

# How can social justice be advanced through coaching?

A qualitative study exploring coaching practices that aim to deliver social justice outcomes.





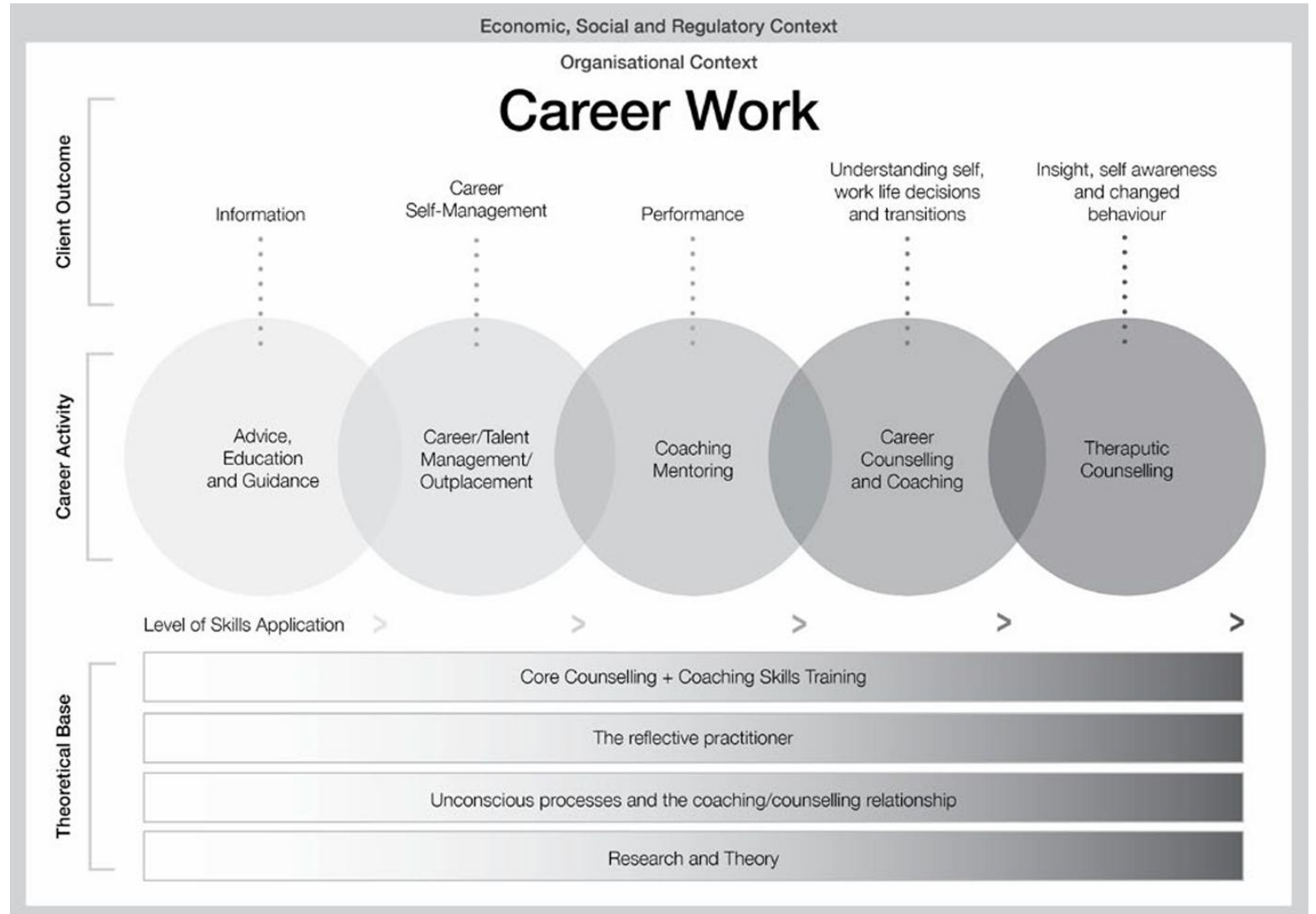
# Agenda

- Background and theory
- Social justice competency frameworks
- Research aims
- Methodology
- Findings
- Implications
- Questions



# What is career coaching?

Sheath 2013



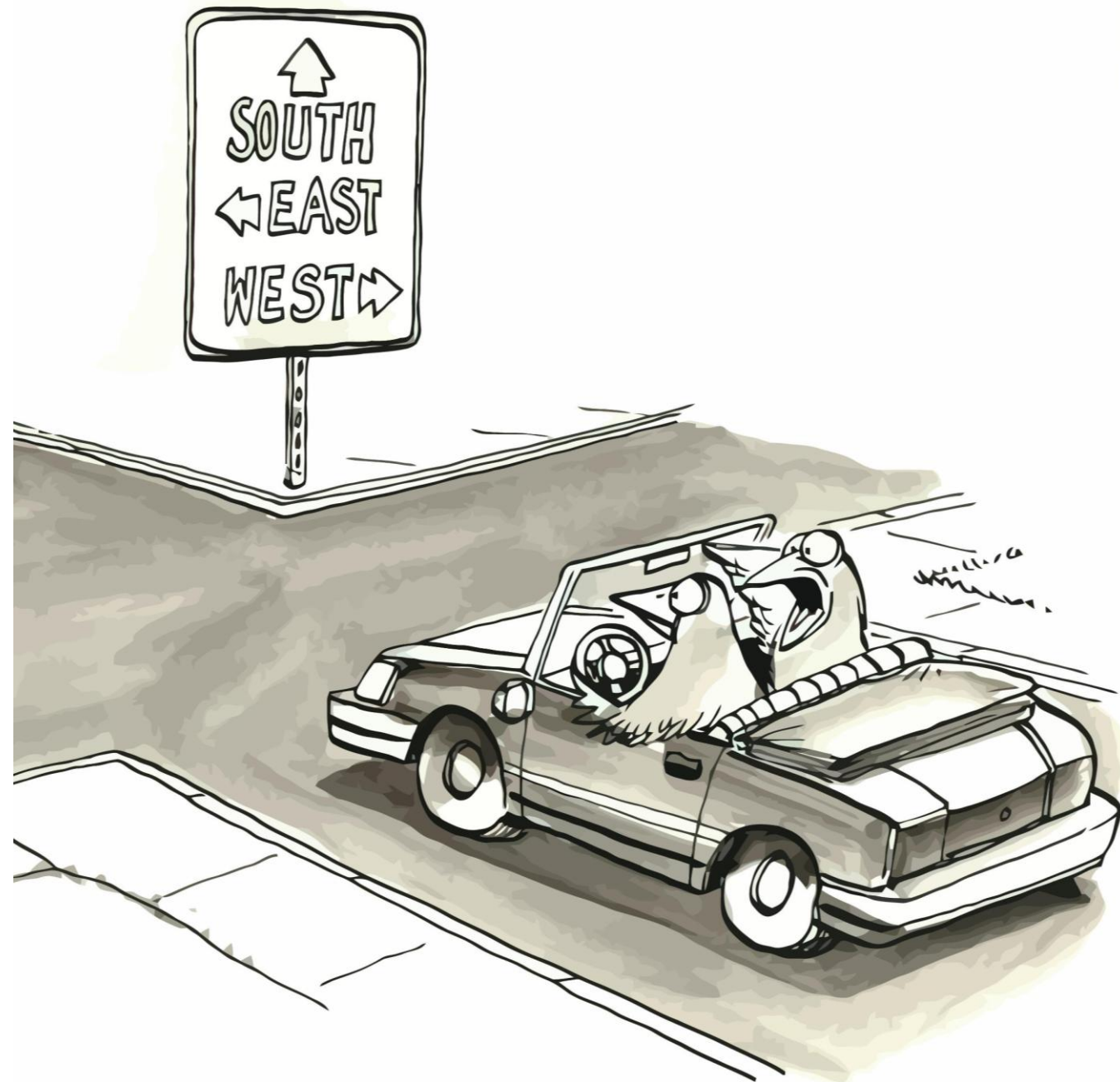
# The influence of social movements in coaching

- Prompted by social contemporary movements the sector began to review its wider role in society.
- The International Coaching Federation revised ethical code incorporates “responsibility to society” (ICF 2020).
- Practice work is underpinned by ethical codes. How does this new ethical code sit alongside notions of neutrality and objectivity that have traditionally underpinned coaching theory and practice?



# Critical theory as a lens to examine coaching practice

- A growing body of literature adopting Critical Theory to question some of the sector's dominant discourses linked to coaching theory.
- “Critical theorists maintain that a primary goal of philosophy is to understand and to help overcome the social structures through which people are dominated and oppressed” (Encyclopedia Britannica).
- Critical Theory allows us to question assumptions and the 'status quo.' It encourages reflection and evaluation of our practices to understand and overcome social structures that dominate and oppress.



**“Why do we always have to go south?!”**

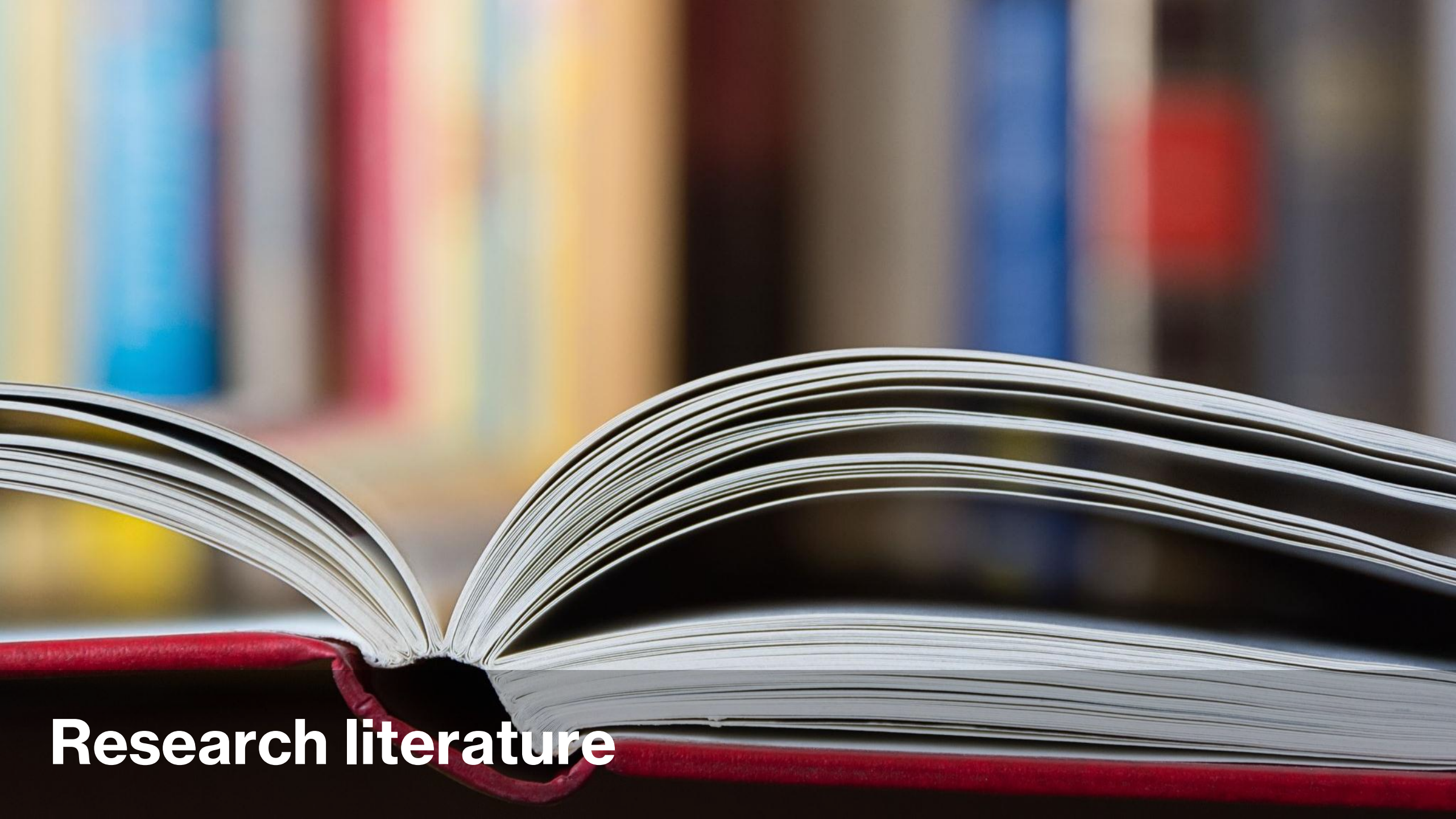


# What assumptions might you want to challenge?

Consider some of the assumptions related to employment discourse, such as personal responsibility for your career and employment status, individual agency, and a focus on individual behaviour change.

These notions may overlook structural barriers such as economic inequality, discrimination, and lack of access to quality education and training. By applying a critical lens, we can question whether this focus on individual responsibility is sufficient.



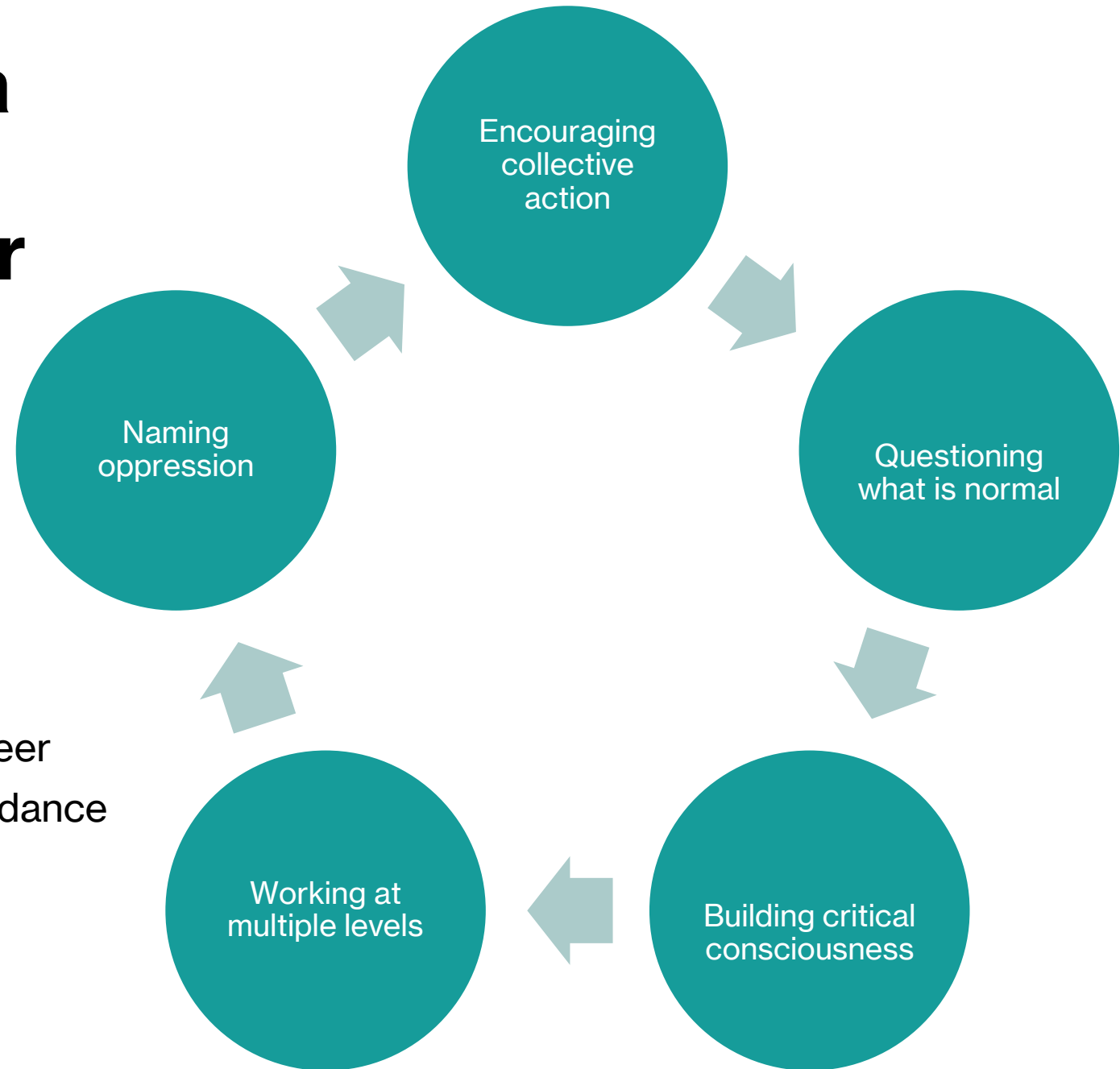


**Research literature**



# Five signposts to a socially just approach to career guidance (Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen 2021)

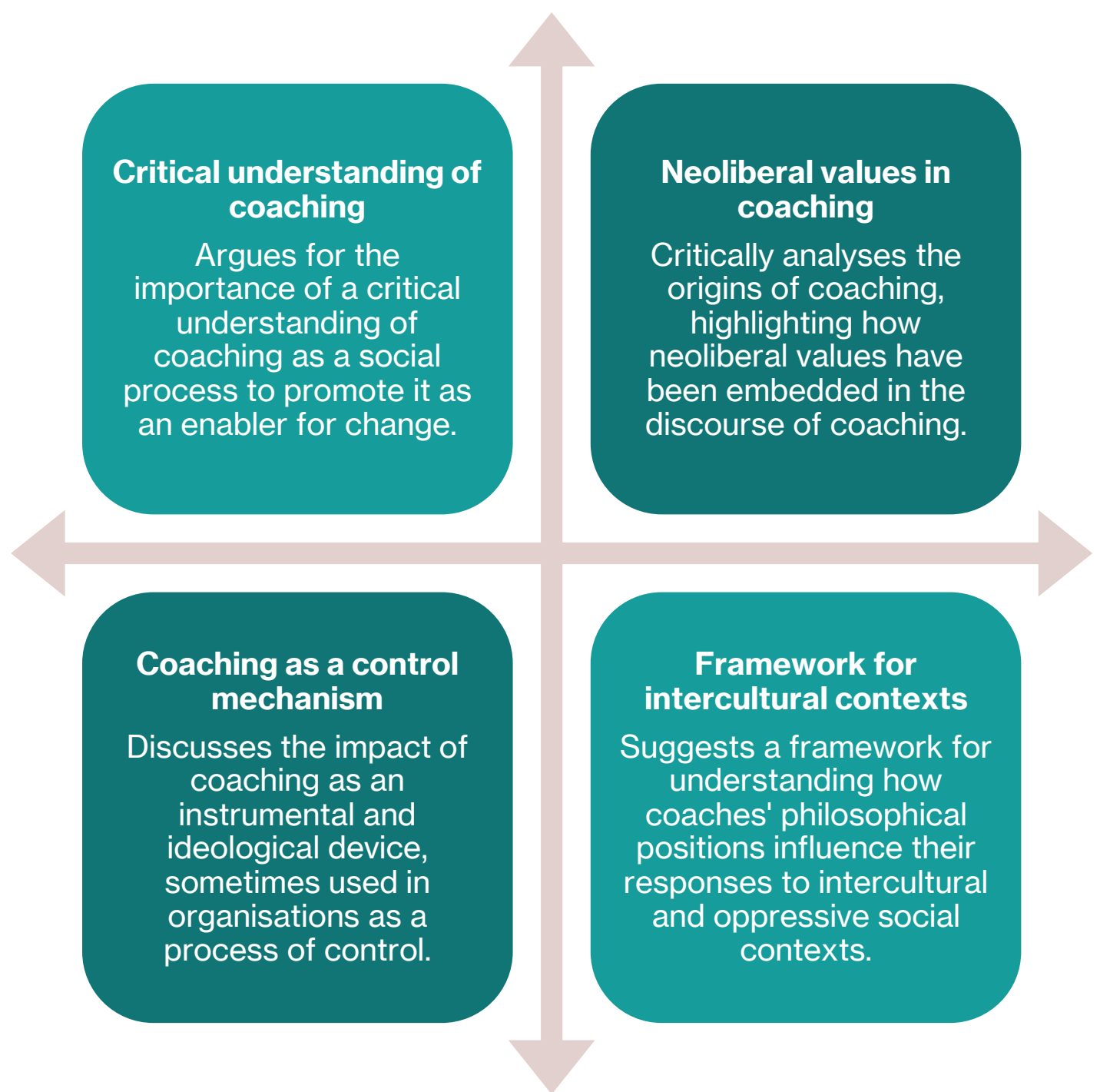
A framework for a socially just approach to career guidance. These scholars argue that career guidance should not only focus on individual career development but also address broader social inequalities and injustices.







# Coaching as a Social Process (Shoukry 2017)



“To develop awareness of the structural barriers at an individual (micro), family and community (meso), and structural (macro) levels and actively tackle societal values, structures, policies, and practices, such that disadvantaged or marginalised groups gain increased access to these tools of self-determination” (Goodman et al 2004)

# **Defining social justice**



# From theory to practice



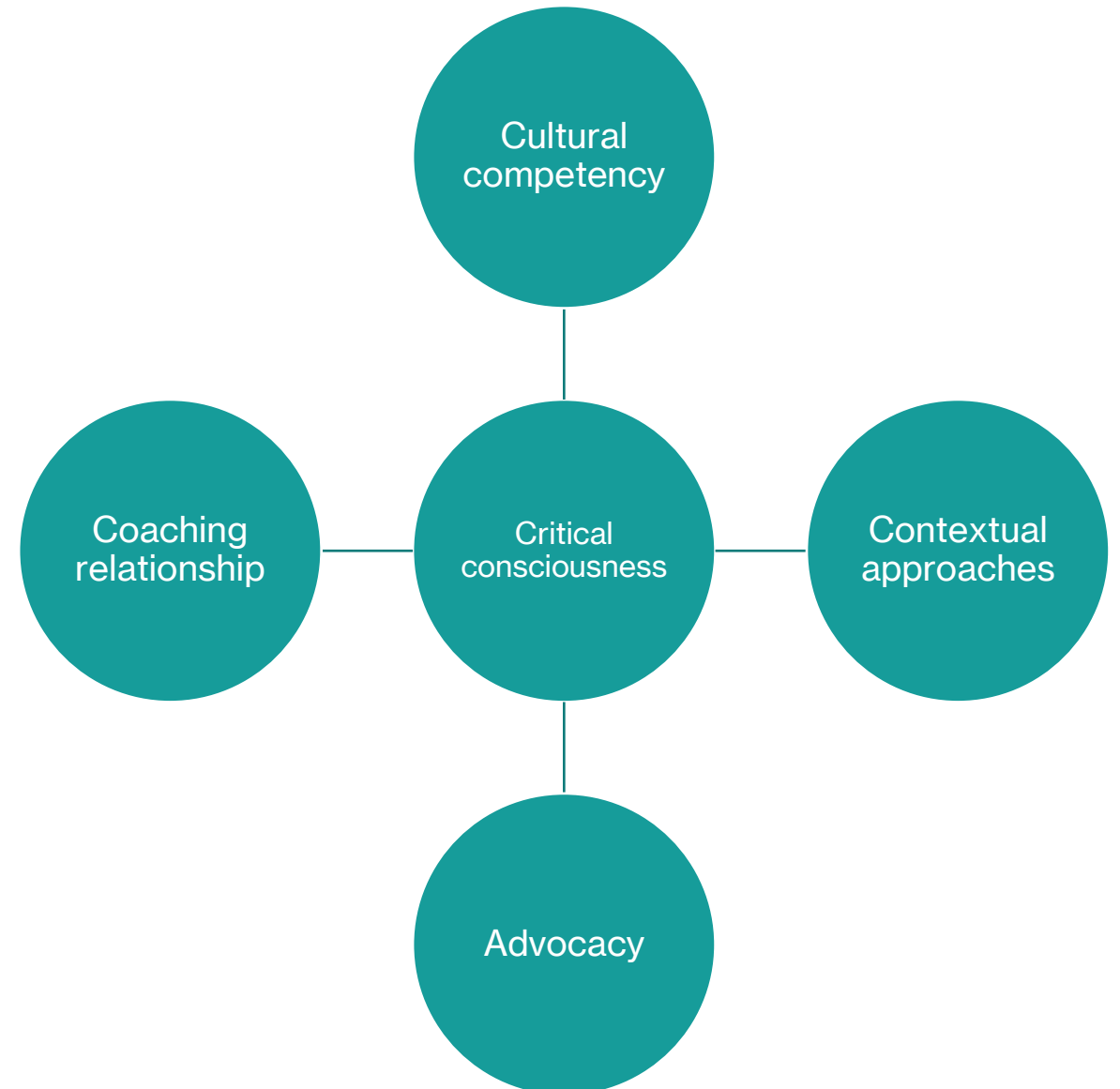
Conceptualising this shift from theory to practice through a social justice competency framework.



Competencies used by the profession for CPD.



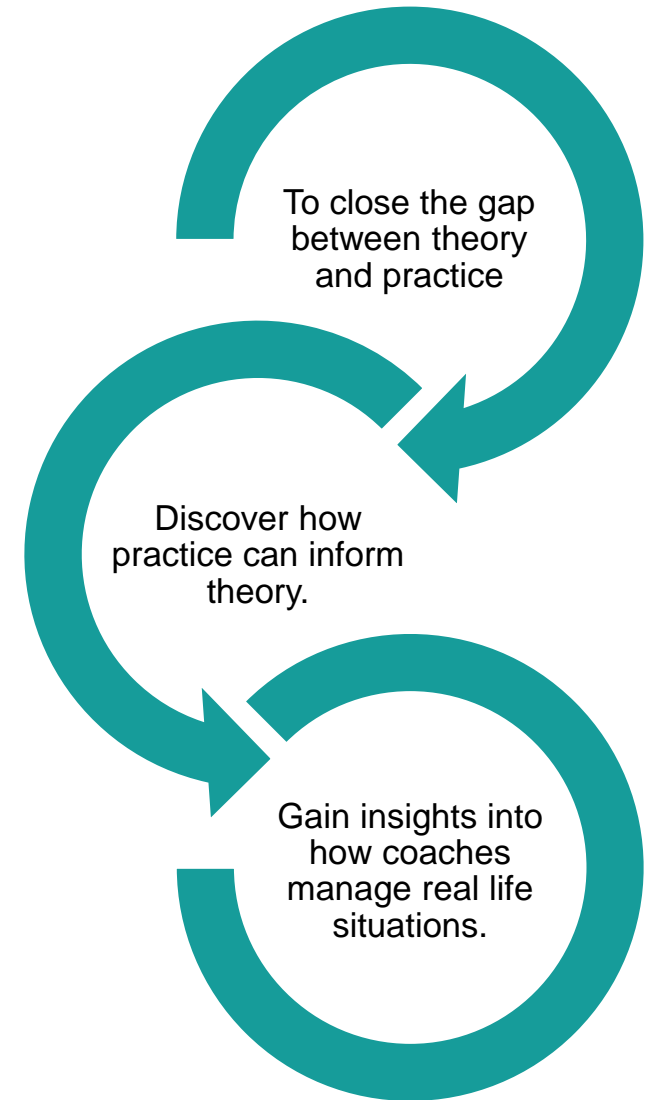
Five areas of significance from across the literature.



# MIND THE GAP

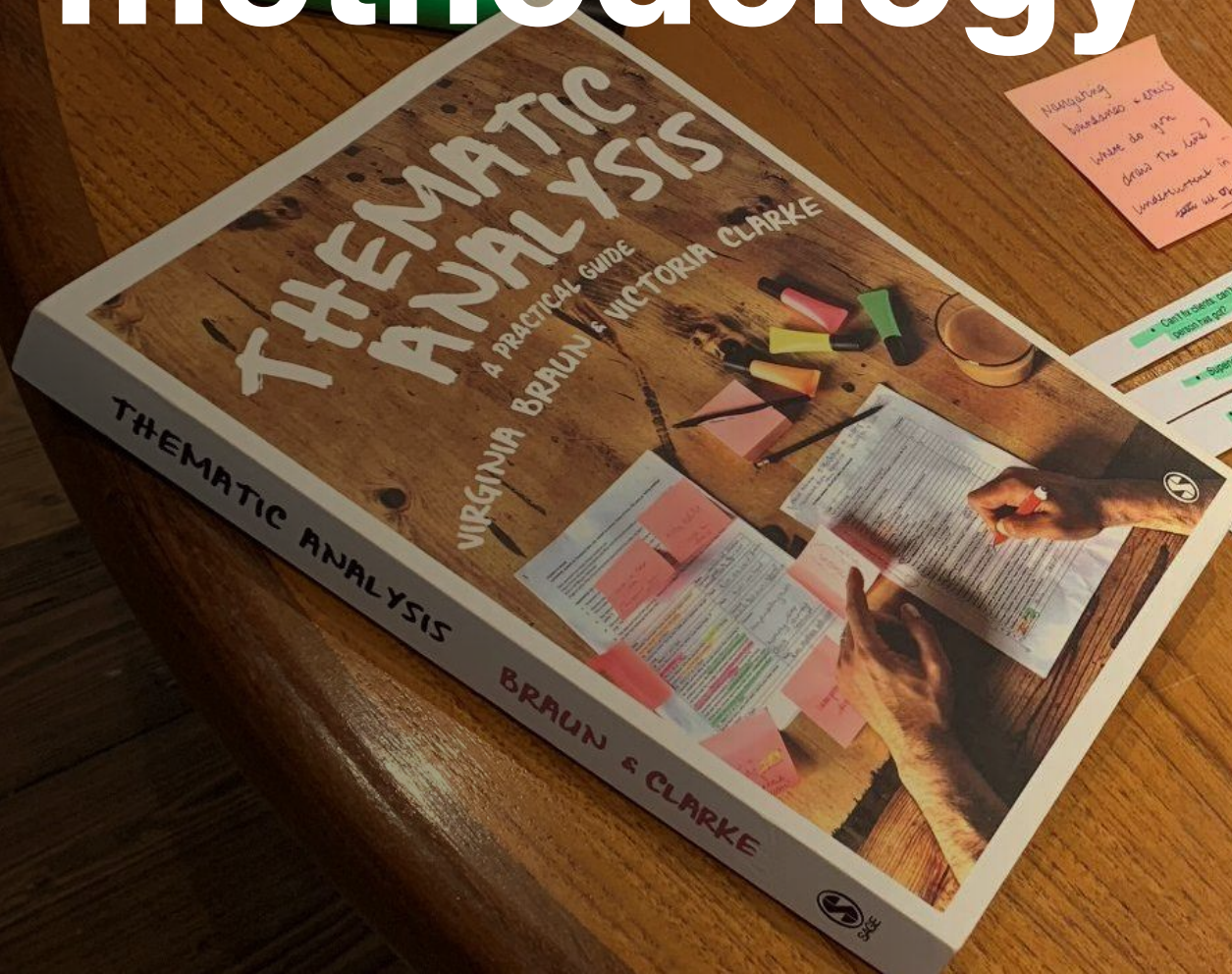


## Research aims





# Research methodology

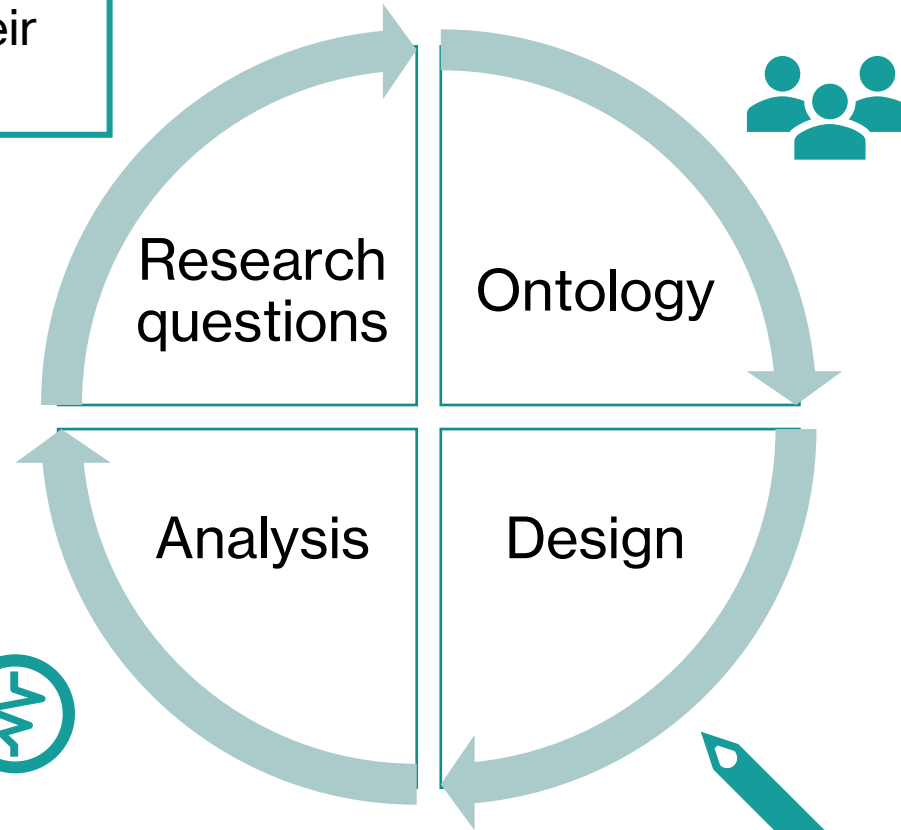




How can coaches actively challenge systemic and structural inequality and injustice through their practice and professional work?

What skills, knowledge and behaviours enable coaches to identify contextual influences that affect their clients?

Social constructionist ontology - society, history and human interaction shape knowledge.



Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Semi-structured interviews with 14 coaching practitioners.

# Interview schedule

What do the terms context and systems thinking mean to you as a coach?

In your experience, how important is it to consider a client's broader life context when developing coaching goals?

How comfortable are you with raising topics of unfairness or discrimination?

How do you or would you support clients experiencing direct or indirect discrimination?

Do you/ or how have you integrated advocacy in coaching?



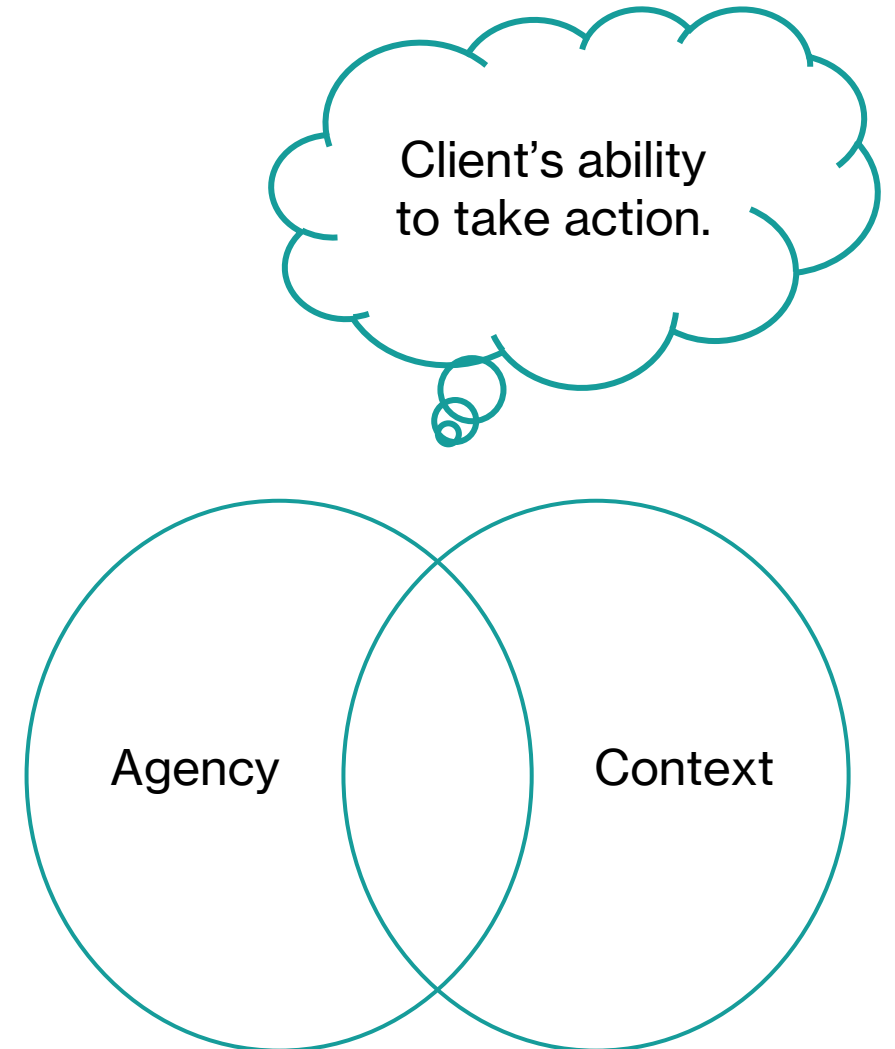
## Research findings

Five themes and several sub themes were generated.



# Agency and Context

- Building client agency and agentic thinking perceived as core role of coaching.
- Context is useful information for building self awareness. Storytelling was a key technique used.
- Participants didn't perceive context in a fixed way but expressed that they could work with the client's context to see how they can influence and change a situation.
- Taken together these two elements were **used to develop self advocacy plans** with their clients.
- Fitting in or fighting? The ethical dilemmas connected to self advocacy.



# Trust

- Participants working with clients facing disadvantage and/or adversity expressed how critical it was to create a trusted relationship.
- Many participants expressed adopting a cautious and tentative approach when introducing issues of race, class, disability, or gender, and considered how to do this sensitively and without influencing their clients thinking.



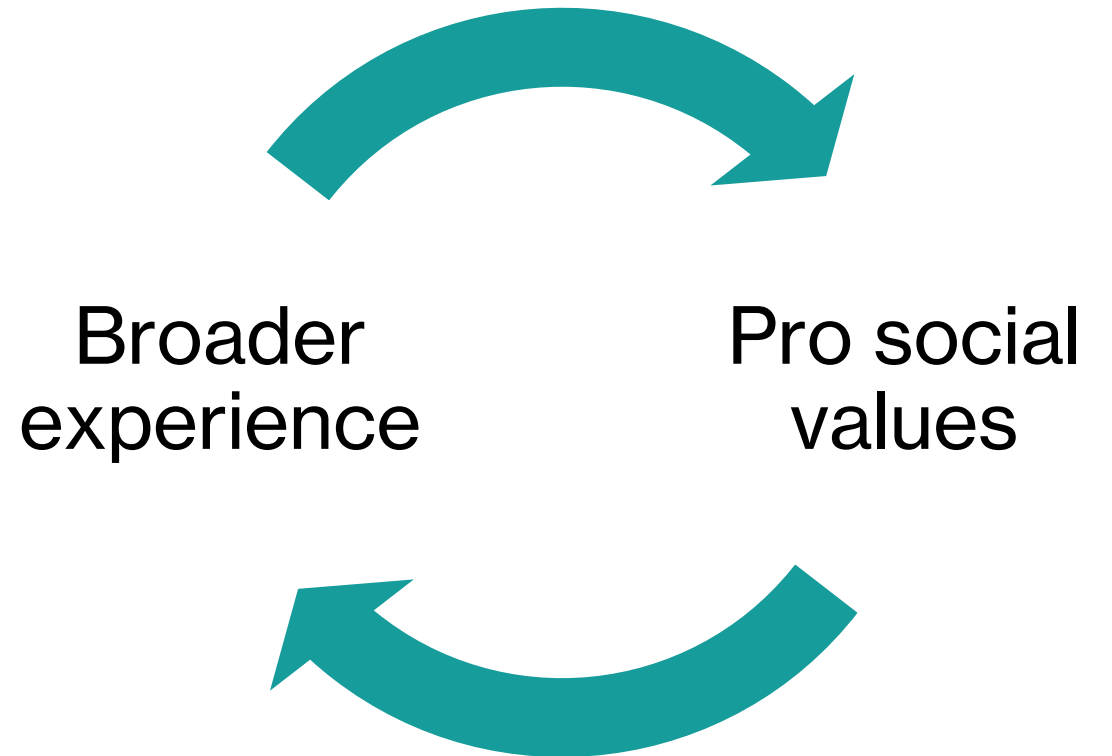
**“But it's actually for Neurodivergent clients who are going to take that length of time to trust you because they have experienced just, you know they've experienced what they would describe as failure after failure”.**

**“If you're coaching a young person in the community and they don't have trust with their coach, they're not going to come back. That's why community coaching is always a little bit more difficult. It takes longer, there's longevity in it. It's not going to happen overnight”.**



# Pro social values

- Findings showed a connection between exposure to real world examples of inequity in their practice influenced their values and practice decisions.
- All participants referenced their personal values, background, lived experience, and commitment to help others as part of their professional journey.



**“I come from a socially disadvantaged background myself, first in my family to university, free school meals, from a sort of deprived council estate. So, I guess that’s my kind of background and interest in this area”.**

**“The more I do this work, the more I am aware that every single person I work with is impacted by a system of global inequity”.**





# Working with discomfort


- Participants expressed that working with issues of social justice, EDI, or discrimination in coaching was difficult and evoked feelings of discomfort.
- **Power and positionality**
- **Competence, confidence and validation**
- **Boundaries and permission**

**“So I would be lying if I said I felt comfortable. And I don't think anybody should feel comfortable. I think you should be a little bit anxious about it because of the territory you're in”.**

**“What's the limits of coaching in that situation? Because you can't be a saviour, you can't be. You can't fix it. I do see these things as systemic issues. You can't fix it. And yet you might be the only person available to that person”.**

**Implications of the research**  
**Exploring the impact of**  
**coaching techniques**





We build  
relationships

## **Centrality of the coaching relationship**

- Research supports existing evidence regarding the Working Alliance and humanistic counselling approaches.
- Value of Empathy: Highlights the importance of empathy in creating positive coaching outcomes.
- Broaching: Coaches use broaching techniques when discussing race, culture, and other social factors.

# Implications for professional development



Rethinking coaching delivery to promote longer-term relationships and service access.



Exploring evidence and research related to client outcomes of Trauma-Informed Practice.



Practicing broaching techniques to reduce discomfort in discussing culture and race.



# Empowerment coaching approaches

- Building self-efficacy: Supports literature on human capital and agency as effective coaching approaches.
- Agency and context: Mutually reinforcing, leading to self-advocacy plans and proactive coaching.

## **Implications for professional development:**

- Learning about Systems Theory and Narrative Coaching to support empowerment strategies.



# Applying critical consciousness

- Critical Reflexivity: Applying critical reflexivity in narrative coaching.
- Macro Factors: Discussing broader social and political factors.
- Client-Led Approach: Importance of staying within coaching boundaries.
- Explicit Contracting: Permitting exploration of structural and political themes with clients.



# Advocacy skills

- Advocacy is distinct from building agency and self-awareness.
- Advocacy skills require specialist knowledge, networks and influence.
- Advocacy involves ethical considerations such as client's willingness.
- Coach-Advocate Role: Acting as a critical friend to organisations to increase equitable outcomes and remove barriers.



## Reflection

How do you currently integrate advocacy into your coaching practices, and what challenges have you encountered?

What strategies do you use to balance advocacy with promoting client autonomy and self-determination?






# Ethical considerations

- Research confirmed several ethical factors to consider when adopting a social justice orientation.
- Coaching Neutrality: Study supports that coaching is not neutral and value-free (Fatien and Gazi 2022) .
- Ethical Codes: Implications and sufficiency of ethical codes.

# Limitations of the study

- Findings not generalisable to the wider coaching population.
- Sampling may have attracted coaches interested in social justice.
- Collecting participants' demographic data could enhance findings by providing more in depth understanding.
- Subjective nature of qualitative research: Researcher's role in generating findings.
  - Detailed methodology provides some mitigation.

**Thank you for listening**



**Open the floor for  
questions and  
discussion**



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