

Entrepreneurial Coaching: A Two-Dimensional Framework in Context

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Coaching is increasingly used to support entrepreneurs across different stages of the entrepreneurial process. Due to its custom-tailored, active, and reflection-oriented approach, it has been suggested that it is particularly well suited to entrepreneurs' complex job demands. However, in the entrepreneurial context, the term *coaching* lacks a clear definition and is frequently used interchangeably with other types of support. We therefore sought to characterize entrepreneurial coaching (EC) and to position it relative to related interventions. We conducted 67 interviews with coaches ($n = 44$) and early-stage entrepreneurs ($n = 23$) experienced in EC. Using qualitative content analysis, we specify outcomes, input, process, and contextual factors for EC. Among process factors, we identify seven coach functions that reflect specific coach behaviors. Contextual factors include entrepreneurial job demands and institutional boundary conditions of "embedded" EC. Based on our findings, we position EC within a two-dimensional framework, consisting of the expert- versus process-consultation approach and the individual-work-venture focus. We locate the seven coach functions within this framework. Relative to other interventions, EC stands between classical workplace coaching and start-up consultancy, closer to, yet distinct from, entrepreneurial mentoring and executive coaching. We derive practical implications for coaches, entrepreneurs, and organizational stakeholders and propose directions for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship is increasingly important in today's working world. As entrepreneurs generate innovations, create jobs, and increase productivity, their importance for national labor markets and the economy is significant (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007). Entrepreneurship is not restricted to enterprise creation but also encompasses the processes of opportunity detection and exploitation (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000) as well as the personal development of an entrepreneur and the whole process of "becoming entrepreneurial" (Lackéus, 2015, p. 9).

The process of being and developing as an entrepreneur is highly demanding. For example, compared to employed professionals, entrepreneurs must tolerate longer working hours, intense time pressure, and high levels of complexity and uncertainty (U. Stephan, 2018). They experience higher levels of stress (Cardon & Patel, 2015) while receiving less social support at work (Tetrick, Slack, Da Silva, & Sinclair, 2000). Furthermore, entrepreneurs often assume multiple roles simultaneously, frequently acting both within the company (e.g. as the managing director) and as a shareholder, thereby increasing their stake in their venture (St-Jean, 2011). While some of their job demands, for example high levels of responsibility, resemble those of executives (Berman, 2019), entrepreneurs are more closely tied to their venture, not only financially as owners but also emotionally as creators of their business idea (Jayaraman, Khorana, Nelling, & Covin, 2000).

Given the high job demands of entrepreneurs, there is growing awareness that they may benefit significantly from external support while setting up and running a business (Kutzhanova, Lyons, & Lichtenstein, 2009). Accordingly, the European Commission's action plan for 2020 proposes to promote and facilitate entrepreneurial behavior and to provide entrepreneurial education to entrepreneurs (European Commission, 2018). Entrepreneurial education encompasses a wide range of activities (formal and informal, theory- as well as practice-oriented) in order to foster an entrepreneurial mindset and the competencies required throughout the entrepreneurial value-creating process (Lackéus, 2015; Volkmann et al., 2009). Classroom teaching and start-up consultancy are among the most established approaches. These latter activities have, however, been criticized for being insufficiently adapted to entrepreneurs' specific needs. Due to the focus on knowledge transfer, such instructively oriented approaches fail to stimulate entrepreneurs' active learning processes or self-reflection (e.g. Audet & Couteret, 2012; Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018; Kutzhanova et al., 2009).

In contrast, stimulating self-reflection is posited to be a core element of coaching (Behrendt & Greif, 2018), an intervention that has been introduced into entrepreneurial education practice more recently. Coaching is, by

definition, a custom-tailored development intervention “that uses a collaborative, reflective, goal-focused relationship to achieve professional outcomes that are valued by the coachee” (Bozer & Jones, 2018, p. 342). As per its definition and in light of its demonstrated effectiveness (Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; Kotte, 2019), coaching appears to be a particularly suitable and promising way of assisting entrepreneurs. However, the concept of coaching in the entrepreneurial context, which we term *entrepreneurial coaching* (EC), lacks a clear definition (Kutzhanova et al., 2009; Müller & Diensberg, 2011). Although EC has recently started to be explored from both a theoretical and empirical perspective (Kutzhanova et al., 2009; Saadaoui & Affess, 2015), findings are scattered, and to date an integrated framework is lacking. Moreover, a wide range of different interventions have been labeled “coaching” within entrepreneurial education, including start-up consultancy and mentoring (e.g. Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018; Müller & Diensberg, 2011).

The central aim of this article is to introduce a conceptual framework for EC that provides a theoretically and empirically grounded basis for future research. Within this conceptual framework, we seek to clarify key characteristics of EC and to position EC relative to related developmental interventions by identifying similarities and differences. In doing so, we integrate distinct literature streams with the emerging literature on EC and contribute to expanding theory on EC. Moreover, we respond to recent calls in the coaching literature to differentiate coaching for specific populations (Cooper, 2019; Jones & Bozer, 2018) by focusing on EC directed at entrepreneurs in early stages of the entrepreneurial process.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Entrepreneurial Coaching and Related Developmental Interventions

The existing literature lacks a generally accepted definition of EC. A few empirical studies refer to the definition of Audet and Couteret (2012) and define EC as individualized support provided by a coach to entrepreneurs in early start-up stages that is aimed at acquiring and developing the skills and knowledge necessary to establish themselves as independent entrepreneurs (e.g. Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2018; Mansoori, Karlsson, & Lundqvist, 2019; Saadaoui & Affess, 2015). Other definitions focus more strongly on working towards the improvement of the venture’s performance as an aim of EC (e.g. Crompton & Smyrniotis, 2011) or take a wider approach and include the support of entrepreneurs at later stages (e.g. Schermuly, Wach, Kirschbaum, & Wegge, 2020).

In the following, we will define related interventions for supporting entrepreneurs and explain how they can be characterized by two underlying

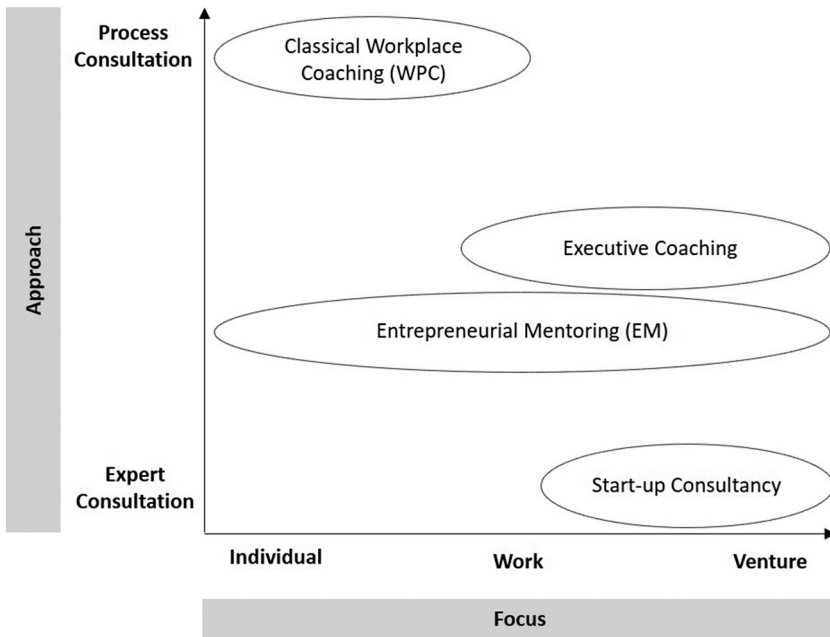


FIGURE 1. Interventions related to EC within the two-dimensional framework

dimensions: expert- versus process-consultation (Schein, 1990) and individual-work-venture focus (Dowejko & Chan, 2019; St-Jean, 2011). The first dimension describes the basic methodological approach of the respective developmental intervention. Expert-consultation is characterized by a consultant possessing a high level of content expertise and providing expert information, advice, and solutions to clients. Process-consultation, conversely, considers clients as experts in their own realities and environments and it enables them, by means of the consultant’s process expertise in facilitating conversations, to find their own solutions (Schein, 1990; Stokes, Fatien Diochon, & Otter, 2020). The second dimension (individual-work-venture focus) concerns the focus of the developmental intervention, that is, whether there is a focus on the individual (e.g. motivations, emotions, personality), their work (e.g. tasks, roles, and responsibilities) and/or the venture (e.g. organizational performance). The developmental interventions differ regarding which of these three foci they emphasize and whether they encompass one or several of these foci. Figure 1 provides an overview of the developmental interventions related to EC within the two-dimensional framework.

Developmental Interventions in Entrepreneurial Education. Among the different interventions in entrepreneurial education, entrepreneurial mentoring (EM) and start-up consultancy seem to be most relevant when considering EC as they share with EC the provision of customized consultation to entrepreneurs (in contrast to classroom teaching, that is, standardized knowledge transfer; Lackéus, 2015).

Start-up consultancy aims to provide solutions for urgent and practical matters, such as assisting entrepreneurs in writing a business plan. It focuses on giving advice and imparting knowledge. To provide effective support, a start-up consultant needs business and management knowledge and to be an expert in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the process of venture creation (Müller & Diensberg, 2011). As such, start-up consultancy can be defined as expert-consultation (Müller & Diensberg, 2011; Schein, 1990) focused on the successful establishment and development of the business; that is, with a primary focus on the venture rather than the individual entrepreneur (Müller & Diensberg, 2011).

Mentoring in the entrepreneurial context can be defined as a relationship oriented towards learning and development in which an experienced entrepreneur supports a novice entrepreneur (e.g. El Hallam & St-Jean, 2016; St-Jean & Audet, 2012). Such a relationship requires the mentor to have practical experience in the entrepreneur's field (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018). Mentors are viewed as fulfilling three basic functions: a psychosocial, career-related, and role-modeling function (e.g. Dickson et al., 2014). For the entrepreneurial context, a fourth, venture-related function has been introduced (Dowejko & Chan, 2019). The terms "mentoring" and "coaching" often lack a clear conceptual delimitation (Lancer, Clutterbuck, & Megginson, 2016), and there is substantial discussion regarding similarities and differences between the two (e.g. Stokes et al., 2020). In the entrepreneurial context, they are frequently used interchangeably both in practice and research (e.g. Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018; Matotola & Bengesi, 2019). Like coaching, mentoring relies on a trustful relationship (El Hallam & St-Jean, 2016; Graßmann, Schölmerich, & Schermuly, 2019) and is characterized by the fostering of entrepreneurs' active learning as well as by personal and professional development (e.g. Audet & Couteret, 2012; Lancer et al., 2016). The most salient difference compared to coaching is that, in mentoring, transferring the mentor's knowledge and own entrepreneurial experience lies at the heart of the relationship, as expressed in the role-modeling function and career-related sub-functions such as acting as a guide (e.g. St-Jean, 2011). EM therefore combines both elements of expert- and process-consultation. In contrast to start-up consultancy, EM spans a broader range of content as is evident in the range of entrepreneurial mentor functions with the psychosocial support focusing on the individual, career-related support representing

a work focus, and venture support focusing on the venture (e.g. Dowejko & Chan, 2019; El Hallam & St-Jean, 2016; St-Jean, 2011).

Workplace Coaching. Although numerous definitions exist, the core of WPC is that it is an individualized, reflective, and relationship-based development intervention aimed at achieving professional outcomes for the coachee (Bozer & Jones, 2018). In order to establish a rapport on equal terms, it is crucial for the coach not to act as an expert but as a sparring partner, to refrain from being directive and to possess methodical and process-related competence to help coachees to develop their own solutions (e.g. Jones et al., 2016; Schreyögg, 2010). Therefore, WPC is generally considered to be a primarily process-oriented type of consultation (Jones, Napiersky, & Lyubovnikova, 2019; Schreyögg, 2010). The specification “workplace” delimits WPC from other types of coaching that are not focused on professional issues (e.g. life or health coaching), whereas WPC focuses on the intersection between the individual and their work.

EC can therefore be understood as a specific type of WPC that is directed towards a particular client population, namely entrepreneurs, whose job demands and whose close, often intensely personal, interconnection with their organization differ from “traditionally” employed professionals (U. Stephan, 2018; St-Jean, 2011). The WPC literature has so far barely focused on differential approaches to the coaching of different target groups. Instead, WPC is mostly used as a generic term that comprises the coaching of a wide range of professionals, across job roles and functions, hierarchical levels, and industries (e.g. Bozer & Jones, 2018; Graßmann et al., 2019). Differential approaches have only recently been addressed (e.g. coaching different types of elite performers; Cooper, 2019) or called for (e.g. expanding coaching research to new work contexts and populations like entrepreneurs; Jones & Bozer, 2018).

One target group of coaching that has been more extensively studied are executives. Top-level executives most closely resemble entrepreneurs in their characteristics and job features. For example, these two groups share the position of being alone at (or near) the top of a company (Berman, 2019; Tetrick et al., 2000) and both carry high responsibility for a whole venture (Berman, 2019; Stephan, 2018), requiring them to make complex decisions under high levels of uncertainty (Busenitz & Barney, 1997). Nevertheless, they differ most notably in that entrepreneurs are more existentially attached to their venture since they assume multiple roles, including being the venture’s founder and owner (Jayaraman et al., 2000). Moreover, in contrast to entrepreneurs in early stages, top-level executives focus on general management and rarely involve themselves in operational work (Berman, 2019).

Executive coaching can be understood as a specific variation of WPC that focuses primarily on improving the leadership and management capabilities of executives in organizations (Berman, 2019; Stern, 2004). There are suggestions that it contains more elements of expert-consultation than classical WPC (Berman, 2019), given that executives expect coaches to help them think through business options and strategic decision-making. In contrast to classical WPC, executive coaching is more concerned with the intersection between the executive's work (i.e. leadership/management tasks and responsibilities) and the organization and its performance at large, especially the higher the executive is in the hierarchy (Berman, 2019; Stern, 2004).

Synthesis: Developmental Interventions Within the Two-Dimensional Framework. In summary, at the extremes of our two-dimensional framework are start-up consultancy and classical WPC. Start-up consultancy can be described as an expert-consultation approach that is focused on the venture, while classical WPC is primarily conceived as a process-consultation approach focused at the intersection between the individual coachee and their work. Mentoring, particularly EM, and executive coaching can be positioned between the extremes. Mentoring differs from WPC with regards to the degree of expert-consultation, given that passing on the mentor's knowledge and experience is an essential element. The question is whether this distinction also holds true for EC and EM or whether EC, like executive coaching, might contain functions that move it closer to the expert-consultation side. Regarding the content focus, EM covers the broadest range. The venture-support function differentiates EM from classical mentoring. Given entrepreneurs' close interconnection with their venture, this raises the question as to whether such an enlarged focus on the venture also differentiates EC from classical WPC, similar to the stronger consideration of organizational-level issues in executive coaching.

State of the Art of EC

Building on the general differentiation from related developmental interventions, we will now focus on the specific characteristics of EC. Strikingly, although EC is increasingly demanded as a reflection- and action-based learning method in entrepreneurial education (Küttim, Kallaste, Venesaar, & Kiis, 2014), empirical research is still at an emerging stage (Saadaoui & Affess, 2015). Even if the body of research on EC is increasing, extant studies focus on particular aspects of EC (e.g. specific outcomes, Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018; Saadaoui & Affess, 2015) are rather isolated and lack integration. This means that the research cannot yet provide a comprehensive picture of EC and its outcomes, input, process, and contextual factors (i.e. components contained in established coaching and mentoring frameworks;

e.g. Ely et al., 2010; Greif, 2013; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003). In the following, we will describe the existing research and derive our research questions for the current study.

A growing number of researchers resort to the established taxonomy of training evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 1994; Kraiger, Ford, & Salas, 1993) when categorizing coaching outcomes (e.g. Ely et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2016; Kotte, 2019). We summarize EC findings accordingly. There is evidence that EC achieves positive effects at all three outcome levels, from the learning to the results level. Regarding cognitive learning, EC studies report mostly self- and role-related learning outcomes (self-awareness, self-reflection, role identity; Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018; Kutzhanova et al., 2009). Regarding affective learning, the most frequently reported outcomes are increased entrepreneurial self-efficacy and self-confidence (e.g. Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018; Crompton, 2012; Saadaoui & Affess, 2015). At the behavioral level, EC prompts entrepreneurs to set up and start the venture (e.g. Bosma, Hessels, Schutjens, van Praag, & Verheul, 2012). In addition, EC fosters actual skill development, such as improved communication and interpersonal skills (Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018; Saadaoui & Affess, 2015). At the results level, the EC literature, to our knowledge, does not specify individual-level effects to date. As for organizational-level results, EC contributes to organizational growth and performance (e.g. Crompton & Smyrniotis, 2011). All in all, although there are some empirical studies on EC outcomes, these studies are disjointed and focused on selected aspects. Consequently, a comprehensive overview of the range of possible outcomes of EC is missing. We therefore aim to systematically explore EC outcomes and identify the outcomes' focus within our two-dimensional framework (Figure 1). We seek to assess:

Research Question 1: What is the range of outcomes of EC?

When it comes to input factors on the part of the coaches, their business knowledge, in particular their entrepreneurial experience, is posited as important for EC (e.g. Crompton, 2012; Crompton & Smyrniotis, 2011). However, empirical findings on how coaches' entrepreneurial (or other) experience relates to the success of EC are lacking (e.g. Audet & Couteret, 2012). On the part of the entrepreneurs, EC studies have identified entrepreneurs' self-reflection, openness to change, and willingness to accept help as predictors of coaching success (Audet & Couteret, 2012; Kutzhanova et al., 2009). To our knowledge, extant research has not explicitly considered how the entrepreneurs' level of entrepreneurial experience impacts upon EC. However, it seems likely that entrepreneurs with differing levels of experience might require different types of support. In total, only few characteristics of coaches

and entrepreneurs have been studied as input factors of EC. As the experience and background of different types of consultants and their respective clients are considered important in interventions related to EC, additional coach or entrepreneur characteristics may be relevant. Therefore, we aim to explore:

Research Question 2: Which coach and entrepreneur characteristics are relevant input factors?

In the case of process factors, relationship quality impacts upon outcomes of EC (Crompton & Smyrniotis, 2011; El Hallam & St-Jean, 2016), in line with being a firmly established success factor in WPC (Graßmann et al., 2019) and relevant in EM (El Hallam & St-Jean, 2016). Initial EC studies have also attempted to identify and categorize coach behaviors (Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2018; Crompton, 2012; Kutzhanova et al., 2009). These can partly be related to established mentor functions of EM and to emerging attempts to categorize coach roles and common factors of WPC and executive coaching (e.g. Behrendt & Greif, 2018; Berman, 2019; Jones et al., 2019; Segers, Vloeberghs, Henderickx, & Inceoglu, 2011). Still, in EC, coach behaviors and their impact upon outcomes remain largely unexplored. Unlike in EM, a consensual and established taxonomy is missing, which points to the usefulness of exploring coach roles or functions in EC systematically. We therefore seek to explore relevant process factors, particularly coach functions, and identify to what extent these functions correspond to an expert- versus process-consultation approach as well as a focus on the individual, their work, or the venture. This leads us to ask:

Research Question 3a: What are relevant process factors of EC?

Research Question 3b: What are coach functions in EC and how can they be positioned within the two-dimensional framework?

As in research on WPC and executive coaching (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Jones et al., 2016; Kotte, 2019), contextual influences have barely been explicitly studied in EC. Context is mostly only described in terms of “the entrepreneurial environment”. Extant EC studies at least point to the importance of (1) job characteristics of entrepreneurs, namely time pressure (e.g. Audet & Couteret, 2012), and (2) potential influences from the organizational context in which EC is (partially) embedded (e.g. boundary conditions of support programs like incubators, accelerators or venture creation programs; role of third parties; e.g. Audet & Couteret, 2012; Ben Salem & Lakhal, 2018; Mansoori et al., 2019). The stage of the venture within the entrepreneurial process (i.e. pre-launch, launch, post-launch) as a contextual factor is notably absent from studies on EC although the entrepreneurship

literature shows that entrepreneurs have different needs at different stages of venture growth (Crompton & Smyrniotis, 2011). Depending on the boundary conditions or the entrepreneurial stage, a different approach or content focus in EC might be appropriate. Given the limited knowledge on which contextual influences impact upon EC, we aim to explore:

Research Question 4: What are relevant contextual factors of EC?

In summary, on the basis of current empirical findings, it is not yet clear where to position EC in relation to other developmental interventions. Consequently, we propose a two-dimensional framework and by exploring the above-named research questions, we aim to develop an empirically supported conceptual framework specific to EC that can guide both future theory development and empirical research on this emerging, practical, and relevant topic.

METHOD

Research Design

To answer our research questions, we conducted a qualitative interview study with coaches and entrepreneurs who had engaged in EC. An explorative, qualitative approach is particularly well suited to the development of a more integrated framework (till now lacking in the EC literature) since it identifies a wide range of outcomes, input, process, and contextual factors including those that go beyond the specific aspects that have been examined in the extant research (Lee, 1999). Moreover, qualitative research designs are especially suited to capturing the context of a coaching intervention (Grover & Furnham, 2016), which is highly relevant given that EC can be considered a particular type of WPC that is shaped by its specific context, namely the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Qualitative interview studies in particular allow for the exploration of subjective experiences and the perceptions of coaches and entrepreneurs, both in depth and, if based on a substantial number of interviews, in breadth (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018) in order to come to a practice-based rather than merely theoretically driven conceptualization of the distinctiveness of EC. Taking into account the transitional state of the EC literature between nascent and intermediate theory (Edmondson & McManus, 2007), qualitative content analysis (QCA), which has been defined as “category-driven qualitatively oriented text analysis” (Mayring, 2015, p. 30, our translation) is particularly well suited for the purposes of our study. First, rather than being purely explorative, QCA allows us to incorporate the extant, emerging theory on EC and from related fields while at the same

time staying receptive to new insights and phenomena. Instead of mere theory testing which is better suited to more developed fields of research, QCA enables us to contribute to theory development on EC because it inherently allows researchers to move back and forth between theoretical assumptions and data (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Second, in QCA, the frequency of categories is interpreted as an indicator of their relevance. On the basis of a substantial sample of interviews, QCA thereby allows us to assess the relevance of particular factors within the overall picture of EC.

Data Collection

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with both professional coaches experienced in providing coaching to entrepreneurs as well as with entrepreneurs who had taken part in at least one coaching intervention. We sought to capture EC from the perspectives of both parties involved in order to create a more multifaceted sense of the phenomenon.

Sampling. As the term “coaching” has gained popularity in the entrepreneurial context but is applied to a wide range of interventions, we introduced the following inclusion criteria for our study: The coaching had to: (1) be conducted in a one-on-one setting; (2) be provided by a professional coach being paid for the sessions; and (3) include at least some elements of reflective learning (i.e. not be purely instructional). On the part of coaches, our second inclusion criterion excludes investors “coaching” entrepreneurs. Although not uncommon in practice, we draw on the current debate in WPC, wherein WPC by a professional coach is differentiated from managerial or supervisory coaching with its associated power dynamics (e.g. Bozer & Jones, 2018; Jones et al., 2016). To foster conceptual clarity, we apply this distinction to the entrepreneurial field. We argue that coaching by “neutral” professional coaches is fundamentally different from the guidance provided by investors (or other stakeholders) involved in the venture due to the latter group’s personal interests and entrepreneurs’ dependencies. Regarding entrepreneurs, we focus on EC directed at founders in the early stages of the entrepreneurial process, from the pre-launch to post-launch stages, for two reasons. First, in practice, entrepreneurship education in general and EC more specifically are mostly directed at early-stage entrepreneurs (e.g. Müller & Diensberg, 2011). Second, prior studies on EC have predominantly focused on nascent and novice entrepreneurs (e.g. Audet & Couteret, 2012; Saadaoui & Affes, 2015). Thus, to relate our framework to both predominant practice and prior research, such a focus seems warranted. Beyond these inclusion criteria, in line with recommendations by Bluhm, Harman, Lee, and Mitchell (2011), we aimed to obtain a maximally heterogeneous sample in order to depict EC

in its assumed variety. We began our study with different variables in mind that might influence perceptions of EC, such as gender, age, prior experience, industry, and organizational context of EC engagements. We recruited interviewees through incubators, start-up centers, and chambers of industry and commerce, as well as through the social professional networks Xing and LinkedIn and independent coaching agencies.

Sample sizes in qualitative research are generally smaller than in quantitative research as the primary aim is to achieve in-depth insights into a phenomenon rather than representativeness (Morse et al., 2002). An established criterion in qualitative research for determining a large-enough sample is saturation (Morse et al., 2002; Moser & Korstjens, 2018), that is, the point at which no further new categories and concepts emerge from the data. Following general estimations for adequate sample sizes in QCA, we aimed for an initial sample of 15 to 20 coaches and entrepreneurs each (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). We then sampled additional coaches and entrepreneurs until we could no longer generate new aspects (Morse et al., 2002; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Saturation was reached after analyzing 67 interviews.

Sample. Our final sample included 44 coaches and 23 entrepreneurs from around Germany. Coaches were between 29 and 72 years old ($M = 47.70$, $SD = 9.78$) and 50.00 percent were male. They had on average 10.19 years ($SD = 6.71$) of practical experience as coaches, which includes an average of 9.76 years ($SD = 6.72$) coaching entrepreneurs. They spent $M = 37.17$ percent ($SD = 24.41$) of their annual working hours on coaching. Our sample of coaches is thus comparable to the German coaching market in relation to age, gender, experience as a coach, and proportion of coaching to total working time (M. Stephan & Rötze, 2017). On average, 29.08 percent of their EC engagements were embedded in an institutional program while 70.92 percent were stand-alone. More than half of the coaches (54.54%) offer coaching not only to entrepreneurs but also to other client populations. 80.65 percent of coaches had their own experience as entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurs were between 22 and 53 years old ($M = 37.26$, $SD = 9.85$) and 60.87 percent were male. They had on average taken part in 7.47 sessions of EC ($SD = 5.25$). The majority (69.57%) of them reported having used coaching as part of a formal program (e.g. incubator). Our sample includes both first- and second-time founders ($n = 3$) in a broad range of fields (e.g. technology, health, marketing, and human resources). At the time of the interview, two entrepreneurs reported being in the pre-launch stage, four were in the launch stage and 17 in the post-launch stage (with a maximum of 5 years since founding their company).

Semi-Structured Interviews. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured telephone interviews. Interview questions, in line with our research questions, were partly predefined and guided by the overall structure of established coaching and mentoring frameworks (Ely et al., 2010; Greif, 2013; Wanberg et al., 2003). At the same time, new topics were allowed to emerge. We included elements of the storytelling approach (Lewis, 2011) by asking interviewees to remember a specific coaching engagement they had experienced and report on these experiences. The majority of questions were asked to coaches and entrepreneurs alike. We explored outcomes of EC by asking why entrepreneurs sought coaching and what outcomes coaches and entrepreneurs perceived. We went into more depth with entrepreneurs about perceived outcomes as their reports are more direct (Bozer & Jones, 2018). We explored input, process, and contextual factors by asking both coaches and entrepreneurs how the coaching started, how the coaching intervention proceeded over time (e.g. what a typical session looked like, how the coach intervened) and what impacted upon the coaching process. Interviews lasted an average of 40.8 minutes, with a range from 26 to 87 minutes, and were transcribed for further analysis.

Data Analysis

QCA (Mayring, 2015; Schreier, 2012) was used to analyze the interviews in a team of four researchers, comprising the first two authors of this study and two graduate students in business psychology. We developed our coding frame such that we created concept-driven higher-level categories as a first step, availing ourselves of existing conceptual frameworks in WPC and mentoring (Ely et al., 2010; Greif, 2013; Wanberg et al., 2003) and differentiated outcomes, input, process, and contextual factors. As a second step, we specified these categories by data-driven lower-level categories for unexplored or unclear research areas (e.g. coach behaviors) and by concept-driven lower-level categories for research areas that are already further developed (i.e. outcomes of EC, in line with established taxonomies of training outcome).

In contrast to quantitative methods, in qualitative research data collection and analysis should be closely interrelated to engage with a phenomenon as deeply as possible, thereby ensuring reliability and validity (Morse et al., 2002; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). We thus coded the first few interviews and created a first draft of our category system. Continuing our coding, we remained receptive to the emergence of new topics. We discussed and refined data-driven categories iteratively among the team of researchers until they were as unidimensional, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive as possible (Schreier, 2012). In line with our approach to sample until saturation, we used the replication of categories and the non-occurrence of new categories as criteria to

finalize our category system (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). For the final coding, we calculated inter-coder reliability using Cohen's kappa and achieved an average $\kappa = 0.72$, indicating a substantial agreement between coders (Landis & Koch, 1977).

RESULTS

In line with our research questions, we first present findings on the outcomes of EC (RQ1). We then elaborate on input factors (RQ2), process factors (RQ3), in particular coach behavior and functions (RQ3a), and on contextual factors that impact upon EC (RQ4).

Outcomes of Entrepreneurial Coaching

Based on the coaches' and entrepreneurs' statements we identified coaching outcomes on all four deductively set levels: reactions, learning (cognitive and affective), behavior, and results. Some lower-level categories specific to the entrepreneurial context emerged inductively from the interviews. Table 1 provides an overview of EC outcomes across the different levels together with the number of coaches and entrepreneurs referring to these outcomes. While Table 1 depicts all outcomes comprehensively, we elaborate only on outcomes that differ from established results on WPC (including executive coaching) or mentoring in order to draw a characterizing picture of EC.

Concerning *cognitive learning* ($n = 26$), increases in *declarative* as well as *procedural business-related knowledge* appear to be relevant. One entrepreneur said:

The fact that I now know exactly how to proceed with the acquisition, both in terms of addressing customers and which tools can be used. How to set up a social media campaign. So, how shall I put this, I really had no plan before.

As to *affective learning* ($n = 13$), interviewees specifically described *entrepreneurial* rather than general *self-efficacy*. One entrepreneur shared:

That simply made me or us feel safe and secure on our path and that we've developed confidence in ourselves, that we're on the right path [with our business idea].

On the *behavior level* ($n = 20$), changes in *externally directed behavior* (i.e. towards investors and customers) figure as prominently as changed *task- and relations-oriented behavior* (e.g. structuring work, communicating with employees). One entrepreneur explained how he interacted differently with customers:

TABLE 1
Outcomes of Entrepreneurial Coaching

<i>Outcome categories</i>	<i>C (n = 44)</i>	<i>E (n = 23)</i>	<i>Total (N = 67)</i>
Reaction	13	22	35
<i>Satisfaction with coaching</i>	2	12	14
<i>Subjectively perceived benefit</i>	13	22	35
Learning	9	20	29
<i>Cognitive learning</i>	7	19	26
<i>Declarative knowledge</i>	5	13	18
<i>Business-related knowledge about</i>	0	4	4
<i>Self-awareness</i>	5	11	16
<i>Procedural knowledge/Cognitive strategies</i>	4	14	18
<i>Business-related knowledge how to (e.g. writing a business plan)</i>	2	8	10
<i>Self-reflectivity</i>	0	6	6
<i>Perspective-taking</i>	1	4	5
<i>Other cognitive learning</i>	1	2	3
<i>Affective learning</i>	2	11	13
<i>Entrepreneurial self-efficacy</i>	2	5	7
<i>Job engagement/motivation</i>	0	3	3
<i>Self-confidence/self-criticism</i>	0	4	4
<i>Serenity</i>	0	4	4
<i>Other affective learning</i>	0	1	1
Behavior/Transfer	4	16	20
<i>Task-oriented behavior (e.g. work in a more structured way)</i>	1	7	8
<i>Change-oriented behavior (e.g. take a strategic decision)</i>	0	3	3
<i>Relations-oriented behavior (e.g. give feedback to team members)</i>	0	10	10
<i>Externally directed behavior (e.g. interact differently with investors)</i>	3	8	11
<i>Other specific or unspecified transfer</i>	0	4	4
Results	3	15	18
<i>Individual level</i>	0	5	5
<i>Individual work performance</i>	0	4	4
<i>Acquired social capital/expanded network</i>	0	2	2
<i>Team/company level</i>	3	12	15
<i>Climate/communication</i>	0	8	8

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)

<i>Outcome categories</i>	<i>C (n = 44)</i>	<i>E (n = 23)</i>	<i>Total (N = 67)</i>
<i>Generally improved teamwork</i>	0	4	4
<i>Changed structures/processes/business model</i>	0	5	5
<i>Global company performance</i>	3	1	4

Note. Numbers indicated represent numbers of interviewees. C = coaches; E = entrepreneurs.

I put more effort into considering the answers that have to be prepared beforehand, or the questions that arise in other people's minds earlier on, and to incorporate them into my lines of reasoning, for example in relation to marketing measures.

On the *results level* ($n = 18$), what stands out is that interviewees mentioned substantially more outcomes on the *team/company level* (e.g. improved climate and communication, changed structures and processes, global company performance) than on the *individual-results level*. One entrepreneur shared how coaching had improved the team/company climate:

That we've learned to address the small problems immediately, so that they never get big. We now have a very good culture of dialogue Usually in such a way that nobody feels offended. I believe that this is also a part of what came out of coaching.

Input Factors

We identified both characteristics of coaches and of entrepreneurs as relevant input factors for EC.

Coach Characteristics. The central coach characteristics that both coaches and entrepreneurs mentioned were related to the (*lack of*) *experience and expertise* of the coach ($n = 28$). More specifically, the coaches' *expert knowledge*, in particular business-relevant knowledge as well as industry-specific knowledge, was seen as valuable and a lack thereof as hindering ($n = 22$). One coach said:

From my own experience, entrepreneurial coaching comes up against limiting factors for me personally when it has to do with numbers. That's something I can't deal with. Or even highly strategic processes. In these matters I'm not the right sparring partner.

Some interviewees also perceived the *coaches' own entrepreneurial experience* as an important factor for coaching success ($n = 7$). One entrepreneur said:

Since our coach himself has many years of experience in entrepreneurship, he was able to convey this everyday experience to us really well so we could really learn a lot. And above all, we were able to avoid many mistakes during the founding stage and so on, because he had already made them for us, so to speak, and could communicate them to us beforehand. That's one of the most important things.

Similarly, extensive *experience as a coach* ($n = 4$) was considered helpful.

Entrepreneur Characteristics. First, *attitudes of entrepreneurs towards coaching* ($n = 12$) were named most prominently by both coaches and entrepreneurs. By describing *entrepreneurs' unrealistic expectations*, interviewees referred to a lack of knowledge about what coaching is, meaning that entrepreneurs expected more directive advice and help. One entrepreneur shared:

There was a small misunderstanding. I'd expected that the coaching agency would also help me to develop a website. That it would offer concrete marketing services.

On the other hand, they indicated that *entrepreneurs' openness and motivation* towards the coaching positively influenced the coaching process.

Second, entrepreneurs' *learning ability and openness to change in general* ($n = 5$) were portrayed as success factors for coaching and for their entrepreneurial success at large.

Third, coaches indicated that the *level of entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial experience* ($n = 6$), relating to being a first-time, serial or seasoned entrepreneur, impacted upon the coaching process in the sense that it required them to adapt the coaching accordingly. One coach said:

If someone comes to us and has already started a business, has perhaps already managed a company, that has an influence on [the process].

Process Factors

We identified process factors of EC regarding (1) the coaches' behavior, (2) the entrepreneurs' behavior, and (3) the working alliance between coaches and entrepreneurs.

Coach Behavior. Categorizing specific coach behaviors described by our interviewees led us to define seven coach functions in EC, namely *supportive, reflection-focused developmental, skill-focused developmental, optimization-focused developmental, educating, implementing, and connective behavior*. Table 2 provides an overview of the seven coach functions and their respective behavioral lower-level categories.

TABLE 2
Coach Behavior Related to the Seven Coach Functions

<i>Coach behavior (coach function)</i>	<i>C (n = 44)</i>	<i>E (n = 23)</i>	<i>Total (N = 67)</i>
Supportive behavior (companion)	38	12	50
Empathic understanding	17	7	24
Encourage and motivate entrepreneur	16	5	21
Explore entrepreneur's needs	12	3	15
Unspecified supportive behavior (companion)	11	5	16
Reflection-focused developmental behavior (personal sparring partner)	40	13	53
Stimulate self-reflection	35	12	47
... on entrepreneurs' (personal) strengths and weaknesses	22	4	26
... on entrepreneurs' attitudes/beliefs/motivations and challenge them	17	2	19
... on work-life-balance issues and level of strain	7	2	9
... (unspecified)	13	8	21
Stimulate reflection on motivation to found/individual relationship to venture	19	3	22
Stimulate reflection and perspective-taking regarding interpersonal and team issues	9	5	14
Skill-focused developmental behavior (skill trainer)	35	11	46
Use skill assessment techniques (e.g. potential analyses, job-shadowing)	19	4	23
Practice (and give feedback on) critical skills and entrepreneurial competencies	25	5	30
... communication skills	17	2	19
... presentation skills/pitch training	9	3	12
... mindfulness, stress and time management techniques	5	1	6
Foster skills in unspecified ways	15	6	21
... interpersonal/collaboration skills (communication, team, leadership)	6	5	11
... other/unspecified skills	12	2	14
Optimization-focused developmental behavior (business development assistant)	38	13	51
Stimulate strategic reflection	21	8	29
... on business idea and challenge it	16	6	22

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (CONTINUED)

<i>Coach behavior (coach function)</i>	<i>C (n = 44)</i>	<i>E (n = 23)</i>	<i>Total (N = 67)</i>
<i>... on alternative scenarios and anticipate change</i>	10	3	13
Evaluate and refine business plan	25	6	31
Identify and work with business-relevant resources (e.g. social, financial)	21	6	27
<i>... critical performance factors (e.g. chances and risks)</i>	14	5	19
<i>... (unspecified)</i>	7	1	8
Educating behavior (advisor)	29	19	48
Provide expert knowledge/advice/assessment	29	13	42
<i>... on financial issues (e.g. business models, funding)</i>	18	5	23
<i>... on other specific topics (e.g. legal, marketing)</i>	6	6	12
<i>... (unspecified)</i>	16	8	24
Provide general information on entrepreneurship	2	8	10
Share own experiences	1	7	8
Implementing behavior (implementation guide)	26	16	42
Work on specific next steps/define action plans	18	9	27
Provide specific tools and templates (e.g. apps, checklists)	11	6	17
Provide overall implementation and structuring assistance	6	7	13
Connective behavior (network broker)	15	3	18
Provide network/contacts	11	2	13
Inform about events/workshops	9	1	10

Note. Numbers indicated represent numbers of interviewees. C = coaches; E = entrepreneurs.

Supportive Coach Behavior. Coach behaviors classified as *supportive* ($n = 50$) have coaches taking on the role of *companions*. One entrepreneur stated:

It's like someone is there by your side. So, he's always there beside us with his experience, that's a huge help.

Among supportive coach behaviors, the most frequently named behaviors were *empathic understanding* and *encouraging and motivating* entrepreneurs. One coach explained:

It's like pretty much everything in life, there are ups and downs. ... And there it's important to have a good coach who's also empathic and personally accompanies them and connects to them where they're at.

Further supportive coach behaviors include *exploring entrepreneurs' personal needs* and *unspecified supportive behavior*, referring to the coach acting as a companion in general.

Reflection-Focused Developmental Coach Behavior. Interviewees described that coaches act as *personal sparring partners* who stimulate reflection ($n = 53$). *Stimulating self-reflection* was most prominent. It mostly focused on entrepreneurs' *personal strengths and weaknesses* but also related to their basic *attitudes, beliefs, and motivations* and to *work-life balance issues*. Further, *stimulating reflection on entrepreneurs' motivation to found and their individual relationship to the venture* was frequently addressed (e.g. their current or desired role within the company, their visions of the venture's future). One entrepreneur shared how the coach worked with him:

He reflected very deeply with me on what I wanted to get out of the company for me. What kind of fears, worries and perhaps also positive aspects would I like to take away with me from the months and years afterwards?

Reflection and perspective-taking regarding interpersonal and team issues were also reported.

Skill-Focused Developmental Coach Behavior. Acting as *skill trainers* ($n = 46$), coaches' behavior encompasses *using skill assessment techniques* (e.g. potential analyses or job shadowing) as well as *practicing and giving feedback on skills and competencies* critical to the entrepreneurial process. Interviewees predominantly described how coaches *practice communication and presentation skills* with entrepreneurs, but also *mindfulness, stress and time management techniques*. One coach explained how customer contact was practiced:

Regarding sales, for example, we've really simulated complete conversation situations and scenarios. This included assigned roles, they were recorded on camera and so on.

In addition, skills were also fostered in unspecified ways, particularly *interpersonal and collaboration skills*.

Optimization-Focused Developmental Coach Behavior. Coaches also take on the role of *business development assistants* by displaying a range of behaviors focused on optimizing entrepreneurs' business ($n = 51$). Optimizing behaviors predominantly include *stimulating strategic reflection*, either by challenging the *business idea* or stimulating thinking in *alternative and future scenarios*, as well as *evaluating and refining business plans* with entrepreneurs. They also encompass *identifying and working with business-relevant social, financial and other resources*, notably *critical performance factors*. One entrepreneur shared:

After having identified the crucial points or the critical success factors, we ... looked at how to develop solutions or countermeasures.

Educating Coach Behavior. Among *educating coach behaviors* ($n = 48$), *providing expert knowledge, advice or assessment*, especially on *financial issues*, but also on *other topics* (e.g. legal or marketing issues), was most frequently mentioned, thus illustrating coaches' role as *advisors*. One entrepreneur stated:

Yes, on the one hand it was on how my bookkeeping had to look, how I had to prepare myself for it, that I had to stay with it, and that he also offered to look over it twice a year. That was really great, because that's what I wanted.

To a lesser degree, interviewees also reported that coaches provide entrepreneurs with *general information on entrepreneurship* and *share their own experiences*.

Implementing Coach Behavior. In displaying *implementing coach behaviors*, coaches take on the role of *implementation guides* ($n = 42$). *Working on specific next steps and defining action plans* with entrepreneurs was named most frequently. One coach shared:

And then we set up a schedule. Every day he has to do something about the whole set-up that he's not so familiar with. I'm not a fan of these kinds of to-do lists with 30 or 60 points, but there's always one thing that has to be done every day.

Furthermore, coaches *provide specific tools and templates* (e.g. apps, software, checklists) and assist in *general implementation issues and overall structuring*.

Connective Coach Behavior. *Connective coach behavior* ($n = 18$) includes providing entrepreneurs with *access to coaches' relevant networks* and *informing them about events and workshops* relevant for establishing contacts. These connective behaviors are directed both to (potential) business partners for entrepreneurs and to a broader network of consultants who might provide more specialized support. One coach described the role as *network broker*:

Yes, in every phase there are different needs. And different questions. And I mostly see myself as an intermediary, because I don't have to know everything. But I have a very good network and know where to find the answers. And I'm good at getting people in touch with each other, which is usually very productive.

Taken together, the reflection-focused developmental function, the optimization-focused developmental function and the supportive function were named by the highest number of interviewees (75% or more; see Table 2). The remaining functions were reported by approximately two-thirds of our interviewees, except for the connective function which was named least. Both coaches and entrepreneurs mentioned the reflection-focused and optimization-focused developmental functions among the top four and the connective function as the least prominent. However, while coaches most frequently emphasized the supportive and developmental functions (i.e. focusing on support and fostering the development of entrepreneurs' reflexivity, skills and business), entrepreneurs most prominently valued the hands-on educating and implementing functions of coaching.

Lack of Wish for Directive Advice. Apart from function-related coach behaviors, an additional category emerged from the responses of some of the entrepreneurs. They criticized coaches for *not delivering enough directive interventions in general* ($n = 5$). One entrepreneur said:

There is one thing that should be done more often in coaching sessions: Concrete interventions! That would actually be more exciting. Sometimes it might help to simply make a suggestion, like saying: "Usually, it's useful if you do this and that. Try it out."

Correspondingly, some of the coaches described entrepreneurs' wish or need for practical knowledge and expert advice ($n = 7$).

Entrepreneur Behavior. Regarding entrepreneurs' behavior, the central factor interviewees related to is how entrepreneurs reacted to feedback and advice. A substantial number of coaches ($n = 17$) and even some of the entrepreneurs ($n = 3$) described their *resistance to feedback and advice* as negatively impacting upon the coaching process. One entrepreneur shared:

And I also have to say that self-employed people, myself included, naturally also show a certain resistance to consulting. Not always in a negative sense. On the contrary, if you weren't like that, you probably wouldn't be able to do what you're doing. Because everyone is shaking their heads anyway. ... And that makes it all the more difficult of course to give advice to such people, myself included.

Accordingly, some coaches indicated that this resistance to advice or inability to take criticism led to the need to address this resistance and, in extreme cases, to end the coaching.

Working Alliance. Regarding the relationship between coach and entrepreneur, interviewees mentioned all three of the established components of the working alliance (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989), namely bond-related aspects, task-related aspects and goal-related activities.

Regarding *bond-related aspects* ($n = 19$), coaches as well as entrepreneurs mainly indicated that *establishing mutual trust* is essential for the success of a coaching engagement.

Task-related aspects ($n = 11$) were mentioned by coaches and entrepreneurs in reference to *coaches explaining their working method*. One coach shared:

And I explain my working method, describe my working method and my approach in order to see if we can work together at all.

A majority of coaches and entrepreneurs referred to *goal-oriented activities* ($n = 43$) as an important part of the working alliance. They emphasized the need to explore entrepreneurs' expectations, motivation and goals *at the beginning of the coaching process*. One coach said:

Well, in the beginning I always have to find out about their motivation. Extrinsic or intrinsic? And accordingly, to filter out for the coachees what we have to work on. "Where do you want to go? Why do you want to go in that direction?"

Moreover, both coaches and entrepreneurs stated that it was beneficial that they *tracked goals* throughout the coaching process.

Contextual Factors

Interviewees highlighted how the specific characteristics of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, namely *entrepreneurs' job demands*, the *entrepreneurial stage*, and *boundary conditions of embedded coaching engagements*, impact upon EC.

As to *entrepreneurs' job demands* ($n = 20$) coaches explained that, in contrast to coaching other target groups, entrepreneurs were engaged in a wide

variety of topics in their daily work, often juggling multiple tasks and role requirements at the same time ($n = 8$). One coach said:

The diversity. That there are just so many topics. Someone who applies for a new job has usually done an apprenticeship, has some professional experience, and applies mostly in the same sector or field. That's the case for a job. But for someone who sets up a business, now suddenly it's the whole business. From being managing director, to financial controlling, the purchasing department, sales, marketing, HR, everything.

They also emphasized that entrepreneurs had to deal with *high levels of uncertainty* ($n = 6$).

Furthermore, the *entrepreneurial stage* that entrepreneurs are in (i.e. pre-launch, launch, post-launch) when engaging in coaching was referred to by a majority of coaches ($n = 32$) as a factor influencing the coaching process. While most coaches ($n = 23$) described *more generally* that different stages require them to deal with different topics and to use different types of interventions (e.g. more directive versus more reflective approaches), some explained in more detail *how the focus shifts* ($n = 9$). One coach explained:

In the pre-launch stage, we concentrate more on the motives, why someone wants to set up a business. The question of why and, of course, about the [entrepreneur's] resources In the course of the entrepreneurial process it's more about the topic of team building, team leadership. How to motivate employees, customers. And usually during the growth stage we must look at the entrepreneur again. Why doesn't he succeed in something that he's striving for? Is it the team? Is it the product?

For those EC engagements that were part of a start-up program or grant (i.e. embedded coaching engagements), interviewees mentioned that the *boundary conditions* ($n = 23$) were often set by the program or grant sponsors rather than contracted between coach and entrepreneur. For example, *program-related restrictions* that shape EC engagements ($n = 12$) implied a *predetermined structure* of the coaching engagement (i.e. standardized procedures and guidelines; $n = 6$), and a *set time frame* in terms of time contingents and/or frequency of meetings ($n = 4$). Program-related restrictions also include the *scope of coaching themes*, in the sense that coaches were not allowed to advise on specific issues ($n = 3$). One entrepreneur shared:

What was missing, as I said, were these financial things, tax for example, that would have really helped me. I actually think it's a great pity that these coaching programs are prevented from doing so. I can't understand that, this really needs to change.

Externally defined boundary conditions also implied that *entrepreneurs' freedom of choice* was often limited in embedded coaching engagements, both with regards to whether to engage in coaching at all or with a particular coach ($n = 9$). When asked for the reason why they engaged in coaching, more than half of the entrepreneurs ($n = 12$) explained that it was part of a program or grant.

DISCUSSION

Our study provides a multifaceted view on the outcomes, input, process, and contextual factors of EC. By basing our analysis on the perspectives of both coaches and entrepreneurs, we thoroughly investigated a research topic that is based upon the relationship between (at least) two stakeholders who sometimes differ substantially in their perspectives (e.g. Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2014). These results thus provide a systematic and holistic picture of EC, with a focus on early-stage entrepreneurs.

Our findings make a particular contribution to advancing EC research in two areas: First, they bring clarity to the current lack of understanding regarding relevant coach behavior in EC by identifying seven overarching coach functions that characterize EC. Second, we provide insights into the currently under-researched contextual factors that impact upon EC by identifying entrepreneurs' job demands, the entrepreneurial stage, and institutional boundary conditions (especially for embedded coaching engagements) as relevant contextual influences.

A Two-Dimensional Framework for Characterizing and Positioning EC

In addition to identifying relevant outcomes, input, process, and contextual factors of EC, a major contribution made by our study lies in the introduction of a novel framework consisting of the two dimensions of expert- versus process-consultation and individual-work-venture-focus. We propose that this framework advances research on EC in at least two ways. First, it serves to systematize coach functions within EC. Second, it allows EC to be positioned in relation to related developmental interventions.

Positioning the seven overarching coach functions within the two-dimensional framework highlights the spectrum and pattern of coach functions characteristic of EC (see Figure 2). While the supportive companion is positioned at one extreme, namely providing individually focused process-consultation, developmental functions differ primarily in their focus, with the sparring partner focusing on the individual entrepreneur, the skill trainer on the entrepreneur's work, and the business-development assistant on the venture. The clearly expert-oriented functions (advisor, implementation guide,

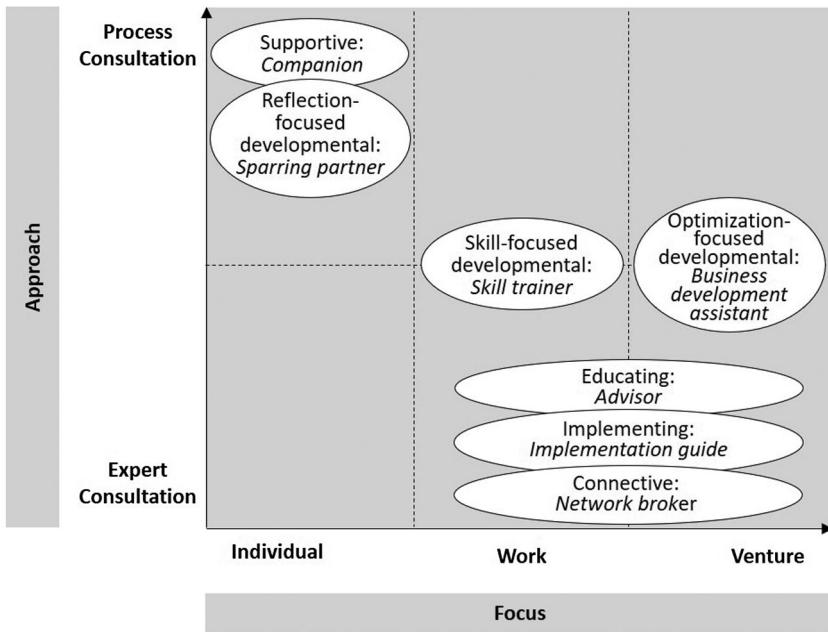


FIGURE 2. Coach functions within the two-dimensional framework

network broker) all focus on the intersection between the entrepreneurs’ tasks and the venture. Such a systematization of coach functions increases the theoretical understanding of how coaches support entrepreneurs in the challenges they face and paves the way for more differentiated research on EC.

The framework also allows us to characterize and position EC as a developmental intervention for entrepreneurs relative to related interventions (see Figure 3). While classical WPC and start-up consultancy constitute opposite ends of the expert- versus process-consultation and individual-work-venture-focus dimensions, EC along with executive coaching and EM can be positioned between the two extremes. We will describe similarities and differences between EC and related interventions in more detail, using these two dimensions.

Expert-versus Process-Consultation. In line with WPC’s focus on process-consultation (e.g. Schreyögg, 2010), stimulating self-reflection has been posited as its key characteristic (Behrendt & Greif, 2018). In contrast, regarding the cognitive learning level, interviewees in our study reported more outcomes for business-related knowledge (“about” and “how to”) than typically found in WPC (Kotte, 2019). Moreover, only two of the seven coach functions of EC

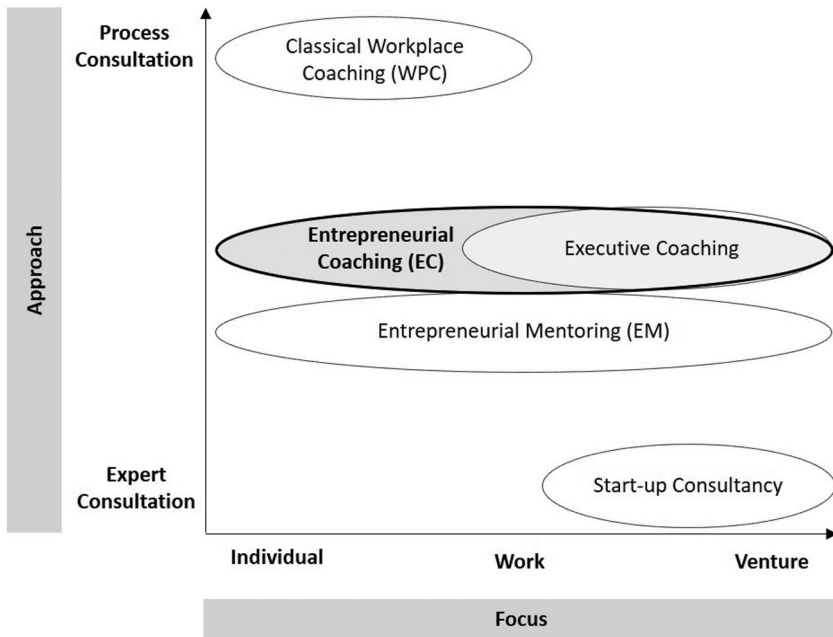


FIGURE 3. EC relative to related interventions within the two-dimensional framework

correspond to a pure process-consultation approach, while the remaining five are in line with an expert-consultation approach or contain elements of both expert- and process-consultation (see Figure 2). When explicitly comparing EC to classical WPC, coaches named the higher proportion of expert-consultation as a key distinguishing characteristic. Moreover, entrepreneurs mentioned the hands-on educating and implementing functions of EC most prominently and criticized the lack of more directive interventions. Our findings therefore corroborate initial research indicating that EC might also include expert-consultation functions (Crompton, 2012; Kutzhanova et al., 2009), similar to executive coaching (Berman, 2019). In our study, the coaches' business-relevant specialist knowledge and, to a lesser degree, their own experience as entrepreneurs were seen as important factors. This emphasis on specialist knowledge is in sharp contrast to WPC (Jones et al., 2016) where clients and sponsoring organizations attribute higher relevance to experience as a coach than, for example, to industry experience or personal experience as an executive (M. Stephan & Rötzt, 2017). Emphasizing the experience as a coach also applies to executive coaching (M. Stephan & Rötzt, 2017), even

though executive coaching has been suggested, similarly to EC, to contain more expert-consultation elements (e.g. Berman, 2019).

Due to its stronger focus on expert-consultation, EC is in fact closer to mentoring and to executive coaching than to classical WPC. EM shares some process-consultation elements with EC (e.g. the psychosocial support function of EM in line with the supportive function we found for EC; e.g. Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). However, with its emphasis on mentors passing on their experience and role-modeling as one of the core functions (e.g. Dickson et al., 2014), EM is more strongly characterized by an expert-consultation approach than EC. As in executive coaching, coaches passing on their own experience play a lesser role in EC, named as a lower-level category by only one of the coaches and by less than a third of the entrepreneurs in our study. In contrast, a majority of both coaches and entrepreneurs mentioned the reflection-focused developmental function, resonating with initial findings indicating that learning outcomes in EC are more reflection-related than in EM (e.g. Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018). This emphasis on reflection also clearly differentiates EC from start-up consultancy, while it draws EC and executive coaching together. Compared to mentors (St-Jean & Audet, 2012), coaches' professional identity is less closely tied to their own experience as entrepreneurs (or executives). A substantial proportion of coaches in our sample did not have experience as entrepreneurs themselves (19.35%) and most coaches (93.20%) worked with a range of other client groups besides entrepreneurs.

Focus on the Individual, the Work, or the Venture. Given the close interconnection of entrepreneurs with their venture (e.g. Jayaraman et al., 2000; St-Jean, 2011), we explored whether the broadened entrepreneurship-specific focus towards the venture introduced for EM (Dowejko & Chan, 2019) and the stronger focus on the organization at large in (top-level) executive coaching (Berman, 2019) also applied to EC. We indeed found a similarly enlarged scope. In contrast to WPC (Jones et al., 2019; Kotte, 2019), interviewees reported more outcomes of EC on the venture-related than the individually focused results level and substantial business-related learning outcomes in addition to self-related learning. Four of the seven coach functions of EC target the venture, either exclusively (as in *coach as business development assistant*) or in combination with addressing entrepreneurs' tasks and responsibilities (e.g. in *coach as implementation guide*) (see Figure 2). Moreover, stimulating reflection on the entrepreneurs' relationship to their venture emerged as one of the reflection-focused developmental sub-functions, making the individual-work-venture link an explicit part of the content of the coaching engagement. EC therefore shares with EM the breadth of topics and associated range of foci from the individual to the venture level and thus its scope is broader than in both classical WPC and (top-level) executive

coaching. In contrast to classical WPC, EC also includes a venture-focus. In contrast to executive coaching, it also includes a focus on the individual while sharing with executive coaching the consideration of the work-venture intersection (e.g. own role within the company, company strategy; Berman, 2019). Because of its broadened focus on the venture, EC also overlaps more than WPC with organizational development and consulting, and its entrepreneurship-specific form, namely start-up consultancy.

Taken together, EC can therefore be positioned between EM and executive coaching. EC shares with EM the broad focus but adopts a slightly more process-oriented approach. EC shares with executive coaching the slightly stronger orientation towards process-consultation but adopts a broader focus on the individual-work-venture dimension.

Taking a Closer Look at Contextual Factors of EC

In line with recent calls to reframe WPC as a contextually embedded social process rather than as an individual intervention (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014), our study explicitly considered contextual factors impacting upon EC and therefore adds substantially to the extant EC literature.

Complexity of Entrepreneurial Job Demands: The Challenge of Focusing the Coaching Engagement. Our study shows that entrepreneurs' job demands, notably the complexity of simultaneous issues and roles (e.g. Cardon & Patel, 2015; U. Stephan, 2018), and their close connection to their venture (e.g. Jayaraman et al., 2000; St-Jean, 2011) lead to a complexity of topics in the coaching engagement that has also been raised in the EM literature (St-Jean, 2011). In fact, coaches named the variety of topics that are addressed during EC as one of the key features, distinguishing it from classical WPC which is generally more focused on specific and distinct topics. In this sense, EC also differs from executive coaching where the scope is generally more narrowly defined as well. Focusing the coaching engagement is therefore more challenging in EC. Tensions may arise, for example, between focusing on and "siding with" individual entrepreneurs with their personal concerns and developmental needs on the one hand, and the venture with its business requirements on the other, thereby requiring coaches to wear "conflicting hats" (Fatien Diochon, Martin, & Kotte, 2019).

The breadth of topics "flooding" the coaching intervention presents a challenge to coaching. Research on WPC shows that negative effects of coaching for the coachee arise in particular when too many different topics are dealt with during the coaching engagement (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2018) and that including additional topics (such as multisource feedback) may distract

from rather than support goal achievement (Jones et al., 2016). Against this background, it is likely that goal-oriented activities were emphasized so strongly by our interviewees since they are a useful strategy for increasing the focus of coaching engagements, thereby facilitating coaching success (e.g. Behrendt & Greif, 2018).

Institutional Boundary Conditions and Additional Stakeholders. The contextual perspective of our study also highlights the need to differentiate between embedded and stand-alone EC engagements. Embedded EC engagements are part of a more comprehensive entrepreneurial program or start-up grant, similar to common practice in EM (e.g. Brinkley & Le Roux, 2018; El Hallam & St-Jean, 2016; Mansoori et al., 2019). Key boundary conditions (e.g. time, structure, content) are at least partially defined externally, that is outside of the coach-entrepreneur dyad. Moreover, both coach and entrepreneur are partly dependent upon the sponsoring organization (e.g. coaches being employed or contracted by a business incubator; coaching as a precondition for entrepreneurs to receive funding). The extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation for engaging in coaching that may result from mandatory coaching is problematic as coaching motivation has been identified as an important predictor of coaching outcomes (e.g. Bozer & Jones, 2018). Similarly, the reported resistance of entrepreneurs to advice and feedback might at least partly be linked to such mandatory coaching engagements. In EM, there is evidence of predetermined relationships being less effective than self-selected ones (McGregor & Tweed, 2002). In summary, the strong institutional influences in embedded coaching engagements curtail the freedom and scope of action of both coaches and entrepreneurs and complicate the contracting between both parties which is key to establishing a solid working alliance (e.g. Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019). In this regard, embedded EC shows more similarities to the organizational dependencies, power dynamics, and the need for stakeholder alignment that are typical of WPC (e.g. Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019; Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014) than one might initially expect in light of entrepreneurs being self-employed.

It is important to note, however, that embedded EC engagements are only one form of EC along with stand-alone EC engagements. In fact, in our sample, half of the coaches conduct more than 95 percent of their EC engagements as stand-alone. Whether and how third parties, for example investors, impact upon or are incorporated into contracting in these stand-alone coaching engagements is as yet unclear.

Synthesis: A Definition of Entrepreneurial Coaching

Based on the review of the literature, our empirical findings, and the discussion thereof, we propose a definition of entrepreneurial coaching as follows:

Entrepreneurial coaching is a custom-tailored, reflective, and results-oriented development intervention that is directed towards entrepreneurs with differing levels of experience and across different stages of the entrepreneurial process. It is based on a collaborative relationship between a professional coach (who may or may not have personal entrepreneurial experience) and an entrepreneur. EC can be embedded (e.g. in entrepreneurial programs or start-up grants) or be conducted as a stand-alone intervention. It entails both expert- and process-consultation elements and, beyond focusing on the individual entrepreneur and their work, involves a consideration of the venture level.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The assumed relevance of input, process, and contextual factors is at present based on the subjective assessment of coaches and entrepreneurs having engaged in EC, rather than on their actual predictive value. Therefore, in a next step, testable pathways need to be specified and assessed empirically. We inductively explored coach behaviors and allotted them to seven different coach functions of EC. This structure needs to be tested factor-analytically similar to the methodical approach adopted for corroborating the mentor functions of EM (St-Jean, 2011). A sound quantitative measure of EC coach functions could in turn enable the testing of specific hypotheses. Similar to the differential impact of specific mentoring functions on specific outcomes in mentoring (Allen et al., 2004), we suggest that coach functions may impact differentially upon specific EC outcomes (e.g. the skill-focused developmental function might particularly foster behavior change; the implementing function might impact upon the results level).

Another pathway that we suggest is between the coaches' background, the degree to which they display specific functions, and EC outcomes. We assume that coaches with a higher degree of technical expertise and personal entrepreneurial experience display more expert-consultation functions, while coaches with more extensive experience as a coach display more process-consultation functions. The assumed link between coach functions and outcomes may be moderated by the level of experience of the entrepreneur. Research on situational leadership theory suggests that inexperienced followers benefit from more directive leadership (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009) which has some overlap with expert-consultation. Moreover, researchers have assumed that inexperienced entrepreneurs make less use of heuristics and

may thus be overwhelmed by information (Ucbasaran, Wright, Westhead, & Busenitz, 2003). Building on this research, we suggest that coach functions in line with expert-consultation are more effective for inexperienced entrepreneurs, while coach functions in line with process-consultation are more effective for experienced entrepreneurs.

In our study, we focused on early-stage entrepreneurs in order to relate our framework to both the predominant practice of EC and existing research. It is reasonable to expect, however, that the approach and focus of EC not only change across the initial pre-launch, launch, and post-launch stages but also at later growth stages of the venture. Purposefully sampling entrepreneurs across a wide range of stages could shed light on how the focus of and approach to coaching is (or is not) adapted to the respective stage and, therefore, extend our initial findings on the impact of the entrepreneurial stage upon the coaching engagement. Moreover, we suggest that future research might further explore contextual factors, taking our two-dimensional framework as a useful starting point. Recent research indicates that the choice of coaching and mentoring behaviors is context-sensitive (Stokes et al., 2020). Accordingly, the contextual peculiarities of specific subgroups of entrepreneurs (e.g. independent start-ups vs. spinoffs, for-profit vs. social entrepreneurs) might impact upon the choice and efficacy of different coach functions in EC.

A limitation of our study is the use of subjective reports on coaches' and entrepreneurs' behavior. Self-reported and actual behavior in coaching may differ substantially (Ianiro, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Kauffeld, 2015). Therefore, observational studies comparing how coaches intervene over the course of EC sessions would be desirable to corroborate our findings.

While our study identifies boundary conditions imposed by the entrepreneurial ecosystem as important contextual factors of EC, particularly for embedded EC engagements, our findings are limited to the perspectives of coaches and entrepreneurs. We suggest the inclusion of a third-party perspective on EC by following up with an interview study on how these third parties view EC, both for embedded as well as for stand-alone EC engagements. While it has already been suggested that incubator managers be included in future EC studies (Audet & Couteret, 2012), we recommend to also include the investor perspective on coaching, particularly since recent entrepreneurship research has indicated that entrepreneurs' "coachability" (Ciuchta, Letwin, Stevenson, McMahan, & Huvaj, 2018) is a part of investors' criteria for investment decisions. Relatedly, the question of how different stakeholders' interests and perspectives are incorporated and aligned in EC remains unexplored. Multi-stakeholder contracting (Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019) might play an important role in EC and thus is a relevant area for future research.

Practical Implications

Our study bears practical implications for coaches, entrepreneurs, and organizational stakeholders involved in EC. For coaches, our study raises awareness of the importance of maintaining a conscious balance between expert- and process-consultation as well as between focusing on the individual, work, and venture. The entrepreneurs' clearly voiced wish for more instructive interventions and the sharing of specialist knowledge and experience is likely to create a strong pull towards expert-consultation. Maintaining a collaborative working relationship that requires and allows entrepreneurs to identify their own needs and solutions in line with a process-consultation approach is therefore particularly challenging in EC. Although coachees in executive coaching settings also express a preference for concrete advice and recommendations (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999), considering the specialized field of EC, the variety of topics and the insecurities which entrepreneurs bring to coaching may make it particularly difficult to "win them over" to a, at least partially, process-oriented coaching engagement. Explicitly and continuously addressing, explaining, and contracting the way in which coach and entrepreneur collaborate (i.e. strengthening the task-related component of the working alliance; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989) seems therefore particularly important in EC. Relatedly, the breadth of topics that results from entrepreneurs' job demands requires coaches to equilibrate their focus on the individual-work-venture continuum. Coaches need to reflect their "habitual pull" towards a particular focus (with the associated blind spots and seducibilities) and should clarify goals with entrepreneurs on an ongoing basis in order to jointly decide upon the respective focus (i.e. strengthening the goal-related component of the working alliance; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989).

For entrepreneurs, our study helps to better understand what outcomes and what type of intervention to expect from EC and how it differs from other developmental interventions. Channeling expectations is relevant, since entrepreneurs' unrealistic expectations were named as a hindering factor in our study, and the alignment of coachee expectations (or lack thereof) impacts upon the success of WPC (e.g. Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018).

For organizational stakeholders, our study raises awareness of the tensions associated with making coaching a compulsory component of entrepreneurial programs or funding. We suggest that the limited choice that some entrepreneurs reported (both with regards to coaching and the specific coach) may contribute to the frequently reported resistance to feedback and advice. Thus, while it is reasonable, from an organizational perspective, to attach conditions to funding, organizational stakeholders should also consider how they could increase degrees of freedom in order to foster entrepreneurs' intrinsic motivation and ultimately the effectiveness of coaching (e.g. by allowing the

choice of coach based on a selection of coach profiles as is common practice in organizationally embedded WPC).

CONCLUSION

Our study contributes to the highly relevant topic of supporting entrepreneurs during the entrepreneurial process (e.g. European Commission, 2018). We provide a clearer picture of what EC is and how it differs from (and resembles) related interventions from the fields of entrepreneurial education and professional coaching by characterizing and positioning EC within a two-dimensional conceptual framework and by suggesting a definition of EC. This framework can pave the way for future empirical investigations into EC. For practitioners—coaches, entrepreneurs, and organizational stakeholders—it can serve as a roadmap to guide them to a better understanding of how EC can be optimally used.

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