

Chapter 3

Methodology and Research Approach

Action Research from an Existential Phenomenological Viewpoint

A Definition of Coaching

Coaching “strives to assist clients in regaining greater control and mastery

over their lives in order that they may experience

a more authentic being in the world”

(Spinelli, 1989: 127).

Chapter 3

**Methodology and Research Approach:
Action Research from an Existential Phenomenological Viewpoint****3.1 Statement of intent**

The intention of this research project is to begin to recognise the specific coaching interventions in the conversation between coach and client, and to identify how the coach's interventions help the client to make breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling and behaviour – and ultimately in performance.

3.1.1 The purpose of the research

To conduct research in relation to what it is that happens, not just in the moment of intervention between coach and client (that moment of change), but what it is that helps to create a transformational shift in thinking, feeling and behaviour on the part of the client as a result of the coaching conversation.

I define the 'coaching conversation' as the verbal and non-verbal interaction between coach and client during a face-to-face or telephone coaching session. My specific research is based on face-to-face interactions.

My research is based upon the language used, and the narrative as it unfolds, during the coaching conversation. As yet not much practical research has been conducted into *what specifically happens in the 'coaching conversation' around change and transformation in thinking, language and feeling and how this impacts on performance*. However, many books have been written from the perspective of specific coaching models (see Chapter 2: Terms of Reference and Literature Review); and various themes have emerged as pertinent to those conversations. There are many examples of coaching conversations, learning conversations and examples of dialogue in the contemporary literature, but no research to date into what happens linguistically in live coaching conversations between coach and client.⁴¹

3.1.2 Parameters of proposed research

In my research project, I have investigated a range of possibilities about causal factors in helping a coaching client to identify limiting paradigms or worldviews, and to make a shift to move outside of that paradigm. I have defined paradigm as "an agreed system of thinking and

behaviour, a set of limiting assumptions, a mindset or attitude” (Webster). In order to clearly define my research project, I based it upon four questions, rather than a hypothesis or precise research statement. In order to determine my questions, I spent an initial year exploring the parameters of my proposed research. I had to decide:

1. What is the general area of my proposed research? (limiting paradigms).
2. What is to be investigated? (the narrative or text in which people tell stories or talk about their current situation and concerns).
3. Who or what is the focus? (the coaching conversation, therefore both the coach’s intervention in the client’s narrative and the client’s narrative or text).
4. Where is the investigation to be undertaken? (in the coach’s or client’s office, or in a neutral designated “safe thinking environment”, i.e. a “safe space”).
5. Why is the research significant, and to whom? (for researchers and practitioners working in the field of executive coaching worldwide).

The above question framework helped me to determine which of my research questions would embody my overall objectives for this project and lead to a discovery of how the coach intervenes in the coaching conversation.

3.1.3 Research questions

My initial research questions developed over a one and a half-year period during the first three semesters of the I-coach Master’s, Diploma and Doctoral programme held in Cape Town. Although I had been coaching over a period of about 12 years at the onset of my doctoral studies, it has been on a professional rather than an academic basis. This three-year project has added depth and knowledge to enhance my coaching practice, and has sent me on a search to discover what it is that happens in the coaching conversation that creates real, positive change in the client’s thinking, language, feeling and behaviour.

I have moved from my original proposal which was to look at the essence of the client’s narrative (i.e. the client’s story), to understanding the “relationship” between the client’s narrative and the coach’s interventions, particularly in the development of the relationship between coach and client – and to research how the coaching conversation helps the client to create changes in thinking, feeling, language and behaviour based on the “relationship” that develops in the coaching conversation.

3.1.4 Coaching questions as they have evolved

1. What is the moment of change during the coaching conversation?

2. How does the coach ask the client questions in order to elicit their current/present story - and the question (in my model) is where to intervene?
3. What are the archetypes underlying people's unconscious processes, and are they the underlying unconscious factors driving the client's narrative?
4. To investigate "narrative" as an effective coaching tool by the use of client case studies and corporate environmental studies to demonstrate that storytelling/narrative is an effective coaching methodology.
5. How is narrative/storytelling an effective methodology in developing cultural competence in individuals and teams in a multi-cultural society and organisation?
6. How does the coaching intervention in the client's narrative help the client to make breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling and behaviour?
7. How does the coaching intervention in the client's narrative help the client make breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling and behaviour – and, consequently, in performance?
8. What is it in the coaching intervention that creates sustained transformational change for the client, helping the client make breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling, language and behaviour – and, therefore, in performance?
9. How do the coach's interventions help to build the relationship which then leads to shifts in thinking, feeling, and behaviour – and performance?

3.1.5 Final research questions

My research questions have 'shifted' from my original question about the 'moment of change' during the coaching conversation as it is not the only question relevant to the research. Based on my studies and professional work over the last three years, I believe it is more useful to analyse the coaching conversation in terms of: (a) breakthrough shifts in thinking, behaviour and performance; (b) creating transformational change; and (c) how the coaching intervention helps to build the relationship between client and coach.

Nine questions were too many to consider for this research project; I refined my research and intensified the focus, formulating four key questions. The four questions that my research project attempts to answer are:

1. How does the coaching intervention in the client's narrative help the client to make breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling and behaviour – and consequently in performance?
2. What is it in the coaching intervention that creates sustained transformational change for the client, helping the client to make breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling, language and behaviour – and therefore in performance?

3. What is it about the coaching intervention that makes the client think or behave in a certain way that helps to make a shift: a paradigm shift, a thinking shift, or a perception shift?
4. How do the coach's interventions help to build the relationship which then leads to shifts in thinking, feeling, and behaviour – and, ultimately, in performance?

My four final research questions have enabled me to collect the right data, to analyse it in order to draw conclusions (positive and negative) and ultimately to provide recommendations to future coaches.

My final research questions are a result of the research project itself, i.e. the client coaching sessions; my reading and studies; lectures attended and delivered; the design and delivery of two coaching programmes to a “foundation” and “advanced” coaching diploma course at The Coaching Centre, Cape Town; a supervision session with Dr Ernesto Spinelli in London; and several supervision sessions with Dr David Lane of the WBLU at Middlesex University and Dr Mike van Oudtshoorn of the I-coach executive coaching programme aligned to Middlesex University London.

3.2 Methodological approach

3.2.1 Insider researcher

This research project is heavily work-based (insider); the researcher is investigating the coach/client sessions that she herself participated in as the coach practitioner; the clients selected were current coaching clients of the researcher's practice. Given that the existential phenomenological approach emphasises the dynamic and dialectic between coach and client, the approach and conclusions are usefully considered from the insider researcher perspective.

The advantage of being an insider researcher is that it is a front-line report from the workplace.

As a researcher I am dealing with direct raw research; there are no intermediaries. The coach practitioner inside the client-coach conversation has the validity of first-person observation; and the researcher as the third party becomes the direct observer of the conversation between coach practitioner and client. There is no particular dilemma in separating the roles of ‘coach practitioner’ and ‘researcher’ in this particular project, as the role of ‘researcher’ is clearly a separate, external process which exists outside of the coach/client conversation. It requires, in academic terms, that the coach and the client become the subjects of the third-party, i.e. the researcher observer.

The disadvantage could be that it is a double-edged process because the researcher has been part of the coach/client dialogue. The question is whether there is any loss of objectivity; however, this is part of the challenge. Also, it is a dialectical process; it is not an objectified coach/client relationship where the coach is omnipotent and the client is a passive subject. This is another reason why it is suited to a phenomenological analysis or approach. The strength of the phenomenological approach is to ensure that progress comes out of the process of the researcher analysing and re-analysing the transcripts.

3.2.2 First research family: qualitative

This project is a qualitative research project; the focus is on the meaning and experience of the coaching conversation. The primary aim of each coaching conversation is to help the client work towards achieving his/her desired outcomes; in my coaching model the coach explores with each client what it is that is holding the client back or stopping the client from achieving those outcomes (i.e., identifying and replacing disempowering assumptions and paradigms with empowering ones).⁴²

The crux of the analysis is the meaning and experience of the coaching conversation, with specific emphasis on the coaching intervention. I have analysed content, structure and meaning in the client transcripts, which are a result of up to six (two-hour) coaching sessions with each client (i.e., up to 12 hours of dialogue between client and coach). The Ethnograph is the computer programme I selected to help with the initial organisation of the data. The reason for using the Ethnograph is that it structured the narrative in each of the coaching transcripts by numbering each line and providing a software technique to analyse themes and patterns within the narrative. The Ethnograph was used to conduct the first level of data analysis; the next three stages were each a hard-copy analysis by myself as researcher. These three stages were facilitated by the Ethnograph which had numbered each line of conversation, and placed all the data onto the left side of each page; the right side of the page was freed up for notes and analytical commentary.

The data gathered is a result of my one- to two-year long contract with six executive coaching clients. I have electronically recorded six to 12 hours of coaching conversations with each of these six clients; each conversation has been transcribed by one of my three research assistants.

The data will be considered qualitative as opposed to measurable or quantitative; I am analysing the coaching conversation for themes, structure and meaning rather than mathematical quantification. I have focused on the richness and depth of meaning from the data gathered. It may prove useful at another stage of research to conduct a quantitative

analysis, but for the moment one of my key purposes is to explore for qualitative meaning and to build a coaching model as a result.

The data have not been collated or analysed in numeric form, although each line has been numbered by the Ethnograph, and the marking up of the transcripts from the first stage of analysis identifies how often certain themes, phrases or words appear. The data is a result of the coaching conversations with each client which have helped to build an evolving coaching model; it is within the structure of that evolving model that I have been working. The model relies primarily on conversations with the client, including interventions from the coach which take the form of questions, observations, reflections, restatements, role play and various other interventions for learning and generating clarity.

3.2.2.1 Focus of the coaching conversations

The focus of each of the coaching conversations is to help the client work towards achieving his/her desired outcomes; the coach primarily explores with each client what it is that is holding the client back or stopping the client from achieving those outcomes (i.e. identifying and replacing disempowering assumptions and paradigms with empowering ones).

Qualitative research design focuses on meaning and experience – which is the subject of my study. I have focused on the meaning and experience of the coaching conversation, with the specific intent of analysing the coach's intervention in the client's narrative and with the aim of discovering the richness and depth of the data. Therefore, I am analysing the content, structure and meaning which is a result of the coaching conversation.

As I will not be concerned with the collection and analysis of data in numeric form, but more with the collection and analysis of information in verbal form, my focus will be to explore patterns, trends and themes in as much detail as possible. Action research is the method by which I have conducted my qualitative research; my organising model to analyse the data has been the three steps of the phenomenological approach detailed by Spinelli (1989).

3.2.3 Second research family: deskwork and fieldwork

This work-based (insider) researcher project is a balanced combination of deskwork and fieldwork (Bell, 1993). The coaching conversations have taken place either in my office, the clients' offices or a neutral venue such as a hotel foyer or café. In reality, fieldwork refers to the process of going out to collect original research data; this was the live electronic recording of up to six two-hour coaching conversations with each client. In this project, 'deskwork' refers primarily to the transcription of the recorded coaching conversations (taped digitally and

manually); and the transcription process completed by two research assistants (each hour of conversation took eight hours to transcribe).

The second stage of deskwork was to sit down at the computer to collate and analyse the transcribed data using the Ethnograph. I invested in this computer software programme to help with the first analysis and original layout of the transcripts. I trained a research assistant to help with the first analysis using the Ethnograph (R2), and we created a code book for the first analysis. This first analysis took place over a period of 12 months as the coaching transcripts were typed up and saved in Word files. The Word files were then converted to Ethnograph files for analysis; together we developed and created an Ethnograph code book which was used to analyse each line of copy. The second and third stages of analysis were my detailed reading of the computer data and print-outs of that data over a period of about six months. The code book of emerging themes, phrases and phraseology was refined with each analysis. I enclose the initial and final Ethnograph code books in Chapter 4: Project Activity.

Another part of the desk work process was three years of reading the contemporary literature in executive coaching, psychotherapy research, existential psychotherapy, existential phenomenology, coaching frameworks and models. The data and information gained from the literature review have been substantial. In order to collate and organise that data I have used two research assistants (R1 and R3) to transcribe my dictated notes on books and articles I read or reviewed; handwritten notes made as a result of books read have been typed up or filed in a card index or in computer files.

Data gathered as a result of my reading, developing of practitioner coaching programmes, conference lectures and an outline for a new book have been substantial; these notes have all been collated and used in my analysis of the original coaching transcript data gathered for this project, and in the continuing development of a coaching model. A major mistake on my part was to include up to 14 coaching clients in the project, which I subsequently reduced to six. I started with six, but due to the failure of some of the recording machinery, and the falling away of clients over time, new clients were included in the project. In the final analysis I used five of the original six clients that I sourced for the project from the beginning. One of the main factors in my choice of clients was that of diversity. I was looking for diversity of ethnic origin, primary language and profession within the South African marketplace.

3.2.4 First research approach – action research

Action research has proven to be the perfect means of conducting this particular piece of research. Action research is the most reliable and sustainable approach in my professional setting, and suits my work preference of working one-on-one with executive clients. Because I

am presented with new clients on a regular and consistent basis, I realised that I would have no shortage of clients to engage in this research project.

For the project, I selected clients from my own coaching practice. This was to ensure that the research was not just practical, but that it was based on real coaching scenarios whose results would be of practical, immediate use to any executive coach wishing to understand more about the dynamics of the “coaching conversation.” Needed for this project were:

1. *a priori* raw material for the research;
2. a variety of coach-client case studies that were up-to-date; and
3. clients who needed a coach and who would be developing some sort of coach / client relationship to achieve their goals.

In the light of the above, my own coaching practice offered exactly these criteria. In addition, if I had used third-party coach-client studies, it would have had the disadvantage of my studying transcripts without the experience of face-to-face interactions between coach and client; these interactions provided the important raw data required for the researcher to analyse. Or, I would have had to sit in on fellow professional coach/client sessions. This would have presented practical and ethical dilemmas for both coach and client, as in Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle where all observation changes the dynamic of the interaction.⁴³ In other words, the client (and probably the coach) would not behave naturally with a third-party observer.

Action research usually involves a small scale intervention on the part of the researcher in the phenomenon being studied. In this research project, being the coach practitioner I could not be anything but actively involved; the coaching conversations between coach practitioner and client were the phenomena to be researched. As the research progressed and the model developed, the phenomenological aspect came to the forefront; including the nature of the relationship between coach and client, which presented itself as the most intriguing and important aspect of both the research and the final model.

Action research requires research to be applied to practical issues occurring in the everyday world. This project was very practical, as it analysed the coaching conversation, the basic tool of the executive coach. Another premise of action research is to effect change and to monitor the results of that change. In this particular project, the analysis of change as a result of the coaching conversation was a very practical application of the research (including the development of a coaching model, with which to deal with change in the coaching conversation). This project addressed the four components of action research: *planning*, *acting*, *observing* and *reflecting* advocated by Bell (1993).

Action research is collaborative by nature, and the clients were a major part of the project. I could not have conducted the analysis without their participation and enthusiasm. The problem may not be solved at the end of the formal research, as I may not be able to specify exactly what happens in the client / coaching intervention. However, in the process of the research an attempt has been made to develop an evolving and practical coaching model, as well as a series of themes for coaching interventions that will ultimately help the client to identify and replace limiting paradigms with empowering paradigms, thereby leading to positive change.

Mary Beth O'Neill (2000: 10) describes a four-step method of action research as *contracting*, *planning*, *using live action intervening* and *debriefing*. This was better suited to this project as it is classic action research applied to coaching; it meant achieving a business result while building the capacity of the client to apply what they have learned to all their organisational situations (O'Neill, 2000: 10). During this action research project my clients were part of the *contracting and planning processes*; they underwent 'live' coaching (*i.e. live action intervening*) which enabled them and empowered them in the workplace; and they experienced the *de-briefing* phase of the research in reading their own transcripts and commenting on them. However, the phases of action research that I eventually worked with are:

1. entry and contracting;
2. data collection;
3. action planning;
4. implementation and follow-through; and
5. evaluation (including termination or renewal of the contract).

In the *entry and contracting* phase I contracted with all of my clients, asking them to sign confidentiality agreements which were submitted with my research proposal. The *data collection* phase included two processes (reading the contemporary literature and conducting the coaching sessions during a two-year period with the project clients). It took three years of reading, two years of recording, and 12 months of transcribing the coaching conversations with the six clients. There was an overlap of coaching, reading, recording and transcribing taking place at any one time. The *action planning* was constantly reviewing the stages of the research process; *i.e.* phases of recording, transcribing, analysing, final interviews with the clients and writing up the process.

The *action planning* phase was the most arduous as it was a constant review and reorganising of data to keep the project on track while continuing to run one business, spearheading the set-up of COMENSA (Coaches and Mentors of South Africa), and being an active participant in the development of a series of practitioner coaching programmes with colleagues at The Coaching Centre, Cape Town. (This level of activity is, however, normal with a working

doctorate.) The *implementation and follow-through* has been managing the research project from beginning to end, including the final write up of the research.

The *evaluation* phase was two-fold: firstly, the many drafts of the findings and conclusions of the data (including an evolving coaching model, and an outline for a new book on coaching to be presented to a publisher in 2006); secondly, the reading of the thesis by several colleagues and a supervisor before editing, proofing and submitting the final rendition.

Action research is based on the belief that intervention in any phase can create change, not just during the implementation step; importantly, this is in alignment with, and a presupposition for, the coaching process.

3.2.5 Second research approach – phenomenological and existential

3.2.5.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a profoundly reflective enquiry into human meaning. Phenomenological traditions are: transcendental, hermeneutic, historical, ethical and language phenomenology.⁴⁴ Phenomenological enquiry investigates different sources of meaning, and can be studied in terms of its practical consequences for human living. Hence its use in psychotherapy research to examine or reflect on the client/therapist relationship (van Deurzen-Smith, 1984).

A 20th century philosophical movement, phenomenology is dedicated to describing the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness (Husserl, 1964). As formulated by Husserl after 1910, “phenomenology is the study of the structures of consciousness that enables consciousness to refer to objects outside of itself; this study requires reflection on the content of the mind” (Karlsson, 1993: 15).

The phenomenological approach to analysis is particularly suited to my research project, as it is a search for meaning, and a search for the meaning-structure of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I have employed this methodological approach to explore coach/client interactions, particularly as they relate to the coach’s questions or interventions and how these build the relationship.

3.2.5.2 A criticism of the phenomenological research method

Embedded in this project is a critique of the phenomenological approach, although on balance this method was the most suitable for this particular piece of research. I have critiqued the phenomenological approach, firstly by addressing its shortcomings, and secondly by doing an actual critique of the phenomenological model that I employed. I have undertaken to be critical of the phenomenological method employed in this thesis by highlighting it as an issue in the

first three chapters. Secondly, I have developed a critique with each client in Chapter 5 (Project Findings) where I selected one client transcript for each client, read and analysed those six transcripts, and included commentary on the dilemma of using the phenomenological method, particularly in:

- Impartiality and bracketing assumptions
- Maintaining impartiality
- Showing partiality
- To conclude

In this chapter where I have included a reasoned rationale for my choice of action research with a phenomenological approach, not only do I highlight the inherent problems for the researcher when analysing the transcripts (i.e. analysing the conversations that occurred between coach and client), I pose the question as to whether it is actually possible for both coach practitioner (when in conversation with the client) and for the researcher (when analysing the transcripts) to bracket all assumptions.

3.2.5.3 Existentialism

I believe that coaching helps the client to interpret their own reality, and to interpret how they construct meaning of their reality. As Spinelli says, “we cannot tolerate meaninglessness”, and “reality is a purely subjective process” (Spinelli, 1989: 6-7). Existentialism says there is no subjective or objective frame of reference; there is only the process of thinking about it. And although “Phenomenologists stress the unique and unsharable differences in each individual’s experience of the world, this stance should not be seen to be either explicitly or implicitly minimising or invalidating the great number of important studies dealing with the shared feature of human experience” (Spinelli, 1980: 14).

In other words, we share a lot of experiences as human beings, but ultimately each individual’s experience of the world is unique. Each of my clients is unique in the way they think, in the way they see the world, in the way they interpret events. In my research, the key concern for investigation is ‘existence as experienced by man as an individual’ (Spinelli, 1989: 105). Existential phenomenology emphasises the “key themes of human experience, mainly freedom, responsibility, nothingness or death, aloneness or isolation and meaning/meaninglessness” (Spinelli, 1989: 106).

3.3 The existential phenomenological approach

My approach to the analysis is from an existential and phenomenological viewpoint. My clients ultimately wish to talk about their ‘purpose in life’ and the anxiety they experience in

trying to 'be' who they are and 'do' what they need to do within the complexity of the systems within which they work. The three steps of the existential phenomenological approach constitute the underlying process which has guided my data analysis.

In my approach to this project, I have followed the general existential trail blazed by such contemporary psychotherapists as Ernesto Spinelli, Irvin Yalom and Emmy van Deurzen-Smith who have written widely on existential and phenomenological approaches to psychotherapy. I am aware of various critiques of existentialism, particularly regarding political aspects; for example, Theodore Adorno (1964) and Victor Farias (1989). However, as this doctorate is not on philosophy, I have concentrated on the approach of existential thinkers where it has illuminated my framework, adapting some of the pioneering work of contemporary existential thinkers to a model of executive coaching.⁴⁵

Theodore Adorno criticised existentialism as isolating a 'spiritual crisis' in Europe (between the 1850s and 1940s) and mistaking a historic-specific period for a universal truth. This produced, according to Adorno, a philosophy of despondency and pessimism. Other critiques have suggested that existentialism has been superseded. However, a number of major modern philosophers (for example, Foucault and Derrida) have borrowed heavily on the existential tradition. Alan Schrift (1995) suggests that a reappraisal of existentialism is a vital element of modern philosophy. As the Stanford website concludes, "It may be that what we have most to learn from existentialism lies before us".

3.3.1 Constructing meaning

Spinelli (1989) says that reality is something for which we construct meaning, and that we have an amazing capacity as human beings to construct meaning. According to Spinelli, the starting point for all phenomenological enquiry is to identify the mental constructs and meaning we apply to all experience. The three steps of Spinelli's organising model can be looked at from two points of view: that of the coach practitioner and that of the researcher. I think it is useful (in the light of this project) to look at both perspectives.

3.3.2 Three rules (epoché, description, horizontalisation)

3.3.2.1 Step 1: The rule of epoché (bracketing assumptions)

This rule "urges us to set aside our initial biases and prejudices of things, to suspend our expectations and assumptions ... to *bracket* all such temporarily and ... focus on the primary data of our experience" (Spinelli, 1989: 17). This is saying that one of the first steps in phenomenology is to bracket all biases as far as possible – to approach both with an open mind. This is practical in both the coach's approach to the client in a coach/client conversation,

and the researcher's approach to the coach/client transcripts. During the coaching conversation, the process of asking questions has to be done from a point of no pre-judgement or assumption, really clarifying and understanding the thinking of the client. This is difficult, as each individual operates within their own worldview and limiting paradigms; and each coach approaches the coaching conversation with assumptions and biases, and must learn to bracket them and put them aside. This is a core skill for a coach: to learn to bracket their own assumptions and biases.

The purpose of Step 1 is to: "Attempt to set aside any immediate biases or beliefs which might predispose you towards any one particular meaning or explanation of the event. Remain open to any number of alternatives, neither rejecting any one as being out of hand, nor placing a greater or lesser degree of likelihood on the options available" (Spinelli, 1989: 17).

3.3.2.2 Step 2: The rule of description

This rule prescribes description rather than explanation. Spinelli (1989) suggests being careful not to put another kind of limitation on experience, i.e. when analysing the client's experience. So we are not to question or deny, merely describe. For example, if as a coach/practitioner you are going to re-frame or say something about the client's process, just describe it, do not impose your assumptions on what they are saying. This is a difficult but crucial point for a coach.

The purpose of Step 2 is: "Having opened yourself to all possibilities, your focus of attention is forced to shift away from theoretical explanations ... Your task becomes one of describing the events of your experience as concretely as possible" (Spinelli, 1989: 17-18). In other words, you build up a store of concrete information based on your immediate experience.

3.3.2.3 Step 3: The rule of horizontalisation (equalisation rule)

The rule of equalisation means that the coach must not put hierarchical significance onto what the client says. The coach is to treat every single thing that the client says as having equal value and significance. This is particularly significant when coach and client identify the menu of topics to be discussed in that coach/client session. Spinelli says that, "We must avoid making immediate misleading hierarchically-based judgements" (Spinelli, 1989: 19). What this means is that the coach cannot choose for a client what is going to be the most important thing for him/her to talk about, and when talking, the coach also cannot prioritise the client's concerns. The coach must try to suspend all judgement and be open to whatever might be of most significance to that client.

The purpose of Step 3 is: “Having collected together a sufficient variety of items, it remains necessary for you to avoid placing any greater or lesser significance or value on each of them and instead, to treat each initially as having equal importance.”

3.3.3 The practical difficulty in applying the three rules

For me, as researcher, when reading the transcripts, the organising model was Spinelli’s three rules in the phenomenological method (epoché, description and equalisation).

The rule of epoché “urges us to set aside our initial biases and prejudices of things.” In other words, the rule of epoché urges us to impose an ‘openness’ on our immediate experience so that our subsequent interpretations of it may prove to be more adequate” (Spinelli, 1989: 17).

The essence of the second rule, the rule of description, is literally to describe, not explain. In this step, we have opened up to possibilities if we have followed the rule of epoché. According to Spinelli, the rule of description urges us to remain initially focused on our immediate and concrete impressions, and to maintain a level of analysis of experience which regards description as its point of focus rather than theoretical speculation. Therefore, in this research project it is the researcher’s intent to describe rather than explain what emerges when analysing the text of the coaching conversations between clients and coach.

The third step is the rule of horizontalisation or equalisation, which recommends not placing any hierarchical significance onto (in this case) the client’s narrative. As a researcher, it is my intent to look at the client’s text and to treat everything the client said as having equal value and significance: “We must avoid making immediate misleading hierarchically-based judgments” (Spinelli, 1989: 19).

My research was an attempt to analyse the transcripts of the six individuals in the coach/client conversations with the impartiality of the three rules. Essentially, the question that emerged in using this organising model was whether it was possible to bracket assumptions. By being mindful of this difficulty, in Chapter 4: Project Activity, I have discussed how I employed this phenomenological model, trying to look at the transcripts as a researcher from a neutral position, and what problems arose.

3.3.4 Paradigm shift and the relationship

Referring back to the research project itself, following a coaching session with one of my key executive clients (C15) in March 2004, I realised that my research was not just about the coaching intervention, or what it is that the coach actually does in the coaching conversation. The question was starting to move towards: *what is it about the coaching intervention that*

makes the client think or behave in a certain way that helps to make a shift: a paradigm shift, a thinking shift, or a perception shift?

In essence, what is it that the coaching intervention gets the client to do, say or think? What is it that the coaching intervention gets the client to do, think, perceive or feel, that leads to a change in behaviour? And what impact does this have on the relationship between coach and client? The relationship had become a major focus in examining the impact and the structure of the coaching intervention.

That is the key change for me in this research project: the shifts in the questions that the project would be answering. The shifts occurred as a result of the work. In phenomenology we are dealing with the ‘science of experience’, and we are dealing with consciousness, the conscious experience of the client and the coach working together – in relationship. Finally, even if the coach’s interventions bring in some intuitive or unconscious thinking on the part of the client, in essence the coach is dealing with the client’s conscious experience – bracketing their own (the coach’s) conscious experience.

3.3.5 Creating a safe thinking environment

The coach practitioner ‘holds the space’ (i.e. creating a safe thinking environment) and needs the skill of ‘immediacy’ and empathy in the immediate moment. Holding the here and now – holding the client ‘where the client is’ – is to do with support. I believe that my task as researcher has been to investigate the coaching intervention: what happens in terms of thinking, feeling, and behaviour on the part of the client because of the coaching intervention, and to examine whether this impact will be greater as a result of the relationship. And how does the coaching intervention (in conjunction with specific components such as listening, empathy, attention and ease) help to create the safe thinking environment for the relationship to develop?

3.4 Specific research techniques

Specific techniques employed during the research project have been *documentary research*, *keeping a research journal*, *the coach/client session transcripts*, using a computer software programme (*Ethnograph*) for the first analysis and layout of the data, *listening and observation*, working with *three research assistants*, and *questionnaires*. The actual physical organisation of the typed and handwritten notes, books purchased, coaching transcripts (hard and soft copies), and massive computer files generated have been a large part of managing this project.

3.4.1 Documentary research

Documentary research refers to documents, articles and literature (library and academically-based, electronic and internet-based, and current published works). As all research involves an analysis of current published thinking on related subjects, I have read critically and extensively the texts and writing of others that relate to my field of research (for example, coaching and executive coaching literature, adult and experiential learning, existential psychotherapy, existential phenomenology, systems and paradigmatic thinking, and analytical psychology). My reading has continued from the first year of the doctoral programme. I have made extensive notes by hand, by computer and by dictation, which I have used to complete the literature review and the methodology sections of this thesis. As part of the process of these studies I have designed and delivered several practitioner coaching programmes; spoken at ASTD (American Society for Training and Development) international conferences on coaching in the USA (2003 and 2004); written several articles (for Coach UK, Worldwide Association of Business Coaches' (WABC) e-zine, and *The History of Coaching* (a book chapter for a collaborative book on coaching published in Cape Town in June 2006: *Sharing the Passion, Conversations with Coaches*) and developed an outline for a new book on coaching.

3.4.2 Research journal

During the three-year programme I have kept a reflective journal of my reading, coaching and research process. This is of no practical use to anyone except myself, but has been eminently useful in reviewing and evaluating the research process from beginning to end, and in the development of a coaching model. I have kept reflections on the coaching conversations; on the development of the coaching model; on the Master's lectures I attended as part of the I-coach two-year programme; on the academic programmes I developed and facilitated for The Coaching Centre in Cape Town; on the development of a supervisory process in the I-coach and Coaching Centre programmes; on the writing up of my research findings; and finally on the entire process itself.

3.4.3 Client/coaching interview (transcripts)

This has been the primary method to collect data for this project. The transcriptions of the client coaching sessions have been analysed for structure and content to understand what helps to create breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling and behaviour from the coaching intervention. In a sense the coaching conversation is not unlike a semi-structured interview, as it comprises strategic questions (open, closed, reflective, and reframing) which have ultimately explored the clients' feelings, motivations, perceptions and attitudes, probing for a depth of understanding.

Each client coaching transcript has been recorded, transcribed into a Word computer data file, neutralised to remove real names, and converted into an Ethnograph computer data file.

3.4.4 Ethnograph computer programme

The Ethnograph is a research computer analysis tool. Once the coaching transcripts had been typed up into a Word file, I was able to convert each Word file into the Ethnograph computer files. I had my third research assistant (R2) help me with this; he studied the detail of setting up the programme. On a weekly basis we converted the transcribed conversations into Ethnograph files. The Ethnograph set up the page with the text on the left-hand side of the page and numbered each line of text. The right side of the page was left free for notes. At this point the text was analysed in three ways: firstly, looking at the client's conversation for themes; secondly, analysing the coach's interventions for specific themes, types of intervention or patterns; and thirdly, a 'marked-up' file listing all of the themes, patterns or words that were emerging from the text in its entirety. This was quite a slow process; each Word file of one two-hour coaching conversation could take half a day to analyse.

A code book of themes emerged from the analysis at the first stage; those themes changed and were refined with each subsequent analysis. The code book developed over four stages of analysis and ultimately created the themes for the final coaching model, which is explained in Chapter 5: Project Findings.

3.4.5 Research assistants

In order to organise the materials and myself effectively, I hired three researchers to assist me. One researcher (R1) handled the transcriptions of the taped dictaphone conversations; a second researcher (R3) assisted with the electronic transcriptions from a digital recorder; both researchers typed up my reflections on each of the coaching conversations, and my dictated notes on books and articles that I had read; and a third researcher (R2), who was about to begin a Masters in clinical psychology, assisted with the set-up and creation of the Ethnograph files, and with the design and set-up of the code book.⁴⁶ The code book of terms and phrases which emerged in the analysis played a major part in the overall design of the coaching model. R2 was responsible for the first level of analysis of the text using the code book of emerging themes, patterns and words which we developed together. The hard-copy analysis of the text in stages two, three and four I performed without any assistance.

3.4.6 Questionnaires

The only questionnaire that I used in my coaching process is the Insights Discovery Profile, which was used with new clients (or when appropriate) to look at conscious and unconscious

behaviours. The reason for using the Insights profile was to help the client identify some of their presenting issues more clearly. Similar to the Myers Briggs MBTI profile, it is highly researched and considered to be over 90 per cent effective. It offers a well-structured framework for exploring conscious and unconscious processes, patterns of thinking and blind spots. Five of the six clients in the research project completed the Insights questionnaire in the early stages (see Appendix 1 on the developing coaching model for more commentary on the Insights model).

3.4.7 Listening and observation

Listening and observation have been key research tools during the last three years; both skills have improved immeasurably as a result of the project. I have developed a skill in observation; this is partly from developing the ability to be ‘inside’ the coaching conversation, and to be ‘observing’ the conversation. It is taking up a meta-position, while never leaving the micro level of being present for the client. It has been necessary to be able to observe the client’s patterns of thinking, linguistic use of words, content and structure of the client narrative, and specifically to begin to understand the client’s world view and paradigmatic thinking.

I took copious notes during the coaching conversations in my first year, and took less and less notes throughout the project. Today I take more specific notes, particularly as some clients want a typed-up reflection of the conversation to refer back to. I spend at least 15 minutes after a coaching session recording my reflections on the coaching and the client’s process. The key to observation has been in developing the skills of listening and probing – and observing the reactions of the client at every step of the way (Bell, 1993).

3.5 Data collection and analysis

3.5.1 Data collection

3.5.1.1 Literature review

Reading, reviewing and analysing the contemporary literature in executive coaching has contributed to my own learning; influenced the development of my coaching model; and enhanced my knowledge in the fields of executive coaching, existential psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural psychology, existential phenomenology, adult and experiential learning, and paradigmatic thinking.

3.5.1.2 Formalising the research questions

The formulation of the research questions took the best part of the first year-and-a-half of the doctoral process. I have formulated four questions relevant to the research project. Each

question has led to the other, and through my research I have discovered not just the coaching intervention to be of importance, but how the coaching conversation develops the coach/client relationship. The questions have contributed to a solid research project, which should contribute to the field of professional coaching by adding to the body of knowledge available academically and professionally for executive coaches.

3.5.1.3 Client coaching conversation (transcripts)

The coaching intervention ranges from questions which explore feelings, motivations, perceptions, assumptions and attitudes – to reflected statements, reframed questions, role-plays, structured question frameworks, advice or silence.⁴⁷ Each coach/client session was taped and ultimately transcribed into a Word document to be analysed, first using the Ethnograph, then by manual analysis.

All the client data has been neutralised, with real names removed; the files are labelled from C1 to C17 (Client 1 to Client 17). They include sessions with three clients whom I considered using as a comparison; these client coaching conversations were not recorded, but with them I took extensive notes and made extensive reflections on both the coaching and client process.

For triangulation, a final interview took place with the clients to engage their thinking on the transcripts (each client was e-mailed the Word files of the entirety of their coaching transcripts). The client data which have not been used for the project will be kept for the writing of a new book on coaching in 2006.

The action steps were:

1. Contract with the coaching client to take part in the research process (three-month process).
2. Record up to 12 hours of coaching conversations (two-year process).
3. Research assistants transcribe the conversations into Word files (two-year process).
4. Researcher 'neutralises' each Word file by changing all personal names in the files.
5. Researcher and research assistant load the Ethnograph into three networked computers.
6. Researcher and research assistant create Ethnograph files for each client.
7. Researcher emails neutralised files to assistant for analysis each week.
8. Each file is analysed for themes and key words in a first analysis.
9. A code book of themes is created.
10. As each client's first coaching conversation is analysed by the Ethnograph, three Ethnograph files are created: the transcript, a marked up file for the coach's interventions;

a marked-up file for the client's narrative; and a final file named 'mark up' with the themes and words listed which was the result of the analysis.

11. Researcher and assistant create 17 lever arch files for all of the coaching transcripts, including original Word files, neutralised Word files, and three Ethnograph files per coaching conversation.
12. Each of the client's final Ethnograph files is bound for ease in hard-copy analysis.
13. One computer analysis and three hard-copy analyses of the Ethnograph 'neutralised' files.
14. A comparison of themes from analyses with themes as they emerged from the literature analysis.
15. The development of an existential model for the coaching conversation (about 20 drafts before the model was finalised at the end of the project).
16. The final interview with the clients having read their manuscripts.
17. Additional finding of themes due to the clients' interpretations and comments.
18. Draft and final editing of the research thesis with comments from supervisor and colleagues.
19. Final evaluation and learnings from the project
20. Finalising appendices, evidence (products developed from the project) and outline for a new book on the coaching conversation.
21. Final proofing and submission of the project.
22. Attendance at the VIVA in November 2005 in London.
23. Edited revisions to the thesis in early 2006.
24. Resubmission of the thesis.

3.5.2 Data analysis

3.5.2.1 *Analysing and interpreting the data*

This has involved a lengthy process to review all of the texts read and analysed for this project, including a meticulous analysis of the transcripts of the coaching conversations, my session and post-session notes. I have primarily looked at the coaching intervention to see what, if any, change happened as a result, and to identify what happened at the level of thinking, feeling and behaviour – and ultimately how that impacted on the client's performance. Eventually it was written, edited and presented in the format of a research dissertation.

3.5.2.2 *Three steps of the existential phenomenological approach*

Influenced by my study of existential phenomenology, I decided to use Ernesto Spinelli's three rules as an organising framework for the analysis of data in this project. My premise was that

following these three steps would help me analyse the data more effectively and objectively. My plan was to use these three steps to:

1. See what it is that happens, in the moment of intervention between coach and client (that moment of change).
2. Understand what it is that helps to create a transformational shift in thinking, feeling and behaviour on the part of the client during the coaching conversation.
3. Research how the client's narrative unfolds during the coaching conversation in relation to the coach's questions and interventions.
4. Analyse the coaching conversation, specifically the language used by both coach and client as the client's narrative unfolds.
5. Identify the phenomena and processes that define those 'moments of change' (the "a-ha!" moment) or cognitive insights in thinking, language and feeling – and how they lead to changes in performance and attitude in the workplace.
6. Look at the coaching conversation over a period of about four to six two-hour sessions or over a year-long period with each client.
7. Identify what it is about the coach's interventions that bring about awareness and an understanding of self, process and personal change in the client.

My conclusion was that this phenomenological approach would best bring about that awareness.

3.5.2.3 Dilemma of Spinelli's phenomenological organising model

The question which presented itself during the process of the research was: "Is it possible to bracket all assumptions?" And if it is true that all human behaviour is based on assumptions (Kline, 2005), then this conflicts with the very nature of Spinelli's first two rules in his organising model.

There are inherent problems for the researcher when analysing the transcripts (i.e. the conversations as they occurred between coach and client). The question is whether it is actually possible for both coach practitioner (when in conversation with the client) and for the researcher (when analysing the transcripts) to bracket all assumptions.

It is apparent from the transcripts that the coach practitioner made huge efforts to bracket assumptions; but what is not in the text is what the coach practitioner was actually 'thinking'. In other words, the coach practitioner may not demonstrate any type of judgement or assessment, thus maintaining a neutral, impartial stance. That is the job of the coach, to appear to be, and to remain, impartial. However, the inner voice of the coach is not present in the text;

it is therefore not possible for the researcher, when reading the transcripts, to say with any certainty whether all assumptions or biases were absent on the part of the coach.

However, the real dilemma is in the researcher adhering strictly to step two in Spinelli's organising phenomenological model and to only 'describe' and neither explain or interpret the phenomenon; and in step one which requires bringing in no personal biases or assumptions. Clearly eliminating assumptions is a difficult task, but one in this instance which can be aspired to as a discipline. This dilemma is explored in Chapter 4: Project Activity.

3.6 Validity and reliability of the research process

I believe that my research has validity in the field of coaching because of its practical application, and will be reliable because of the diverse range of clients and tools that I have introduced within a varied working environment over a period of three years. My process of gathering and analysing the information has been consistent, and my working methods have been methodical and organised.

Validity is about "measuring or investigating what I am setting out to research by asking the appropriate research questions and using legitimate methods to obtain information which is analysed and leads to logical conclusions and recommendations" (I-coach manual: 42). *Reliability* is "being able to gain consistent results from the application of the same research" (I-coach manual: 42).

Being a qualitative research process, I have controlled the variables of the client-coaching interviews by my recording, effectively transcribing and reflecting back what actually happened in the interviews. Epistemology refers to the assumptions that we make about knowledge and how that knowledge is obtained. I realise that my assumptions about what I would generate as a result of the project have changed as the process has developed in a three-year period. The knowledge and experience I have gained has proved invaluable to the development of my coaching practice and the academic training of emerging coaches in the South African marketplace. I also feel it will have relevance in the international arena of coaching, as I plan to write a book with the research project as the foundation material.

3.7 Structuring the analysis

The coaching conversation consists of the client's discourse and the coach's interventions. One practical difficulty was how to use the Ethnograph (computer software to analyse data for structure, patterns and meaning), synthesised with the hard-copy analyses of each coaching

conversation transcript. I realised that ultimately the Ethnograph would help with the layout of the text and easy access to the material, and with the first stage of analysis. I knew that I needed to painstakingly read the material if I was to discover how the coaching intervention helps to create change at the level of thinking, feeling and behaviour – and ultimately how that impacts on the client’s performance. The word missing in this statement is “language”, but I considered the word “language” for the purpose of this research to be implicit in “behaviour”.

- My specific query was how exactly to structure the analysis of the data. My reading was to discover if there was a specific structure for phenomenological enquiry and I found the three components in my reading of Spinelli (1989).
- Are there specific questions to be asked?
- Are there certain words to be looked for?
- How can the researcher be clear about the essence of the conversation?
- Is there a clear analytical process used with a phenomenological approach when analysing text?
- How can I use the three steps of Spinelli’s organising model most effectively (époché, description, equalisation)?

3.7.1 Ethnograph and first level of analysis

I performed the first level of analysis using the Ethnograph, which enabled me to number each line, to name the types of interventions, and to create a code of words, patterns and themes as they emerged from first to final analysis. The layout of the Ethnograph transcript allowed me to review the code that was emerging with each analysis and to look at it in the light of my evolving coaching model. To begin with, we created an Ethnograph file for each client coaching session; we then conducted the first stage of analysis. As we began to read through each line, a series of words, patterns and themes began to emerge. We created a ‘book’ of the client code words or themes which emerged, and a list of the different types of coaching interventions as they emerged.

3.7.2 Second, third and fourth levels of analysis

In the second and third hard-copy analyses, specific coaching interventions came into view repeatedly; in the fourth hard-copy analysis the dominant client themes to emerge were those of the coaching model. The questions and interventions on the part of the coach teased out these client themes.

3.7.3 Triangulation – the final conversation

It was suggested by my first supervisor that I have a final interview with each client; in other words, have a conversation about the reflections, learnings and authenticity of the entire selection of transcripts. Dr David Lane (WBLU, Middlesex University London) suggested that in analysing the data it is important to continue to re-investigate, continually refining and reporting carefully. The first two parts of the research were facilitating and taping the coaching sessions between coach and client; the second part of the project was to transcribe the coaching conversations, and the third part to analyse the data. Therefore the three components of the research project have been to (1) tape the conversations; (2) transcribe and analyse the data from an existential phenomenological point of view; and (3) interview the clients once they had read the transcripts for a further perspective on the coaching conversation.

The final conversation and component of the research project was to ask the client six questions:

1. What were your thoughts or reflections having read the transcripts?
2. Where did you see a change, a shift, an insight or an “a-ha!” moment?
3. What do you think brought about changes in thinking, feeling or behaviour; and how do you think that impacted on subsequent performance in the workplace or at home?
4. What made the difference to you?
5. Tell me how did that make you feel?
6. What would you pick as the crucial moment when you saw something that helped you to stay with that experience in the coaching conversation?

3.8 Evidence

Because this is a working doctorate, the research is based on work in progress (i.e. the conversations between coach and client in an existing coaching practice). One of the requirements of the programme is to produce ‘evidence’ as a result of the project. The evidence produced for this project is (a) an existential executive coaching model of the coaching conversation; (b) a code book of client themes and coaching interventions; (c) an outline for a new book on coaching to be written in 2006/2007; (d) two academic coaching programmes for the practitioner and advanced diplomas for The Coaching Centre in Cape Town; (e) a lecture on the 10 thinking components of the Nancy Kline thinking process; (f) a doctoral thesis which reports the findings of the research project; and (g) a by-product of the research process being the spearheading and founding of COMENSA.

3.9 Conclusions

The conclusions of the project have been: firstly, the development of a code of client themes for the executive coach to work from with clients; and secondly to develop a series of themed interventions that help the client to achieve their desired objectives (and that help the client to identify and replace limiting paradigms). One of the key findings of the project has been a reminder of the importance of working flexibly within a coaching model that addresses not just the linear, surface-level objectives of the client, but also one that helps coach and client to develop the relationship in such a way that the deeper issues of being, doing, and becoming emerge (for both coach and client). These are addressed through the four stages of a new coaching model, in which three levels of the coaching conversation are developed through the listening and questioning skills of the coach. See Chapters 4 and 5 for the activity and conclusions of the research.

Although I initially set out to develop a specific ‘template’ of questions or a question framework, I have discovered that for the coach to be flexible and spontaneous, being present to the issues of the client at all times, it is more useful to have a coaching model and a series of themes which are addressed through the use of questions. Although specific questions have shown up as useful, it is important that the coach never be prescriptive in their use.

3.10 Ethical and legal considerations (organisational/professional context)

One of the first concerns in setting up this research project was the question of ethics. At first I decided to work within the ethical code of the EMCC, until COMENSA (Coaches and Mentors of South Africa) developed an ethical code for South Africa.⁴⁸ A by-product of the research process was the spearheading and founding of COMENSA; this was a requirement of my doctoral project – i.e., to establish an ethics and standards body for coaches in South Africa. It paralleled my journey in terms of working ethically with clients in this project.

The leading and building of this organisation has stimulated my learning in terms of ethics and standards, and has meant that I have had a chance to meet the majority of the coaching and mentoring community in South Africa – from coaches and mentors, to training institutions and corporate buyers of coaching. This process has been instrumental in my understanding of the depth of the ethical issues, not only in South Africa, but for coaching and mentoring worldwide.

3.10.1 COMENSA

Two fundamental principles in setting up COMENSA have been (1) “inclusivity” – i.e. including rather than excluding coaches and mentors (the lessons learned from the divisive nature of South Africa’s apartheid past informed our commitment to inclusivity); and (2) democratic participation (every decision is taken by consensus or voting between members in the three chapters). The underlying purpose has been to create ethics and standards for coaches and mentors in South Africa, and to develop coaching as a credible institution.

In the first six months of this pioneering project, I consulted with as many of the coaches, coaching and mentoring consultants, informal coaching and mentoring groups, training institutions and corporate buyers and providers of coaching in South Africa as possible to rally enthusiasm for the project. It has been three years in the making, and is now an established section 21 company, with formulated codes of ethics and supervision, and proposed standards of competence and criteria for membership.

The most astonishing feature of this process has been to observe and negotiate the attempted sabotage of the process. As I indicated, South Africa has a history of being exclusive, so the thought of all coaches and mentors being included in the organisation is anathema to a number of established coaching and mentoring mavericks in the country.

However, COMENSA has now set up and is operating three provincial branches and nearly ten portfolio committees, with elections of members to formal governance structures scheduled for August 2006. One of our members, Paddy Pampallis Paisley, presented a paper on *A Theory of Supervision* to the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) in Brussels in 2005. COMENSA was formally launched nationwide in April 2006.

One of the features of this project has been the COMENSA public forums (to determine ethics and criteria for membership), which have started the difficult process of creating an ethical code for South Africa and criteria for membership of the institution. A major decision on the part of the members has been not to be an accrediting body, but rather a forum for continuing professional development.

In order to uphold the highest standards of behaviour in the coaching profession, we have gone through a consultative process to develop the ethics code. I enclose the notes from the two public forums that I and my colleagues chaired in Johannesburg and Cape Town to formulate the ethical code for COMENSA.⁴⁹ The learning for me has been in terms of patience in setting up such a large consultative body in what is a relatively new profession in South Africa. It has had a major impact on my understanding of ethics and the need for an ethical code when working as a researcher.

3.10.2 Ethical and organisational issues

With reference to this particular research project, I have tried to live up to the expected academic and ethical standards in terms of having all clients sign a contract and be involved in this confidential project from the beginning. This includes the electronic recording of the coaching conversations; conversion of those sessions into the Ethnograph; analysis and the final conversation with the clients having read all of their transcripts. The stakeholders in this project are my clients, the university, my peers and colleagues, and the wider professional coaching community (academics and professional practitioners alike).

All of my participants have been informed of the objectives of my study, and assured that (in the dissemination of the findings) they will have a copy of the final dissertation with their names disguised. I have assured all participants that they can withdraw from the project at any time.

One of the problems that occurred during the process was that for an entire year of recording my recorder was not working properly; this was discovered only a year into the project. This problem was compounded by some taped sessions not having come out loudly enough for easy transcription, and some clients had less than six two-hour sessions. For that reason I expanded the number of clients I brought into the research project; I worked with 14 clients with the aim of selecting six at the end of the data gathering. I was prepared to work with up to 14 clients as I plan to write a book at the end of this project and wanted more than six clients in my sample.

The data files include printed copies of each original taped session transcript, the neutralised version with client numbers and all names changed, plus the Ethnograph version with each line in the transcript numbered. A massive amount of data has been generated. Part of the final process of the analysis was to read through the entirety of the transcripts and select the six to use in the final analysis. The remaining client data will be useful for writing a book subsequent to finishing this research project. Each client involved in the final analysis is aware of this, as they have been included in the final taped interview, having been asked to read their transcripts and comment.

3.10.3 Access to information, including ethical issues and confidentiality

One of the key concerns in any research project is the nature of the agreement entered into. Research ethics is about being clear with the client about the nature of the agreement entered into in respect of the research purpose and the coach/client relationship. My agreement with clients was to work in accordance with the EMCC code of ethics, as none existed within South Africa at the time I started my research project. Each client is aware that I am involved with the establishment of COMENSA.

Each client signed a confidentiality agreement (enclosed at the end of Chapter 4: Project Activity) which became part of their coaching contract. We initially agreed timing, client objectives, confidentiality, boundary issues, methodology of the coaching process and explanation of this researcher's coaching model. As ethical issues have arisen in the project we have dealt with them. For example, who was transcribing the transcripts was a major issue for all clients. It was important they were happy with the confidentiality agreed with my first researcher (R1), who transcribed the majority of the earlier conversations. Having written and published a number of books, I have been keen to protect the names of my clients within the transcripts, have coded individual and company names accordingly, and research findings have been neutral in relation to the individual clients themselves.

3.10.4 Ethical problems and research assistants

It is important to be clear about the nature of the agreement entered into with research subjects or contacts. If there were issues that had not been made explicit at the beginning, I quickly learned to confirm them by being explicit and open with the client. Ethical problems usually arise when there is a conflict of interest. Both social and economic implications were explored in every case.

Those from whom I sought permission to run with this project were the Work-Based Learning Unit (WBLU) of Middlesex University London, the individuals who formed part of the research and evidence gathered, and the three research assistants who have worked on the project (R1 transcribed the majority of the coaching transcripts; R2 designed the first level analysis of the coded transcripts; R3 transcribed my reading reflections and coaching sessions reflections).

The clients' commitment in terms of time and my ability to finish the doctorate within the specified three-year period have also been ethical issues. Potential problems with clients who were not able to continue the coaching for various reasons meant the project has grown from six to 14 clients. Each of these issues has been surmountable, if difficult, with particular reference to time limits to complete the project by 1st September 2005.

3.11 An ethical code

Being involved with the development of an ethical code in the South African context has had a considerable influence on my research project. I have realised that this project is just the first step for me in developing on-going research into coaching in the South African marketplace. I may even write a small book on the development of COMENSA, once the ethics and standards codes have been finalised.

Endnote 49 of this chapter gives more detail about the development of an ethical code for COMENSA, which is a by-product of this research project. The note also reflects the results of the Cape Town steering committee's meeting to agree a way forward in terms of empowerment for coaches and mentors within the entire South African marketplace, and in relation not just to ethical and diversity issues but to the entire concept of empowerment and how that can be defined.

3.12 In summary

The intention of this research project is to begin to recognise the specific coaching interventions in the conversation between coach and client, and to identify how the coach's interventions help the client to make breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling and behaviour – and ultimately in performance.

This project is a qualitative research project; the focus is on the meaning and experience of the coaching conversation. The primary aim of each coaching conversation is to help the client work towards achieving his/her desired outcomes, and the coach primarily explores with each client what it is that is holding the client back or stopping the client from achieving those outcomes (i.e. identifying and replacing disempowering assumptions and paradigms with empowering ones).

The crux of the analysis is the meaning and experience of the coaching conversation, with specific emphasis on the coaching intervention.

My research questions have 'shifted' from my original question about the 'moment of change' during the coaching conversation, as it is not the only question relevant to the research. Based on my studies and professional work in the last three years, I believe it is more useful to analyse the coaching intervention in terms of: (a) breakthrough shifts in thinking, behaviour and performance; (b) creating transformational change; and (c) how the coaching intervention helps to build the relationship between client and coach.

3.12.1 Action research

Action research has proven to be the ideal means of conducting this particular piece of research. Action research is collaborative by nature, and the clients were a major part of the project. As a result of the research, I have developed a practical coaching model, and a series of themes for coaching interventions that help coach and client to develop a relationship, and the client to articulate existential issues and identify and replace limiting paradigms with empowering paradigms, thus leading to positive change.

3.12.2 Phenomenology

As an analytical approach, phenomenology is particularly suited to my research project, as it is a search for meaning and is a search for the meaning-structure of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). As formulated by Husserl after 1910, “phenomenology is the study of the structures of consciousness that enables consciousness to refer to objects outside of itself; this study requires reflection on the content of the mind” (Karlsson, 1993: 15).

3.12.3 Existentialism

I believe that coaching helps the client to interpret their own reality, and to interpret how they construct meaning of their reality. Existentialism says there is no subjective or objective frame of reference; there is only the process of thinking about it. In other words, we share a lot of experiences as human beings, but ultimately each individual’s experience of the world is unique. Each of my clients is unique in the way they think, in the way they see the world, in the way they interpret events. In my research, the key concern for investigation is “existence as experienced by man as an individual” (Spinelli, 1989: 105).

3.12.4 Existential phenomenology

My approach is from an existential and phenomenological viewpoint. My clients ultimately wish to talk about their ‘purpose in life’ and the anxiety they experience in trying to ‘be’ who they are and ‘do’ what they need to do within the complexity of the systems within which they work.

Action research has structured my project, and the three steps of the existential phenomenological method have been the underlying process which has guided my data analysis. My premise was that an existential phenomenological approach would help me to analyse the data more effectively and objectively.