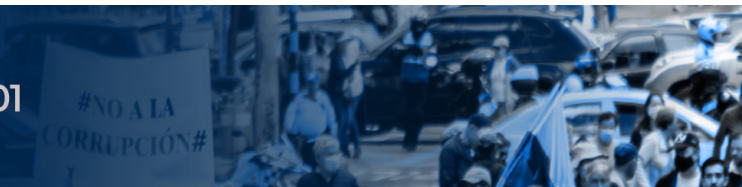


Chapter 01 / Capítulo 01



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Coaching for personal growth as an emerging practice in México City

Coaching de superación personal como práctica emergente en la Ciudad de México

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ABSTRACT

Personal improvement coaching has become an emerging practice that responds to the search for meaning and promises of individual transformation. This presentation reports the progress of an ongoing research project within the Master's Program in Political Sociology. The study employs a qualitative approach and draws on a constructivist theoretical perspective to examine the experiences of people who have participated in personal improvement coaching processes in Mexico City. The theoretical framework articulates the general theory of socialization proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1967), studies on modern experience (Giddens et al., 1996), and analyses of the commodification of well-being and self-improvement (Illouz, 2008) to understand how discomfort, success, progress, and stability are reinterpreted. The methodology is based on semi-structured interviews with men and women who took part in coaching programs, exploring their recruitment, trajectories, and assessments. Preliminary findings indicate that coaching operates simultaneously as a market of promises and as a cultural device that channels aspirations, generating appropriations, reinterpretations, and, in some cases, disenchantment. The presentation discusses how these practices navigate between narratives of personal improvement and their commodification in a context of continuous pursuit of optimization.

Keywords: Coaching; Personal Improvement; Modernity; Socialization.

RESUMEN

El coaching de superación personal se ha consolidado como una práctica emergente que responde a la búsqueda de sentido y promesas de transformación individual. Esta ponencia presenta los avances de una investigación en proceso en marco de la Maestría en Sociología Política. Esta investigación tiene un enfoque cualitativo y parte de la perspectiva teórica constructivista para estudiar las experiencias de personas que han participado en proceso de coaching de superación personal en la Ciudad de México. El marco teórico articula la teoría general de la socialización planteada por Berger y Luckmann (1967), los estudios sobre la experiencia moderna (Giddens et al., 1996) y los análisis sobre la mercantilización del bienestar y la mejora individual (Illouz, 2008) para entender cómo se resignifican el malestar, la idea del éxito, el progreso y la estabilidad. La metodología se basa en entrevistas semiestructuradas a hombres y mujeres que participaron en programas de coaching, para explorar su captación, trayectoria y valoración. Los hallazgos preliminares muestran que el coaching opera simultáneamente como mercado de promesas y como dispositivo cultural que canaliza aspiraciones, generando apropiaciones, reinterpretaciones y, en algunos casos, desencanto. La ponencia discute cómo

estas prácticas navegan entre las narrativas de superación personal y su mercantilización en un entorno de búsqueda continua de optimización.

Palabras clave: Coaching; Superación Personal; Modernidad; Socialización.

INTRODUCTION

This research on self-improvement coaching arises from experiences close to my family environment, where these courses appeared to be an attractive option for solving personal problems or achieving goals, but which, from my practical point of view and academic training, I perceived as a scam. However, recognizing this judgment as a product of my own social position led me to rethink the problem from a sociological perspective, avoiding both prejudice and simplistic explanations. What initially seemed like a phenomenon of economic deception soon presented itself as a more complex practice, linked to larger processes such as the contemporary offer of well-being, meaning, and belonging, in which individuals participate who, despite criticism, value their experience as positive and transformative.

During the formulation of the project, I explored the relationship between coaching and other phenomena, such as sects, employment scams, and pseudo-therapies, which led me to conceive of it as a space for secondary socialization. From the constructivist theory of socialization, coaching can be understood as an agent that introduces interpretive frameworks in tension with or in rupture from previous references such as family, religion, or formal education. However, it is not received passively; it is re-signified and, at times, resisted.

Mexico City is a privileged setting for analyzing these experiences: a diverse, heterogeneous urban space marked by anonymity, pressure to optimize, and the proliferation of offers of meaning. Thus, the overall objective of this research is to analyze subjects' experiences during recruitment, the trajectory of the coaching process, and the assessment of personal development coaching in relation to their sociocultural conditions and expectations within the sociopolitical and cultural context of Mexico City in the 21st century.

DEVELOPMENT

My interest in coaching began with the experiences of family members who took these courses, which, from my practical point of view, seemed, and still seem, like a scam. However, we know that this practical sense is neither neutral nor universal, but rather structured by the social position of the individual, in my case as a graduate student in social sciences with training and experience in sociology and social work, who lives in Mexico City, who lived in the State of Mexico for most of my life, and who has seen and evaluated the implications of the participation of those close to me who took coaching courses. However, to say that it is a scam, from a sociological point of view, would be a very flawed analysis, based on prejudice and which explains nothing in scientific terms. Although I think so, and even with advances in research, I believe that it may be a statement that lacks sociological imagination and consideration of the complexity of social relations.

From the choice of topic and during the first part of the project formulation process, prior to participating in the postgraduate calls, I began to find links between coaching and other situations such as job scams, some spiritual practices, and what are popularly known as cults. To find an analytical approach, I began using the concept of coercive organizations, thinking of them as socializing agents, and starting from the premise that socialization never stops

throughout life, I saw this as having a transcendental implication for people's lives.

However, this organizational approach that I was beginning to propose had several theoretical and methodological problems. To begin with, when I think of coercive organizations right now, I think first of the military and then of all institutions because, thinking in terms of Giddens, all structures constrain and enable. So the adjective "coercive" was somewhat empty in that context and also problematic, because my interest is in how people experience coaching, scams, or cults, however they define them. I wanted to know why, despite the criticism, many people like the experience and think it helped them, served them, and made them better people.

That is why the research problem, which answers the question "What do I need to achieve in this research?", ended up being framed as follows: To link the subjects' experience in the process of recruitment, trajectory, and assessment of personal development coaching with their sociocultural conditions and expectations, within the sociopolitical and cultural context of Mexico City in the 21st century. Institutionalism or other meso-level approaches can capture the experience. However, the focus on the organization is a perspective that would involve not only interviewing the participants but also the coaches, as well as other methodological approaches such as discourse analysis and ethnography. It may be very fruitful for other research, but I do not have that time within the master's program, and it was not of interest to me at the moment. So focusing on the participants' experience is a delimitation of those possibilities.

I am very interested in learning about the options offered by the wellness and meaning market in the current context. Above all, what is presented as something it is not, for example: conspiracy theories, pseudosciences, pseudotherapies, and coercive groups. That is why this research examines how people turn to one of these options for meaning and solutions to their problems because they trust it, and it is my role to understand what they are trusting.

I chose Mexico City as the setting for my research because it is a place where the emergence of personal development coaching in its urban dimension can be observed. It is a heterogeneous and diverse territory, where different social trajectories and multiple offers of meaning converge, allowing for an analysis of how individual experiences are articulated in relation to modern culture. In addition, the city's metropolitan character creates particular conditions: the anonymity of urban life and the constant pressure to optimize time, relationships, and one's own performance, factors that fuel demand for practices such as coaching. Listening to the work of colleagues in this field has allowed me to refine the idea of the urban experience not only as a setting, but also as part of the configuration of these practices and the way subjects appropriate or question them.

This led to the establishment of the general objective, which is to analyze the experience of subjects in the process of recruitment, trajectory, and assessment of personal development coaching, in relation to their sociocultural conditions and expectations in the sociopolitical and cultural context of Mexico City in the 21st century, using a qualitative methodology with a constructivist approach, based on semi-structured interviews to reveal the mechanisms by which these practices socialize and reframe discomfort. For this purpose, constructivist socialization theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) is useful because it allows us to observe coaching as an agent of secondary socialization, with a new interpretive framework of reality, often in tension or rupture with the previous one (family, religion, formal education), but which is not received in a unidirectional manner. Instead, the constructivist perspective allows us to observe the resignifications and resistances. What made me choose it, after comparing different theories of

socialization and subjectivation?

Therefore, the general question to be answered is: How is the experience of the subjects in the process of recruitment, trajectory, and evaluation of personal development coaching linked to their sociocultural conditions and expectations in the sociopolitical and cultural context of Mexico City in the 21st century? It is worth noting that, to investigate the assessment, I will use the sociological double process model (Vila-Henninger, 2021) because it allows analysis of dispositions, incorporations, and the judgments made by the subjects. In this sense, the possible answer I propose in the hypothesis is that the subjects' experience with personal development coaching is shaped by their sociocultural conditions, expectations, and discourses of self-improvement, within a context of capitalist modernity and a crisis of traditional references, operating simultaneously as an offer of meaning and a space in dispute, where subjects interpret their experience in a situated and relational manner, oscillating between appropriation, re-signification, disenchantment, and questioning of their values, promises, and practices.

I know that the verb “configure” may attract attention, but it is a vestige of my training in relational sociology and, above all, in the figurational sociology of Norbert Elias. Although the theoretical framework is not centered on this approach, I do retain two figurational principles for this research, which are: 1) Socialization is a never-ending process, and 2) My goal is to observe the network of social relations that configures coaching, from modern values to everyday practices (Elias, 1970). This is an analytical and qualitative research study with a constructivist approach, as the objective is to understand the experience of participants in personal development coaching courses. The information I need cannot be obtained from secondary sources, as it involves accessing situated interpretations that emerge from personal experience.

Therefore, the fieldwork consisted of collecting empirical data through semi-structured interviews with participants in personal development coaching courses. I chose courses because this type of coaching is also presented in books, videos, and digital content. However, I am interested in learning about experiences in controlled spaces with defined time and place. For this research, I included only adults. However, if I have time in the coming months, I would like to observe the implications at that formative stage and, if possible, write about that particular population. The sampling was intentional, using networks of contacts (snowball sampling) of people I know personally and those I have contacted through social media, mainly those who commented on TikTok videos on the subject. These included comments that seemed to reflect a negative assessment of the experience, as well as those that benefited some aspect of their lives.

At this time, the research is in the process of transcribing the interviews, which will then be analyzed using a coding scheme previously applied in MAXQDA. This coding was based on the terms shown at the top of the category scheme.

The chapter structure will consist of a first theoretical-methodological chapter, which will first incorporate socialization theories (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Vila-Henninger, 2021), as well as analyses of modernity and modernization, which is the cultural focus of the research (Beck et al., 2001; Giddens, 1991), that is, the codes with which people understand the world, which may have different interpretations but still influence practices. Finally, in this chapter, I also worked on analyses carried out from the perspectives of philosophy and the social sciences on self-improvement and the commodification of well-being (Nehring & Röcke, 2024).

The second chapter articulates the contextual framework according to the concepts, which are not categories of analysis but rather axes for contextualizing the research. To illustrate one of these axes, when I think of neoliberalism, I think of the project of restoring the power of economic elites through privatization, deregulation, and individual responsibility (Harvey, 2007). In this model, coaching reinforces the narrative that success depends exclusively on personal effort, blurring the structural conditions that shape individuals' trajectories. In Latin America, neoliberal restructuring has generated structural inequalities (Basualdo & Arceo, 2006) and difficulties that have led to coaching being understood as an individualistic response to public problems, promoting adaptation strategies rather than systemic change.

CONCLUSIONS

The third and final chapter will describe the findings from the interviews. So far, the research shows that personal development coaching, beyond being a practice questioned by certain academic and social sectors, constitutes a space where individuals negotiate meanings about themselves and their place in the world. Far from being a unidirectional process in which discourses of self-improvement are adopted, the interviews reveal appropriations, resignifications, and resistances. For some, coaching appears to be a useful tool for dealing with personal or professional crises; for others, the experience translates into disenchantment, questioning, or even the perception of having been defrauded.

In this sense, coaching can be understood as a cultural device characteristic of capitalist modernity, offering meaningful narratives in a context of uncertainty and fragmentation of traditional references. Its expansion in Mexico City responds to both the city's social heterogeneity and its urban dynamics, where the search for anonymity and, at the same time, belonging is combined with the pressure to optimize the individual. In this way, coaching is configured as a contested space of secondary socialization, in which subjects simultaneously experience aspirations for well-being and tensions with the values and commercial logic that permeate these practices.

The contribution of this research lies in shifting the normative judgment that simplifies whether coaching "works" or "deceives" toward a sociological perspective that addresses how it is experienced, interpreted, and what role it plays in the lives of those who participate. This approach allows us to recognize coaching as an emerging urban practice that, although fueled by the commodification of well-being, is sustained by the trust of those who seek it as a resource to give meaning to their trajectories in 21st-century Mexico City.

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Research: Tania Guadalupe Álvarez Ramírez.
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Project management: Tania Guadalupe Álvarez Ramírez.
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Software: Tania Guadalupe Álvarez Ramírez.
Supervision: Tania Guadalupe Álvarez Ramírez.
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Writing - review and editing: Tania Guadalupe Álvarez Ramírez.