

Elena Trifan

COACHING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN BUCHAREST

Elena Trifan

National University of
Political Science and Public
Administration
Bucharest, Romania
trifan.elena@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Coaching is a personal development practice where a coach attends coachees in achieving an objective. Coaching is promoted as a suitable solution for accomplishing a well-paid job, social mobility, a thriving business, as well as gaining a fulfilling relationship with a significant others or with oneself. It states that it can help alleviate new social impediments such as lack of communication skills, troubles finding the inner self or a positive attitude toward life. This article explores the intimate connection between coaching and the neoliberal settings, describing coaching as a community of practicing a new type of neoliberal self.

KEYWORDS

- personal development
- community of practice
- post-Fordism
- neoliberalism
- coaching
- selfhood

Almost any person who entered a bookstore is familiar with the self-help shelves on which one can find advice on achieving happiness, job satisfaction, getting rich, or finding love, all by following a few steps. This approach centered on the self, concerning life's problems has many other forms, and while the books are the most visible, there are also trainings, workshops, coaching, games, seminars, and many other activities that can help oneself accomplish one's desires. I became interested in this topic, while researching practices of coaching as tool of refashioning the postmodern self. I observed the transformation of the self through the lens of personal development tool. Several of my informants, who had been coachees at the time of my research, become personal development trainers later on. Another interesting aspect is how they describe the process of change experienced by customers; they become more present in their life, they get in touch with their really needs – they discover their true self. Nevertheless, one moment in particular convinced me both of the popularity of the phenomenon and of the common language shared by enthusiasts of personal development: Carmen Șerban, a manele^[1] singer started to promote personal

1 Maneaua is contemporary popular music creation rooted in the musical culture of the boyars of Southeastern Romania, which was still predominantly Ottoman, at the beginning of the 19th century. Consequently, it presents a number of pan-Balkan features (Translated from: <http://www.muzecltaranuluiroman.ro/conferinte/?p=116>).

development on many popular TV-shows (La Măruță, WowBiz):

I have developed personally lately, I have watched personal development movies, I have read a lot of books trying to understand how these energies work and the smooth running of life, of our health, of stuff because at one time I was diagnosed with a benign tumor and so on. Now I am almost healed because my faith healed me. (Carmen Serban, WowBiz, 30 January 2014)

This moment suggests that the practices of personal development have gone mainstream, it is no longer a phenomenon performed just by a small number of enthusiasts. Even more Romanian popular TV-stars started talking about their connection with personal development: Andreea Marin, a very popular TV-host in the 2000s is training to become a coach, while Andreea Raicu, another famous TV-host and model uses her blog for promoting personal development.

The purpose of this article is to describe the phenomenon of coaching, analyzing the implied perception of the self in the practice and the shape of the change imagined in the practice. Observing the context in which coaching has gained momentum, one can notice that there is a link between the neoliberal contexts and the popularization of personal development practices (McGee, 2005, Rose, 1996) such as coaching, thus contributing to the individualization process. Although this may seem contradictory, I argue that the process of individualization is performed in a community, specifically a community of practice defined in the terms of Wenger and Lave (1991). Using the theories of communities of practice my aim is to present the type of learning that is involved in the process of becoming a coach, and how the transmission of knowledge influences the practice of the activity in order to explain the relation between the individual and the community in the process of coaching.

Methodology and research questions

The core of the research was conducted in the spring of 2011 and 2013, between February and May. During this period, I conducted in depth interviews with six coaches, five clients, a motivational writer, two trainers, three psychology students, a participant in a seminar of a famous brand of personal development and three members of students' NGOs. I participated in trainings, fairs and other manifestations related to personal development. In 2013, I attended a three months course on personal development. Another complementary part of the research consisted in a content analysis of the coaches' websites with an emphasis on the definitions, purposes and means of promotion.

This article aims at answering the following questions: How the self is understood and acted upon in coaching practices? How the coaching community is shaped? In order to answer these questions, I attempt to respond to some secondary questions: What are the values transmitted in a coaching practices? How are these values transmitted? Who are the actors involved in the practice?

In the first part of the article, I review the theories regarding the social-historical context, in which coaching and other personal development practices emerged, particularly theorizations that link transformations of post-industrial societies with transformations of the self. In the second part, I describe the coaching process in connection with the communities of practice in order to present the relation and connections between individuals involved in coaching and personal development. Starting from Wenger's and Lave's (1991) theory of communities of practice, I identify

the main characteristics of the mentioned communities. Furthermore, I describe the means by which coaching is transmitted from a coach to the coached person. Finally, I analyze what could be the implication regarding coaching as practice that individualizes, and proposes a flexible self in agreement with the neoliberal requirements.

The story of the self

In Romania, the concept of personal development gained social resonance after 1989, but in the Western societies, especially in the US, it has a history of more than 150 years (Moskovitz, 2001). The concepts of self-fulfillment and self-help are related with personal development, and in some studies, they are used interchangeably. For the US, Starker considers as the starting point of the self-help current, the self-perfecting tradition of puritans, with the first books of this genre being guides towards “spiritual perfection and worldly progress” (Starker, in Back 1989). During the industrialization, the puritans’ books were replaced by the New Thought’s, a mind-healing movement based on religious and metaphysical (concerning the nature of ultimate reality) presuppositions that centered on affirming “the Divinity of Man and his Infinite Possibilities through the creative power of constructive thinking and obedience to the voice of the indwelling Presence which is our source of Inspiration, Power, Health and Prosperity”^[2].

During the World War II, Moskovitz argues that the mobilization of the psychologists and psychotherapists was unprecedented: over one million persons have had contact with this activity. After the war, the teachings of the psychologist have entered the life-style of the Americans – if during the war they were treating ‘normal’ people on large scale dealing with abnormal circumstances, the target extended towards treating ‘normal’ people with ‘normal’ everyday problems (Moskovitz 2001). After these years, Starker (1989) considers that the next period in psychology was “the selfish years”, which is strongly connected to the growing popularity of psychoanalysis. Abraham Maslow proposed the pyramid of needs, placing the need for self-fulfillment at the very top, Rogers introduced the counseling and the client centered therapy, and new popular methods or therapy appeared, for example: EST^[3], Rebirthing^[4], Primal Therapy^[5], Co-counseling, Sensitivity Training, Shouting Therapy, Transactional Analysis, Bioenergy, Encounter Groups, Rolfing^[6], Gestalt Therapy, Nude Marathons, etc. These methods proposed to “do what you want”, “become a new person”, “get in touch with your inner person”, and “let everything hanging” (Starker, 2002, p. 113). More recently, the personal development industry that comprises of products (such as books) and services (like coaching) has parred the Hollywood movie industry, producing a reported economic output of roughly ten billion dollars a year^[7]. In the US there are almost 14.000 coaches (some can make 3000\$ per hour) and around 5000 motivational speakers.

2 <http://www.britannica.com/event/New-Thought> (accessed: 14.05.2015)

3 The est Standard Training, two weekends seminars created by Werner Erhard that combine different methods, from Dale Carnegie speeches to Heidegger’s philosophy;

4 A type of therapy based on the conscious control of breathing, developed by Leonard Orr, that supposedly helped cure pain and other ailments;

5 Therapy based on trauma, argues that neurosis is caused by repressed pain of childhood trauma;

6 Alternative and holistic medical treatment, developed by Ida Pauline Rolf.

7 Available here: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2146449,00.html> (accessed: 14.05.2015)

The popularization of personal development coincides with certain transformations in the capitalist system (McGee, 2005, Rose, 1996). Therefore, linking those phenomena together, I will describe the relation between the capitalist regime and personal development practices. Taking into account the purpose of this article, I will focus in this part on the latest transformations, namely the transformations within the capitalist system that occurred after the 1970s. The analysis follows David Harvey's (2002) take on the cultural transformations induced by the 'flexibilization' that has characterized the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist accumulation. Elizabeth Dunn (2004) argues that the change in Western societies is a consequence of the transition from a local to a global economy, meaning that the shift was brought up by global flows of services and goods. The production of goods has been delocalized: some parts are made in India, others in China, and are assembled in Peru or Romania and sold almost everywhere in the world. David Harvey (2002) talks about the post-industrialization of the so-called developed societies, in which, due to automation, low-demand and smaller production prices from the poorer countries determined the corporations to change the production of goods. Therefore, the economy of the developed countries has become an economy based on the production of services; hence, the work in offices has replaced the work in factories. This shift consequently brought about changes concerning the opportunities and constraints that workers had to face in their labor, and to the expectations to which they were held by their employers. This process of neoliberalization of labor induced the need for high labor flexibility, symptomatic for which is a decrease in long-term work contracts correlated with increase in short-term and temporary work, mostly outsourced.

Consequently, the individual must develop social and inter-personal skills, public speaking skills, persuasive abilities, meaning one must constantly improve oneself in order to make it under such flexible labor requirements. Moreover, one has to be very adaptable to the changes in the labor market, to quickly learn new skills and be able to rapidly reorient in case of an imminent lay-off (Ho, 2009). As described by Karen Ho (2009), regularly laying-off employees is a popular strategy shared by corporations worldwide as means to increase financial profitability. Coaching is one of the ways to cope with flexibility in highly competitive environments, as it purportedly offers easy solutions for the individuals that are seeking for ways to stay ahead in this uncertain and challenging labor market. By taking some courses, one is said to be better prepared to deal with whatever comes one's way. Nonetheless, coaching is not only for individuals, as it was firstly used for companies in order to resolve corporate problems determined by the same mentioned changes. Both usages can be observed in the statements of purpose posted on coaching firms' websites:

Improving time management and priorities; performance improvement strategies at the executive board, developing skills of delegation, leadership (individual and system), improving relations with the boards and senior, balance personal and professional life, social, family, etc., positive influence and multi-annual strategy; presentation skills and representation of the company's brand in front of others ^[8]

Also:

Developing better relationships, learning to communicate effectively, establishing harmonious goals whose accomplishment generates satisfaction, balance, self-knowledge, self-control, health, etc. ^[9]

8 Extracted from: <http://coaching.ro/servicii/ceo-coaching/#sthash.PTRhbq18.dpbs>. Similar enumerations can be found on other coaching websites. (accessed: 13.05.2015)

9 http://www.mastercoach.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=21&Itemid=35. Similar

Anthony Giddens has a similar view as the websites about the self-help manuals because he considers them “text of our time” (Giddens, 1991, p. 64), useful in the reflexive projects of self-refurbishing specific to what he calls the high modernity. For Giddens, self-help and other therapeutic works of this sort “point towards changes that might release individuals from influences which block their autonomous development” (1991, p. 64). The popularity of self-help books and related practices might be thus sought in the tension between the “*difference, exclusion, and marginalisation*” (1991, p. 6), that late modernity produces, and its promise of “world compatible with the Enlightenment’s promise of autonomy, self-determination, free agency for the individual” (Gluck, 1993, p. 217). Luc Boltanski’s and Eve Chiapello’s (2007) analysis of management literature that also concerns the change in the late-modern society may be similar to Giddens’s regarding the form of the changes. For the authors, the capitalist system has embedded the “artistic criticism” of the 60s movements, the firms have reorganized their business model in order to attract the college graduate who believed working in a corporation will turn them into “corporate drones”. Therefore, managerial work has been transformed to be similar to artistic work – flexible, meaningful and project-based translated in short-term contracts, team-buildings, multi-tasking, subcontracting similar with post-Fordist labor model described by Harvey (2002). However, different from Giddens, Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) argue that this “new spirit of capitalism” produces social inequalities, as those who benefit from it are those that are very flexible and adaptable socially and geographically.

Thus, between the ‘70s and ‘80s the image of the rigid Fordist employee is replaced by the flexible post-Fordist employee. During the Fordist production times, the employee was envisioned as a mere machine to perform certain functions, often repetitive, as depicted in Charlie Chaplin’s movie, *Modern Times*. This type of production centered on the existence of a great leader that promised job security for all the employees, depending on the principle of meritocracy. Postmodern critiques of the Fordist model highlighted the ways that this form of organization partially or completely inhibits the skills and abilities of the employees (Petersen, 2011). In addition to these critics, McGee’s (2005) study on self-help culture in US, mentions that important macro-economic changes emerged in the United States, as the percentage of women entering the labor market between 1970 and 2000 increased by 16%, while that of men decreased by 5%. Moreover, the sociologist adds that the search for one “true” and “genuine” self and life plan was a solution proposed for women in the 1960s: “One is saved from a life of meaningless contingency and accident by a self-conscious life plan. Work is reimagined, not as a deprivation for which one ought to be compensated but as means of expressing oneself, as a source of identity and personal fulfillment” (McGee, 2005, p. 42).

Along with this change, real wages have stagnated during this period, with the exception of the last three years. At the same time, the advance of globalization has contributed to the augmentation of cheap and more flexible labor demand - flexibility has been achieved largely by hiring temporary workers (McGee, 2005, p. 67).

From a psychological point of view, Anders Petersen (2011) argues that the requirement to find the authentic self is the determinant of the recent increase in the share of depression. He considers that the authentic self is nowadays a powerful moral ideal that is driven by growing insight into the core of each individual. In this sense, the self becomes a malleable material that, under favorable conditions, can be shaped

into meeting the requirements. As one coach exemplified as she described her activity: “I have shifted from computer programming to human programming”.

The changes described have not only affected the Western part of the world, but with the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, these countries have sought to reach Western standards of capitalism. Social scientists have described how this type of changes also occurred in the Eastern part of Europe (i.e. Dunn 2004; Cohen 2006, Chelcea 2010; Petrovici 2010). Following the fall of the socialist regime in Romania’s case (Chelcea 2010, Petrovici 2010), but also in the other former socialist countries like Poland (Dunn 2004) and Russia (Cohen 2006), new management and new employee-entrepreneurship emerged mainly through the growing presence of multinational companies, which attempted in various ways to transform the “lazy” and “resourceful” employee of socialism (Kideckel, 2010) into the self-employed entrepreneur of post-Fordism. Consequently, the personal development services and literature found their place on the Romanian market – do it yourself as a way of thinking and relating with others and, most importantly, with the self. In the east-European countries the promoters of this type of reality were chiefly foreign managers (or locals aspiring at western capitalism standards) who tried to re-educate their employees in the spirit of “third wave capitalism” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). The personal development market promotes the same values of post-Fordist economy and most importantly offers solutions for the misfits. Nikolas Rose, drawing from Michael Foucault concept of governmentality (Foucault, 2008) he argues that the psy disciplines, that also includes personal development practices, have helped shaped the new subjects in concurrence with advanced liberal economies (Rose, 1989, Rose, 1996).

The coached self

Mihaela graduated college with a BA in naval engineering in Galati, a port city on the Danube, in South East Romania. She had been working as a teacher for some time in a good school in Galati, but after the redistributions, she received a job in what she considered “a less respectable school in the county”. Therefore, she decided to quit that job in order to open a business with her husband. As things were not going very well in that area, she sought a second source of money: a friend of hers proposed to sell cosmetics for Amway, a multi-level marketing company. Besides cosmetics, she received personal development books for self-training. After a while, she gave up selling cosmetics and became increasingly interested in personal development, especially because she wanted to open her own business and it seemed that this method was what she had been missing in their first attempt. Eventually, they moved to Bucharest where she attended personal development workshops, and made acquaintance with her future coach. Now, she is also a coach.

This story describes the trajectories of those in search of personal development. In the context of social and economic transformations in the ‘90s Romania, Mihaela searched for ways to improve herself and thrive in uncertain environments like many others in post-socialist countries that turned to MLM companies for income sources (for Tupperware in Russia see Patco 2009). I suggest that there is a certain isomorphism between the model of individual self that both post-Fordism and personal development propose. I will start by describing what coaching is and what the practices related with this type of activity are, and then I draw attention upon the

values promoted by coaching and implied in the post-Fordist societies.

Coaching does not have a standard definition, but by analyzing the interviews I have conducted with coaches, a set of main characteristics becomes legible. Coaching is a type of personal development, achieved with the help of a coach that guides and attends the individual throughout the process of change. It is stated that the change does not regard the whole life of the individual, but is concentrated around a certain goal. Coaches refrain from providing strict guidelines, but rather help with reformulations, questions and homework, guiding the individual to change what is thought to be hidden from him. Two assumptions underpin the necessity for the individual to change: on the one hand, that the self is an entity that can be molded into a desired form, and, on the other hand, that the individual needs help in order to achieve this objective. For a better understanding of the implication, it is important to see what the desired form is and what the goals that one wants to achieve are. I will start answering the latter part of the inquiry because it will provide insights on the first part, too. The goals mentioned by my informants and on websites of the coaching services can be divided in two categories, one regarding what I will call inner features – the increase of performance, time management, self-sufficiency, etc. – and another concerning social features – job/career change, marital status change, the startup of a business, etc. These objectives have their counterparts in the flexible selves and the self-entrepreneurship mentioned in the literature above. The ones related to inner features describe an individual that must be efficient, capable of adapting to a changing work-environment, implying that one must always increase life productivity in accordance with the requirements of the labor market, i.e. temporary and less standardized work. The objectives connected to actions in the personal and professional fields consider the ability to accommodate to changes and thus accommodate the post-Fordist requirement of flexibility. The flexibility of the labor market has a counterpart in the flexibility of the employee that must be able to accommodate into a constantly changing work environment, with its type of work, of work-contract, and work rhythm and duration.

As they work with people that have other working places, coaches must accommodate with their clients' schedules, respecting once more the principle of flexibility. The space of the activity is also flexible: a pub, a café, an office, or even virtual space, as many practitioners offer coaching services via Skype. Some coaches work in a small-size coaching company dealing with professional objectives and following what might be called a Fordist organization: an office, a schedule, etc. Other coaches are self-employed and this situation reflects the post-Fordist type of worker even better. The temporary feature is a specific characteristic of the type of labor the coaches perform. Whether they work in a company or by themselves, they are hired by companies or by individuals, for a temporary period until the clients have achieved their objectives.

Therefore, coaching is a practice of post-Fordist societies, and with its declared purpose of helping others, it becomes a tool for the individual, enabling one to perform in the post-Fordist world. Coaching assists the individual in the process of becoming a flexible and a performing employee and the coaches are key exponents of the transformation of labor. Time flexibility, space flexibility and, most importantly, the permanent transience of their work proves that coaches are very well accommodated to the new flexible requirements.

From the coaching perspective, the self is flexible, can be changed and, most importantly, improved. This perspective centers on the individual's attention on herself in order to transform into the desired form. The transformation of the self becomes the objective of this activity, enhancing the process of individualization that started, as

LeBreton (2000) mentions, at the end of Renaissance period and continued throughout capitalism. The relation between coaching and capitalism, also, has been stated by some of my informants:

The peasant that has time and sits around taking care of land, bees, forests, cows and stuff like that has himself and nature as coach. In these conditions, which we have set apart from this framework, we develop suitable solutions. In an industrialized world, we have industrialized solutions (M.S, coach).

In addition:

The need to change is as old as the world; capitalism gave rise to a formula that pays really well in connection with performance, as the needed performance grows higher, as capitalized and appreciated this practice becomes. (I.N, coach).

Coaching may resemble, at first sight, another common practice in modern societies: psychotherapy. The way in which the actors involved relate to one another may be similar. A customer chooses a psychotherapist to solve her problems in exchange for a fee. Together, the two actors establish a number of sessions in which the therapist attempts to guide or to listen to the client in order to help him overcome his problems. The differences arise from the last formulation. In psychotherapy, the client's goal is formulated in medical terms (to overcome anxiety, depression, panic attacks, etc.), whereas in coaching the goal is formulated in terms of performance (to change a job, to speak in public, to manage time, etc.). Another difference lies in the ways meetings are conducted. As E.N., a coach who also holds a graduate degree in psychology, puts it:

They have common roots, but in practice they are two very different approaches, psychology is analytical or mostly analytical, but coaching is actuated, causing you to action. Psychology and psychotherapy use analyses and are focused on the past, coaching is focused on the present and on the future (E.N, coach, graduate in psychology)

Coaching as a community of practice

In this latter part, I will analyze the relationship between the actors involved in coaching focusing on the process of becoming a coach. For this purpose, I will use the concept of *community of practice*. In the social sciences, community may seem to be a controversial concept. In an article regarding the study of communities in anthropology and history, Alan Macfarlane (1977) mentions that in a survey of 94 definitions of community, all they have in common is that they deal with people or, in other words, that community implies having something in common. Furthermore, he suggests that communities tend to lie in the eye and methodology of the beholder (Macfarlane, 1977, p. 4), thus critiquing the methodologically-induced tendency to reify community. Therefore, any group can be defined as a community if one uses the right instruments, proving that there should be a better understanding of the term, as well as a proper definition.

As I am acknowledging the methodological problems of the study of communities, the necessary starting point of this analysis is that the actors involved in coaching have something in common. This something is, as I will illustrate in the following passages, the model of the self, namely how the individual is imagined. In this sense, coaching can be viewed as a *community of practice*. This concept is usually used in organizational studies describing the groups of employees; it has been originally developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) in order to describe a different approach to

learning. The concept of communities of practice is directly correlated with the concept of *situated learning*, introduced by the same authors and it regards learning in a social context. Lave (1991) defines *situated learning* as “situated social practice”, which “emphasizes the inherently socially negotiated quality of meaning and the interested, concerned character of the thought and action of persons engaged in activity” (Lave, 1991, p. 67). The author claims that “learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people engaged in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world” (Lave, 1991, p. 67).

It was clearly stated by my informants and all other sources I have consulted (books and websites on coaching) that the only way for a person to become a coach is to be coached. Thus, in order to become a coach, one must have herself previously achieved those objectives that towards which she will coach others. Otherwise, the question of how a coach can guide someone in her transformation into a self-sufficient individual if the coach has not been on the same path. Moreover, personal examples of success are legitimizing and increasing the confidence in the success of the program. From reviewing around more than 100 blogs of personal development, I noticed that many use their success stories as means of advertising. Dale Carnegie was one of the first self-help authors that used his example of personal success to sell his self-help services – books, lectures and seminars (Starker, 1989).

In Bucharest there are a couple of local schools that provide certification for future coaches under two of the local coaching associations, and several international schools that organize coaching courses either in person or via the Internet. The certification process consists of several stages: courses, coaching the future coach by a more experienced coach and coaching among those participating in these courses. Therefore, coaching is learned by practicing it. The newcomers or clients as they are in the first part of the interaction, and old-timers engage coaching sessions in order to achieve an objective. However, besides learning about herself, the client is becoming aware of the coaching practices and teachings. Thus, just like in the example of the Alcoholics Anonymous practices (Lave, 1991) the person that is being coached changes her identity. The fulfillment of the objective implies that the client has achieved the values of coaching; as a result, she has learned a new identity in the spirit of personal development.

To attend the courses of certification in coaching one must fulfill certain requirements, as shown on the front page of the site Coachinc^[10]: these services are aimed at people who already have a successful career. One of my informants has mentioned a reason for the requisite:

What I find very important in personal development is that the trainers must not just have financial interest in the activity, and they must know that they are able to support those people. If I am not paying attention to your needs, I may create a dependency link. Not consciously, but because I am guided by my needs. (R.O. coach)

Along with the financial support, requirement for success may be justified by the fact that the coach can focus on others problems if her own problems are already resolved.

Wenger (2000) identified three patterns under which one can belong to a social learning system: engagement, imaginations and alignment. These patterns “usually coexist and every social learning system involves each to some degree and in some combination” (p. 228). Engagement is achieved through doing things together;

¹⁰ <http://www.coachinc.com/coachinc/default.asp?s=1> (accessed: 13.05.2015)

imagination involves constructing an image of ourselves, of our communities, and of the world, in order to orient ourselves, to reflect on our situation, and to explore possibilities. Alignment involves making sure that our local activities are sufficiently aligned with other processes so that they can be effective beyond our own engagement (Roberts, 2006). Wenger (2000) identifies three dimensions of the relation by which practice becomes the source of coherence of a community. Firstly, members interact with one another, establishing norms and relationships through *mutual engagement*. Secondly, members are bound together by an understanding of a sense of *joint enterprise*. Finally, members produce a *shared repertoire* of communal resources over time, including, for example, language, routines, artifacts and stories (Roberts, 2006).

There are some differences between the two situations. The groups of people interested in coaching and personal development do not intentionally construct a community, and do not consider themselves or their clients to be a community. However, what brings them together are their common interests and identity. Although they do not interact with each other (given the number and distances), there is a small-scale interaction between smaller groups of individuals. Illustrative in this sense are support groups, self-help groups, seminars, trainings that have the purpose of learning, as well as coaching meetings and public events such as fairs and exhibitions. One such meeting was held at a bookshop in downtown Bucharest where coaches and people interested in coaching attended a lecture about leadership followed by a discussion called Master Mind Group where some of the people present have discussed their problems. One person was wondering how she can make money out of coaching because a lot of people are coming to the free session but are not willing to pay for it. Then, a more experienced coach advised her to search for a niche in the market. Another person suggested opening a blog, and another one suggested finding ways to stand out from other coaches. This was an informal meeting attended mostly by strangers that shared their knowledge about coaching and personal development. It can be viewed as a place for learning for newcomers, or a place of networking for older coaches. Other means of interacting, which are more formalized, are the coaching associations where the members conform to an ethical code and set standards for the community to follow. In Romania, there are two organization of this kind: The Romanian Coaching Guild and The Romanian Coaching Society.

Another important aspect that needs clarification is the construction of identity, which is considered to happen inside a community of practice: “Individual learning should be thought of as emergent, involving opportunities to *participate* in the *practices* of the community as well as the development of an *identity* which provides a sense of belonging and commitment” (Handley, et al., 2006, p. 642). Grey considers “the perspectives on identity, the «project of the self» goes some way to explaining how the nature of individuals’ participation (for example, in a workplace community) influences their understanding of «self»” (Grey, in Handley et al., 2006, p. 644).

Coaching is similar to a community of practice because of the process of learning involved and its means of transmission. Just like *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the community of practice mentioned above, coaching is aimed at changing the identity of the individual, who is learning the practices of a new self. Coaching and other personal development processes, like in any other community of practice as described by Wenger (1998), is a place for negotiations of identity and meaning. This is well represented by the process of change mentioned in the definitions of coaching. This can be described as a new identity for the individual entering the coaching domain or as a common identity for all of those interested in personal development practices.

Coaching is an activity that takes place during several meetings between a client and a coach, and its purpose is to help the client attain her objective. In the first meeting, the two parts involved must agree upon an *objective* to be attained after completing the training. The coach helps the client formulate her objective. As one informant noticed, “most of them [clients] do not set their objectives *smart*”. “Smart set objectives” is an acronym and stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time Bound (SMART). After setting the final objective, at every other meeting, the client has smaller specific objective to fulfill, in order to achieve his final purpose. A session consists of a discussion between the coach and the client with the aim to get the client closer to achieving his final objective. Statements announcing that the client is getting closer to reach his objectives are commonly called *aha moments*; the customer reaches some revelation and realizes what hinders him to achieve the goal. There are several techniques that a coach employs to generate these achievements in a customer’s thinking: observation, questions, re-formulations, homework, reflecting and so on. Coaching is described as “a conversation that will benefit the other person, the coachee, in a way that relates to the coachee’s learning and progress,, (Starr, p 3, 2003). The most important value transmitted by coaching is to “be present” which is one of the most common expression that attracts the new clients, as explained by Alina, explaining how she engaged with Landmark Forum^[11]:

I was super-busy and on messenger a friend told me something and he got my attention because he was talking differently. He told me something like this: “you are not paying attention to what is happening around you (A.O.)

Shared by other strategies of personal development, the necessity of being present implies that one must acknowledge one’s need, the changes that one goes through, and every other aspect of one’s existence, including one’s relation with others. Furthermore, one must act in the present, not in the future or in the past. The past is reconciled and the future is not a reason for preoccupation because acting in the present eliminates the worries for it. The new identity constructed by coaching revolves around being present, a self-reflecting, proactive, positive person.

Wenger remarks that “communities of practice depend on internal leadership, and enabling the leaders to play their role is a way to help the community develop” (Wenger, 2000, p. 231). There can be multiple forms of leadership: thought leaders, networkers, people who document the practice, pioneers, etc. These forms of leadership may be focused on one or two members or widely distributed, but this can change over time. However, Roberts argues that power in the context described above may prove to be problematic. The position of the members is not rigid, new members can transfer from an inferior, peripheral position toward one of full participation when they acquire the knowledge and skills. The power is held by those who have full participation and can negotiate the meanings (Roberts, 2006, p. 627).

In coaching and in other practices, a group of persons holds the knowledge of personal development and shares it with the followers. However, the group is constantly growing, as the students become teachers, suggesting that the power of knowledge is transmissible. The relation with the mentor was often mentioned. Alan Cardon^[12] was mentioned by many of my informants with obvious appreciation, which can be observed in the testimonial below:

What inspires me the most is the way you love people and your passion for what you do. Just

11 <http://landmarkforum.com/> (accessed: 14.05.2015)

12 A popular coach in Romania that founded one of the first coaching school in the country.

talking with you and everything seems possible and easy to achieve. I can say that the main outcome from all the interactions with you during courses, supervision or social meetings is the fact I found myself, what I really want and what to do to achieve it. I'm grateful for the right words you said to me in difficult situations as well as in the happy ones, even though they were not all formulated as questions. A warm Thank You from my heart.^[13]

However, most of the coaches do not remain alongside the mentor for their activity. All of his students with whom I have talked had opened up businesses of their own in different domains: life coaching, business coaching and educational coaching. In addition, it can be observed from the testimonials of coaching schools that not all of the students are opening their own coaching businesses, with some of them continuing to remain employed in the same workplace. Increasingly, more companies in Romania resort to this type of service for their employees in order to transform them into those self-built individuals that so many authors (McGee, 2005, Dunn, 2004, Rose, 1996, etc.) spoke of, specific to post-Fordist capitalism that are needed in order to increase productivity and decrease costs.

Conclusions

In the context studied, coaching is a tool of personal development that promises to help the individual to fulfill his agreed objective. This process has a number of implications: firstly, it assumes that the individual would change in the process, developing the required skills. Consequently, the self of the individual is regarded as flexible; hence, it can be molded into the desired form. Secondly, it describes the fact that the individuals are looking for a change. With respect to objectives coaches and coachees alike target the relation of the individual with the changes in the social environments described as post-modernity (Harvey, 2002). The management of time, social skills, and the ability to change jobs, all of them can be translated into problems of the post-modern society.

Coaching is learned in practice. The old-timer coach has started as a novice client that acquired the mentioned skills to teach others how to acquire them too. Therefore, the knowledge attached to the practice of coaching is transmitted in a community of practice. It may not be a community in the narrow sense of the word, i.e. defined by a common, visible environment. Therefore, coaching has the characteristic of accommodating the individual with the changes in the social and economic sphere.

In conclusion, coaching is a means of promoting the values of post-Fordism. Moreover, through the practice, it accommodates the individual with the changes and uses for this purpose the means of a community of practice. Thus, although the knowledge transmitted is individualizing the participants, the means of transmission are engaging the participants in a communitarian practice.

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