or what a person defines by success in a coaching pathway. However, in so many areas of life, it is not so much related to what you bring home as to the extent to which what you bring home is close to the expectations someone had." "I am also mentor and when you move from coaching to mentoring I state it and I ask the question to the person with respect to what they need right now." "I think the main characteristic is the definition. It means that it must be a well-defined coaching that does not arouse how to say doubts in the person who is contacting you precisely that not that the coach is not mistaken for a consultant."	Clear Communication	

The Entrepreneur's Cognitive Engagement

The success of coaching is also influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of the entrepreneur before and during the engagement with the coach. In particular, the entrepreneur can shape the extent of the benefit received based on their expectations and motivation, both of which are encompassed in the concept of *coachability* and together determine the entrepreneur's level of cognitive engagement.

The entrepreneur's expectations are critical to the success of the intervention and must be appropriately shaped through clear communication from the coach. An entrepreneur who clearly understands what to expect from the coaching sessions is more aware of their starting point and the potential they can achieve through coaching. If, however, the entrepreneur expects to receive a ready-made solution, they may feel disappointed or frustrated by the coaching process, which typically involves gradual change and requires time and patience.

This is directly related to the entrepreneur's motivation and level of coachability. An entrepreneur who has realistic expectations about what to anticipate from a coaching session is more likely to engage fully in the process, accepting this specific form of guidance. According to the interviewed coaches, *coachability* refers to the entrepreneur's willingness to receive advice, feedback on their performance, and input from an external party. It is evident that for coaching to be effective, the entrepreneur must embrace this form of guidance, allowing them to overcome any resistance to change. In Table 3 we present the most significant quotes from coaches for the entrepreneur's cognitive engagement dimension.

Table 3: Quotes from Coaches for Entrepreneur’s Cognitive Engagement – Source: Authors’ own elaboration		
Meaningful Quote	Sub-dimension	Dimension
"The first thing I do is in the first meeting is trying to clearly establish agreements to make them aware of my role and functions as a coach"	Entrepreneurial expectations	The Entrepreneur's Cognitive Engagement
"I try to set their expectations as much as possible in a clearer and more precise way. I really want them to come out of the meeting knowing that what I can offer them goes from a certain point. If it goes well, they choose it no if not it's not a problem, because it's not what they need. This, in my opinion, is the most important thing because then clarified well the arrangements and the rest is easier you travel better also faster."		
"... Because they expect that there is an intervention concerning, let's say, climate improvement. Entrepreneurs believe it comes in a magical way. And then, when they actually focus on the problem, it emerges that is a management issue. Here so you have to bring them to this issue of management."		
"That is, a person may take home a lot from a coaching intervention but being very far from the expectations he had tends to downplay them. Or conversely he or she takes home a little something a sprinkle but certainly very close to what he or she expected he or she considers it very successful. This is essential for me and I devote an important part of a coaching or noncoaching relationship to this aspect because the clients I accept and decide to work with are those who communicate to me, those who are very clear about what to expect from a coach."		
"I think one factor that affected quite a bit was the fact that I followed special entrepreneurs because of the sensitivity they had to the topic of coaching. So this predisposition of theirs to be joined by me made it easier to build the alliance together."	Entrepreneur's Coachability and motivation to learn	
"Hot on the heels of that, I would tell you that one variable that I encounter and that always strikes me so much is this willingness to learn, even though the coaching path is not a training path, however, there is a willingness, as it were, to learn, this thirst to improve, to know what the methodologies are ... certainly this is a determining aspect."		
"The magic ingredient is great foresight and great humility on the part of the entrepreneur or businesswoman-that is, that they are the first people to question themselves who roll up their sleeves to improve themselves.. It is their motivation."		
"Have you ever heard of coachability? It's critical in my work to have criteria to say at some point, "Maybe it's not the coaching that's needed!" This depends essentially on how I analyze the question, that is, the entrepreneur and what he requires of me, but you also have to look into his motivations. Otherwise it is not needed."		

The Nature of the Coaching Intervention

This dimension concerns the characteristics of coaching from the perspective of the nature of support it provides to the entrepreneur, as described by the interviewed coaches. It also specifies the methods they employed that contributed to the success of the intervention.

One key aspect that contributes to successful coaching is its high degree of customization, tailored to the specific needs of the entrepreneur. This necessitates that the coach immerses themselves in a deep understanding of the entrepreneur's requests and constructs a pathway that addresses relevant points to satisfy their personal and professional needs.

For this reason, coaches have defined coaching as a process driven by the entrepreneur. Their role is to enhance the entrepreneur's awareness of multiple perspectives and possible directions, but they do not interfere with the final choices, which ultimately rest with the

entrepreneur. This aspect is why coaches assert that there is no one-size-fits-all model that works universally. Even the tools for monitoring and measuring progress must always be adapted to the specific case.

Moreover, for coaching to be considered effective and to facilitate necessary changes, it must operate on the level of values. The beliefs that entrepreneurs hold—along with the factors that led them to choose entrepreneurship—are fundamental to initiating a process of reflection and transformation. This means that coaching should not focus immediately on surface-level elements, such as the identity with which the client identifies, but rather on the roots—the system of principles that guide the individual. According to the coaches, addressing this dimension leads to significant behavioral changes that help the entrepreneur reach their desired goals through profound introspection.

The values system is accessed through the coach's attitude of challenge and questioning, in alignment with the nature of coaching. The purpose of coaching is to challenge the status quo and existing beliefs, encouraging the entrepreneur to develop greater awareness of their untapped potential. It is not uncommon for the coach to bring to light aspects that may be far from what the entrepreneur wishes to hear, with the aim of enriching their perspective.

Finally, coaching is not the appropriate type of support when a problem arises, as it does not operate according to a corrective or remedial logic. Professional coaches assert that the success of coaching is contingent upon it being accepted as a form of ongoing accompaniment, embracing a developmental and growth-oriented perspective. In Table 4 we present the most significant quotes from coaches for the nature of the coaching intervention dimension.

Table 4: Quotes from Coaches for the Nature of the Coaching Intervention– Source: Authors' own elaboration

Meaningful Quote	Sub-dimension	Dimension
"First of all the fact that it's an activity tailored to the entrepreneur that's a very important thing. The coach has to be good at doing that to understand who I'm dealing with and offer them the challenge."	Customization	The Nature of the Coaching Intervention
"The question is always related to the coaching intervention aimed at changing situation of organizational gender. I usually activate the methodological foundations of coaching, which are valid for any kind of intervention, but at the content level... well, you only find out by living."		
"One characteristic of my work as a coach is that it is very variable. It implies that the coaches are dealing with very different people so each time you have a different problem and a different person or a different business in front of them, although I approach them according to the rules of coaching."		
"I can also start in coaching the enterprise, we can start in team building, we can start in developing customer relationships... that is there it really depends really on the demand analysis that we do within the organization."		
"There is never a pre-packaged model for what our work is like where I know I have had success with that person and then I use the same model for another person. I always have to have that humility of being a coach that then leads you to be very attentive to the situation that is completely new despite maybe there are variables that come back."		
"The intervention project is really co-constructed with the entrepreneur, who are the protagonists of the intervention. They are all tailored interventions, like a tailored suit. There is no success model, I relate with entrepreneurs with the whole set of tools that are more or less the same, but then the fate of the process you cannot plan."	Value-based change process	
"I mean that in addition to providing practical tools that would start maybe an incremental process of change; so, I learn how to handle situations with practical tools, the transformative processes instead I always saw them as something that would go deeper into changing what are the beliefs and principles."		
"Values, because anyway entrepreneurs like every human being moves according to values. Entrepreneurs, who build or have built an enterprise does so because he has such strong values that, like, that guide him and then maybe they change over time, right? Depending on age, values can change, right? Of course, of course they do. But a family, though, underlying, if there is a family, like say, values are that lever for any kind of change."		
"Coaching does not work on the identity of the person. It leverages the person's identity and the system of principles, values, etc. Nevertheless, it aims to act on behavior. Today you come because you have a problem, that's what you think. Actually very often the problem you have is a behavior that has always worked in your life, that has always brought you results that today is dysfunctional and a new behavior is needed."		
"The risk then of adopting a viewpoint that is purely formative or more orthopaedic is always there instead how to say the viewpoint must still be to stand in a logic of starting from strengths and then reaching heights of excellence."	Development and not repair logic	
"The intervention should not be set up in an orthopaedic logic, i.e. to go and repair i.e. it is not about going and repairing something it is about going and seizing the strengths the potentialities train them so that they can then be developed."		
"Coaching should be done for a person who is well, who wants to improve, not when there is a solution to be found. That's what crashes people."		
"I become a kind of traveling companion for each and every team but without meddling too much, also because the solutions emerge from themselves, I at most put them in a position to do so."	Entrepreneur-lead based approach	
"I take you to show you the system you are in, make you aware of the resources and your potential. And then at that point, however, you make your own choices, it's not me what you have to do."		
"I'm offering you a cue, I'm offering you my input, why you take it or don't take it is your choice, it's how you take it, what you do with it, how you want to build on it. what behavior you want to act on that new thing."		

The Quality of the Coaching Relationship

According to the interviewed coaches, the relationship between the coach and the entrepreneur is the most relevant dimension of effectiveness, serving as the foundation for the entire coaching process. However, for coaching to be deemed successful, this relationship must meet certain conditions that define its quality.

First and foremost, the concept of trust is central. The entrepreneur's sense of trust in the coach is contingent upon the coach being perceived as a competent individual capable of addressing the entrepreneur's needs. Trust is not established solely through perception but is built through

concrete actions that manifest during the meetings. This entails creating a positive environment where the entrepreneur can express themselves without fear of judgment, fully relying on the coach and providing a comprehensive view of their world. Such an environment fosters a stable and strong relational dynamic, allowing the entrepreneur to be open and enabling the coach to approach the situation in a functional and personalized manner.

In addition to trust, the quality of the coaching relationship is characterized by a general sense of genuineness, openness, and honesty. Genuineness, which encompasses a sense of closeness, makes the coaching relationship one of equality, where the coach does not assume a position of power over the entrepreneur.

Finally, the quality of the relationship is defined by active listening and a logic of co-construction. The listening described by the coaches is deep, attentive, and engaged. They often encounter entrepreneurs who feel a profound sense of solitude, and their primary need is to be heard. Listening to them serves to understand and activate a series of relational dynamics that make the coach appear as a true ally during the journey of change. This form of listening can be likened to empathy; however, coaches emphasize that empathy must be managed carefully to maintain the impartiality of their intervention. The logic of co-construction recognizes that there is always a collaborative element present during the coaching process. It is a highly balanced situation where the contributions of both the coach and the entrepreneur are essential for achieving success. In Table 5 we present the most significant quotes from coaches for the quality of the coaching relationship dimension.

Table 5: Quotes from Coaches for The Quality of the Coaching Relationship – Source: Authors’ own elaboration		
Meaningful Quote	Sub-dimension	Dimension
<i>"The alliance is a relationship of trust that is established between the coach and the coachee, so between the entrepreneur and the coach. It is also a feeling where the coaches know that they can trust, they know that the other person at that moment is not judging us but is helping them."</i>	Trust	The Quality of the Coaching Relationship
<i>"Basically in coaching two things are fundamental as I see and experience. I consider the presence and the trust that are the two deepest skills that are raised that you have experience so the fact of the presence of the trust mixed together."</i>		
<i>"In my opinion in coaching, a very important part is trust building, and we build trust with people even if we can get into their world and that we know what is in theirs."</i>		
<i>"I don't think so, it's really a relationship of trust and partnership between people. When that happens, when you really create that trust, the success of the path is guaranteed."</i>		
<i>"The word trust then is declined in so many ways. I feel that I can trust, I feel that you are trustworthy, I feel that I feel trust towards you, I feel in a protected environment within the session, I feel that I can be fully myself. Trust is essential because it allows the person to express themselves in a 360 degree way and because it legitimize a series of questions that the coach can ask that in an unprotected setting, in a low-trust setting, would be bounced."</i>		
<i>"The kind of relationship that I create with the entrepreneurs is a very very close relationship precisely because I become part of each of these groups and the maxi-group then and this allows me precisely to work also on issues that are personal sometimes."</i>	Genuine Relationship	
<i>"I believe that in my work the building of the coaching relationship is fundamental, that is, the moment you build a good relationship you have the prerequisites to be able to then build the whole coaching process, it is as if it is entry the conditio sine qua non. If I can build a good relationship, so a relationship in which there is listening, there is alliance, there is acceptance and there is creativity, at that point we are able to work constructively."</i>		
<i>"For me the main lever to do with creating a partner relationship, a relationship that is based on, now I would tell you about honesty, openness..."</i>		
<i>"The relationship is an equal relationship it's not that I am an escort and I define that already at the time of the contract at the time of the agreement I define that I am for them an instrument that I take them where they want to go."</i>		
<i>"If it fails to establish an authentic relationship, it is difficult for the coaching relationship to succeed"</i>		
<i>"Because when I listen, I have a listening that allows me to empathize with the person, not that if I didn't have that I couldn't do it, however somehow starting a coaching journey, indeed starting a relationship with an entrepreneur ."</i>	Attentive Listening	
<i>"Entrepreneurs need to be heard, because as with CEOs, there is the loneliness of the CEO, the loneliness of the entrepreneur. Of course, of course. So listening, listening as the first thing, trusting always, yes, listening and trusting are also, these are skills in coaching that are very interconnected. "</i>		
<i>"So the fact that there is an alliance, so that there is really deep listening on the part of the coach; therefore, that there is listening and there is no judgment and therefore there is a mutual truth."</i>		
<i>"Entrepreneurs co-construct with us the conditions to produce change, it is always a logic in doing things together within the relationship"</i>	Co-construction	
<i>"Goals that we define together but that are already in their in their head."</i>		
<i>"The intervention project is truly co-constructed with the entrepreneur that is the key player in the process.."</i>		

DISCUSSION⁹

The objective of this chapter was to identify the key factors that characterize the success of EC, according to the perception of professional coaches who systematically support entrepreneurs. Additionally, this chapter aimed to explore potential connections between the identified factors. The results of this chapter revealed four dimensions of successful EC: the coach's expertise, the entrepreneur's cognitive engagement, the nature of the coaching intervention, and the quality of the coaching relationship. The coach's expertise, which encompasses both formal qualifications and ongoing learning, plays a significant role in the effectiveness of EC. While prior entrepreneurial experience may facilitate understanding, it is not a necessary factor, as the success of coaching largely depends on the coach's ability to communicate effectively and guide without imposing solutions. Similarly, the entrepreneur's attitude, particularly their expectations and motivations, directly impacts the coaching outcome. Clear expectations, shaped by the coach's communication, and a high level of coachability are essential for engagement and overcoming resistance to change. We found that the coaching process is highly personalized, tailored to the entrepreneur's specific needs and values. Successful coaching aims to address deep-seated beliefs, fostering long-lasting behavioral changes. EC is not a quick fix but rather a continuous developmental journey oriented towards growth and transformation. Finally, the relationship between the coach and entrepreneur is the cornerstone of a successful intervention. Trust, built through the coach's competence and the creation of a non-judgmental environment, promotes open communication and effective collaboration. Authenticity and a sense of equality ensure that the coach supports the entrepreneur as a partner, while active and deep listening reinforces the sense of support and understanding.

⁹ The results, theoretical implications, and contribution have been made clearer and more explicit based on the reviewers' comments.

These results present theoretical implications providing a more detailed overview of the dimensions underlying the effectiveness of EC. Through qualitative analysis of coaches' perceptions, we can extract further details that allow us to better describe the essence of these dimensions. Previous studies had already highlighted the importance of the coaching relationship (Diller et al., 2022; Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015; Baron & Morin, 2009; Kotte et al., 2021), the coachee's motivation (Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016), and the role of the coach (Azizi et al., 2023; Mansoori et al., 2019) in achieving positive intervention outcomes. However, these studies, while focusing on these dimensions in isolation or testing their quantitative validity, did not delve into the specific characteristics of each dimension or explain why they are crucial for coaching effectiveness. Our study complements this body of work by providing a more nuanced understanding of these dimensions. Specifically, we found that the coach's expertise comprises multiple elements, but only a proper training path in organizational coaching equips the professional with the key competencies for successful intervention. Contrary to prior hypotheses (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Mansoori et al., 2019), past entrepreneurial experience does not guarantee greater success; rather, it merely facilitates communication between the coach and entrepreneur.

Additionally, we expand on the work of Bozer & Jones (2018) and Grover & Furnham (2016), who identified the coachee's openness as a success factor. Our study emphasizes the crucial role of the entrepreneur's expectations in increasing their motivation and willingness to learn, specifying that the coach must be capable of shaping these expectations through clear and effective communication.

The coaching relationship, already extensively studied, has also been conceptually enriched by considering the entrepreneurial context. Specifically, we clarified the role of the coach's empathy, which is considered a key factor in going beyond a simple working alliance (Diller et al.,

2022). However, our study reveals that empathy must be managed carefully to avoid compromising the coach's impartiality and external judgment. This balance defines the authenticity of the relationship, which, while based on trust, active listening, and closeness, must adhere to specific professional standards.

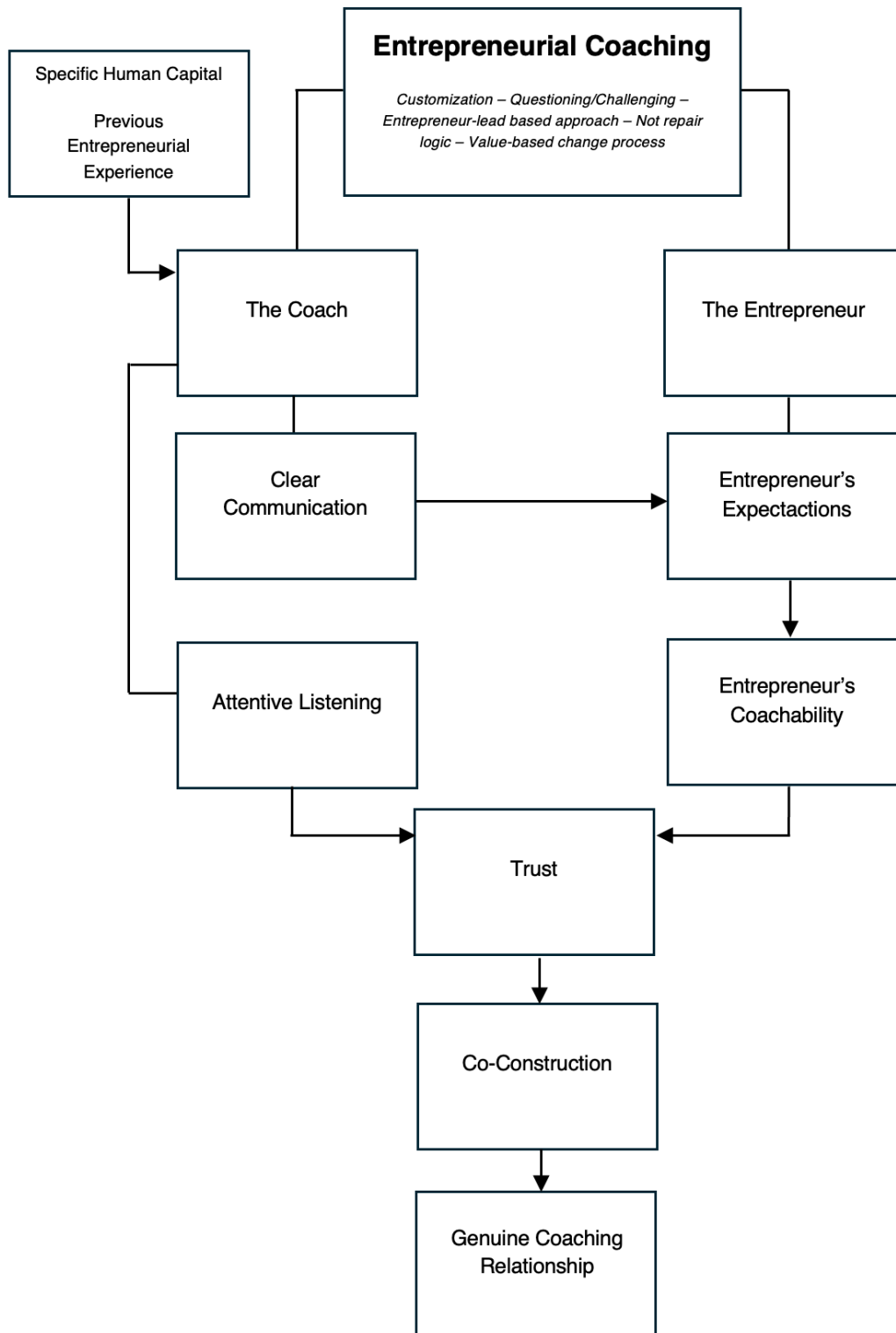
Finally, in addition to advancing the understanding of known dimensions, our study presents in a systemic and comprehensive way the inherent characteristics of coaching interventions. This not only helps explain why coaching is effective but also deepens our conceptual grasp of how the coach structures the intervention with entrepreneurs. While previous studies identified the high degree of customization in coaching interventions (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021), we expand this understanding by adding that, for coaching to drive behavioral change (e.g., Boyatzis et al., 2024) it must first address the entrepreneur's values and beliefs, which are often at the root of resistance to external support.

Relationships between the Dimensions of Success in Entrepreneurial Coaching

In light of the coaches' perceptions, this chapter provides insight into the possible relationships between the various sub-dimensions that characterize the effectiveness of EC. This finding is significant because it attempts to trace the dynamics between coach-entrepreneur-relationship-intervention that explain how effectiveness is manifested. It also addresses questions raised by previous studies (e.g., Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016), which suggested that the dimensions of effectiveness should not be studied through a logic of identification, but rather of correlation. Figure 2 illustrates the relationships we identified.

Figure 2:

Interactions for Successful Entrepreneurial Coaching



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Figure 2 illustrates the sub-dimensions of EC success, as described by professional coaches, and the possible relationships between them. These relationships outline a pathway that leads to the achievement of successful interventions. As we can observe, the inherent characteristics of coaching—namely, its customization and reliance on a dialogue of questioning and challenging between coach and entrepreneur, aimed at influencing the entrepreneur’s values—serve as the foundation. These traits, which distinguish coaching from other interventions that are more solution-oriented and action-driven (see the work of Kotte et al., 2021 and Audet & Couteret, 2012), need to be fully understood and recognized by the entrepreneur, who must have clear expectations regarding the type of support they are receiving.

The entrepreneur’s expectations are shaped by clear and effective communication from the coach, which must focus on explaining these inherent characteristics of coaching. This communication will be facilitated if the coach has prior entrepreneurial experience, making them more relatable to their client in terms of language and knowledge. Once expectations are properly shaped, and the entrepreneur understands what to expect, they are more likely to be motivated to receive support and learn, thereby increasing their level of coachability. This mechanism, which fosters greater openness, leads to the development of trust in the coach. This trust is further strengthened by the coach’s attentive and deep listening, as well as their possession of specific human capital, including certifications and academic qualifications related to their coaching training. These credentials enhance the entrepreneur’s sense of trust, as they serve as a guarantee of the coach’s competence and professionalism.

Once trust is solidified, a co-construction dynamic begins, in which both the coach and entrepreneur mutually engage in building a path tailored to the entrepreneur’s specific needs. The logic of co-construction thus entails closeness, professionalism, honest dialogue, ethical principles, and authenticity from both parties, consolidating a genuine and high-quality coaching relationship.

As demonstrated by the data collected, this is the focal point on which the evaluation of coaching effectiveness should be based. Only through a relationship built on these principles can EC demonstrate its capacity to generate positive and meaningful outcomes, which are accepted by the entrepreneur.

Contribution

This chapter offers several contributions to the literature on the effectiveness of EC. First, we provide findings based on the exploration of the perspective of coaches who work professionally and systematically with entrepreneurs, relying exclusively on their experiences without referencing theoretical models derived from similar support practices, such as mentoring. This is significant because the literature on EC lacked substantial empirical support, and a deep exploration of the coaches' perspective was absent (Cox et al., 2023).

Second, this chapter contributes to a deeper and more detailed understanding of the typical success factors of coaching suggested by previous studies (e.g., Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016), clearly specifying: i) the components of the coach's expertise that influence coaching success; ii) the levers that the coach can use to ensure that entrepreneurs' expectations are aligned with the type of intervention they will receive, with the aim of increasing their motivation and levels of coachability; and iii) the conditions that determine a higher standard of quality in the relationship between coach and entrepreneur. This is relevant because, although the literature has identified certain key success factors, it has not provided in-depth insights into them—insights that only an inductive study like ours could offer.

Third, this chapter contributes to the literature by providing an integrated and relational view of the dimensions of EC success that we identified. In doing so, we address the needs of previous studies (e.g., Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Kotte et al., 2021) to

understand how these factors could be intertwined to formalize a process that leads to successful interventions. In doing so, we enhance the understanding of the effectiveness of EC by outlining the existence of a pathway characterized by effective communication from the coach, shaping the entrepreneur's expectations, and subsequently generating a sense of trust. This trust leads to the establishment of a high-quality coaching relationship, which is essential for achieving successful outcomes. This is important because the literature on coaching effectiveness has largely operated under a logic of mere identification and quantification, and no prior attempt had been made to examine the relationships between these success dimensions.

Practical Implications

This chapter offers practical implications for entrepreneurial coaches and organizations that support entrepreneurship, such as incubators, accelerators, and entrepreneurship education programs.

For entrepreneurial coaches, we emphasize the importance of their coaching training and communicative skills. Attending courses and schools recognized by professional organizations and obtaining certifications increases their status, which in turn allows them to establish more solid and beneficial relationships with their clients. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of adopting an open mindset that is conducive to continuous learning. This will enable coaches to design and structure coaching paths that create greater value for the entrepreneur.

For organizations that support entrepreneurship, the practical implications concern the improvement of the quality of the selection processes for coaches who will support entrepreneurs. The selection of a coach is a crucial phase for the effectiveness of the intervention and the right fit with the entrepreneurs' needs. We suggest that these organizations focus their selection criteria on

the coach's background and training, while also paying attention to the individual's mindset and attitude.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This chapter offers valuable insights into the dimensions of EC success from the perspective of professional coaches; however, there are certain aspects that future research could address to build on these findings. First, while the qualitative method based on semi-structured interviews was instrumental in capturing in-depth perceptions, the results could be enhanced by incorporating larger and more culturally diverse samples. Future studies could use quantitative approaches to validate the dimensions and their relationships across broader contexts.

Additionally, this research focuses specifically on the perspective of coaches, leaving room to explore the viewpoint of entrepreneurs themselves. Integrating the perceptions of both coaches and entrepreneurs in future studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the coaching dynamic and its outcomes. A dual perspective could offer further insights into how both parties contribute to the success of the coaching intervention.

Finally, while this study identifies key dimensions of success, it does not examine the potential impact of external factors such as industry-specific challenges or economic conditions. Future research could explore how these contextual elements influence the effectiveness of EC, offering a more nuanced understanding of how different environments shape coaching outcomes.

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APPENDIX 1

Semi-structured Narrative Interview Protocol for Entrepreneurial Coaches

1. Introduction and Explanation of the Research

- a. Explanation of the research objectives and consent for audio recording.
- b. Introduction to the interview: "I would like to hear your story about your entrepreneurial coaching experience and the details of your relationship with the entrepreneurs you have supported."

2. Coach's Background

- a. When did you start your coaching career?
- b. How and why did you decide to become a coach?
- c. How did you start working with entrepreneurs in your coaching experience?

3. Experience and Perceptions in Entrepreneurial Coaching

- a. What does it mean to you, as a coach, to support and guide entrepreneurs?
- b. Do you think there is a difference between coaching an entrepreneur or a group of entrepreneurs compared to other professionals, such as managers?
- c. What do you believe is the distinctive characteristic of entrepreneurial coaching?
- d. Based on your experience, what is the goal of entrepreneurial coaching?
- e. What are the key characteristics that enable coaching to achieve these goals?

4. Stories, Anecdotes, and Metaphors

- a. Do you have any stories, examples, or anecdotes you would like to share that summarize what you have told me?
- b. If you had to choose a metaphor, which one would best represent your work as a coach?

APPENDIX 2

To view the matrix used for define the Theoretical Background, access the following link:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1la7aB0HwdX3WKeFP7PbePpQVWuMVJzhk/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=103046990244529798001&rtpof=true&sd=true>

CHAPTER 4

ENABLING AND DETERRING FACTORS OF ENTREPRENEURIAL COACHING EFFECTIVENESS: AN EXPLORATION OF START-UP ENTREPRENEURS' PERCEPTIONS

ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to enhance the understanding of coaching effectiveness for start-up entrepreneurs by examining which characteristics of key success factors are linked to the perception of positive outcomes.

Given the difficulty in scrutinizing what occurs within the coaching relationship, we implement a qualitative design, in which we conducted interviews with 11 start-up entrepreneurs who received coaching support within incubators and accelerators in order to capture their perceptions of the experience.

Overall, our findings highlight the existence of enabling factors that allow start-up entrepreneurs to perceive the benefits derived from coaching, namely the coach's authentic attitude, the informal nature of the coaching relationship, and the personality of the start-up entrepreneur. At the same time, we identify deterring factors related to start-up entrepreneurs' perception of coaching effectiveness. These factors stem both from the absence of an organizational culture that adequately values coaching within incubators and accelerators, and from entrepreneurs' limited understanding of what coaching entails compared to other types of interventions. These deterring factors undermine the entrepreneur's personal development, which is considered a crucial outcome for start-up growth.

This chapter contributes to the scholarly debate by presenting one of the first attempts to integrate enabling factors, deterring factors, and coaching outcomes, revealing significant interactions among these dimensions. Furthermore, it provides deeper insights into the coach's attitude and the nature of the coaching relationship, showing how they can be correlated with benefits for start-up entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial coaching effectiveness; Start-up entrepreneurs; Coaching outcomes; Enabling factors; Deterring factors.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, it is reasonable to believe that start-up entrepreneurs—individuals who “have taken steps to found a new business but who have not yet succeeded in making the transition to new business owner” (Carter et al., 1996, p. 151)—are key players in the economic landscape, as they significantly contribute to regional and national growth and innovation (Fiorentino et al., 2021; Frare & Beuren, 2021; Spencer et al., 2008). Given this relevance, entrepreneurial support ecosystems—such as incubators, accelerators, and science parks—have become increasingly popular in practice and in research because they play a crucial role in the growth of start-ups (Bergman & McMullen, 2021). Strengthening these ecosystems is vital, as the early stages of entrepreneurship are particularly fragile (Clausen, 2020), with failure rates reaching 90% (Kotashev, 2021)¹⁰. Key causes include difficulties in securing capital (38%), weak business models (19%), and poor team choices (CBinsights, 2019)¹¹. Consequently, start-up entrepreneurs face constant pressure, uncertainty, stress, and isolation (Stephan, 2018; Cardon & Patel, 2015).

One of the many services these support structures offer to start-up entrepreneurs is coaching (Arlotto et al., 2013; Schutte & Direng, 2019), a development intervention involving a working alliance between coach and entrepreneur (Diller et al., 2022; Kotte et al., 2021). The goal is to help entrepreneurs acquire the specific skills needed for start-up development and to provide them with the tools for acting autonomously (Audet & Couteret, 2012). In the literature, the debate on coaching encompasses both conceptual and empirical studies aiming to understand how coaching becomes effective, identifying its outcomes (e.g., Saukkonen & Nukari, 2016; Wang et al., 2022) and the factors that contribute to its success (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021; Nicholls-Nixon & Maxheimer, 2022). Generally, research shows that coaching benefits start-up

¹⁰ <https://www.failory.com/blog/startup-failure-rate> (accessed on 26 June 2024)

¹¹ <https://www.cbinsights.com/research/report/startup-failure-reasons-top/> (accessed on 26 June 2024)

entrepreneurs by increasing their competitiveness, improving decision-making and risk management, and enhancing entrepreneurial self-efficacy, goal-setting, and opportunity development (Mohamed et al., 2024; Nair & Blomquist, 2021; Saadoui & Affess, 2015). Furthermore, key success factors include the entrepreneur's coachability—their openness to receiving and implementing feedback (Somià et al., 2024)—and the methodologies adopted by the coach (Mansoori et al., 2019).

Although these studies have provided valuable insights into understanding the dynamics that drive the effectiveness of coaching for start-up entrepreneurs, further empirical work is needed to substantiate its impact. It is still unclear how critical success factors are connected to positive outcomes. This gap partly arises from existing research focusing on statistical descriptions of coaching effectiveness, measuring the relationship between coaching interventions and start-up failure rates (Bakkali et al., 2010; Fitouri & Zouaoui, 2021; Messeghem et al., 2013, 2020). This approach does not provide details on how success factors operate and which characteristics are more important in achieving coaching goals. Another reason for the lack of understanding between success factors and positive outcomes is that most studies employ deductive methodologies with quantitative approaches (Kotte et al., 2021). As a result, the current body of knowledge lacks an in-depth observation and exploration of the perspectives of individuals involved in the coaching process. Consequently, it remains unclear how start-up entrepreneurs perceive they have benefited from coaching and, more importantly, which specific factors contributed to their success. This happens because, in many cases, coaching is not fully understood in terms of its meaning and objectives, and start-up entrepreneurs are often reluctant to engage with it with high motivation (Audet & Couteret, 2012).

To address this gap, this chapter presents a study that aims to identify the key factors driving coaching effectiveness and to understand how these factors are linked to the positive outcomes

perceived by start-up entrepreneurs. Through a qualitative interview study, we capture the perceptions of 11 start-up entrepreneurs who received coaching within incubators and accelerators, examining their lived experiences and exploring the dynamics that made coaching beneficial for them.

This study contributes to the debate on the effectiveness of coaching for entrepreneurs by clarifying how engaging the personal sphere of the entrepreneur is essential for improving start-up performance, and how this engagement leads entrepreneurs to perceive coaching as effective. This aspect enhances the understanding the coaching effects, which still primarily focus on the performance-related dimensions of the coachee (e.g., Dobrea & Maiorescu, 2015; Kutzhanova et al., 2009). Furthermore, this study enriches the dimension of the bond within the working alliance – a construct used to study the coaching relationship (Diller et al., 2022; Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015) – by incorporating dimensions of informality and a friendly atmosphere. Lastly, we also identify factors deterring the effectiveness of EC, which are primarily rooted in a weak or absent coaching culture within support structures. These barriers can undermine the achievement of personal development outcomes, which are considered crucial.

This chapter is structured as follows: in the next section, we present the theoretical background, providing insights into how previous studies on start-up coaching have addressed its effectiveness. We then outline the methods and analytical procedures for the interviews. Subsequently, we present the results, described in terms of dimensions and sub-dimensions. Finally, we discuss the findings, theoretical contributions, practical implications, and suggestions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, we present the studies that characterize the debate on coaching for start-up entrepreneurs. After specifying the importance of this specific target, we will address the topics

related to the study of the effectiveness of the intervention. In Appendix 2, we include a summary matrix reporting an overview of the studies that we have been scrutinized to elaborate our arguments.

In an increasingly dynamic ecosystem, start-ups represent a highly valuable entrepreneurial configuration due to their flexible characteristics and the extensive technological innovation embedded in their business projects (Fiorentino et al., 2021; Frare & Beuren, 2021). Start-up entrepreneurs are significant for wealth generation, job creation, and competitiveness (Spencer et al., 2008). Indeed, they generate significant economic and social impacts, including the creation of new jobs and the promotion of "regional, national, and industrial economic growth" (Tripathi et al., 2019, p.56). Moreover, start-ups act as essential drivers of the innovation economy (Reisdorfer-Leite et al., 2020). To capitalize on market opportunities, they develop innovations that allow them to achieve a competitive edge (Marcon et al., 2024). For these reasons, recent studies have emphasized the need to strengthen and improve the complex support system for start-up, which includes incubators, accelerators, science parks, and co-working spaces (Bergman & McMullen, 2021) to guide them toward growth.

Within incubators and accelerators, one of the most common development interventions is coaching (Arlotto et al., 2013; Schutte, 2019; Schutte & Direng, 2019), offered as support to start-up entrepreneurs to help them acquire the necessary skills for business growth, with the ultimate goal of making them self-sufficient (Audet & Couteret, 2012). Previous research has shown that effective coaching generally impacts the performance of start-ups (e.g., Mohamed et al., 2024), enhancing their competitiveness and economic growth. Specifically, coaching improves decision-making processes and risk management (Wang et al., 2022). Moreover, coaching has been shown to positively affect entrepreneurial self-efficacy, goal setting, and opportunity development (Saadoui & Affess, 2015), as well as access to funding (Nair & Blomquist, 2021) and the enhancement

of critical competencies for start-up success, such as strategic planning, marketing and sales, and financial planning (Saukkonen & Nukari, 2016).

Other studies on coaching for start-up entrepreneurs have sought to understand not only outcome measures but also which aspects of coaching are crucial for the benefit of entrepreneurs (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021; Nicholls-Nixon & Maxheimer, 2022). It emerges that an entrepreneur's openness to change and the relational dynamics with the coach are key factors for coaching effectiveness (Audet & Couteret, 2012). This openness to change has later been reframed within the concept of coachability (Kuratko et al., 2021; Marvel, 2022), defined as the individual's ability to receive and implement feedback from external support. Higher levels of coachability in entrepreneurs have been shown to facilitate the acquisition of new skills (Somià et al., 2024) and improve relationships with investors (Ciuchta et al., 2018). Additionally, the coach's engagement and interest in the entrepreneur also plays a significant role (Nicholls-Nixon & Maxheimer, 2022).

Regarding the relationship between coach and entrepreneur, many scholars agree on its relevance for the success of the intervention (Mohamed & Zouaoui, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Specifically, it has been demonstrated that EC relationships benefit from a greater focus on elements such as empathy, closeness, and supportive behavior (Diller et al., 2022). The tactics and methodologies adopted can also influence the outcomes of coaching. Mansoori et al. (2019) suggest that the Lean Start-up methodology used by coaches can significantly affect relational dynamics with the entrepreneur, although there is potential for tension between market demands and the coach's feedback. Nonetheless, these tensions can be mitigated through effective communication techniques, including persuasion, engagement, critique, and provocation (Redien-Collot & Lefebvre, 2015).

Despite their significance, these studies have provided a predominantly descriptive view of how coaching works for start-up entrepreneurs (Mohamed et al., 2024). Most of them have statistically illustrated how entrepreneurs supported by a coach maintain a lower failure rate compared to those without support (e.g., Bakkali et al., 2010; Fitouri & Zouaoui, 2021; Messeghem et al., 2013, 2020). However, this raises questions about the dynamics that generate this effectiveness, an area that still lacks strong empirical support. As a result, we are not yet able to understand how start-up entrepreneurs achieve specific goals thanks to EC or more importantly, which particular factors are considered crucial for EC effectiveness from start-up entrepreneurs' perspective. The literature has yet to adopt approaches that allow for a detailed exploration of start-up entrepreneurs' perceptions, which are crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of EC effectiveness.

Entrepreneurial perceptions are defined as the subjective view that entrepreneurs have of the resources and opportunities available to their business (Penrose, 1959). These perceptions are essential for evaluating coaching effectiveness because they directly influence personal development, learning dynamics, and the ability to overcome barriers to change. Since entrepreneurs are the ones assessing the progress and outcome of the coach's intervention, their subjective view is key to verifying the dimensions of coaching success and effectiveness (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Carrasco et al., 2023). By focusing on these perceptions, it will be possible to understand how start-up entrepreneurs believe they have achieved certain results thanks to EC and what links exist between success factors and outcomes based on their lived experience. In light of this theoretical background, this study aims to address the following research question: *What factors start-up entrepreneurs perceive as leading to positive outcomes from coaching?*¹²

¹² This research question was revised following reviewers' suggestions to better align it with the study's objectives.

METHOD

Research Design

In order to address the research question, we conduct a qualitative interview study that allows for an in-depth exploration of entrepreneurs' perceptions about the coaching experience. This approach not only enables us to capture the meanings entrepreneurs attribute to coaching in relation to their specific contexts but also facilitates a comprehensive understanding of what they think they have achieved thanks to the coach's intervention (Neergard & Ulhøi, 2007). Furthermore, we choose a qualitative design because it is necessary to build theory on some aspects that are still under-researched or not yet considered in the EC literature (Van Burg et al., 2020).

Participants¹³

This study relies on a sample composed of 11 start-up entrepreneurs who experienced coaching interventions along their start-up journey. They were identified and contacted through a two-step process. First, we reviewed the list of certified incubators in Italy, available on the website of the Ministry of Business and Made in Italy¹⁴. Each incubator was contacted by both email and phone to gather information about their programs, specifically regarding the presence of external coaches supporting the start-ups they host through structured coaching sessions in workshops or lectures; or unstructured sessions where the coach is present for the entire duration of the incubation or acceleration process. In any case, during the approach, we provided the following definition of coaching to avoid misunderstandings, ambiguities, and confusion with the general support the program offers to start-ups: *“Coaching is a support and development intervention that guides entrepreneurs through a reflective process with an external coach, stimulating their reflection*

¹³ The sampling procedure has been clarified following the reviewers' comments.

¹⁴ <https://www.mimit.gov.it/it/impresa/competitivita-e-nuove-imprese/start-up-innovative/incubatori-certificati>

and inspiring them to unlock and maximize their personal and professional potential, with the aim of making them independent.” (International Coaching Federation; Audet & Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021). For those who responded positively, we sent an email to the individual entrepreneurial teams to schedule an interview.

In the second phase, we utilized the snowball sampling technique (Parker et al., 2019). At the end of each interview, we asked participants to suggest other entrepreneurs who met our inclusion criteria. This approach allowed us to expand our sample and include additional relevant participants. Table 1 illustrates the composition of our sample.

Table 1:
Participants’ Demographic Information

ID	Gender	Age	Work Location	Education	Years of experience	Sector
S1	Male	29	Norway	PhD at Electrical Power Engineering	2	Energetic transition
S2	Male	26	Norway	Master's degree	2	Education
S3	Female	30	Norway	Degree in civil engineering	3	Construction
S4	Male	26	Norway	Bachelor degree in media sciences	2	Media & Communication
S5	Male	29	Italy	Master's degree in Entrepreneurship and Innovation	4	Sustainable technologies
S6	Male	50	France	MBA	12	Transport
S7	Male	28	Italy	Master's degree in Data Science	1	Botany
S8	Male	28	Italy	Master's degree in Economics	2	Tourism
S9	Female	32	France	Degree in Economics and Entrepreneurship	2	Recruitment
S10	Male	29	Italy	Master's Degree in International Management	2	IT services
S11	Male	27	France	Master’s Degree in Industrial Engineering	2	EdTech

Source: Authors’ own elaboration

Out of the total, 9 of our informants identified themselves as males (81%) while the remaining 2 as females (19%). In terms of level of education, 1 participant holds a PhD (9%), 7 hold a master's degree (63%), and 3 have a bachelor's degree (27%). Regarding their work location, 4 participants (36%) are from Norway, 4 (36%) from Italy, and 3 (27%) from France. On average, our respondents can count on 3 years of entrepreneurial experience.

Data Collection

Data were collected through either online or in person semi-structured interviews with a direct focus on the experience that participants had with the coach. This approach allowed us to maintain a level of comparability among participants while still encouraging the emergence of new themes during the interviews (Louis & Fatien-Diochon, 2014). This data collection technique provides the flexibility needed for interviewees to freely share their experiences and perceptions (Barribal & While, 1994). In Appendix I we present the interview's protocol with the list of questions we asked to our respondents. Interviews were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams or Google Meet platforms. With the entrepreneur's consent, each interview was audio-recorded. All the interviews were manually transcribed, and integrated with memos and field notes taken during the interviews in order to have more details about the answers given by the entrepreneurs. On average, the interviews had a duration of 30 minutes, ranging from a minimum of 22 minutes to a maximum of 40 minutes. In Appendix I we present the interview's protocol with the list of questions we asked to our respondents.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using QCA, a systematic method for describing the meaning of interviews by generating functional dimensions to achieve the research objectives (Schreier, 2012). Data analysis was articulated around the following steps:

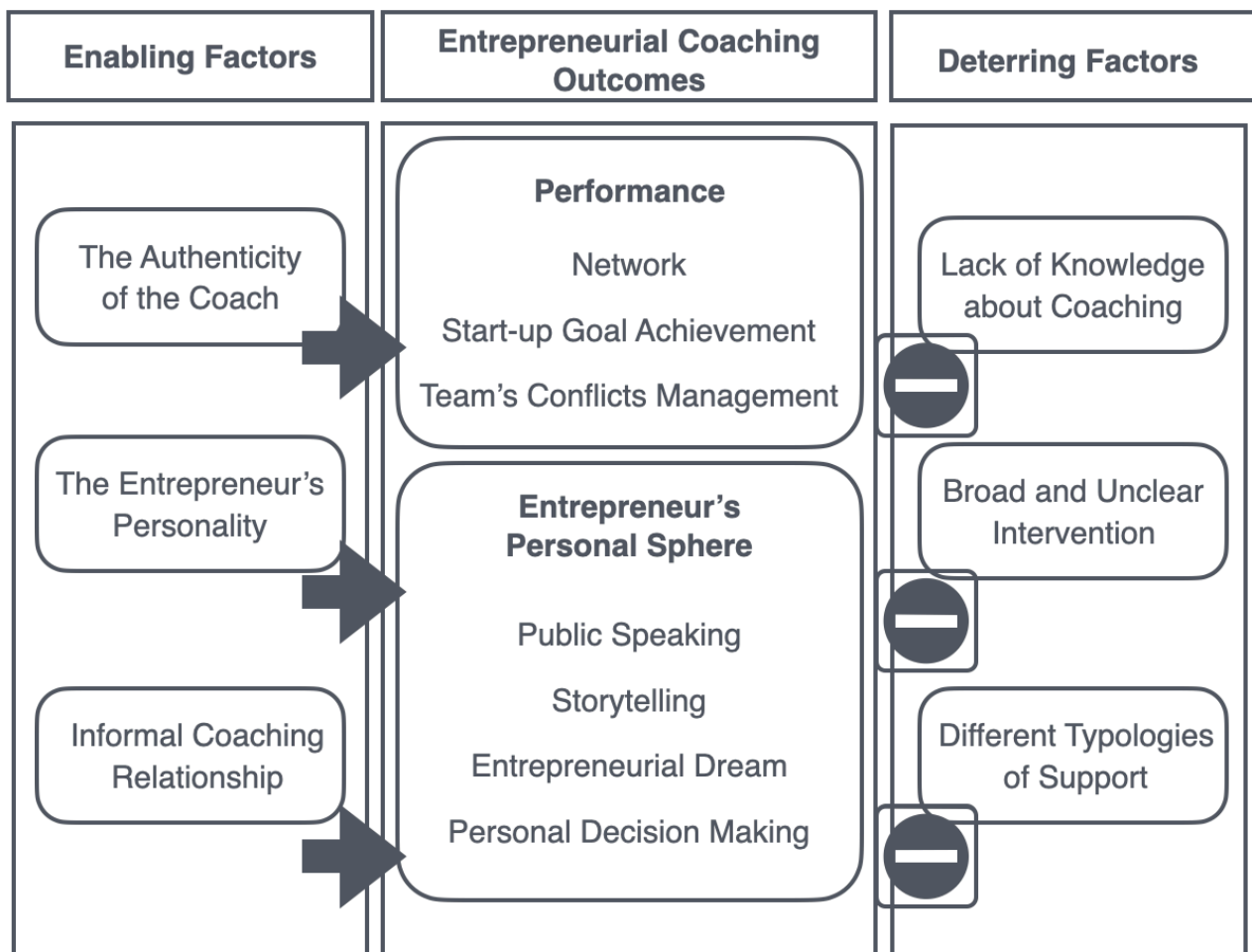
1. *Selecting*: Given that QCA aims to analyze specific content that addresses the research question and objectives, the first stage involved reading the transcribed interviews and selecting relevant participant responses about their experience with the coach.
2. *Structuring and Generating*: In this phase, we structured our coding frame, which consisted of dimensions and sub-dimensions identified inductively using a data-driven strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through open coding, we identified coding units within the responses and extrapolated relevant concepts. This procedure supported us in better conceptualizing the dimensions. We continued this process for all interviews and then iteratively aggregated the relevant concepts into dimensions and subdimensions to capture nuances of meaning.
3. *Defining*: After identifying the main dimensions and sub-dimensions, we defined them to clarify their meaning and ensure consistent use. We named each dimension, described its meaning, provided examples, and established decision rules to clarify how and why specific coding units were assigned to each dimension.
4. *Revising*: This phase involved revisiting the interview transcripts and reviewing our coding frame (Mayring, 2015). It allowed us to update the identified dimensions based on new elements that emerged during the review process.

RESULTS

In this section, we present the results of our study. It emerged that start-up entrepreneurs perceive a series of personal and organizational performance outcomes directly resulting from coaching. Additionally, certain dimensions were identified by the respondents as crucial for generating these outcomes. However, there are also dimensions that act as barriers to the perceived effectiveness of the intervention, potentially hindering the achievement of specific goals. Figure 1 summarizes the dimensions and sub-dimensions that emerged from the interviews with start-up entrepreneurs.

Figure 1:

Outcomes, Enabling, and Deterring factors around Entrepreneurial Coaching Effectiveness



Entrepreneurial Coaching Outcomes

For the start-up entrepreneurs interviewed, the support received from the coach was generally considered effective and instrumental in achieving specific outcomes, leading to a certain level of satisfaction for some. The outcomes perceived as achieved can be divided into two categories: outcomes related to the start-up's performance and those related to the personal growth of the individual. The former pertains to the establishment of foundational dimensions that instill in the start-up a sense of autonomy, enabling it to handle not only present but also future managerial challenges. The most frequently mentioned outcome was the creation and development of a network, i.e., the ability for start-up entrepreneurs to connect with various individuals who played a crucial role in the business's growth. Through EC, entrepreneurs were able to build relationships with investors and experts in specific managerial areas such as marketing or financial planning, which are critical skills in the early stages of the entrepreneurial process. This was particularly relevant because some interviewees acknowledged that the coach was not an expert in their field, and therefore, these connections were essential.

Another key insight that emerged from the entrepreneurs' perceptions was that EC was instrumental in achieving critical milestones that define the progressive development of the start-up. In other cases, it was noted that while the outcomes might have been reached eventually, they would not have been achieved at the same pace. Thus, EC also seems to accelerate the attainment of certain goals, acting on dimensions such as the entrepreneur's more effective team management and the improvement of their communication skills within the organization. Regarding the entrepreneur's communication skills, thanks to EC, interviewees highlighted a significant improvement in conflict management within the leadership team of the start-up.

The second category of outcomes perceived as achieved through EC concerns the personal sphere of the entrepreneur—those results that contributed to improving the entrepreneur as a person before being the leader of a business. The identification of these outcomes revealed how EC has a strong influence on the entrepreneur's private life, even more so than on their organizational performance. Naturally, these personal outcomes are connected to improvements on the managerial level. For example, outcomes such as the ability to manage fear and emotions lead entrepreneurs to make more thoughtful decisions and face market uncertainties with greater stability. This results in an enhanced ability to lead the organization and better manage both internal conflicts and those with external partners. The increased autonomy that EC provides entrepreneurs allows them to make decisions more independently from external support, thus improving the organization's flexibility. Public speaking is also a key outcome, stemming from the entrepreneur's increased self-esteem and confidence, enabling them to effectively communicate the company's vision and enhance their leadership. Lastly, the enthusiasm and motivation maintained by the entrepreneur act as significant drivers for organizational development, fostering innovation and boosting competitiveness. In Table 2 we insert the most significant start-up entrepreneurs' quotes about coaching outcomes.

Table 2: Quotes from Start-up Entrepreneurs for Coaching Outcomes – Source: Authors' own elaboration

Meaningful Quotes	Sub-Dimension	Dimension
<i>"Our background is from academia and all of our network was formed of other researchers. So we didn't have the network within investors and people who know business development, scaling up, go to market and these kinds of things. So for us, network was really important."</i> <i>"They kind of have biweekly meetings and then they ask us what they need. And then, of course, because it's one of the earliest accelerators and early-stage investors in Norway, then they have a huge network to bring in people with different types of skills."</i> <i>"For us, the most important thing with accelerator programs is the network. I think like all of the main achievements that we have done is the internal team itself. And because a lot of the achievements are either technical or business. So, it's us launching a product or launching a new version. It's us getting that first pilot or getting that sale. And at the end of the day, that's our responsibility. So, for us, like the good thing with accelerators have often been to be the door opener. But then they only open the door and then it's up to you to follow up and close that deal or close that necessary investment."</i>	Network	Coaching Outcomes
<i>"Not at all, we would not achieve the same results in terms of performance without coaching."</i> <i>"By time, yes, we would have achieved the same results but not as fast."</i> <i>"Without coaching, I personally believe that I would never have been able to achieve certain results. Team management, communication skills are only some of the most critical achievements."</i>	Start-up Goal Achievement	
<i>"The spectrum of usefulness was very broad: understanding the psychological factors triggering fear of conflict helped me manage these fears; improved negotiation skills. This was possible because I could express my feelings and needs clearly and consistently."</i> <i>"It was unexpected that after coaching, I feel significantly more adept at handling tense and conflict situations with the other members of the team"</i>	Teams' Conflicts Management	
<i>"Coaching was not just mere support or teaching, but it provided me with a true entrepreneurial vision. Moreover, I believe it had a greater impact on me as a person, shaping me and providing tools that go beyond business management, such as public speaking and corporate storytelling."</i> <i>"Fear management, finding my inner balance. After coaching I felt more self-confidence. These are all goals achieved thanks to the coach who, however, started by helping me manage my emotions."</i> <i>"It gave me everything I needed at that stage of my life, where I needed to channel and find the right direction regarding my choices, including professional ones. It instilled values in me and gave me the right boost I needed."</i> <i>"I really appreciated that the coaching embraced both personal and business perspectives without ever fully separating them."</i>	Entrepreneur's Personal Sphere	

Enabling and Deterring Factors of Perceived Coaching Effectiveness

The perceptions of the interviewed start-up entrepreneurs suggest that the achievement of outcomes from coaching is enabled by critical factors. We identified two types of critical factors, divided into two distinct dimensions: enabling factors, which facilitate the achievement of outcomes and enhance the perception of positive results; and deterring factors, that hinder the perception of these outcomes, acting as barriers to the perceived effectiveness of EC.

Among the enabling factors, interviewees emphasized the coach's authenticity, the entrepreneur's personality, and an informal coaching relationship. Regarding the coach's authenticity, it refers to the intervention being perceived as more effective when the coach adopts a direct, clear, and sincere communication style. By doing so, the coach can make entrepreneurs aware from the start of the coaching approaches, the expected outcomes, and the number of sessions. Having a clear roadmap helps entrepreneurs adjust their expectations. Moreover, the type of dialogue and communication the coach establishes with the entrepreneur is crucial for both personal and business growth. Indeed, a coach who adheres to professional standards and embodies them authentically can challenge the entrepreneur's beliefs, fostering change and growth. Additionally, the coach must possess strong questioning skills, meaning the ability to ask the right questions to stimulate introspective reflection in the entrepreneur, leading them to independently assess past decisions and build better decision-making paths for the future. Lastly, the coach is considered authentic when, over the course of the sessions, they deepen their understanding of the entrepreneur's reality. This allows the coach to navigate the entrepreneur's situation effectively, while maintaining an external and impartial perspective, which entrepreneurs found fundamental for providing constructive feedback without assumptions or judgments. For obvious reasons, the coach's authentic attitude can only determine the perceived effectiveness of EC if the entrepreneur is also aligned with this type of dialogue. The entrepreneur must be open to

change and learning, and recognize the coach as a professional who can offer significant contributions to the development of the start-up. As some interviewees pointed out, this largely depends on the entrepreneur's personality, as they must not only accept the support but also show respect for the coach's work. The combination of these enabling factors is essential for defining the quality of the coaching relationship, another critical factor in enhancing the perceived effectiveness of EC for start-up entrepreneurs. For this relationship to be considered a determining factor, it must have informal characteristics. This includes friendly advice and meetings outside of the formal setting where coaching typically occurs. Going beyond the basic contractual principles of the support creates greater closeness and trust from the entrepreneurs. This is also facilitated by the fact that the coach is described as highly accessible, providing specific support even for last-minute issues. The coaching relationship should take place in a positive environment, where the entrepreneur feels free to express themselves, and is truly seen as an equal by the coach, without any sense of condescension from the latter.

On the other hand, the deterring factors includes a general lack of understanding of what coaching entails as a form of support and a related lack of understanding of the coach's role. Another obstacle is that the coaching program often had overly ambitious and poorly defined goals. The lack of understanding of the coach's role and the intervention's characteristics was reflected in several statements from entrepreneurs who expected to receive concrete support, such as the transfer of experience and the provision of ready-to-implement solutions. Faced with a coaching approach entirely based on different principles—focused on self-reflection and challenges—entrepreneurs found themselves confused and unable to recognize the value of the support received. The coaching program's broad and poorly defined goals further contributed to barriers to achieving the intended outcomes. This left entrepreneurs without the tools to monitor and assess the progress made through EC. Additionally, the psychological support offered did not help

entrepreneurs understand the true nature of coaching or the specific reasons the relationship was established. When there is no clear definition from the coach about the role they are assuming and the functions they will perform, it leads to significant confusion and an inability for the entrepreneur to accept the support and perceive it as beneficial for the start-up's growth. In Table 3 we present the most significant start-up entrepreneurs' quotes about enabling and deterring factors.

Table 3: Quotes from Start-up Entrepreneurs for Enabling and Deterring factors – Source: Authors’ own elaboration

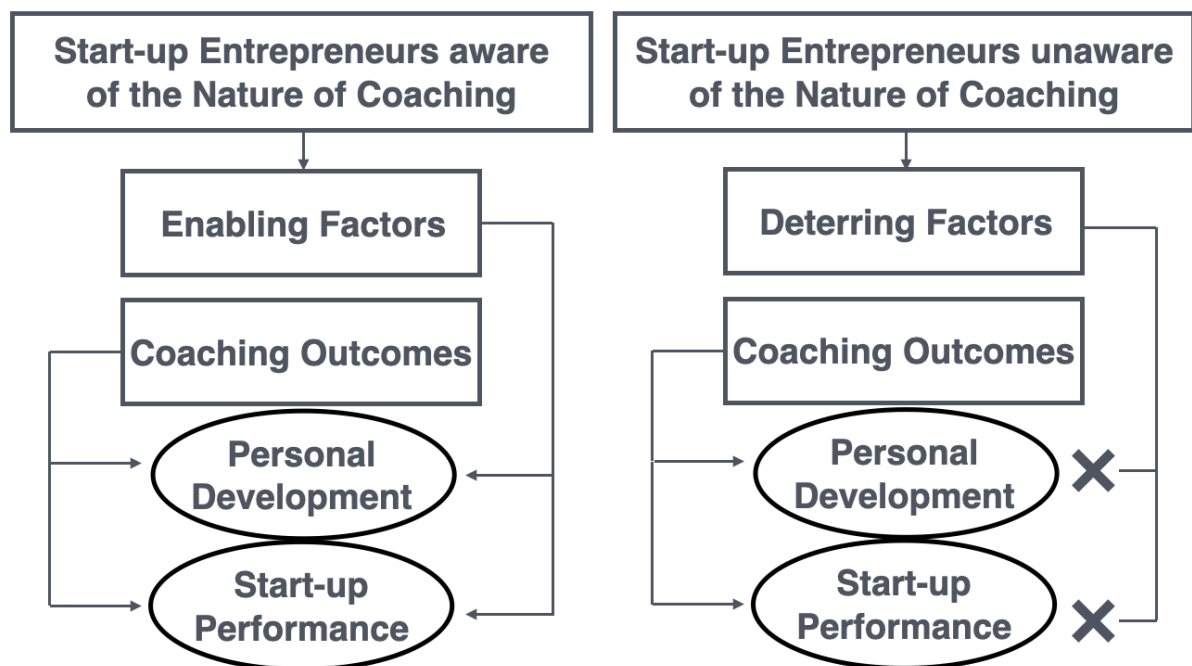
Meaningful Quotes	Sub-Dimension	Dimension
"The coach offered a different point of view that helps us triangulate the situation. This has pushed us out of our comfort zone."	The Authenticity of the Coach	Enabling Factors of Coaching Effectiveness
"The element that made the difference is that the coach challenged me with a consistently sincere and authentic attitude."		
"Honesty and challenging communication are elements that greatly aid in growth and development."		
"It was important to have a clear understanding from the beginning of how the process was structured: expected outcomes, objectives, and the number of sessions we would need to complete."		
I think like initially the coach needs to completely understand the competency level the start-up is at and the people behind it. Then they need to have not always, but often they should have a good understanding of what they're actually trying to achieve. And then when the coach has that type of knowledge, you can basically have a very practical and pragmatic approach to it."		
"It depends on how a person is and which is her personality. I consider myself a very sociable person, so I have never had great difficulty in establishing good relationships."	The Entrepreneur's Personality	
"It's important to arrive at meetings prepared and know how to ask the right questions. It's a form of respect towards the coaches because asking the right questions can solve very big problems in just a few minutes."		
"The relationship with the coach was mainly informal. So it was very friendly advice most of the time. And some of our coaches we have been having dinners with or stuff like that. So nothing like super formal with contracts and anything. It was just regular people having conversations. We trusted these coaches very much."	Informal Coaching Relationship	
"There was never any doubt that it was going to be helpful because we only contacted them when we needed help. So we would, if I wondered about anything, I would call or send an email and say, I need help with this. Can you help me? They would say yes or no. And if it was yes, they would help me. And that was it."		
"It was very helpful that they never approached us with any sense of arrogance."		
"You have the technology part, you have the management part, you have the business development part. So what's been important for us is to get like solid coaches, people we can trust and are really skilled in this field for those different assets."	Lack of Knowledge about Coaching	Deterring Factors of Coaching Effectiveness
"I would love to have a person who have done exactly the same as me and knew all of the answers, right? But that's very seldom the case, right? Of course you want to have support and all of that but at the end of the day like you are building a business, right? Then you need to execute"		
"I'm not sure what you mean by coach!"		
"It's difficult to say if I would have obtained the same results, because I don't know what would happen without the main like for the first one. The program was unstructured, very broad".	Broad and Unclear Intervention	
"The coach we had provided different types of support, including psychological."	Different Typologies of Support	

Interrelationships between Enabling Factors, Deterring Factors, and Coaching Outcomes

In this paragraph, we provide insights into the possible relationships between enabling factors, deterring factors, and coaching outcomes. Figure 2 summarizes the relationships identified from the interviews.

Figure 2:

How Enabling Factors and Deterring Factors influence Coaching Outcomes' perception



Source: Authors' own elaboration

The perceptions shared by the interviewed start-up entrepreneurs reveal relationships between the enabling and deterring factors and the coaching outcomes. The most significant insight concerns the fact that, among the identified outcomes, some are more at risk than others when the deterring factors are present. These deterring factors, stemming from a lack of clarity and understanding of the coach's actual role in supporting entrepreneurs, influence the expectations of

the participants, shaping their respective levels of satisfaction. When these deterring factors exist, start-up entrepreneurs tend to expect support that is solely focused on improving the start-up's performance. Start-up entrepreneurs have explicit needs related to bridging gaps in knowledge and skills in specific management areas, and they expect to receive tailored and concrete solutions to address specific challenges. As a result, they are less willing to engage in a support process that ultimately leads them to self-generated solutions, particularly if these solutions are rooted in personal dimensions, such as their guiding values, confidence, and self-esteem.

Since they do not perceive these personal aspects as directly related to their organizational growth needs, the deterring factors of the perceived effectiveness of EC risk undermining several dimensions related to personal development. In contrast, those start-up entrepreneurs who have understood the professional role of the coach and embraced this form of support—thus exhibiting the enabling factors—demonstrated growth that was first personal, before organizational. According to the start-up entrepreneurs' post-intervention evaluations, this personal growth was not only more functional to their business development but was also considered a foundational element of their satisfaction, and consequently, of their high levels of perceived effectiveness.

The key insight here is that when deterring factors such as misunderstanding or misaligned expectations are present, the outcomes most at risk are those linked to personal growth. Start-up entrepreneurs who expect only a business-focused intervention, aimed at providing immediate solutions to operational challenges, may not fully engage with the deeper, more introspective elements of coaching that address self-confidence, leadership style, or personal values. These elements, however, are crucial to long-term entrepreneurial success.

For those who did embrace the broader scope of coaching, including its focus on personal development, the experience led to more profound and enduring benefits. By addressing internal challenges, entrepreneurs were able to make better decisions, manage uncertainty, and lead more

effectively. This personal growth became the foundation of their business success and was ultimately the driver of their satisfaction with the coaching process.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to deepen the understanding of the effectiveness of EC. Focusing on the perceptions of start-up entrepreneurs, we sought to explore how they believe they have achieved certain outcomes through the coach's intervention and to identify which success factors are deemed fundamental. Additionally, this study aimed to specify the connections between the identified success factors and the positive outcomes of EC.

The results show that the perceived effectiveness of EC for start-up entrepreneurs is defined by achieving a series of outcomes considered positive. These outcomes can be divided into two categories: on the one hand, personal growth outcomes, such as increased self-confidence, decision-making abilities, and conflict management skills; on the other hand, outcomes related to start-up performance, such as the development of strategic networks and the improvement of key managerial skills. However, the achievement of these outcomes is influenced by the presence of enabling factors and deterring factors. Enabling factors, such as the coach's authenticity, the entrepreneur's openness to change, and the informal nature of the coaching relationship, are viewed as key factors in facilitating the achievement of these outcomes. Together, these factors created a supportive environment that fostered both personal and organizational development.

Conversely, the deterring factors, mainly related to a lack of clarity regarding the coach's role and confusion about the objectives of the coaching program, hindered the full realization of the outcomes, particularly those related to personal growth. When entrepreneurs' expectations are focused solely on immediate improvements in the start-up's performance, neglecting the more

introspective aspects of coaching, there is a risk that the overall effectiveness of the support will be perceived as limited.

Theoretical Implications and Contribution

These findings have theoretical implications that enhance the understanding of the effectiveness of EC for start-up entrepreneurs. First, it is necessary to consider the effectiveness of EC not solely in terms of organizational performance outcomes. The scholarly debate has so far focused on defining the improvement of start-up entrepreneurs' performance as a measure of effectiveness, a particularly common outcome deemed relevant for the early stages of the entrepreneurial process (Kuratko et al., 2021; Na et al., 2022; Saukkonen & Nukari, 2016). However, our study reveals that the outcomes perceived in the personal sphere of the start-up entrepreneur have a significantly greater impact on their satisfaction and lead them to perceive EC as beneficial for their venture.

Second, studies that have approached the topic of EC effectiveness deterministically—stating that coaching is effective in the presence of certain key factors (e.g., Mohamed & Zouaoui, 2021; Mohamed et al., 2024)—overlook a range of details that can offer multiple facets of success in the intervention. The results of this study enhance the understanding of these factors by shedding light on nuances that emerge only by considering the lived experiences of start-up entrepreneurs. Indeed, we provide insights suggesting that the coaching relationship should be considered an enabling factor of effectiveness only if it has an informal nature. In so doing, we enrich the construct of the working alliance used to study the coaching relationship, which consists of dimensions related to the agreement on goal definition and the bond between the two parties. The operationalization of the bond dimension has been defined based on mutual appreciation between the coach and the

coachee (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015). With the present study, we also include the informal nature of this bond and the friendly dialogue.

Finally, our findings support the view that the effectiveness of EC should be understood not only through the identification of success factors but also by considering the barriers to it (e.g., Carter et al., 2014). We advance the knowledge of these barriers by specifying that they predominantly stem from a lack of organizational culture surrounding coaching within support structures, such as incubators and accelerators, as well as from a weak personal culture regarding this type of intervention among start-up entrepreneurs themselves. Additionally, we attempted to link these barriers to the perceived outcomes, highlighting that certain outcomes are "at risk" if such barriers arise. These outcomes are those related to the entrepreneur's personal development, considered essential for this early stage (Nicholls-Nixon & Maxheimer, 2022).

Practical Implications

This chapter has practical implications for managers of entrepreneurial support structures and for coaches working with start-up entrepreneurs. For managers of entrepreneurial support structures, this study provides insights for improving coaching programs. Such improvements could involve creating the contextual conditions that foster informal relational dynamics between the coach and the start-up entrepreneur. This means not only structured meeting rooms but also shared spaces where the coach can work autonomously. In this way, coaching will be flexible and more attuned to the needs of start-up entrepreneurs, impacting the entrepreneurs personally and achieving higher levels of satisfaction. Managers can also use these insights in the selection process of coaches, using criteria such as previous business coaching experience and the authenticity of their attitude. Furthermore, this study offers insights for the managers of these support structures so that they adopt management frameworks to promote a stronger coaching culture as a

developmental intervention. This is relevant to prevent confusion and barriers to the perception of effectiveness, as described in our findings.

For coaches, this study offers operational insights, highlighting the importance of adopting a sincere and direct attitude and maintaining a depth that impacts the entrepreneur's personal sphere rather than solely aiming to optimize the process for the improvement of the organizational performance.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

For future research, we propose observing entrepreneurial perceptions of the coaching experience on a larger sample size. While our study provides valuable insights, the relatively small sample is currently unable to achieve theoretical saturation. The main difficulty in obtaining a larger sample size lies in the fact that not all support structures actually provide coaching activities, even if they list it among the services offered. Furthermore, despite being provided with an explanatory definition of coaching, some start-up entrepreneurs tend to lack a clear understanding of the nature of the intervention and how it fits into the broader supporting program. Expanding the sample can help capture a wider range of experiences, revealing new dimensions of the coaching success determinants, as coaching is closely tied to context and the individuals involved.

We also recommend examining how entrepreneurs' behaviors can influence the coaching process and their perceptions. Our research did not fully explore individual differences such as motivation, level of coachability, and emotional attachment to their business, which may play a significant role in shaping their perceptions of coaching outcomes.

From a contextual perspective, investigating the perceptions of coachees in non-entrepreneurial settings—such as managers, executives, or employees—could enrich the

understanding of coaching effectiveness. This is an area that our study did not address, potentially limiting the broader applicability of our findings.

Additionally, exploring the impact of emotional factors on perceptions of effectiveness among more experienced and stable entrepreneurs compared to start-up founders could yield valuable insights. Our focus primarily on start-up entrepreneurs means that we may have overlooked the nuances present in different entrepreneurial stages.

Methodologically, we suggest conducting longitudinal studies to observe the long-term impact of coaching from both personal and organizational perspectives. The cross-sectional design of our study offers a snapshot of perceptions at a single point in time, and understanding how these perceptions evolve over time could provide a more comprehensive view of coaching's effectiveness.

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APPENDIX 1

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Start-uppers on Coaching Perceptions

Part One: Authorization and Introduction

1. **Introduction and explanation about the research:**
 - Briefly explain the research objective.
 - Clarify that the interview will be audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the collected data.
2. **Request for authorization:**
 - “I would like to inform you that this interview will be recorded. Do you agree to the audio recording of this interview?”
 - If yes: “Thank you. Could you verbally confirm that you consent to the recording?”

Part Two: Demographic Information and About the Start-up

4. **Demographic information:**
 - “Could you provide some information about yourself? For example, your age, education level, and previous work experiences?”
5. **Information about the start-up:**
 - “What is the idea behind your start-up?”
 - “Could you briefly describe your team?”
6. **Past experiences:**
 - “What past experiences do you think have been most relevant to the creation of your start-up?”
7. **Education:**
 - “What type of education have you had? Have you attended any specific courses or programs related to entrepreneurship?”
8. **Cohort:**
 - “Are you part of a cohort or group of start-uppers? If so, could you describe it briefly?”

Part Three: Description of Coaching Activities

9. **Description of supporting activities:**
 - “Can you describe the coaching activities you have benefited from? For example, workshops, lectures, coaching sessions...”
10. **Meeting the coach**
 - “When did you first meet your coach?”
11. **Duration of the relationship:**
 - “How long did the relationship with the coach last?”

12. Number of coaching sessions:

- "How many coaching sessions have you attended?"

Part Four: Narrative of the Coaching Experience

13. Perception of coaching effectiveness:

- "In your opinion, do you think that you would achieve the same results in terms of performance even without the coaching support?"
- "Why?"
- "Can you consider the coaching you followed to be successful?"
- "What are the elements that made the coaching successful in your opinion?"
- "Can you identify any results you think you have achieved as a result of coaching?"
- "Do you think you have achieved unexpected or unanticipated results from the support program?"

14. Coach-Coachee relationship analysis:

- "How would you describe the relationship between you and the coach?"
- "How did the context influence the coaching?"

15. Objective data about performance:

- "Can you provide objective data regarding your start-up's performance? For example, revenue growth, number of customers, funding received..."

Conclusion

18. Closing:

- "Thank you for your time and for sharing your experience. Is there anything else you would like to add or any questions about our research?"

APPENDIX 2

To view the matrix used for define the Theoretical Background, access the following link:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1o_aHJwBNISsle9VhX35oUkdzWIPDk3fY/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=103046990244529798001&rtpof=true&sd=true

CHAPTER 5

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This final chapter aims to summarize the key findings of the dissertation and highlight their respective theoretical and practical implications and the overall theoretical contribution. More, we provide at the end of this chapter insights and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation provided the theoretical context of the research topic and identified the gap in the literature on the effectiveness of EC that guided the empirical research, which considered the perceptions of both professional coaches and the start-uppers they supported.

Chapter 2 presents a SLR aimed at understanding how the concept of EC has been studied, considering the stage of the entrepreneurial process, the context, the target audience, and the outcomes. Through this study, we extended the definition of EC provided by Kotte et al. (2021), specifying that it is a broad and multifunctional support and development intervention, which can take different forms depending on the type of client (entrepreneurial or non-entrepreneurial), the context in which it is applied (within organizations, in support programs, or in entrepreneurship education), and the outcomes achieved. By conceptualizing EC through these four dimensions, inspired by Gartner's (1985) theorization of entrepreneurship, we addressed the issue of theoretical fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity with other types of interventions, challenges that have been highlighted by numerous scholars (e.g., Audet & Couteret, 2012; Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019; Kotte et al., 2021).

Chapters 3 and 4 constitute the empirical core of this dissertation. Both are qualitative studies that aimed to deepen the understanding of the effectiveness of EC. These two studies stem

from the need to understand pragmatically the perspectives of those who have directly experienced coaching, in order to identify the critical success factors of EC, defining how their interactions shape pathways to achieve the effectiveness of the intervention. Furthermore, the connections between the determining factors of EC success and the perceived outcomes are established. To this end, we conducted interviews with coaches who professionally and systematically support entrepreneurs (Chapter 3) and with start-up entrepreneurs who have experienced coaching with incubators or accelerators (Chapter 4).

Key Findings of the Dissertation

This thesis aimed to amplify the voice of EC within the broader conversation on various types of support for new venture creation. The tool used by this thesis to amplify the voice of EC is a multi-perspective theoretical framework that offers a conceptual scope applicable to better understanding the intervention, a vision of the possible interactions between the key factors that determine success, and the ways in which these factors connect with the perception of positive outcomes. The amplification of the voice occurred in two different ways: i) by providing insights for building its conceptual identity, and ii) by offering greater empirical support for the dynamics that manifest its effectiveness.

The key findings of this thesis focus on three different points. First, there is agreement between professional coaches and start-up entrepreneurs on the factors that determine the success of the intervention. These factors relate to the personal and professional sphere of the coach, the entrepreneur's attitude, and the relational dimension between the coach and the entrepreneur.

Second, while there is agreement on the aforementioned dimensions, this thesis identifies divergences in perceptions between coaches and start-up entrepreneurs regarding how these dimensions should present themselves to determine the effectiveness of EC. For the coaches, it is a

priority that a good entrepreneurial coach must have adequate professional training and a skill set that adheres to national and international professional standards. For start-up entrepreneurs, the focus seems to shift more towards the coach's behavior, which must be authentic, sincere, and impartial in evaluating the development of the start-up. Regarding the coaching relationship, coaches believe that trust is built through clear communication that addresses entrepreneurs' expectations. For start-up entrepreneurs, however, trust is built through a more informal, almost friendly relationship.

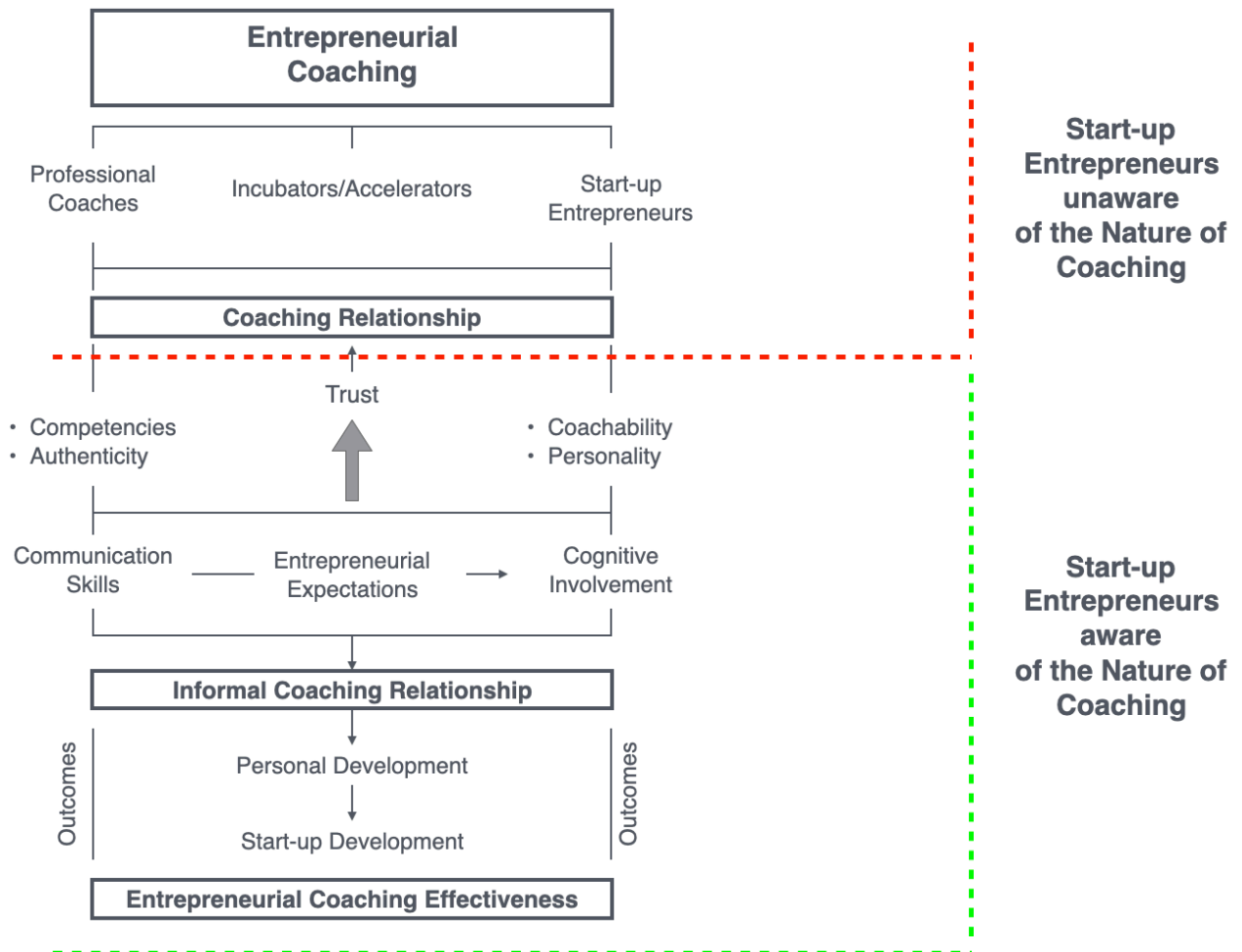
Third, by clarifying the key factors of effectiveness related to the perception of positive outcomes in EC, this thesis provides relevant insights into identifying the deterring factors of the success of the intervention. These factors stem from a lack of understanding of the coach's role and the type of support they provide, which is also reflected in a weak organizational culture on the part of incubators and accelerators. This makes start-up entrepreneurs unaware of the true nature of coaching, as they fail to grasp its goals and approaches. Therefore, these factors represent barriers that hinder the perception of relevant outcomes, such as the entrepreneur's personal development.

The Theoretical Contribution: A Framework for Entrepreneurial Coaching Effectiveness

From the results obtained from the three studies included in this thesis, a theoretical framework was developed—a structure that supports the connection between relevant theories on the topic under study and the results that were obtained (Kivunja, 2018). In doing so, it was possible to theoretically contextualize the dimensions of EC success by identifying potential relationships between them based on the data that was collected. Figure 1 illustrates the aforementioned framework.

Figure 1:

The Theoretical Framework for Entrepreneurial Coaching Effectiveness



Source: Authors' own elaboration

This theoretical framework presents three fundamental aspects. First, it highlights the key dimensions necessary to conceptually define EC. Second, it incorporates the critical success factors of EC, derived from the combined perspectives of professional coaches and start-up entrepreneurs, emphasizing the interactions that lead to the effectiveness of the intervention. Third, the framework

illustrates how enabling factors contribute to achieving benefits, while deterring factors act as barriers.

The dimensions necessary for defining EC conceptually are based on the typical dimensions identified by Gartner (1985) to enrich the understanding of entrepreneurship. In fact, this thesis demonstrates the importance of examining EC in relation to the phase of the entrepreneurial process in which the coach intervenes, the target audience, the support context, and the outcomes generated. From an empirical standpoint, this thesis focuses on start-up entrepreneurs navigating the early stages of new venture creation within incubators and accelerators. The EC outcomes considered, as observed in our research, pertain to both the personal development of the entrepreneur and the growth of the start-up. The significance of explicitly defining these dimensions lies in the fact that their combination can lead to different types of support with varying effectiveness dynamics. Therefore, this thesis clarifies that the evaluation of EC effectiveness must be anchored in a careful definition of these dimensions. In doing so, we contribute to the literature on EC, legitimizing its complexity and multifunctionality. This contribution is significant as it advances prior definitions (e.g., Kotte et al., 2021) by offering additional insights into the four dimensions, enriching our understanding of the phenomenon and enabling its distinction from other similar support interventions.

Regarding the critical success factors, this theoretical framework combines pragmatically the perceptions of professional coaches and start-up entrepreneurs to identify the enabling factors of EC effectiveness, according to their lived experiences (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019). Both actors consider the coaching relationship as the *conditio sine qua non* for successful EC. Thus, understanding the interactions among the other elements at play that influence the establishment of a quality relationship is crucial. The coach is undoubtedly the most significant factor in shaping the quality of the relationship, primarily through their certified competence profile, which

determines their professionalism, and their authenticity, expressed through spontaneous and sincere behavior. However, the coach should not bear the full responsibility for building a quality relationship. The entrepreneur's personality and motivation also play a crucial role in the success of the relationship. The greater the entrepreneur's motivation to learn and change, the more likely they are to accept the coach's support. The combination of factors from both the coach and the entrepreneur influences the sense of mutual trust, which is the foundation of the coaching relationship and the working alliance. This trust-based working alliance, where coaching goals are co-constructed, is necessary but not sufficient. Our studies reveal that the relationship must also be characterized by a sense of informality, which is fostered by a deeper cognitive engagement from the entrepreneur. This is achieved through the coach's communicative abilities, which help shape the entrepreneur's expectations and clarify the core values of coaching and the coach's role. Such an atmosphere creates closeness and a friendly environment, facilitating the entrepreneur's perception of personal development outcomes, which are essential for enhancing start-up performance. Defining these interactions among the enabling factors is crucial because it allows for a precise analysis of the roles of both the coach and the entrepreneur, as well as the relational dynamics that lead to achieving the intervention's objectives. In this way, this thesis contributes to the debate on EC effectiveness by providing a comprehensive and multi-perspective view of the enabling factors, moving beyond the purely descriptive and isolated perspectives of previous studies (e.g., Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Mohamed et al., 2024), which focused solely on results as the measure of success. Furthermore, we emphasize the specific traits a good coach should possess, highlighting not only professional skills (e.g., Azizi et al., 2023; Boyatzis et al., 2024) but also attitudinal and behavioral characteristics essential for building a high-quality coaching relationship. We connect these traits to the entrepreneur's involvement and how they can be more effectively engaged in the coaching process. Finally, we enrich the concept of the working alliance

(Diller et al., 2022; Gessintzer & Kauffeld, 2015), defining it not only as an equal relationship but as one that is also informal and friendly.

Lastly, with regard to deterring factors, this thesis identifies how a lack of understanding of the coach's role by start-up entrepreneurs undermines the perception of the EC effectiveness. This lack of understanding is attributed to a weak culture of coaching, not only at the individual level but also within the organizational cultures of incubators and accelerators. In the framework, this cultural gap is reflected in start-up entrepreneurs' lack of awareness about what coaching entails and how it differs from mentoring and consulting. This unawareness, which is not clarified by support structures, leads entrepreneurs to expect support focused solely on the growth of their start-up. Therefore, when dynamics aimed at their personal development are introduced, they perceive coaching as irrelevant to their needs. Consequently, trust is not established, and entrepreneurs are not fully cognitively engaged in the coaching process, reducing their perception of personal growth outcomes, which are crucial for professional growth. By identifying these deterring factors and linking them to coaching outcomes, we contribute to the literature on effectiveness of EC by providing deeper insights into why entrepreneurs may resist coaching. Previous studies (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Carter et al., 2014) considered this aspect, but without fully exploring the link to at-risk outcomes, particularly cultural deterring factors.

Practical Implications

This thesis can offer a practical contribution to EC professionals by directly addressing some of the most relevant challenges in the current context. One of the main issues is the lack of clarity regarding the coach's objectives and role, particularly in relation to mentoring and consulting. This

is due to the fact that a coaching culture is not yet sufficiently widespread, even within the entrepreneurial support ecosystem. We emphasize the need for these ecosystems to adopt management systems that promote the diffusion of this culture and integrate it into their organizational framework. Furthermore, it is essential that coaches possess high-level communication skills that enable them to clearly define, from the outset, the type of support they will provide. Another relevant point is the fact that entrepreneurs tend to perceive coaching as effective when it impacts their personal sphere. In light of this, coaches must develop methodologies that foster personal growth alongside professional development. This can be achieved through reflective practices and tools that enhance self-awareness and emotional resilience. This thesis highlights that the quality of the coach-entrepreneur relationship is crucial for the success of the intervention. Therefore, coach training programs should focus on developing relational skills such as active listening, controlled empathy, and authentic communication, which are vital for building trust and achieving high relational standards. In terms of measuring coaching outcomes, this study highlights the need for multidimensional evaluation frameworks. These should not only assess entrepreneurial performance but also measure personal growth using psychological tools that track self-awareness and emotional management. Finally, the interconnection between the various success dimensions underscores the need for iterative, adaptive coaching models. Coaches should continuously reassess both the quality of the relationship and the alignment of goals to ensure the sustained effectiveness of the intervention.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this dissertation has attempted to bring contribution to advancing the understanding of the effectiveness of EC, several limitations should be acknowledged. In particular, Chapters 3 and 4 rely on a qualitative methodology, which inherently limits the sample size, potentially affecting

the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the subjective nature of interviews introduces variability in participants' interpretations of their coaching experiences, as each individual perceives coaching differently. By focusing solely on incubators and accelerators, the study further narrows its scope to entrepreneurs, limiting the applicability of the findings to other contexts where EC typically occurs. We therefore believe that it is necessary to understand whether the qualitative results obtained can also be significant for a larger sample. Longitudinal studies could also offer valuable insights into the long-term impacts of coaching on both personal development and start-up growth, spanning various stages of the entrepreneurial lifecycle. Moreover, future research should explore contextual variability, such as how the effectiveness of EC differs between incubation environments and established business settings. Finally, an examination of cultural factors influencing the dynamics and outcomes of coaching relationships would further enrich the understanding of EC in its diverse contexts. Addressing these areas in future studies could significantly deepen the understanding of EC and its multifaceted nature.

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ACTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS FOLLOWING THE REVIEWS

This section aims to clarify the revisions made to this doctoral thesis following the evaluations and comments received from the reviewers. Below, some key aspects that emerged during the review process are summarized.

Comments on Chapter 3

- **Clarification of Contributions and Novelty:** The reviewers suggested that the study's contribution and novelty should be more clearly highlighted. In response, the author made the results more explicit, anchoring them to existing literature to better showcase the added value. It was emphasized that the main contribution of the study lies in providing a more detailed understanding of the critical success factors in entrepreneurial coaching. To achieve this, the author adopted a structure that includes:
 1. Findings from the study;
 2. Results of prior studies on the topic;
 3. How the obtained results contribute to the debate on the effectiveness of entrepreneurial coaching.
- **Sampling Procedures:** The reviewers requested more precise details regarding the sampling procedures. Additional information was included on how the coaches were identified and contacted, the criteria applied (e.g., possession of national or international certifications), and the method used to conduct interviews (online). Regarding the query, *“You have coaches working in different European countries—what is the rationale for that?”*, the author clarified that the study’s goal was not tied to any specific geographical location but rather

aimed to explore how coaching for entrepreneurs operates within the frameworks established by the International Coaching Federation (and other similar bodies). Consequently, no restrictions were imposed concerning the participants' nationalities.

- **Methodology Suggestions:** The reviewers recommended a methodology for interview analysis aligned with Grounded Theory and the Gioia method (Gioia et al., 2013). While the author recognizes the validity of this approach, the choice to use Qualitative Content Analysis was based on two distinct reasons. First, this method is widely used in the literature for analyses similar to those conducted in the referenced chapter (see, for example, Kotte et al., 2021). Second, the logic of Qualitative Content Analysis aligns well with the phenomenon under investigation, which required a blend of inductive and deductive approaches. In entrepreneurial coaching literature, certain dimensions are already established as key to its effectiveness. Therefore, the author did not start the analysis from a "tabula rasa" but sought to confirm the presence of these dimensions, explore them in depth, identify new ones, and examine their interrelationships.
- **Revisions to Figure 2:** Following feedback that Figure 2 appeared "too linear," the author revised it to better represent the relationships among the identified dimensions.
- **Inclusion of Participant Quotes:** Reviewers highlighted the importance of including quotes from interviews in the results section. While the author agrees with this perspective, they emphasized a narrative approach to presenting the findings rather than simply listing elements supported by quotes. This decision aligns with recent high-quality publications aiming to adhere to a high standard (see Fernando & Patriotta, 2020).
- **Theoretical Contribution:** As noted earlier, the theoretical contribution was restructured to enhance clarity and immediacy. The study provides deeper insights and attempts to connect the dimensions of entrepreneurial coaching success from the perspective of the interviewed

coaches. The author clarified that the study does not propose specific methods to increase entrepreneurs' motivation or coachability but rather offers insights into possible levers coaches can activate to engage entrepreneurs more effectively in the coaching process by addressing their expectations.

Comments on Chapter 4

- **Research Question Reformulation:** The reviewers suggested reformulating the research question as: *“What factors do start-up entrepreneurs perceive as leading to positive outcomes from coaching?”* This revised question better aligns with the study's objectives and observed findings.
- **Sample Size and Theoretical Saturation:** The author acknowledges that 10 interviews are insufficient to achieve high-quality results and that theoretical saturation has not yet been reached, as noted in the study's limitations section. However, this is an ongoing study, and the sample size will increase in future iterations (as of November 2024, an additional interview has been conducted, bringing the sample to 11 participants).
- **Definition of Coaching:** To address potential ambiguities, the author specified in the methodology section that a definition of coaching was provided to participants during recruitment to avoid misunderstandings. Nonetheless, the author agrees with the reviewers that some participants conflated coaching with the broader support services offered by the program they were part of, even though they consistently referred to coaching. Rather than viewing this as an anomaly, the author considered it a key finding of the research, linking it to the theoretical contribution regarding the deterrents to coaching effectiveness and the cultural challenges surrounding the phenomenon—both at the individual level

(entrepreneurs) and organizational level (lack of integration of coaching culture within the broader organizational culture of incubators/accelerators).