Addressing resistance to change through a micro interpersonal lens: an investigation into the coaching process

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Abstract

Research Design

We drew upon critical realism and abductive research methodology to understand connections between coaching intervention and individual change resistance through 21 in-depth interviews with independent coaches listed in coaching associations in Germany.

Purpose

This study investigated resistance to change and change management through a micro-level interpersonal perspective. Specifically, this paper addresses in what way external change experts, such as coaches, identify distinctive emotional and behavioural indicators of resistance and facilitate individuals to develop positive strengths and motivation to change.

Findings

This study first re-evaluates the implications of resistance and extends its meaning from negative obstacles into natural emotional responses of individuals and constructive resources for change. In addition, the study results indicate resistance can be distinguished through both explicit behaviours, body language along with implicit emotional reactions, like being tiredness or making small jokes. Moreover, several micro-level interpersonal approaches for coaches to apply in dealing with resistance, including understanding coachees' cognitive

status and working environment, adapting varied communication styles as well as drawing upon coachees' strengths.

Originality

Overall, this study demonstrates that external coaching is one of the valuable approaches in responding to individual resistance in organisational change management. The research findings widen existing bipolar paradigms of resistance (either change obstacles or positive resource) into a neutral spectrum which holds impartial view on emotional reactions to change. Furthermore, individual differences and contextual factors play essential roles in change process, for instance, coachees' personality, personal experiences, knowledge, interpretations to change process and topics as well as organisational context (e.g., power, hierarchy and culture) need to be considered into change management strategy.

Practical Implications

The research results offer organisations (e.g., managers and HR professionals) essential guidelines in micro-level change management strategy by considering external coaching as a valuable option to deal with varied individual, social and contextual factors (e.g., organisational power and politics). From the organisational investment perspective, indicators of resistance and approaches to facilitate coachees' emotional reactions can be served as a preliminary protocol for stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness of their change management schemes. Moreover, the framework outlined in this research can be considered in the future coaching education and professional development programmes.

Key words: coaching, resistance to change, micro-level change management, individual resistance

Paper Type: Research Paper with a practical focus

Introduction

Change has been recognised as the only "constant" throughout the industrial development. The demand for organisations to change is increasing, mainly due to digitalisation and globalisation (Hoe, 2017). These changes often occur as part of the business, like the adjustment of strategy, replacement of stakeholders and people, development of technology and external environment demands (Kerber and Buono, 2005; Stragalas, 2010). Hence, it is challenging to manage a sustainable business without having variations (Merdzanovska, 2016; Vedenik and Leber, 2015). Indeed, one of the major challenges in change management is individuals' acceptance, who are directly affected by new information or strategies (Hudescu and Ilies, 2011; McKay, Nuntz, and Näswall, 2013). However, most contemporary literature or practice has neglected the value of people's emotional responses in the change progress. Instead, some scholars in change management 'resist' resistance (Kulkarni, 2016). Yet, the fundamental features in the change process are comprised by complex distinctive characteristics and contingencies (George and Jones, 2001). Hence, it is essential to appreciate the micro-level prospect, including managing individual cognitive states in change management. Coaching has been defined as one of the change interventions drawn upon effective interpersonal interactions, professional relationships and coachees' strengths for the enhancement of desired outcomes (Lai, 2015; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011). In addition, coachees' commitment and acceptance of change (i.e., motivation or readiness for change) were identified as contributing factors in facilitating sustainable transformation (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018; Bozer and Jones, 2018; de Haan, 2019). Nevertheless, there has been lack of empirical research focusing on individual resistance in the coaching process. Accordingly, our study addresses this research gap by investigating into associations between coaching and change process. The research objectives include in what way coaches

sense resistance, manage coachees' emotional reactions caused by external stimulations and facilitate an effective change process.

Literature Review

Individual change process

Seeing "people", being mostly affected by changes, have been considered as the critical contributor to determine whether a full transformation can be implemented successfully (McKay *et al.*, 2013), a micro-level individual change analysis is essential in change management study. Individual change process can be split into cognitive schemas, affective influences and behavioural expressions (George and Jones, 2001). Schemas refer to people's abstract cognitive structures to understand different contexts and impressions in life. Abstract cognitive structures usually consist of varied stimuli, concepts and relationships among all these elements (Bracher, 2012) and schemas are used to interpret information once it has been developed as a context. New information is often understood in a way that matches with the developed and existed schema. Therefore, people construct and grasp reality according to their original expectations and perceptions (Rousseau, 2001). Specifically, individual schemas lead to top-down or theory-driven processing in which new information is interpreted based on existing organised knowledge. Hence, information process is hardly taken into account actual facts or data (George and Jones, 2001).

However, people can be motivated by unpleasant states of dissonance to engage in psychological work and reduce the discrepancy (Festinger, 1962). Whereas individuals' emotional responses are provoked by the discrepancy (Helpap and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2016) as well as by encounters with unexpected incidents directly impacting on personal goals or aspirations (Frijda, 2016); discrepancies can be regarded as positive opportunities for change. Individuals' cognitive responses may promote a second reaction aimed at regulating

and moderating the emotion whereas intending to identify the inconsistency between their schema and information process. Precisely, individuals attempt to actively understand and identify the underlying problem of discrepancy. This second reaction potentially reduces negative aspects and facilitates individuals engaged in reshaping their views about the world. Thus, individuals often undergo an actual change through this re-confirming and reshaping process. In summary, change is an emotionally charged journey and emotions have a decisive influence on the commitment to change and recipients' expectations of change (Helpap and Bekmeier- Feuerhahn, 2016). Therefore, this individual change process can be interpreted being a course of affective, cognitive and behavioural reactions in change recipients.

Individuals' resistance to change can be recognised as part of social and psychological nature of human beings due to their repetitions of habits, customs or minds. Overcoming stress emerged from this process is the only way to depart from long-established patterns to a new circumstance (McDougall, 2001). Some literature argued change should be managed on a group level considering that people tend to remain in their protective social environment for its benefits (Lewin and Cartwright, 1951). Nevertheless, individual psychological resources are predictors of the resistance intention at both social and individual level (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012). Despite the traditional view that implied obstacle on resistance (Bareil, 2013); the modern paradigm considers resistance as a change resource whereby the same behaviour is interpreted as feedback to the proposed change, with the aim being to understand and adapt to it (Klonek *et al*., 2014). Everything occurred under recipient's action is the response to the change. Furthermore, a resistance intention itself is often a partially confirmed sense-making of the resistor (Helpap and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2016). General speaking, resistance is explained as a cognitive, behaviour, or emotional state; these dimensions may be intertwined due to varied situations and circumstances (Patalano, 2011).

Despite the fact that Lawrence (1969) stated that resistance is neither positive nor negative, the recent literature has recognised resistance as a motivational drive or resource for change.

Individual change process and resistance have been distinguished as part of people's emotional reactions to new information or incidents, contemporary literature yet mainly emphasised on the organisational level or top-down approaches to manage resistances or resistors in the change process, including group-based communications, leadership training or team building activities (Jost, 2015; Predişcan et al., 2013; Reissner and Pagan, 2013). Considering that individuals' needs, emotional responses and attitudes towards to upcoming changes or new information appeared to be neglected in extant research; our study proposes coaching, 'an individual basis reflective process between the facilitator (coach) and participant (coachee) that helps or facilitates coachees to experience positive behavioural changes through continuous dialogue and negotiations with coaches to meet coachees' personal or work goals' (Lai, 2015; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011), can contribute to emotional responses, worries and confusion during the change journey.

Coaching and Resistance to Change

Regardless the variety of coaching definitions, the core element of coaching includes a one-on-one systematic interpersonal interaction process between a hired facilitator (the coach) and a coaching recipient (the coachee) to facilitate learning or change (Grant, 2014; Sperry, 2008). The range of ultimate coaching purposes is varied from specific performance-related goals to self-growth and enhanced self-awareness (Kilburg, 2000). The diversity of coaching topics results in a cross-disciplinary intervention mainly from adult learning, leadership, management, social sciences and psychology (Grant and Cavanagh, 2007). Several systematic reviews (e.g., Chatterjee et al., 2021; Jones et al. , 2016; Theeboom et al. , 2014) have confirmed the positive effects coaching contributing to individual level outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy, goal achievement and healthy lifestyle). For instance, psychologically

informed coaching approach, like positive psychology has been substantially used to develop psychological capital to support change (Giraldez-Hayes, 2021). Besides, theories in adult learning (e.g., experiential learning) were employed to facilitate positive organisational team change (Hughes and Albertyn, 2017). Whereas there has been yet substantial research evidence to determined that coaching is an effective approach to tackle resistance; some studies implied that a better understanding of critical emotional moments (e.g., tense, exciting, or significant) between the coach and coachee facilitated greater understanding of coachees' challenges to change and motivations, values and beliefs behind their actions. (de Haan *et al.*, 2010). In addition, Cox and Bachkirova (2007) indicated that coaches usually reflect on these critical moments emerged in the coaching process to explain coachees' emotional responses to new information.

Recent systematic literature reviews on coaching also offered preliminary insights between coaching interventions and coachees' resistance to change. First, there was often a lack of acceptance from coachees at the early stage of the coaching course considering that coaching was initiated and sponsored by the organisation without proper consultations with employees. Nevertheless, coaching requires both organisational and individual commitment regarding the necessary resources and time required. Accordingly, it is important to focus on coachees' needs and circumstance prior to any formal goal setting or actual coaching sessions (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018). Indeed, coachees' acceptance of the "coaching" as a development opportunity and their commitment to this process is essential for the coaching outcome. This commitment relies on the trust building with their coach and organisation (de Haan, 2019). Bozer and Jones (2018) suggested that the coachees' motivation to change is a precursor to the results of coaching as well as an important indicator for their sustainable changes. Furthermore, the coach's positive pre-coaching mindset eased coachees' concerns about "coaching" and activated constructive responses and behaviours through "friendly"

interactions within the coaching dyad. Accordingly, coaches' attitudes and behaviours are considered as essential determents in mitigating individual resistance in the coaching process.

Several active ingredients have been identified and verified in facilitating an effective coaching process. First, the professional relationship between the coach and coachee (i.e., working alliance) originated from psychotherapy has been verified as an antecedent to activate coachees' self-reflection on coaching and performance capability (Graßmann *et al.*, 2020). In addition, a coachee-centred process offers a better understanding of the emotional aspect of resistance. For instance, coaches' accommodated communication skills (e.g., asking open questions and listening with empathy) provided coachees psychological safety to express their feelings at the beginning of the coaching relationship and to reduce distance among all collaborators (Lai and Smith, 2021). The coachee should have a certain extent of autonomy over the development areas and plans to elicit their intrinsic motivation. Moreover, a transparent communication channel between the coachee and sponsoring organisation facilitated trust building for the enhancement of coachees' motivation. Given that contemporary literature has indicated that resistance is neither positive nor negative; and considered resistance as a motivational drive or resource for change, coaching can be one of the valuable approaches to promote positive attitudes and strengths for change. Whereas practice in coaching supervision has provided coaches spaces to reflect on both coachees' and themselves' critical emotional transformation that helps to deal with resistance (de Haan *et al.*, 2010); there is very little research to investigate what is understood as resistance to change within the context of coaching. There is a need to further research in what way coaches detect and make sense of and responded to resistance in the coaching process. One conceptual framework (Figure 1) following four research questions has been outline.

RQ1: What is understood as resistance to change within the context of coaching?

RQ2: How do coaches make sense of resistance to change in the coaching process?

RQ3: How do coaches respond to resistance to change?

RQ4: What are the contributing factors in addressing resistance to change in the coaching setting?

Insert Figure 1

Research Methodology

This study adopted critical realism and abductive research methodology by means of semi-structured interviews to understand patterns and meanings of individual's change resistance in the coaching context. The critical realism which focuses on clarification of existing theoretical knowledge and business practices corresponded with the present study's objectives: interactions of the coach's influence and coachees' resistant behaviours within a specific coaching context (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Given that research in the field of change initiatives and supporting organisational change projects through coaching has been considerably established (Armenakis and Harris, 2009; Atkinson, 2014; Giraldez-Hayes, 2021); we acknowledge that organisational change management as the existing objective reality in contemporary business practice. However, recent literature indicated that change resistance is usually shaped and interpreted by subjective realities, such as individual experiences and contextual factors in the organisation (García-Cabrera and García-Barba Hernández, 2014). Accordingly, personally and socially constructed views of resistance to change is acknowledged in our research. To understand complex and various components in the micro-level individual change process within a well-established business practice and environment, we consider critical realism which stresses on finding explanations about observable sensations, underlying mechanisms and causes within the sophisticated interactions of roles and behaviour (Saunders *et al.*, 2016*)* as the most appropriate philosophical approach of this study. In addition, the abductive approach, constituted by a

circular relationship between empirical data and theory (Danermark, 2002) was applied to explain in what way professional coaches interpret and sense-making individuals' correspondences to changes within contemporary change management framework. Aligning with epistemological position of this study, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were administrated with coaches to share their experiences in distinguishing indicators of resistance, contextual factors and approaches they used to deal with individuals' cognitive and emotional reactions to change. Participants who also had coaching education experiences (i.e., coaching trainers or supervisors) were asked to discuss elements related to resistance in their training and development design.

Participants and data collection

The purposive sample strategy that considers specific aspects such as maximum variation, extreme or deviant cases, convenience, and typicality was used (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Accordingly, a total of 21 business coaches (10 females and 11 males) with at least two years experiences (20 of 21 had more than 5 years of experiences in coaching during the data collection) in working as external coaches for organisations in Germany and officially listed in coaching associations were recruited. Of these 21 interviewees, 10 participants additionally have acted as business coaching educators for training programmes. Each interview took approximate 1 hour. Considering that all interviews were conducted in German; then transcripts were imported into NVivo and translated to English. To prevent potential translation errors, an independent academic in Germany who speaks both fluent German and English was invited to review the quality of translation prior coding and themes generalisation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of this study adopt Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach and analysed the data through NVivo with 5 steps (Figure 2). To begin with, the first author

familiarised with all interview data by reading and scrutinising full transcriptions. Then initial high-level clusters (Table 1) were generated to capture possible aspects regarding research questions and to build a conceptual abstract (Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Ryan and Bernard, 2000). Next, a code sorting process was carried out to identify preliminary themes associated with sub-research questions and outline a thematic map. To minimise potential bias from the first author, these preliminary themes were reviewed and amended by the second author. Subsequently, we applied the across case approach (Ayres *et al*., 2003) to re-evaluate each theme including identified codes and those collated data for a verification. Then each theme along with codes were examined additionally to identify further sub-themes and refinements. This step aimed to produce a detailed and validated thematic map that reflected all patterns in the dataset accurately (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As some recoding was required during this review process, iterative coding cycles were repeated. Finally, further refinement of coding and detailed definition of code descriptions were confirmed for the concluding theme definitions and descriptions.

Insert Figure 2

 Insert Table 1

Findings

Contemporary evaluation and position of resistance in the eyes of coaches
Overall, most of interviewees expected, embraced and encouraged resistance in the coaching process though varied descriptions of resistance were given. A total of 16 interviewees acknowledged the existence of resistance as normal emotional reactions when there is a new information sensed by the coachee.

Resistance is that something is countered…the coach sees as reasonable (IWE 17), is usually something emotional, which triggers a topic (IWE 4).

In addition, 11 interviewees perceived resistance as "anticipated" seeing that hesitation, uncertainty and struggle are common in any change process.

> There is no change without resistance, resistance is part of a change, as is the fact that the grass is green … because if there is no resistance at all, then it is more of a concern to me (IWE 9).

Moreover, six interviewees indicated resistance as positive signs for further in-depth conversations about change.

> I welcome resistance because it invites new discussions … is a huge inspiration, an idea and energy that is there in the room that you just have to use (IWE 20).

Whereas a few interviewees perceived resistance being negative; they revealed that coachees' resistance could be emerged from the coach's style. Specifically, the coach had certain extent influence on coachees' reception of new information.

> I cannot see the resistance in the long term as something positive, but it is not really something negative (IWE 18).

In general, the interview findings indicated resistance has been re-evaluated in the contemporary coaching process, a more constructive and welcoming attitude on resistance was positioned by participants.

Resistance can be interpreted through behavioural and cognitive correspondents

Essentially, participants used varied senses to recognise resistance, mainly through coachees' behaviours, body language and emotions. The initial coding of interviews resulted in 105 codes illustrating explicit resistant statements and behaviours by coachees, such as silence, evasive distracting answers or tears. In addition, a total of 39 initial themes indicated implicit body language and gestures as indicators of resistance, such as voice and tone, facial

expression and breathing. Furthermore, interviewees disclosed emotional implications including anger, fear and frustration were considered as signs of resistance. Yet, few positive signals, like making jokes and laughing were exploited as coachees' defence against resistance.

Insert Table 2

Contextual and individual factors that provoke resistance

The interview data was further analysed to distinguish sources of resistance. First, contextual and organisational sources, such as change assignments often provoked coachees' intense reactions. The organisational sources can be split into two categories: working relationships and environment. Besides, coachees often withheld ideas of change due to their working relationships with colleagues and line managers as well as organisational culture. Coachees hesitated to open for change owing to conflicts within and between teams, autocratic leadership style and lack of appreciation in the organisation. Furthermore, issues emerged from the working environment including communication strategy and organisational structure affected coachees' willingness to welcome new information and strategies. Second, coachees' individual characteristics and concerns are essential determinants to influence on their readiness and motivation to change. For instance, coachees' perceived competency and career opportunities may prevent them from change when the new strategy is contrary to individual objectives and needs. Besides, lack of skills and unclear information caused fears and concerns of their future in the organisation. Moreover, coachees' perceived stress level and work-life balance determine their readiness to learn new topics or skills.

It is often not the case that the coachee does not want to talk about it, but there is a fear (IWE 7).

These obstacles can then be grounded in himself, i.e. in ... his abilities, his resources (IWE 9).

Third, interactions within the coaching dyad were recognised being critical to shape the foundation of change process, such as the first coaching meeting to define objectives, expectations and approaches in this change journey. In total, 13 interviewees indicated that the extent of mutual trust and sympathy determined future coaching collaboration.

Trust is very, very important in coach-coachee relationships (IWE 10).

I (as a coach) also need to have confidence in the other person. I have to be sympathetic to them. Otherwise, it will not work (IWE 6).

80% of the coaching success is based on the relationship and not on the method (IWE 21).

Overall, the coach is expected to offer a safe and supportive coaching atmosphere for coachee to express their feelings. The coach's neutral attitude and position in the coaching process ensured coachee's efforts were valued and recognised. Some interviewees described themselves *"unintentional"* and *"neutral"*, without pushing the coachee in one direction. the coach's self-reflection has been highlighted to adjust their approaches to accommodate varied coaching scenarios. For instance, *"having a sincere interest in the person of the coachee (IWE 20)"*. *"the assumption of good reason with others. Everyone has a good reason in their views for why they behave the way they behave (IWE 21)"*.

In terms of coachee's attributes, being open to new information and making commitment to their responsibility are two essential factors to promote a thriving coaching relationship.

The coachee also needs the commitment to….the willingness to work on behaviour, thought patterns, perspectives and similar points" (IWE 2).

In summary, resistance could be provoked by various causes; contingencies and personal circumstances both need to be considered. Furthermore, the quality of interpersonal interactions between the coach-coachee played a key part to ease the tension in the change process. Accordingly, effective professional relationships with all relevant parties in coaching course are contributing factors in managing resistance.

Approaches of coaches to manage resistance

As reported by interview participants, types of resistance influence their approaches to manage resistance. The interview data distinguished resistance into two categories: resistance to coaching topic and resistance to coaching approach itself, which are discussed further below.

Overall, participants tended to focus on coachees' positive psychological states, such as strengths and emotion when coachees' exhibited concerns to the coaching topic, i.e., organisation's change strategy. Most of the interviewees drew upon interpersonal skills to de-stress and relax the coachee, for example, by telling a joke. *"I cost money. I come here for you (IWE 20)"*. Effective interpersonal skills helped to detect the fundamental issues behind the resistance. *"And then listen, what's the topic, where did the discrepancy, the incongruence, what are unspoken questions, prompt questions etc. (IWE 1)"*. Besides, the interviewees attempted to give coachees the feeling of being appreciated and taken seriously. Moreover, the coaching environment was highlighted by some interviewees, such as a comfortable and quiet space or change of the scene (e.g., a green area or park).

> If you devaluate the past, you also depreciate the person, and this strengthens the resistance at some point (IWE 7).

In general, the range of ultimate coaching purposes is varied from specific performance-related goals to a desire for self-growth and enhanced self-awareness (Kilburg, 2000).

Therefore, hidden agendas have been identified especially the coaching is sponsored by the organisation (Louis and Fatien Diochon, 2014), the potential conflicts within the organisation and team resulted in concerns to coachees.

Sometimes coaching is a reward, sometimes someone wants it for themselves and sometimes coaching is a sanction (IWE 21).

Essentially, interviewees tended to ensure coachees' motivation or readiness for coaching prior to the official session. Specifically, they did not prefer an enforced coaching engagement.

Let's say that, because I do not do coaching where the client does not volunteer for coaching (IWE 15).

Meanwhile, majority of the interviewees applied flexible and coachee-centred approaches to accommodate coachees' preferences at the early stage of coaching.

What should actually be in coaching, that you find it interesting for you? (IWE 7).

The interviewees further explained that the coachee is encouraged by these questions to think about personal challenges and problems. Hence, it led to an increase in openness and consequently a decrease in resistance.

To summarise, it is crucial for coaches to adjust approaches in accordance with contextual factors such as sources of resistance in the change process. Integrating all essential identified themes in this study, a conceptual framework is emerged to understand the role coaching take in the individual change process and in what way coaches make sense of and responded to resistance in change management (Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3

Discussion

Overall, this study offers preliminary insights of resistance to change in the coaching context by answering four research questions. To answer research question one, our study expands meaning of resistance from a conventional pessimistic perspective into optimistic and encouraging attitude. Most of interview participants recognised resistance as natural and anticipated when receiving new information. Certain interviewees valued resistance since coachees' emotional reactions opened a further discussion about coachees' challenges and struggle. Despite a wide spectrum of resistance has been identified in this study, all interviewees acknowledged resistance being a cognitive state and micro-level strategy is required in the change management process. Regarding research question two, resistance could be identified through both explicit observable behaviours and implied emotional indicators. Interestingly, some appeared engaging behaviours or body language, including making jokes, laughing and being delighted were exploited by coachees to suppress their concerns for change. Furthermore, our study outlined essential approaches coaches used to respond to coachees' resistance in accordance with diverse contextual and individual sources. In general, causes of coachees' resistance include working relationship within and across the team, organisational culture and coaching alliance within the coaching dyad. With regard to research question three, this study summarised micro-level interpersonal strategies offer coaches a holistic understanding and appreciation of individual differences and issues that prevent from change. Moreover, coaches drew on flexible and coachee-centre approaches to elicit coachees' strengths and tackle with protentional issues. Finally, the research findings suggested a high-quality coach-coachee professional relationship as crucial foundation in managing resistance to change. Coaches' accommodated communication skills, coachee-lead and transparent process promoted coachees' self-awareness, openness and change readiness.

This study primarily contributes to three theoretical areas in organisational change and management, which are discussed in detail below. First, this study expands existing organisational change theory from a macro-level prospect into micro individual cognitive and interpersonal context. Whereas contemporary literature in organisational change designated resistance into either negative or positive (Armenakis and Harris, 2009; Bareil, 2013; Klonek, Lehmann-Willenbrock and Kauffeld, 2014), our study results suggested a more welcoming attitude on coachees' emotional reactions towards change should be applied. The interview data indicated resistance was acknowledged being "normal", "anticipated" and "neutral". Moreover, resistance often elicits a further discussion over rationales hindered from change. Hence, coaches should embrace coachees' affective and cognitive responses to new information or strategy. Accordingly, our research elaborates the positive approach of framing change further (Armenakis and Harris, 2009) by indicating neural position of resistance and focusing on the creation of readiness for change. This finding also tallies with recent coaching literature which stressed on positive psychology coaching (e.g., strength and courage) facilitating employees' psychological capital development, including self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism (Giraldez-Hayes, 2021). Aligning with the readiness to change model (Prochaska *et al.*, 1993), our study results outline specific or implied indicators, including astonishment, fear or voice and tone, for coaches to distinguish coachees' emotional switch as the cognitive precursor of the behaviours of resistance to or support for organisational change.

Second, the present study offers a further insight in change management theory by drawing upon micro-level interpersonal strategies in the change process. Whereas exiting change management literature has emphasised on top-down organisational level communication or training approaches (Klonek *et al.*, 2014), our study acknowledges the importance of individual differences and contextual factors (e.g., working relationships with the team and

line manager as well as organisational culture). The study results propose a bottom-up perspective by analysing sources of resistance and adjusting strategies accordingly. Following from readiness for change model (Prochaska *et al*., 1993), our study suggested flexible change management practices should be considered due to fluctuating scenarios in the coachee's social environment. Therefore, this research took an initial step to re-evaluate organisational change management via individual cognitive prospect (George and Jones, 2001) and acknowledged psychological resources being predictors of the resistance intention at both social and individual level (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012).

Third, this study widens recent theoretical arguments on a social oriented coaching process (Shoukry and Cox, 2018) through indicating contextual factors should be acknowledged while coaching is applied in change management. Whereas coaching has been defined as a cross disciplinary intervention, including psychology and management; latest coaching literature has shifted the focus to social issues in coachee's organisation. For instance, organisational hierarchy, power and politics play essential roles in facilitating coaching alliance and desired outcomes (Lai and Smith, 2021; Louis and Fatien Diochon, 2018). Meanwhile, our study distinguished coachees' working relationship with their team, line managers and organisational culture are potential causes of resistance. Specifically, coachees' readiness and motivation for change are determined by these contextual factors and can be recognised as a social process either. This research finding resonates with extant action research in team coaching to facilitate change through collective and social interactions (Hughes and Albertyn, 2017). Hence, our study expands existing coaching literature from performance management, learning and development, workplace well-being purposes to the benefit of organisational change management.

In terms of practical implications, our study could be used as preliminary guidelines for coaches to deal with coachees' emotional response towards new information and strategies by

considering social and organisational contextual factors (e.g., power and politics), including identifying sources and indicators of coachees' cognitive states as well as appropriate mechanisms. Furthermore, from the economical perspective, these guidelines may be transformed into a fundamental protocol for organisations to evaluate the effectiveness of their change management schemes. Finally, our research findings may offer some fresh innovative elements into contemporary coaching professional development contents. For instance, extant coaching training programmes is primary positioned within the economic driven ideology to generate positive coaching outcomes (Shoukry and Cox, 2018); indicators of resistance outlined in this study allow coaches to establish a more in-depth understanding of rationales underpinning coachees' reactions to change.

Finally, this study brings new insights regarding research methodology in change management and coaching fields by employing critical realism. Given that most relevant studies have emphasised on objective realities, such as validity of change initiatives and coaching approaches; our combination of research philosophical stance indeed expands existing positivism viewpoints into a more humanity consideration when looking at micro-level resistance in the change process. This approach also offers evidence-based practitioners in change management and coaching an opportunity to develop a more comprehensive account of individual interpretations and responses in the change process.

Conclusion

Regardless individual resistance has been highlighted as a crucial ingredient in the organisational change management process, there is a lack of research concentrating on micro-level perspectives that integrate personal characteristics, working environment and organisational culture into consideration. Our study indeed offers a new insight in change management literature by investigating in what way one-on-one change interventions, such as coaching, facilitate individuals' motivation and readiness to change. This research outlines a

preliminary individual change framework in the coaching setting that specifies indicators and sources of resistance for coaches to accommodate their approaches. Whereas this study has achieved its outlined objectives research questions, several limitations were identified for the future research development. For instance, participants in the present study were restricted within a small representative coaching context in Germany. In addition, the qualitative research design may have confined generalisation of research findings. Accordingly, we like to suggest a wider cultural context should be considered in the further research given that existing coaching and change management studies were mainly dominated by highly developed coaching markets, including Northern America and Western Europe. In addition, a cross-validation of these identified resistance indicators and strategies is required. For instance, a quantitative study to examine whether these change management strategies through coaching facilitate positive impacts in the organisation, such as leader-member relationships, performance management or employees' well-being, is necessary. Moreover, a further study to investigate whether individual resistance related topics in coaching training programmes add values to the enhancement of working alliance is crucial. Our research took an initial step scrutinising the relations between coaching and individual resistance in the organisational change management process, we also acknowledge the present study is a "kick-off" of micro-level change management focusing on individuals' cognitive states and psychological strengths in the change process. More rigorous empirical studies are needed to resonate with this research discipline.

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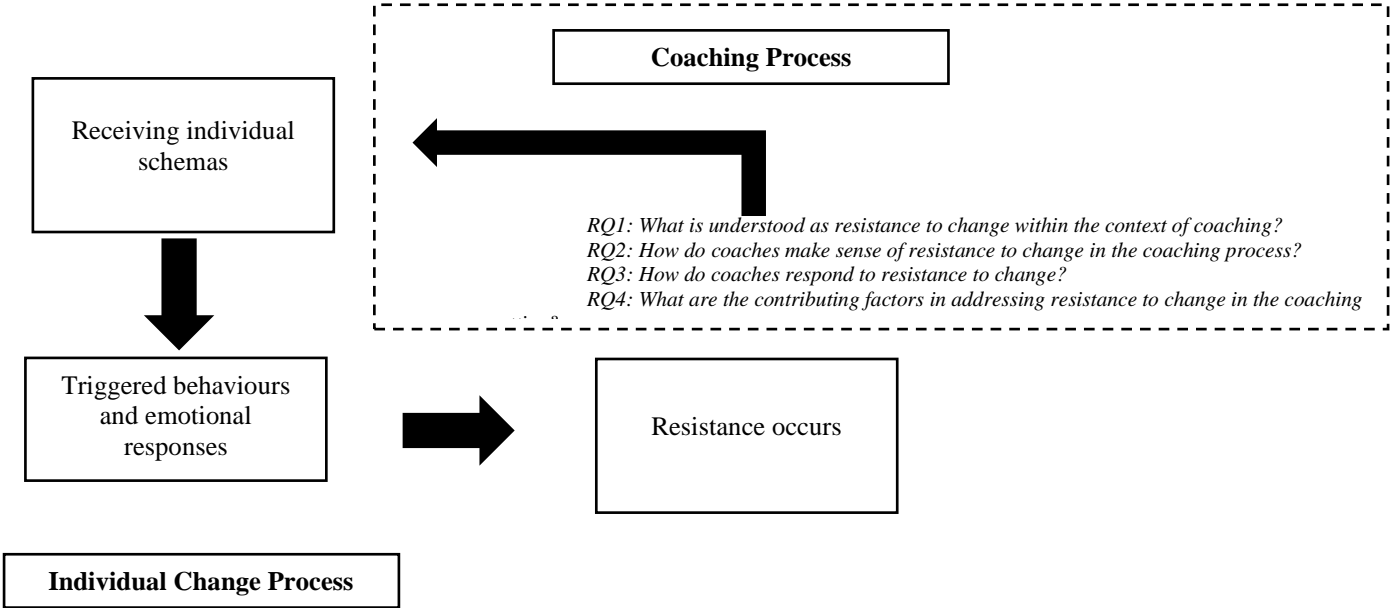Figure 1 Conceptual framing of individual change process and coaching

Coaching Process

Receiving individual
schemas

RQ1: What is understood as resistance to change within the context of coaching?
RQ2: How do coaches make sense of resistance to change in the coaching process?
RQ3: How do coaches respond to resistance to change?
RQ4: What are the contributing factors in addressing resistance to change in the coaching

Triggered behaviours
and emotional
responses

Resistance occurs

Individual Change Process

Figure 2 One example of theme generation

| Theme | Sub-theme | Further refinement |

- Undersanding of resistance
  - Types of resistance
    - Against coaching
    - Against the topic
    - ......
  - Evaluation of resistance
    - Negative
    - Positive
    - Neutral
  - Term
    - Decision
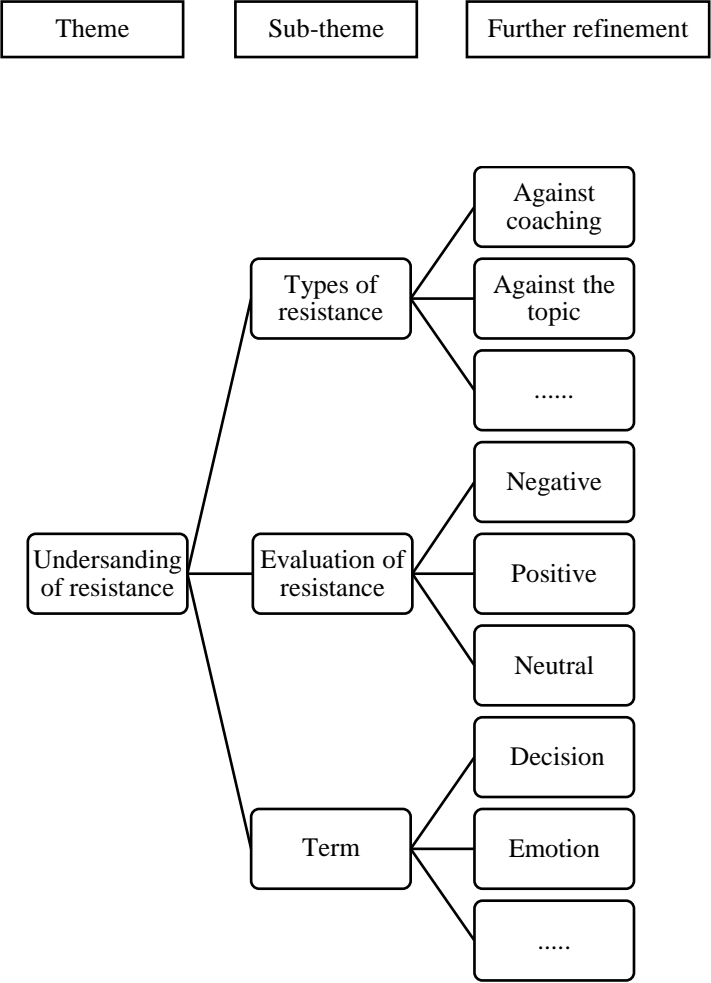   - Emotion
    - .....

Figure 3 A preliminary organisational change management framework in the coaching setting