Understanding the multifunctional role of entrepreneurial coaching through a systematic review of the literature

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Abstract
Purpose – The aim of this study is to systematise the entrepreneurial coaching (EC) literature by understanding how the phenomenon has been investigated along four dimensions inspired by Gartner’s (1985) conceptualisation of entrepreneurship: entrepreneurial process, context, target and outcomes. In so doing, this study will provide a frame of its multifunctional role and identify relevant gaps and suggestions for future research.
Design/methodology/approach – We conducted a systematic literature review to collect existing works on EC. We analysed 85 selected papers with a qualitative content analysis that allowed us to highlight relevant research themes for the entrepreneurial process, context, outcomes and target.
Findings – Our results demonstrate that EC has a multifunctional role in entrepreneurship that can be summarised in five different typologies, depending on the stage of the entrepreneurial process in which it is applied, the context, the target and the outcomes.
Originality/value – As one of the first attempts to systematise studies on EC, this work extends previous conceptualisation of EC by detailing different typologies of this intervention, thereby contributing to reduced fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity.
Keywords Entrepreneurial coaching, Systematic literature review, Qualitative content analysis
Paper type Literature review

Introduction
Entrepreneurial coaching (EC) is a developmental intervention for entrepreneurs facing different stages of the entrepreneurial process based on a collaborative relationship with a professional coach (Kotte et al., 2021). Entrepreneurs face many obstacles during their journey and need specific support for each stage of the process (Audet and Couteret, 2012; Ben Salem and Lakhal, 2018; Kotte et al., 2021; Saadoui and Affess, 2015); this has made EC a key tool in supporting entrepreneurship with a growing scientific interest for the phenomenon (e.g. Ben Salem and Lakhal, 2018; Mansoori et al., 2019).

EC literature is currently characterised by heterogeneous perspectives and multidisciplinary contributions (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2018) which have caused fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity (Kotte et al., 2021). This is why the term “EC” is often used interchangeably with other similar developmental interventions, such as mentoring (Audet and Couteret, 2012). Fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity make EC a concept with a fuzzy meaning and it is not possible to correctly distinguish EC from other interventions and understand its functions. This could be problematic, if we are to develop efficacious EC support services within incubators or entrepreneurship education programs.

To address these issues, we conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) of existing EC studies. We investigated how EC has been studied along four dimensions derived from the conceptualisation of entrepreneurship developed by Gartner (1985), namely entrepreneurial process, context, target and outcomes. In doing so, we respond to the fragmentation and...
conceptual ambiguity by systematising previous studies within an organising framework which details the multifunctional role of EC. Finally, we set a research agenda to highlight relevant gaps and possible lines of future research.

This paper is structured as follows. First, the theoretical background is presented. The procedures followed in conducting the SLR are then explained, and the qualitative content analysis (QCA) to identify the main research themes is illustrated. Finally, we present the results and the discussion.

Theoretical background

Coaching is a partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential (International Coach Federation) [1], and it has been increasingly adopted in entrepreneurship. According to one of the most extensive definition of EC, this intervention is "a custom-tailored, reflective, and results-oriented development intervention that is directed towards entrepreneurs with different levels of experience and across different phases of the entrepreneurial process [...] based on a collaborative relationship between a professional coach (who may or may not have personal entrepreneurial experience) and an entrepreneur" (Kotte et al., 2021, p. 548). As a planned intervention (see Klofsten and Öberg, 2012), EC is developed as a process with several stages, such as contracting, assessment, intervention, and evaluation (Diermann et al., 2022).

EC becomes relevant in entrepreneurship training programmes and incubators, because it enables them to support entrepreneurs dealing with high job demands that are typical of each stage of the entrepreneurial journey (Kotte et al., 2021; Kutzhanova et al., 2009). For this reason, EC is provided independently of the person's request and is increasingly being incorporated into entrepreneurial training and education programmes (European Commission, 2018).

Past research on EC has often reiterated how fragmented this phenomenon is (e.g. Audet and Couteret, 2012; Bachkirova and Borrington, 2018; Ben Salem and Lakhal, 2018; Kotte et al., 2021) and that it is characterised by a narrow selective focus on a few aspects of the phenomenon (e.g. Diller et al., 2022; Mohamed and Zouaoui, 2021). Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of how coaching works alongside the entrepreneurial process is still missing (Kotte et al., 2021). All these aspects make it challenging to understand EC mechanisms, so they remain a wall that blocks the advancement of inquiry on this topic (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2018).

EC literature is also plagued by conceptual ambiguity, which has blurred its conceptual boundaries. This means that other developmental interventions, such as mentoring and start-up consultancy, have been used as synonyms (Audet and Couteret, 2012); see Appendix 1 for a summary of the most adopted synonyms. The fact that different labels have been used to refer to EC has led to a broad conceptualisation of the construct, thereby blurring its conceptual boundaries and activating substantial debate in the literature regarding the differences and similarities, thereof, particularly between coaching and mentoring (Kotte et al., 2021). In entrepreneurship, these two interventions share a trustful relationship (El Hallam and St-Jean, 2016); while the greatest difference is that the mentor’s experience is at the heart of the intervention (Kotte et al., 2021). Conversely, coaching puts at the centre of its action the coachee’s specific objective or need (Audet and Couteret, 2012). Despite efforts to identify a demarcation of these two constructs, the conceptual ambiguity thereof is still present in both research and practice. Addressing conceptual ambiguity referred to in EC literature is relevant, because study fragmentation and conceptual confusion are both detrimental to advancement and practice in this field (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2021).
In light of this, this work has three objectives. (1) To address the fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity by recomposing the literature on EC along four entrepreneurial dimensions: entrepreneurial process, context, target and outcomes; in doing so, we develop an organising framework inspired by the conceptualisation of entrepreneurship developed by Gartner (1985), who pointed out that entrepreneurship is a processual phenomenon in which individuals, emerging organisations, and context are iteratively interplaying. (2) To understanding the multifunctional role of EC by shedding light on its operating mechanisms. (3) To develop a research agenda to guide future research.

Method
Research design
We conducted a SLR following the procedure suggested by Tranfield et al. (2003) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Shamseer et al., 2015). The procedure for the SLR (Figure 1) consists of: (1) identification of keywords; (2) selection of studies and quality assessment; (3) data extraction; and (4) data synthesis.

Identification of keywords
We used (“entrepreneur* coach*” OR coach*) AND entrepreneur*, to capture the multitudes of labels used to refer to EC. For this reason, an extensive search for journal articles was conducted on Web of Science® (WoS) and Scopus®. Due to the novelty of the topic under

![Understanding entrepreneurial coaching](image)
investigation (Kotte et al., 2021); no limitations in terms of the time were imposed. The first search returned 491 articles: 255 from WoS and 236 from Scopus. After eliminating the duplicates, a total of 361 articles were obtained.

Selection of studies and quality assessment
Given that EC is an emerging field of research, we decided to include both quantitative and qualitative papers (Schermuly et al., 2021). In our case, for quality assessment, we (1) only considered articles from peer-reviewed journals, to attain results with high accuracy (Grégoire et al., 2019); and (2) specified precise inclusion criteria.

To be considered as part of the sample, studies needed to investigate coaching intervention within specific contexts aimed at providing individuals with entrepreneurial outcomes and skills. We kept a broad lens (1) due to the fragmentation around the phenomenon; and (2) because coaching is not only provided independently or within organisations but is an increasingly present component in training or education programmes (Kotte et al., 2021). We excluded articles that did not consider the entrepreneurial context or coaching as an entrepreneurial support tool or that did not consider it to be part of a specific programme.

Some examples of excluded articles were the study by Horne et al. (2022), because they did not consider an entrepreneurial context, only mentioning the “entrepreneurial marketplace” without further specifications; and studies in which EC was only marginally addressed (e.g. Svetek, 2022) or was related to other constructs similar to EC such as mentoring (e.g. Kubberod et al., 2018). In other cases, no clear identification of the entrepreneurial contexts and dynamics was examined (e.g. Ribeiro et al., 2020). At the end of this analysis, the final sample was comprised of 85 papers.

Data extraction
Drawing on Torraco’s (2016) methodological indications, we built a matrix to synthesise information for each paper (Appendix 2 – For content in this appendix, kindly contact the corresponding author at giammarco.marras@unica.it).

Data synthesis
Data were analysed through a QCA, a technique for analysing textual data into inductive categories (Forman and Damschroder, 2007). This is recommended when there is a significant knowledge gap in a topic or when the existing body of knowledge is inadequately grounded in theory, as in the case of EC (Armat et al., 2018). The first author of the present SLR conducted the analysis by filling out four different deductive categories: the stage of the entrepreneurial process to which the coaching refers (e.g. Audet and Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021); the context (e.g. Diermann et al., 2022); the outcomes (e.g. Theeboom et al., 2014); and the target (e.g. Kotte et al., 2021). During the analysis of the papers, we codified each element referring to the four categories, and identified different sub-categories. The inter-rater agreement coefficient (Daniels, 2019) among the author and three external researchers was equal to 72%, which is considered acceptable to ensure the reliability of our study (Schreier, 2012).

Results
While presenting the descriptive results in Appendix 3, we delineate the organising framework in the following text.
**Organising framework**

Figure 2 presents the organising framework of EC resulting from our SLR.

**Target: for whom is EC adopted?** The target defines the recipients of the intervention. We found three sub-dimensions of targets: operating entrepreneurs ($N = 36$, $38\%$ of the reviewed articles), nascent entrepreneurs ($N = 31$, $33\%$ of the reviewed articles), and non-entrepreneurs ($N = 28$, $29\%$ of the reviewed articles).

Operating entrepreneurs are individuals who own their enterprise and are faced with dynamics related to the development and growth of their own business (e.g. Kotha et al., 2022; Nicholls-Nixon and Maxheimer, 2022) or are coping with crisis or business failure (e.g. Na et al., 2022; Schermuly et al., 2021).

Nascent entrepreneurs are individuals who have taken “steps to found a new business but who have not yet succeeded in making the transition to new business owner” (Carter et al., 1996, p. 151). This dimension includes pre-incubatees (e.g. Heikkinen and Stevenson, 2016); incubatees and start-uppers (e.g. Bergmann and Utikal, 2021; Nair and Blomquist, 2021); business project leaders (e.g. Laaraj and Ferhane, 2018); entrepreneurs within accelerators (e.g. Mansoori et al., 2019); and aspiring entrepreneurs (e.g. Barrell et al., 2021).

Finally, non-entrepreneurs are individuals who do not own a business, such as managers or employees. In some cases, they are not even employed and do not know whether they intend to become entrepreneurs, such as undergraduate and graduate students. These individuals are nonetheless involved in entrepreneurial dynamics: for students, there are entrepreneurship education programmes in which EC sessions are included (e.g. Elenurm and Moisala, 2008; Vural and Çoruh, 2019). For managers and employees, there are intrapreneurship programmes (e.g. Fey et al., 2022; Helman, 2019; Wakkee et al., 2010); which have been conceptualised as “encompassing organizational sanctions and resource commitments to generate, develop and implementing innovative ideas and activities in the form of product, process and organizational innovations” (Wakkee et al., 2010, p. 3).
Outcomes: which outcomes are associated with EC? Several EC studies have focused on understanding coaching interventions outcomes, thereby creating a heterogeneous and unsystematic body of knowledge. To categorize these outcomes, we considered the subdivision provided by Theeboom et al. (2014) as part of their study on coaching effectiveness; the categories are performance/skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes, and goal-directed self-regulation.

The “performance/skills” category (N = 41, 34% of the reviewed articles) concerns subjective and objective outcomes reflecting performance or demonstrating behaviours needed for an organisation to be effective. Examples we found included entrepreneurial skills from a specific program (e.g. Suharnomo and Wahyudi, 2021); innovative work behaviours (e.g. Na et al., 2022); leadership (e.g. Åstebro and Hoos, 2020); venture growth (e.g. Kotha et al., 2022); internationalisation (e.g. Gao et al., 2021); and increasing sales (e.g. Mukata et al., 2018).

The “well-being” category (N = 10, 8% of the reviewed articles) concerns subjective and objective outcomes representing people’s well-being, health, need fulfilment and affective response. Examples we found included psychological well-being (e.g. Galvão and Pinheiro, 2019) and reduce emotional exhaustion (i.e. burnout) (e.g. Busch et al., 2021).

The “coping” category (N = 7, 6% of the reviewed articles) concerns the ability to face present and future jobs and stressors. Examples include entrepreneurial self-efficacy (e.g. Maxheimer and Nicholls-Nixon, 2022) and reduced stress hormone levels (e.g. Schermuly et al., 2021).

The “work attitudes” category (N = 37, 31% of the reviewed articles) concerns cognitive, affective and behavioural responses towards work and career. Examples of outcome measures within this category are relationship building (e.g. Bin Idris and Abu Bakar, 2020); encouragement to create a new business (e.g. Hua, 2021); and satisfaction with the coaching relationship (e.g. Ben Salem and Lakhal, 2018).

The “Goal-directed self-regulation” category (N = 24, 20% of the reviewed articles) concerns the level of goal achievements (e.g. Audet and Couteret, 2012), goal attainment (e.g. Busch et al., 2021); and “the processes involved in attaining and maintaining goals, where goals are internally represented desired states” (Vancouver and Day, 2005, p. 158). In this regard, examples may be developing a vision (e.g. Freeman and Siegfried, 2015) and improving strategic decision-making (e.g. Fielden and Hunt, 2011).

Entrepreneurial process: in which entrepreneurial phases has EC been investigated? EC has been studied during the pre-venture creation, new venture creation, and post-venture creation phases.

Studies in pre-venture creation (N = 40, 47% of the reviewed articles) focus on the activities preceding the founding of a new company and have primarily examined the role of coaching at the pre-founding phase (N = 27, 38% of the reviewed articles). These studies have specifically shown how coaches can support coachees embarked on a learning path to develop competencies and skills in entrepreneurship (e.g. Premand et al., 2016) or assist the embryonic activities related to the development of the new business idea (e.g. Marvel et al., 2020).

Other studies have specifically looked at the incubation phase (N = 13, 15% of the reviewed articles) by showing how the coach might help aspiring entrepreneurs to “materialize a business idea into a legally constituted enterprise with a marketable product/service” (Fernández et al., p. 785); and cope with the uncertain phases of the entrepreneurial process (e.g. Maxheimer and Nicholls-Nixon, 2022; Nair and Blomquist, 2021).

As far as the new venture creation is concerned (N = 22, 26% of the reviewed articles), studies have investigated the dynamics between the coach and nascent entrepreneurs (e.g. Mansoori et al., 2019); the impact of a start-up training program (e.g. Ramirez-Pérez et al., 2015); and to understand how coaches can improve the functioning of the new venture and support the founders’ innovative behaviour (e.g. Gao et al., 2021).
Finally, studies on post-venture creation (N = 23, 27% of the reviewed articles) address the issue of EC after the phase of venture creation, by focussing attention on scale-up, succession and critical events.

During the scale-up phase (N = 18 out of 23, 78%), entrepreneurs need to be coached to improve specific individual or organisational outcomes, such as the construction and change of entrepreneurial identity and increase the effectiveness of their business (e.g. Valencia, 2020). Succession is the dynamic in which the business is transferred to the heir after a specific event; it includes cases where the process has been managed by a coach or where the entrepreneur has undergone preparatory programmes for such an eventuality. Finally, critical events are difficult situations for which the coach organisationally and psychologically intervenes. In particular, studies have examined the COVID-19 pandemic emergency (e.g. Na et al., 2022) and the business failure (e.g. Ben Salem and Lakhal, 2018; Schermuly et al., 2021).

Context: in which settings and situations has coaching been adopted? Context is the place where EC is implemented. It is important to consider this dimension, as it has recently been argued that workplace coaching needs to be seen as a contextualised, rather than dyadic, intervention embedded in its social and organisational context (Diermann et al., 2022).

Based on the design adopted by the selected articles, we found that EC either takes place within organisations (N = 22, 26% of the reviewed papers) or within a programme (N = 53, 62% of the reviewed papers). Examples of EC within organisations, are established organisations (e.g. Ben-Ahmed, 2020); fast-growth firms (e.g. Crompton et al., 2012); and family businesses (e.g. Valencia, 2020). Papers concerning EC within a programme, refer to entrepreneurship support programmes (e.g. Van Coller-Peter and Cronjé, 2020); leadership development programmes (Ulvenblad and Björklund, 2018); and entrepreneurship education programmes attended by students (e.g. Tunstall and Neergaard, 2022).

Finally, we found studies in which EC is virtually implemented by using an online platform (N = 3, 4% of the reviewed papers), such as those of Hunt et al. (2019) and Fielden et al. (2011). The remaining papers (N = 7) did not specify a context.

Discussion
In the present paper, we conducted a SLR to reorganise the fragmented, ambiguous literature on EC. Specifically, we reviewed articles to understand how EC has been studied along the four dimensions that characterise entrepreneurship as a processual phenomenon (Gartner, 1985), namely entrepreneurial process, context, target and outcomes. Moreover, through this framework, we attempted to understand how EC works within each dimension, by detailing its multifunctional role. Finally, we identified suggestions for future research.

Overall, a key result of this SLR is that EC can be considered to be a broad and multifunctional supportive intervention. We found that EC has been investigated along different targeted individuals, in different phases of the entrepreneurial process, in different contexts and with different expected outcomes.

Considering the aforementioned results, we developed an organising framework that allowed us to systematise the fragmented EC literature, so we could address recent suggestions for a lens to better conceptualise this phenomenon (e.g. Audet and Couteret, 2012; Ben Salem and Lakhal, 2018; Kotte et al., 2021) in order to theorise by proposing well-distinguished, manageable categories that can support the scholar community by reducing fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity (Kotte et al., 2021; Sandberg and Alvesson, 2021).

Theoretical implications
Based on the aforementioned organising framework, we extend the EC definition provided by Kotte et al. (2021). Specifically, we can define EC as a **multifunctional** custom-tailored,
reflective, and results-oriented development intervention that is directed towards non-entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs with different levels of experience and across different stages of the entrepreneurial process. It can be part of entrepreneurship education programmes, training programmes or conducted as a stand-alone intervention. It is implemented to achieve multi-outcomes, both individual and organisational [2].

Given the multifunctional traits of the intervention, we theorise five different EC typologies that emerged from our organisational framework, shown in Figure 3.

The first EC typology concerns the pre-venture creation phase. This intervention is aimed at non-entrepreneurs, of whom it is unclear whether they will accrue interest in becoming entrepreneurs, such as students, managers, and employees. These individuals attend entrepreneurship education or training programmes in which EC is designed in order to transfer general entrepreneurial knowledge and functional entrepreneurial skills. In other cases, the role of EC is to encourage and stimulate participants to develop new business ideas.

The second EC typology concerns the pre-venture creation phase. In this case, however, EC interventions are directed towards individuals who intend to become entrepreneurs who attend entrepreneurship education programmes to acquire the skills and knowledge needed

![Figure 3. Entrepreneurial coaching typologies](image)

Source(s): Authors own creation
to establish businesses and develop entrepreneurial projects. In this case, EC is targeted at nurturing the capability to develop a business vision or improve the initial business idea.

The third EC typology refers to the business creation phase; this intervention is aimed at nascent entrepreneurs. The EC implemented in a dyadic form or in group, is applied within incubators or accelerators to acquire the necessary skills to develop the new enterprise and improve the individual’s entrepreneurial attitudes. By following these objectives, EC is designed in such a way that nascent entrepreneurs become prepared to face the challenging phases of scaling-up.

The fourth EC typology concerns the post-venture creation phase. In this case, the intervention is considered stand-alone and is aimed at established entrepreneurs who need specific support at individual and organisational performance levels. In these cases, EC interventions are designed to improve strategic competency, organising competency and technical competency.

The fifth and last EC typology is related to the post-venture creation phase. However, the aim of this specific typology is to support insolvent entrepreneurs during business failure. In this case, EC can either be stand-alone or embedded in specific programmes, and the session can either be executed in person or virtually. The aim of this intervention is to improve entrepreneurs’ perception of coping resources and well-being at a critical and stressful moment in the entrepreneurial process.

With this theorisation (see Sandberg and Alvesson, 2021), we thus contribute to the problem of conceptual ambiguity in the EC literature. These five typologies demonstrate how EC is a broad, multi-functional support intervention and, may therefore, overlaps with other forms of support; this overlap is thus a natural consequence of the complexity associated with EC, which is characterised in the content, methods, context and subjects it addresses. By identifying these five EC typologies, we can make this complexity known and legitimise ambiguity as an identity trait of EC. This conceptualisation will help scholars to explore the overlap more systematically with other forms of intervention such as mentoring.

**Research agenda**

To address the third objective of this work, a research agenda is proposed. Assisted by the organising framework, this agenda should guide future inquiry by highlighting the gaps worth studying to advance the field of research, as summarised in Table 1.

**Entrepreneurial process.** Few studies strive to shed light on how EC might support entrepreneurs facing highly stressful situations, such as business failure (Ben Salem and Lakhal, 2018; Schermuly et al., 2021); this is because a common assumption has been that EC is mainly targeted at entrepreneurs in the early stage of their journey (e.g. Audet and Couteret, 2012; Kotte et al., 2021). Beyond the more technical and financial definition of

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Gap</th>
<th>Research suggestion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurial</td>
<td>Business failure</td>
<td>Coaching relationship between the coach and the</td>
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<td>process</td>
<td></td>
<td>entrepreneurs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>EC within incubators</td>
<td>Contents and operating mechanisms</td>
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<td>Target</td>
<td>Entrepreneurial teams</td>
<td>Entrepreneurial team coaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Outcomes’ dynamic model</td>
<td>Outcomes integration and longitudinal approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>EC and mentoring</td>
<td>Overlapping interventions</td>
<td>Integrate EC and mentoring within the organising</td>
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<td><strong>Source(s):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>framework</td>
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Table 1. Research agenda and suggestions for future research.
business failure (e.g. Ben Salem and Lakhal, 2018) and given the significant results already obtained by scholars on the effects of coaching on health and coping resources (e.g. Schermuly et al., 2021), we suggest to adequate consideration of the defining aspects of the relationship between coaches and entrepreneurs during this challenging phase. Focussing on the relationship between the coach and the entrepreneurs is one way to deepen the question of treatment effectiveness (e.g. Baron and Morin, 2009); and doing so at this specific stage where the human aspect is preponderant (e.g. Ben Salem and Lakhal, 2018) can provide meaningful results about other operating mechanisms concerning EC in this less common studied phase.

**Context.** One of the context in which EC requires further study is business incubators. This is because research has focussed on the processes and operations of the supporting organisation without adequately considering the content of the interventions. Within incubator programmes, EC is referred to in different terms, such as mentoring or business coaching (e.g. Audet and Couteret, 2012; Schutte, 2019); and is placed as a constant ingredient without knowing what precisely it consists of. Investigating EC within incubators is relevant as they support nascent entrepreneurs at a stage where the probability of failure is exceptionally high (Gozali et al., 2015). By knowing the content of the intervention, incubators will be more adept at choosing and planning activities.

**Target.** EC devoted to supporting entrepreneurial teams still lacks adequate studies. We suggest investigating how coaching works for entrepreneurial teams to identify (1) elements that differentiate it from the traditional dyadic and, thus, one-to-one coaching form; and (2) how this type of intervention has been shown to be effective. Understanding entrepreneurial phenomena at the team level is currently of paramount importance. Indeed, teams have “a greater potential than individuals to rise to the growing challenges facing organizations” (Widdowson et al., 2020, p. 1; Hawkins, 2017); and thus arises the need to provide a better understanding of how to improve the support of entrepreneurial teams. In this case, we refer to entrepreneurial team coaching, which we defined as a developmental intervention to support learning capabilities and dynamics of the group as a whole, with possible benefits in learning and increased performance and well-being for individual and team members (Dassen, 2015).

**Outcomes.** Much must be done to understand how the studied outcomes can provide meaningful information about coaching effectiveness. Considering previous studies on the topic, Schermuly et al. (2021) indicated that these works ignore essential situational moderators; indeed, these outcomes need to be more connected to the coaching context. We propose that these outcomes should be placed within a dynamic model. The model’s dynamism lies in the fact that it must adequately consider the context, the stage of the entrepreneurial process, and the temporal issue, especially for organisational outcomes. To methodologically capture this complexity, we suggest adopting longitudinal designs to monitor the evolution of outcomes and the relationship between them over time.

**EC and mentoring.** EC is often confused with other support interventions, particularly mentoring. Although past studies have attempted to demarcate the conceptual boundaries between the two interventions, this confusion persists in theory and practice. Through our work, we defined EC as a broad intervention, and as a consequences, it may overlap with mentoring in some cases. Future research should investigate the differences between these two interventions in entrepreneurship by reading both constructs with the processual lens we proposed, which considers process phases, target, context and outcomes. In this way, it will be possible to identify the singular and common features of these two interventions and understand when and how they overlap within the entrepreneurial domain.

**Contribution.** This SLR contributes to the literature on EC in three ways. First, we extended the definition of EC devised by Kotte et al. (2021) and provided further details concerning the target of the intervention, the types of programmes in which EC can be embedded, and the wide spectrum of outcomes.
Second, we identified the complexity of EC, which has already been mentioned by previous studies (e.g. Audet and Couteret, 2012; Bachkirova and Borrington, 2018; Kotte et al., 2021). We provided a systematisation of these factors within four known entrepreneurial dimensions (Gartner, 1985), from which theorising on the different functioning of EC emerged. In so doing, we contributed to the problem of conceptual ambiguity, specifically between EC and mentoring.

Finally, from our organising framework, we provided a line of research that will lead future studies to investigate specific aspects of EC in a systematic manner.

Practical implications. This work has practical implications for entrepreneurship support organisations. Incubators, accelerators, and other training programmes can benefit from a more orderly conceptualisation of coaching when defining its role within the programme. Specifically, not only can the coach’s intervention be structured in a precise manner according to the target group or stage of the entrepreneurial process, but content, tools, and methods can be defined according to the needs of the coachees.

Notes
2. We used bold text to highlight the extension elements deriving from our study.

References
Papers signed with * are part of the sample.


Schreier, M. (2012), Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice, SAGE, Los Angeles.


**Further reading**


Appendix 1

List of the main terms identifying EC with authors and definitions.

These labels come from most entrepreneurship studies, some particularly recent (e.g. Na et al., 2022; Babcock, 2021; Kurakto et al., 2021). Business coaching (e.g. Crompton et al., 2012; Cheah, 2012; Dobrea and Maiorescu, 2015; Schutte, 2019; Ben Ahmed, 2020; Idris and Abu Bakar, 2020; Pocek et al., 2022; Na et al., 2022) and mentoring (e.g. Hancox et al., 2015; Heikkinen and Stevenson, 2016; Kubberod et al., 2018; Kurakto et al., 2021) are the terms that are most often used interchangeably with EC. Business coaching is a construct defined as “a formal relationship in which a coach and a coachee collaborate to assess the coachee’s leadership developmental tasks, to challenge current constraints exploring new possibilities, and to ensure accountability and support for reaching goals” (Blackman et al., 2016, p. 460). Considering the differences between coaching and mentoring, the coaching relationship is to a large extent a planned intervention with specific activities, methods, and objectives. Mentorship, on the other hand, is demand-driven. Moreover, coaching concerns general competence, whereas mentoring is a specialist task (Klofsten and Öberg, 2012) involving a relationship with a more experienced individual (Weinberg and Lankau, 2011).
In this regard, one of the works that have contributed to overcoming conceptual ambiguity is that of Kotte et al. (2021). Their empirical observation aimed to provide positioning for EC concerning classic workplace coaching, executive coaching, entrepreneurial mentoring, and start-up consultancy to identify its conceptual boundaries. They have placed these constructs within a two-dimensional framework, considering approaches (process consultation and expert consultation) and the focus (individual, work, venture). Meaningful results emerged from this work, as they stated that a key distinguishing characteristic of EC is the higher proportion of expert-consultation, i.e. “a consultant possessing a high level of content expertise and providing expert information, advice, and solutions to clients” (Kotte et al., 2021, p. 521) remarkably like executive coaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Research field</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Definition of the construct</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Business coaching</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship, business management</td>
<td>Crompton et al. (2012), Cheah (2012), Dobrea and Maiorescu (2015), Schutte (2019), Ben Ahmed (2020), Idris and Abu Bakar (2020), Pocek et al. (2022), Na et al. (2022)</td>
<td>A means of individual development, allowing, on the one hand, the increase of managerial performances and, on the other hand, the increase of competitiveness between corporations (Dobrea and Maiorescu, 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Psychological coaching</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship, education and training</td>
<td>Galvão and Pinheiro (2019)</td>
<td>A driver for positive change and improvement of several of the required skills for successful entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Wellness coaching</td>
<td>Health and wellness</td>
<td>Babcock (2021)</td>
<td>A means for helping patients to manage chronic diseases like diabetes and hypertension or achieve a variety of personal health goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Incubator coaching</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Schutte and Direng (2019)</td>
<td>A tool to support entrepreneurs during start-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Peer group coaching</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Kutzhanova et al., 2009</td>
<td>Coaching in the business world is represented most often by executive coaching that attempts to align individual performance and organisational goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship, innovation and learning, education and training</td>
<td>Hancox et al. (2015), Heikkinen and Stevenson (2016), Kubberod et al. (2018), Kuratko et al. (2021)</td>
<td>A special help entrepreneurs receive from a mentor in the early stages of their venture [. . .] supporting opportunity recognition (Kuratko et al., 2021)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Authors’ own creation

Appendix 3
Descriptive analysis of the reviewed papers
Source: Authors’ own creation.
Published studies on EC are mostly empirical works (N = 75 out of 85), the majority of which adopt a qualitative (N = 38, 45% of the empirical papers) rather than a quantitative approach (N = 32, 38% of the empirical papers). Finally, only 5 works (6% of the empirical papers) used a mixed-method approach.
Furthermore, most empirical papers adopt a cross-sectional design (N = 55, 73% of the empirical papers) compared to a longitudinal one (N = 20, 27% of the empirical papers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Methodologies</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
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<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed methods</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research design</th>
<th>Methodologies</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Longitudinal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By looking at the journals, our data show that the 85 papers composing our unit of analysis were published in 74 different journals from different disciplines, including psychology, sports, management, and public health, indicating an increment of attention to EC, especially after the 2016 years.

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