

# Coaching for Emancipation: A framework for coaching in oppressive environments

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## Abstract

While coaching is establishing itself as an effective human development approach, there is limited understanding of the dynamics of coaching in the context of oppression. This paper summarises a study that examined the use of coaching as an emancipatory approach, and explored how oppression affects coachees, coaches and the coaching process. Building on a cross-disciplinary review of emancipatory approaches, an initial coaching model was developed. Then, a cooperative inquiry was conducted with twelve coaches from Egypt, who used the model with 22 coachees, leading to the development of a theoretical and practical framework for the use of coaching to support the emancipation and development of individuals. This study is possibly the first to research coaching as an emancipatory approach. It provides insights into how oppression affects individuals and describes the individual's journey to emancipation. It proposes a detailed framework of the processes that support individuals through that journey, and discusses the implications of the social context on the coaches' development.

**Keywords:** Critical Theory, Consciousness, Emotional Development, Social Change, Arab Spring

## Introduction

Two essential questions behind this research are: *How does oppression affect individuals? And how can they liberate themselves from its implications?* The questions originated from my coaching experience, noticing how the social context affects the way coachees see themselves and engage with the world. Western coaching approaches, celebrating the resourceful, self-directive individual, seemed out of place when used within an environment where coachees were unable to make choices, and constrained psychologically and socially from pursuing their choices. Hegazy (2013) argues that the psychology of oppressed societies implies specific challenges to the process of development, these challenges need to be met with approaches specifically designed for that purpose. Considering the prevalence of oppression in many societies, it becomes essential that the theory of coaching is expanded to include an understanding of its implications.

In the past few decades, several human development disciplines have realised their ineffectiveness when applied in oppressive contexts. Traditional methods of education, psychotherapy, and research were critiqued for not only being ineffective, but also for becoming part of the oppressive system. The emergence of emancipatory approaches within these disciplines has been a response to that critique. While coaching has lagged behind in offering an emancipatory practice, such a call is starting to emerge in the literature. Western (2012) argues that coaching can be an emancipatory force, helping individuals to achieve a fuller sense of life, and a collective endeavour to improve workplaces and society. The flexible and participatory nature of coaching makes it potentially effective for navigating the challenges of oppressive social contexts.

This study aimed to develop a theoretical and practical framework for the use of coaching in oppressive environments to support the emancipation and development of individuals. In order to achieve this aim, a critical cross-disciplinary review of the literature was conducted. Then, an initial model of coaching for emancipation was developed. The model was used by a group of coaches in Egypt following the revolution of 2011 (also known as the Arab Spring), and the resulting framework originated through a process of cooperative inquiry with the coaches.

## **Literature Review**

In this section, I begin by reviewing the coaching literature, providing a critical evaluation of coaching's potential and limitations in supporting individuals in oppressive environments. Next, I lay the foundation for constructing a model of coaching for emancipation, through a cross-disciplinary review of theories of oppression and an analysis of several emancipatory approaches.

### ***Emancipatory potential of coaching***

Over the past decade, coaching has established itself as a fast growing approach for human development (Passmore, 2008). One of the main characteristics of coaching is that it is participatory; core principles of coaching include equality between coach and client (Rogers, 2008), a non-directive approach (Ives, 2008), a collaborative and facilitative relationship (Grant, 2003), and supporting self-responsibility and ownership of one's life (Wilson, 2007). While these principles are not always adhered to (Parsloe & Wray, 2000), coaching is generally understood as an empowering approach.

Another important aspect of coaching is its capacity to support critical reflection and reflective learning (Cox, 2012; Kristal, 2009). Askew and Carnell (2011) argue that a coaching approach that fosters critical consciousness is capable of helping individuals think differently about themselves and their society. Brockbank and McGill (2006) note that critical reflection in coaching helps to transform the client by exposing power relations, challenging what is deemed natural, and appreciating the power of language and the prevailing discourse. Critical reflection is considered as a key enabler for emancipatory learning, involving increased awareness and questioning of the assumptions under which we and others think and act, and being ready to act differently (Brookfield, 1991).

A third aspect is flexibility. Coaching is often critiqued for being unregulated and unstandardised, but it is also this fact that makes it open and adaptable to serve different purposes. Western (2012) describes coaching as "a vital and dynamic space that enables creativity to emerge, whereas other 'helping relationships' are often saddled with more restrictive cultures" (p.10).

The above characteristics suggest that coaching could be an effective approach in supporting individuals in challenging social contexts.

### ***Limitations of current coaching approaches***

Coaching literature contains very limited discussion or research on its relation with the socio-cultural context (Passmore & Law, 2009). Schultz (2010) argues that critical accounts of coaching are rare, and that coaching is rarely viewed from the socio-political perspective. He suggests that the common understanding of coaching needs to be reconstructed in order to allow it to become a tool for emancipation. Eyre (2012), in an interview with Sir John Whitmore, quotes him saying that coaching can save the world, arguing that coaches must become aware of the bigger social and economic context, to help leaders of organisations appreciate the need for a more inclusive and caring capitalism. Outhwaite and Bettridge (2009), Dyer (2002) and Du Toit and Sim (2010) all argue for a similar role for coaching with executives. Meanwhile, there is hardly any discussion on a possible role for coaching in addressing wider non-organisational social issues.

One of the criticisms of coaching is that it stems from one dominant cultural view; it is predominantly a westernised phenomenon, and the dominant culture it arose from is individualised, democratic capitalism (Western, 2012). The main studied populations in coaching research are managers in medium to big organisations, over-represented by alpha males who allegedly occupy 75% of the senior positions in big corporations in USA and Europe (E. Erlandson, 2009).

Whitmore (2007) has put the growth of coaching down to a growth in individualism, and desire for self-exploration. This aspect has been a key theme for the critique of coaching and the therapeutic culture of the last few decades (Swan, 2010). Lasch (1978) argued that the therapeutic culture creates a narcissistic and introspective society, focusing on 'I' instead of 'we'. Western (2012) argues that the promise of individual happiness favours an individualistic focus over social understanding. Many writers suggest that coaching, by supporting the interpretation of problems as individual issues, ignores other non-individual interpretations (Kühl, 2007, 2008; Schultz, 2010).

Another bias in the coaching literature is the focus on goal achievement and performance improvement. Askew and Carnell (2011) argue that this focus on goal-achievement in coaching may avoid important learning about the self. Critical theorists Marcuse (1991) and Habermas (1970) argue that a practical focus on improvement within the boundaries of a social system can distract from a critical stance towards the whole system, so coaching can be used to detract employees from reflecting on the structures that oppress them (Western, 2012). Brockbank and McGill (2012) suggest that performance coaching aims to maintain the status quo by suppressing challenge and questioning to the existing system, thus reinforcing existing power relations and reproducing social inequalities.

Outside the mainstream contexts, studies in cross-cultural coaching focus on understanding and adapting to other cultures, working within their boundaries. This approach seems to be missing a critical stance, whereby cultural traits are questioned and challenged. It implies that social realities are accepted as givens, regardless of their implications on the individual. In the context of oppression, the role of coaching, as implied by these approaches, may be considered hegemonic, as it reinforces the dominant culture. Coaching can be accused of not offering "a challenge to the entrenched worldviews of the individual or organisation" [or society] (Du Toit & Sim, 2010, p. 49).

Another limitation in current coaching approaches is that they are built on assumptions that are fundamentally violated in oppressive environments. One of the ground precepts of coaching is the belief that coachees are resourceful. Underneath this belief are the principles of choice and self-responsibility (Rogers, 2008). Under oppression, the concept of choice may be prohibited by external coercion, or internally relinquished because of the internalisation of oppressive beliefs. Critical reflection, considered by Cranton (2006) as a prerequisite for self-responsibility, is a dangerous and rare skill in such environments.

In summary, there is a gap in coaching research and theory covering the use of coaching for emancipatory purposes, or its use in oppressive contexts. In order to lay the foundation for a critical theory of coaching, I explore in the following paragraphs the concepts of oppression and emancipation.

### ***Oppression***

Oppression is what happens when a social order distorts the humanity of some of its members through unjust and sometimes violent perceptions and actions (Freire, 1970). Oppression usually targets specific groups based on gender, ethnicity, ability, age, wealth, beliefs, sexuality and other factors (Harro, 2000). It can also affect whole nations, under dictatorship or colonisation. Oppression is multi-dimensional and multi-layered, where each dimension (e.g. law, religion, values) has its own multiple layers (e.g. gender, age, class), all dynamically interrelated

(Kucukaydin, 2010). It is a complete system of structural elements that continuously reproduce inequality in everyday practices (Dominelli, 2002). It extends to the unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people and the normal processes of everyday life (Young, 2000, p. 36).

The literature offers deep insight into the implications of living in oppressive environments, as it affects every aspect of the human condition (Dominelli, 2002). People are taught ideologies that legitimate the interests of the dominant group (Eagleton, 2007). They learn to accept and defend an unjust social order, not only as natural, but also as desirable (Gramsci, 1988). Eventually they become alienated, thinking and acting as part of an anonymous mass (Fromm, 1942). They become estranged from their ability to think freely and critically, and hence unable to challenge the conditions that cause their alienation (Brookfield, 2005).

Harro (2000) argues that we get socialised to playing the roles prescribed by our social identities. This process is pervasive, consistent, and self-generating, as rules are proactively maintained within every social circle. Social roles are often linked to stereotypes that become self-perpetuating, as individuals behave in ways that reinforce the stereotypes (Plous, 2003). The incorporation by an oppressed group of the prejudices against them is referred to as internalised oppression. Pheterson (1986) notes that “internalised oppression is likely to consist of self-hatred, self-concealment, fear of violence, and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness, and gratefulness for being allowed to survive” (p. 148). Later, Žižek (2001) argues that people may struggle to let go of their oppression, because they have emotionally invested in it a lot over the years. Gradually, the oppressive condition becomes an integral part of their identity.

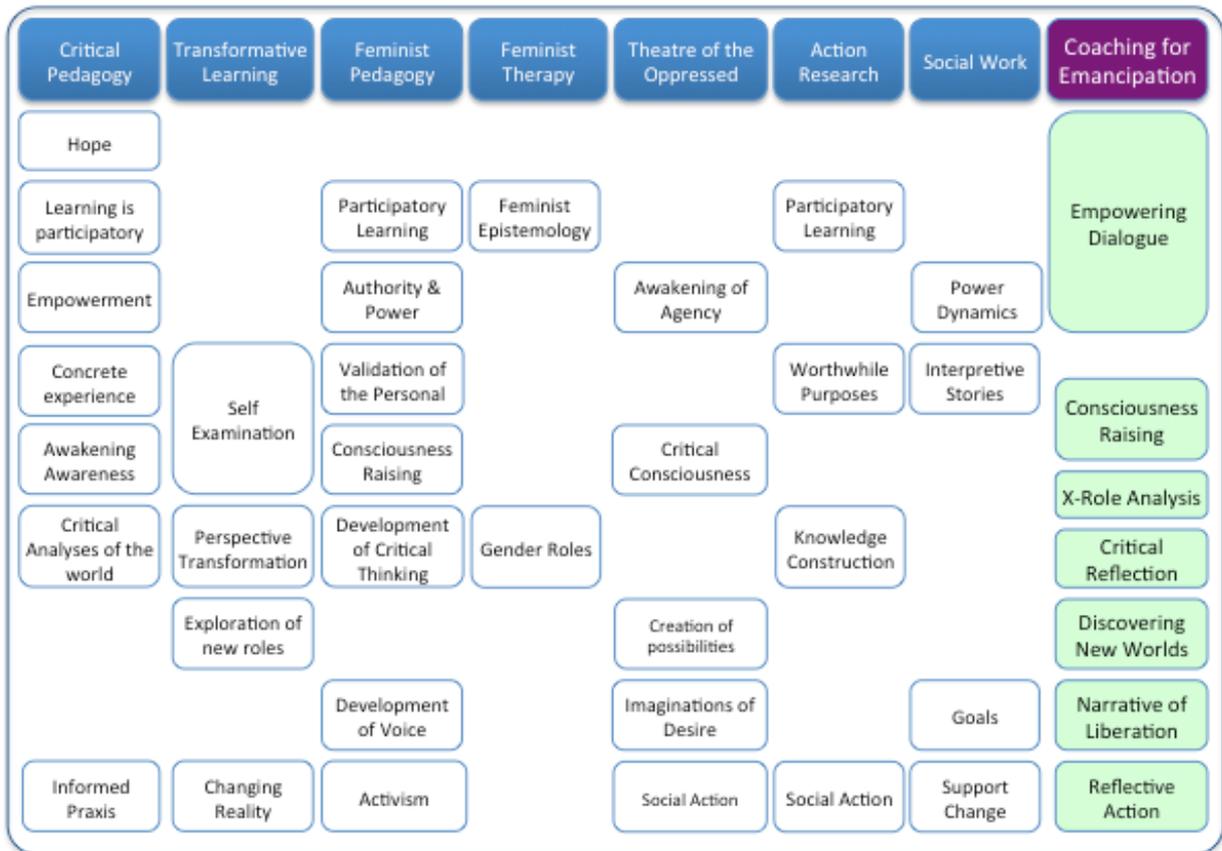
Hegazy (2013) suggests that oppressed individuals suffer from a depreciating self-regard, living in a continuous state of fear and feelings of loss of control over their lives; they learn to admire and submit to the idealised image of the oppressor. The oppressed amplifies the wounds of the past, feels helpless towards the present, and sees no future. Watkins and Shulman (2008) argue that even being a bystander in an oppressive environment results in a long list of psychic wounds.

The above studies emphasise the centrality of oppression to the experience of people living in its context, and the need for human development approaches to incorporate an understanding of oppression in their frameworks.

### ***Features of Emancipatory Approaches***

Emancipatory work is founded on the belief that humanisation – restoring one’s humanity and becoming fully human – is the vocation of all people (Freire, 1970). A cross-disciplinary review reveals the key themes found in emancipatory approaches within the fields of education, psychotherapy, arts and theatre, action research, and social work, as summarised in Figure 1.

The first theme is that learning needs to be participatory and empowering, this is most evident in the practice of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). The second theme is that practitioners need to understand and use the power dynamics that are inherent in the social context and the helping relationship, as exemplified in anti-oppressive social work (Dominelli, 2002). A third theme is the importance of starting from the lived experience of learners, sharing their interpretations of the experience in a process of consciousness raising, this is most evident in feminist pedagogy (MacDonald, 2002). A fourth theme is criticality; many approaches such as transformative learning (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, 2000) emphasise the importance of critical thinking and reflection as key ingredients in reviewing one’s beliefs about self and the world. Feminist therapy stresses the importance of critical social analysis, to understand how society creates roles, or patterns of culturally approved behaviours (Worell & Remer, 2002).



**Figure 1: Key emancipatory processes across multiple approaches**

Meanwhile, emancipation is not only a cognitive process. Using imagination to create possibilities and to explore emotions and desires is as important as cognitive analysis. This area is extensively covered within methods like theatre of the oppressed (Boal, 1995), applied theatre and liberation arts. Another theme is the importance of balancing internal/individual change with external/social action. Inglis (1997) argues that it is impossible to reach emancipation without action, If the focus is only on personal transformation, empowerment becomes a way to act more successfully in the existing system rather than changing it. This concept is key to participatory action research (PAR), as identified by Fals Borda (2008).

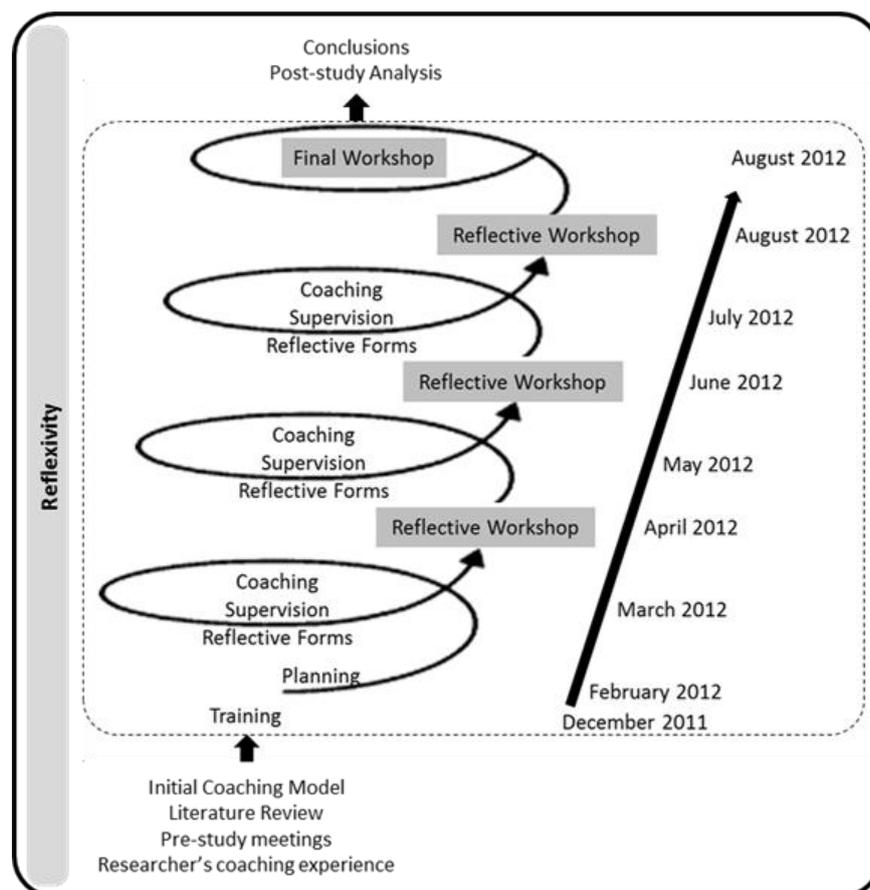
Bulhan (2004) summarises the different dimensions of emancipatory approaches: “What is needed in situations of oppression is a mode of intervention that bridges the separation of insight and action, internal and external, individual and collective” (p. 272). The far right column of Figure 1 shows how these concepts have guided the creation of the initial coaching model, which was used in the inquiry as will be explained in the next section.

## Methodology

The aim of this study originates from the critical theory paradigm that defines my view and role as a researcher-practitioner. Critical theory maintains a historical-realist ontology, proposing that we live in virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, ethnic, economic, and gender values that are crystallised over time. In order to gain knowledge about the studied environment, critical theory proposes a dialogical epistemology, where knowledge is created by inquiry through a

dynamic interaction with the environment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 2005). The methodology chosen to meet these requirements is co-operative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2008). It relies on working collaboratively with a group of co-researchers, reflecting on their direct experience with the studied environment.

The timeline of the study is shown in Figure 2. Following a cross-disciplinary review of emancipatory approaches, I developed an initial model of coaching for emancipation. Next, a formal invitation to join a co-operative inquiry was sent to circles of human development practitioners in Egypt, resulting in a group of twelve coaches/co-researchers who would undertake the study. The inquiry group attended an extensive training on the coaching model, as well as an initiation into the inquiry's design. The coaching model was used with 22 coachees over six months. Coaching sessions constituted the action phases of the inquiry, during which the coaches were collecting data in the form of reflective journals, research forms and personal notes. Feedback was also sought from the coachees. Each action phase was two months long and included one to two coaching sessions per coachee and one supervision session with the coach. Then, the group gathered for three days of reflective workshops, where the data generated was collaboratively analysed, reflected upon, and critically discussed. The study included three full cycles of action and reflection. The reflective workshops generated a considerable amount of data: debates and ideas were exchanged verbally, audio recorded, noted on whiteboards, and recorded in writing by members of the group. These sources were organised, compared against the literature, and presented to the group for discussion at the following workshop.



**Figure 2: Research Timelines and Cycles**

### ***Validity considerations***

Heron (1996) lists the conditions that are essential for the validity of co-operative inquiry. They include having multiple cycles of data collection and analysis, divergence and convergence of the experiences, congruence of outcomes (across practical, conceptual, imaginal and empathic forms of knowing), worthwhile purpose, collaboration and participation, criticality, and the shared meaning of language and context. The research procedures, training of the participants, and facilitation of the reflective workshops were all critical in ensuring these conditions were met. The research design also tried to meet the four criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. I discuss the limitations to these later in this paper.

In hindsight, I believe that cooperative inquiry represents a powerful approach for researching coaching. Its participatory praxis provides means for critical reflections to take place and for a group to provide a support mechanism for all its members. It may be argued that coaching and cooperative inquiry share common values such as mutual respect, critical reflection and collaborative decision-making. The coaches viewed the research process as developmental on both cognitive and emotional levels.

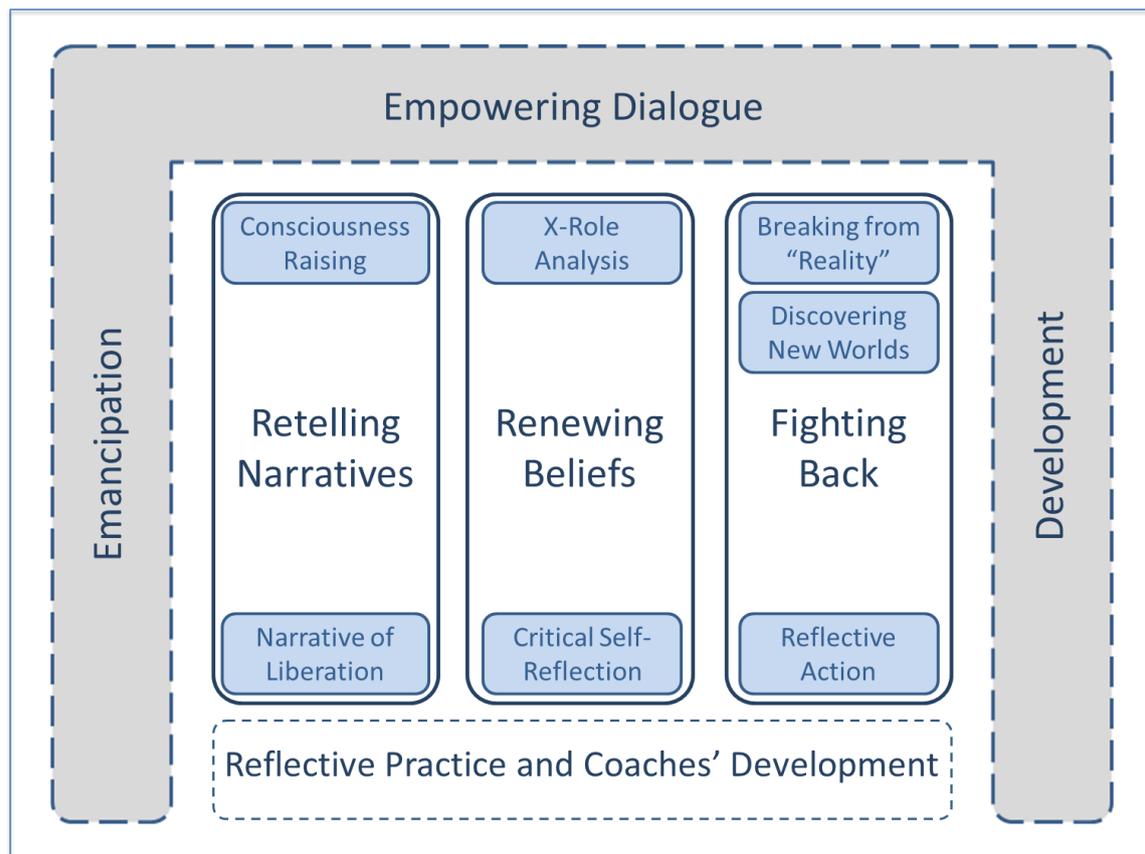
### ***Egypt as a research context***

The selection of Egypt as a model environment for this inquiry was based on multiple factors. Egypt has had a history of political oppression throughout its modern history, from colonisation (1517-1952) to military dictatorship (1952-2012). Political oppression has been coupled with extreme poverty and religious extremism, leading to gender discrimination, and violence against religious minorities. Corruption is evaluated as extremely high (Sorensen, 2012). More than third of the Egyptians are illiterate (UNDP, 2012). In 2010, the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report ranked Egypt 125<sup>th</sup> out of 136 countries in terms of the disparity in rights between men and women (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010).

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets of Cairo and other cities, demanding the fall of Mubarak's regime. People around the world watched the 18 days of demonstrations that led to Mubarak stepping down, after 30 years in power. After the revolution, it became clear that emancipation is a much longer journey; many people feared the change and instability, and supported a renewed military rule. Islamic extremism flourished, and Islamist groups known for being repressive of civil liberties and freedoms became very active (O'Brien, 2012). Mass sexual harassment incidents increased. Religious discrimination led to significant numbers of religious minorities forced out of their homes or leaving the country. By the summer of 2011, the psychology of hope that dominated Tahrir square was replaced by fear (Masoud, 2011), and notable writers were predicting the end of the revolution (Žižek, 2011). The events of the last few years are but a reminder that oppressive environments have the ability to regenerate themselves. What was coined as the "Arab Spring" is still unfolding as a long and painful struggle (Francois-Cerrah & Sadik, 2013).

### **Findings and Implications**

The findings of the study are organised in a framework of coaching for emancipation, as depicted in Figure 3. The proposed framework includes three aspects that emerged from the study:



**Figure 3: Coaching for Emancipation Framework**

***1. Coaching for emancipation is founded on a critical theoretical understanding of the dynamics of oppression and emancipation, development, and empowerment***

One of the key outcomes of the study was a better understanding of the dynamics of living in oppressive environments. The study suggests that oppression is experienced as a complex web of daily interactions that affects the entire social and psychological experience of the individual, depriving him/her from the concept of choice, and fostering senses of helplessness, unworthiness, self-blame, and grief. This view echoes the description of Habermas (1987) of the invasion of the lifeworld, and the psychological features of the oppressed described by several authors including Freire (1970), Bell (2007), and Hegazy (2013).

While confirming previous theories of the impact of oppression, the study offers a theoretical view of the journey from oppression to emancipation. It proposes that both oppression and emancipation are neither individual nor social phenomena, but that they are both the subjects of a continuous exchange between the individual and his/her social world, whereby the individual internalises, resists or changes the oppressive structure. Oppression flows primarily from the external world to the internal one, while emancipation originates internally and seeks to produce change in the external world.

When moving through emancipatory journeys, coachees go through cycles of naming oppression, building hope and self-belief, developing critical awareness, facing social resistance, failing and losing hope, finding alternatives, breaking the cycle of oppression through actions of resistance, and transforming their narratives into ones of liberation. These phases share many

elements with Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning (TTL), but expand it in two aspects: first, by noting the primacy of emotional processes in the emancipatory journey, as opposed to TTL's cognitive focus, and second, by showing how the social system reacts to the change in the individual, and how individuals react back through cycles of relapses and resistance. The two aspects have implications for emancipatory coaches, in terms of the need to facilitate the processes of building hope, self-belief, and emotional strength, and to work with the coachee through the negative and sometimes punitive social reactions.

The study suggests that oppressive contexts have negative impacts on cognitive and emotional development, as many coachees exhibited thinking patterns resembling the descriptions of lower levels of cognitive development by authors such as Kegan (1982) and Baxter Magolda (2004), as well as high levels of emotional unawareness and vulnerability. While Wilber (2000) argues that developmental lines are independent, in the sense that one may be more developed cognitively than emotionally or vice versa, findings suggest a co-dependence, whereby the individual's development in one dimension acts as a prerequisite and an enabler to other dimensions. Most particularly, the emancipatory journey has strong emotional demands that often act as barriers to meaning making. Coaching may need to start with a process of emotional fitness, removing feelings of fear, self-blame and victimisation, or as one coach put it: "*Emotional empowerment is essential in the developmental journey of an emotionally wounded person; it can be the whole coaching journey.*"

Many coachees appeared initially as powerless, they did not believe in their ability, did not feel in control of their lives, and could not make sense of their experiences. Coaches can support their coachees' empowerment through the acquisition of self-efficacy, agency, and clarity. They can do so by reflecting hope, appreciation and respect in the coaching dialogue; by using goal setting and imagination, celebrating achievements, and by helping coachees to uncover the cycle of oppression, and to reconstruct a holistic view of their experiences.

The study suggests three principles that relate to moving from powerlessness to freedom: The first is that despite the importance of creating an empowering environment in the coaching session, this can sometimes act as diversion from the process of resisting the oppressive condition, as coachees become content with the coaching relationship. This coincides with Foucault's (2012) argument that power produces its resistance; resistance gets its strength from being defined as opposition to oppression. Hence, it is important not to overprotect the coachee, in order to maintain his/her chances for initiating acts of resistance. The second principle is to continuously maintain balance between empathy and appreciation from one side, and confrontation and criticality from the other. The third principle is that during both appreciative and critical moments, the coach needs always to see the coachee as the only person who can assume responsibility over his/her life. The value of self-responsibility takes precedence over empowerment and resistance. In his later work, Foucault (2000) argues that resistance and liberation from power – whilst important – do not mean freedom, as new structures of power will replace the removed ones. What can prevent this reoccurrence are practices of freedom, which are built on self-formation. In many cases, the actual achievement of the coaching relationship is exhibited in the coachee deciding they no longer need the support of the coach, as one coach noted: "*The coachee is the one who gives you the authority and the one who takes it back. Accepting the coachee's trust is empowering for both of us.*"

## **2. Coaching for emancipation is enabled by three processes: Retelling narratives, renewing beliefs and fighting back**

In the process of **Retelling Narratives**, coachees use stories to understand, externalise and re-author their lives, starting from consciousness-raising and naming oppression in the lived experience, to authoring a narrative of liberation. Many coachees initially exhibit symptoms of

missing awareness, such as seeing self through others, denial, fragmented stories, and mixing ideas, facts and feelings. These symptoms resemble defense mechanisms of isolation, introjection and denial (Freud, 1968). Naming oppression takes place through immersion in the lived experience, followed by a change in the way experience is interpreted, moving from self-blame and fatalism to the identification of external oppression. Coachees experience this shift in meaning making in different ways and at different paces, with possible relapses to self-blame and fatalism. This phase is emotionally dense and requires support. The increased awareness of the lived experience ideally continues to expose new layers, and eventually becomes self-generating without the need for coaching interventions, as a coach described her coachee: *“She started to own her consciousness-raising, bringing the abnormal and unusual situations and ideas in her life to understand and dig into. All she needed is the first step and now she goes into all the uncomfortable places inside her by herself.”*

In the second part of the process, the coachee is invited to author a ‘narrative of liberation’. Narratives help coachees create links between their fragmented experiences, linking past and future. They provide possibilities for transforming stories of oppression into ones of liberation. As the heroes of their stories, coachees explore how these stories are filled with aspects of resistance, and moments of victory that they can celebrate. Narratives of liberation are empowering and emotionally liberating, because they open possibilities for coachees to re-author both their past and future. Findings agree with other theories on the liberating power of narratives in therapy (White, 2007), coaching (Drake, 2010) and social work (Abels & Abels, 2001). Meanwhile, they challenge Drake’s (2010) view of the prerequisites for effective narratives, suggesting that narratives can effectively support emancipation, regardless of the individual’s initial lack of self-awareness or ego strength.

In the process of **Renewing Beliefs**, the focus is on understanding and challenging the structures leading to the coachee’s experience of oppression, whether they are social structures or deeply held assumptions and beliefs. Social analysis and self-reflection balance each other. The personal and political need to be in a constant dialectical relationship; where each is used to re-interpret the other.

In ‘X-Role (Social) analysis’, coachees reflect on how social systems and power shape their thinking, choices and behaviours. This awareness is vindicating for the individual who is struggling with self-blame; it also results in an empowering sense of solidarity with a wider cause, and supports a more informed planning of actions of resistance. These results are in line with the reported benefits of social and gender role analysis in feminist therapy (Israeli & Santor, 2000). Working with beliefs, it was noted that many coachees are unaware of how their interpretations are built on generally simplistic and unchallenged assumptions. However, cognitive beliefs are protected by strong emotional boundaries, and challenging them often causes resistance and stress. One coach wrote: *“It was clear how the fact that [the coachee] doesn’t talk much about his personal life to anyone helped his assumptions to be further embedded in his mind. They were never challenged, never questioned, as he never expressed them.”*

In the process of **Fighting Back**, coachees undertake three types of actions: breaking from the reality of daily oppression, discovering new worlds where new behaviours can be implemented, and engaging in reflective actions of resistance and change. This process is underlined by the belief that there is no growth without action. Actions are neither naturally emancipatory nor oppressive but rather bare the possibility of supporting or hindering emancipation dependent on their context. Reflective action is one of the strongest enablers of the emancipatory journey. It involves planning, understanding the implications of confronting social conflict, and dealing with the emotional barriers of change.

'Breaking from reality' is a concept in progress; it goes against the common flow of coaching and the overall trend of personal development, self-work and the current therapeutic culture. While coachees expect an increased focus on the self (Swan, 2010), breaking from reality tries to do the opposite, on the basis that such immersion in the self, and in one's reality, is in itself a barrier to seeing and acting freely to change that reality. What makes it even more problematic is that the more coachees are immersed in their oppressive reality, the more they seem to need a break from it, and the less they are prepared to consider one.

The above three processes provide access to different dimensions of the experience, balancing the rationality of critical reflection and the emotional expressive nature of narratives, focus on individual experience and wider social analysis, understanding historical factors and imagining the future, immersion in the lived reality and detachment from it, and the continuous interplay between action and reflection.

### **3. Emancipatory coaches need to be continuously engaged in a process of reflective practice that drives their own development**

A distinct factor in the experience of coaches working in oppressive environments is that they may be heavily affected by the social context, and may share many of the struggles exhibited by their coachees. Coaches have many moments of doubt, and are emotionally affected by the feelings and beliefs expressed by their coachees, as much as they may affect their coachees by their own feelings and beliefs. The coaches in this study have shown developmental moves from confusion to clarity, from fear to hope, and from control to freedom within the duration of the study. One coach shared a reflection on how this journey affected her: *"It narrowed the gap between the inner and outer me, I feel more genuine and comfortable with myself. I am more in control and more aware and this is empowering. I'm liberated in my thoughts and feelings. My limitations have been stretched; I'm growing."*

Facilitating emancipatory journeys requires the coaches to develop awareness of their own assumptions, understanding of the processes of socialisation and identity formation in the cultural context of their coachees, and their critical thinking skills. The experience of the coaches has shown that the process of coaching for emancipation involves a complex web of decision points, regarding timing and appropriateness of interventions, understanding the meaning of coachees' behaviours, being mindful of power dynamics and dealing with emotions. These decisions are all made in the moment, implying a need for coaches to move from retrospective reflectiveness to reflection in the moment, as described by Schön (1983). Reflective practice may be a common requirement in all coaching (Hay, 2007), but is essential in coaching for emancipation.

### **Limitations of the current study**

In this section, I discuss the main limitations that need to be considered when reusing the findings of the study:

**1. The historical moment:** The study took place in a unique historical moment, one year after a revolution, and one year before another revolution. The so called 'Arab Spring' defined the zeitgeist; revolution was in the air, forcing a discourse of change and identity, disorienting dilemmas were abundant in daily life, forcing people to reconsider the meaning of many things. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that qualitative research can never be repeated exactly in the same way, because the context is always changing. There is hence a question about transferability: can Coaching for Emancipation achieve similar results in countries or societies that are at different stages of change? I believe that this can only be answered with further research under different and diversified settings.

**2. Culture:** The question of culture is around whether the cultural context of the study has implications on the findings that make them only relevant to a specific culture. Erlandson et al. (1993) suggest that such argument is valid in almost all cases. Any claim around the generalisability of findings would be problematic. Bassey (1981) proposes that practitioners who wish to use the findings in other contexts need to evaluate whether their situation is comparable to that described. Meanwhile, the meaning of culture in oppressive environments is itself controversial. For example, Abdelfattah (2006) and Moustafa (2006) show that the concept of cultural uniqueness is often used as a political and ideological defence to reject change, on the basis that concepts like democracy or human rights do not suit 'our culture'. Similarly, Mokhtari (2012) argues that "For years, Middle Eastern governments missed few opportunities to cast human rights as a foreign and un-Islamic tool of Western culture and political agendas" (p. 195), but he also reminds us that Western politics have appropriated, and instrumentalised the same concept to serve its own purposes. So while culture needs to be understood, it should not be used as a pretext to maintain oppression. The current study suggests that oppression can be seen as a meta-layer to culture, whereby it may take forms that are specific to the cultural context (for example, in terms of traditions of marriage). Beyond these forms, the dynamics of oppression act in similar ways across cultures, and in different communities within the same wider cultural group. The analysis of the coachees' stories did not reveal specific findings related to the Egyptian culture, but rather seemed similar to the different accounts of oppression from various cultures around the world.

**3. Voice of the coachees:** In developing a theory of coaching, the importance of the voice of the coachees cannot be downplayed. However, in this study the voice of the coachees only appeared directly in the written and verbal feedback they provided throughout the coaching journey, documented in detail by the coaches in their reflective journals and made available to the group for analysis. With the exception of one coach who became at one time a coachee of another coach in the group, the inquiry group was made up of coaches. What the study therefore provides is representative of how coaches theorise their practice drawing on their interpretation of their coachees stories and feedbacks, rather than how coachees theorise their own experience, which needs to be addressed in future studies.

### **The Future of Coaching for Emancipation**

Coaching for emancipation is proposed as an emergent practice that would benefit from application in various settings and further research. Key themes, identified by the inquiry group, for expanding this work are: (1) Exploring further the role of emotions in the emancipatory process, (2) Complementing the cognitive and emotional dimensions by exploring how spiritual, identity, and psychosexual development are affected by the experience of oppression, (3) Understanding the requirements for adapting Coaching for Emancipation to cover younger age groups, as well as communities living within less oppressive environments, like ethnic minorities living in democratic countries, (4) Exploring a more in-depth use of arts, and lastly, (5) Expanding the practice of breaking from reality.

I have shown that coaching has an emancipatory potential that is not yet fully utilised. I have argued that the reality of oppressive contexts implies that coaches hoping to help coachees in these contexts have to prepare well, and differently, for such a challenging endeavour. Coaching for emancipation is proposed here as a framework to guide this new and much needed practice.

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