A New Sense of Self: Exploring the Experience of Coaching during a Full Time Master of Business Administration Programme

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Abstract

This study used the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach to explore how five full time Master of Business Administration (FTMBA) students experienced coaching during their studies. Life stage transition was apparent for all five students and coaching was found to help the participants to deepen their self-awareness and develop a more empowered sense of self. The safe holding space provided by coaching was a key source of support which enabled them to deal with the psychological adjustments inherent in transition and to develop new strategies to realise their future vision. Implications and recommendations for coaching theory and practice are discussed.

Key words: interpretative phenomenological analysis, transition, life stage, MBA, coaching

Introduction

Having coached many FTMBA students at Cranfield University, I am aware of the significant personal transition that they undergo during the programme. Choosing to study a full time MBA results in a major life change for such students – they give up their jobs or former lifestyle to come and study for a year. Most of these students are keen to progress their careers, but many come having not yet worked out what that means. My sense is that they use the programme as a space to reinvent themselves. To some extent, they are in the neutral zone (Bridges, 2004) whilst studying. I had noticed that a good number of the students at Cranfield were in their early 30s and so I was interested to understand more about how their life stage (Levinson, 1986) might impact on their personal transition. The Age 30 transition (Levinson, 1986) spans the ages from 28 – 33 and is portrayed as an opportunity to take stock of the current life structure and to make decisions which will form the foundation of the next stage of life.

At the time of the study, Cranfield FTMBA students were supported by three coaching programmes during their course. The career coaching intervention began with a one-day workshop which formed the foundation for two 90-minute one-to-one coaching sessions with an experienced, external career coach. The workshop and first coaching session took place in term one. The second coaching session was scheduled for term two. The executive coaching programme was made up of six one-hour sessions scheduled throughout the year, beginning early in term one. Again, experienced external coaches facilitated these sessions. Co-coaching is the term used at Cranfield for one-to-one peer coaching which was launched at the start of term two. Students were encouraged to choose their own co-coach and to meet about ten times during the remainder of the MBA programme.

This study explores how the phenomenon of coaching was experienced by the FTMBA students, with a particular focus on three key questions:

- to what extent is life stage transition apparent in Cranfield FTMBA students?
- how does coaching enable FTMBA students to make meaning of their sense of self?
- how does coaching support FTMBA students during a time of transition?

Motivation for the research

At the time of conducting the research, I was responsible for the career coaching programme provided for Cranfield FTMBA students. I also worked closely with faculty colleagues who led the executive and co-coaching interventions for FTMBA students. I had observed the considerable flux that many students experience during the programme. I had seen that most students seemed to find the coaching a valuable source of support during what are often challenging times for them. At the same time, there were usually a few students within each cohort who were frustrated at the lack of answers or solutions provided by the client centred coaching approach adopted. I was curious to understand more about how the students experienced the different coaching interventions.

From a broader perspective, coaching has the potential to play a significant role in helping individuals to navigate significant transitions throughout their lives (Palmer and Panchal, 2010). A limited number of studies has been conducted in this area, such as those by Zarecky (2014), Florent-Treacy (2009) and Stapleton (2012). This study aimed to contribute to the research literature by adding to the evidence base which informs our understanding of the impact of coaching on the lived experience and meaning making of individuals going through transition.

The next section provides a summary of the insights gained from a review of the literature on life span development, career transition and coaching for transition. I will then outline the methodological approach that I took, before describing the key themes which emerged from the data analysis. Finally, I will consider the implications of my findings for the theory and practice of coaching.

Literature review

Life span development

Adult development theories propose that people have the potential to learn, develop and change throughout their adult life (e.g. Levinson 1986; Kegan and Lahey, 2009). An overarching theme is that our sense of self and the way we make meaning of our experiences is continually evolving throughout our life course. Sartre's emphasis of the developmental aspects of being human is relevant here. This has been described as: "we are always becoming ourselves, and that the self is not a pre-existing unity to be discovered, but rather an ongoing project to be unfurled" (Smith, Larkin and Flowers, 2009, p. 19).

Levinson (1986 p.6) takes a holistic approach, describing the "life structure" as being the "underlying pattern or design of a person's life at a given time". The pattern is made up of times of relative stability separated by times of transition and is a result of the evolution of the life course rather than a reaction to external events. The Age 30 Transition (Levinson, 1986) is described as occurring in early adulthood and being a time when previous life choices are re-evaluated in the light of the future. Decisions made in the past might not fit anymore and individuals consider making deeper commitments to work and/or personal relationships. The notion of re-evaluation and transition in order to form a new life style is

echoed in Bridges' (2004) model. Whilst Bridges (2004) proposes a different life structure to that described by Levinson (1986), he also sees the end of the twenties as being a period of significant reappraisal of the life to date, and an opportunity to make decisions which will change the lifestyle going forward.

Levinson's theory of adult development has prompted a number of research studies. Whilst Dunn and Merriam (1995) did not find persuasive evidence of Age 30 transition, they recognised the limitations of the survey methodology used. In comparison two qualitative studies focusing on women found evidence of a major transition around the time of their late 20s and early 30s (Reinke, Holmes and Harris, 1985; Gramling, 2007). Moreover, a more recent study (Panchal and Jackson, 2007) found the transition was even more evident in Generation Y during their late 20s and early 30s.

Arguably, coaching is about facilitating and supporting growth and change. For example, Peter Bluckert provides the following definition:

> *Coaching is the facilitation of learning and development with the purpose of improving performance and enhancing effective action, goal achievement and personal satisfaction. It invariably involves growth and change, whether that is in perspective, attitude or behaviour. (Bluckert, 2005, p. 173).*

Taking this into account, Lawrence (2017) argues it must be beneficial for coaches to have an understanding of adult development theories and to consider how to use that knowledge in their practice. He highlights that the risk of applying such theories too rigidly to coaching practice is that it could result in an overly diagnostic and judgemental approach. However, if applied tentatively and flexibly, viewing the presenting issue through the lens of adult development theory may provide new insights and could help the coach to adapt their approach to the needs of the client (Lawrence, 2017).

Career transition and sense of self

The concept of the boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994) has become prominent in current career theory. This has implications for an individual's sense of self and also for the qualities or competencies that are useful for successfully managing a boundaryless career (Eby, Butts and Lockwood, 2003). Ibarra (2003) proposes that we have many possible selves and so in periods of career transition we need to explore these different selves to find a good fit for that particular time in our life. Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) suggest that when going through a career change it could be more helpful to integrate old and new identities instead of letting go of our old identity in order to take on a new one. This contrasts with theories of transition which emphasise an ending of what has gone before in order to move on and embrace a new start (Bridges, 2004).

Coaching for transition

A relatively limited number of studies have explored the impact of coaching on individuals seeking to manage personal transition. Polly Parker (2017) points out that research into coaching and career transition exists, but these phenomena are rarely explored together. She argues that it would be valuable to integrate both fields of study to strengthen the theoretical base of coaching for career change and role transition.

Despite the growth of coaching interventions within MBA programmes there appear to be few studies investigating the experience of coaching for MBA students. Most of the studies conducted have been surveys, e.g. Parker, Hall and Kram (2008) and Mosteo et al (2016). However, Dubouloy (2004) used interviews to explore the development of MBAs whilst they were in the "transitional space" (Dubouloy, 2004, p. 467) of a two year EMBA programme. Group coaching was found to help the students to let go of their "false self" (Dubouloy, 2004,

p.467). Dubouloy argues that it is the false self which is responsible for unhelpful career decisions, such as staying too long in the wrong career or making a sudden decision to leave. In this sense his view differs from that of Ibarra who focuses on the importance of an individual's career identity and their "true self".

My review of the literature has demonstrated the recurring theme of a developing sense of self and its significance to key life stages and career transition. The literature suggests that re-evaluation of the self can be painful and difficult but can bring many potential benefits. Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) explore the construct of liminality derived from anthropological studies of rites of passage. They argue that the state of being "betwixt and between social roles and/or identities" (2016, p. 47) is very relevant to the nature of careers today and stress the importance of understanding liminality. They assert that the better we understand it, the better able we are to offer advice about realising "the benefits of its fertile emptiness" (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016, p.61). Coaching has the potential to play a significant role, but research into how it can play that role and its impact is limited, especially when it comes to qualitative phenomenological research. Hence my study has a contribution to make in this area by adding to the limited research base regarding the impact of coaching on the lived experience and meaning making of individuals going through such transitions.

Methodology

My philosophical stance regarding research into social science is that of a social constructivist. I recognise the "active role of individuals in the construction of social reality" (Bryman, 2016, p. 30). Due to my interest in understanding the lived experience of FTMBA students, I decided to use interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Larkin and Flowers, 2009). I felt that this method was best placed to provide rich and detailed data about how the students made sense of the phenomenon of coaching. I took a purposive approach to sampling and used information provided by the graduate administration team to select female students aged between 28 – 33 at the start of the programme, in accordance with the age band suggested by Levinson (1986) for Age 30 transition. This resulted in five participants. However, once I started data collection I discovered that one of my participants was, in fact, aged 45 at the start of the programme. As her age fell within the banding for Mid-life transition (Levinson, 1986), I decided to include her data in this study. The characteristics of the sample group are presented in Table 1 below. For reasons of anonymity, I have used pseudonyms and I have not attached these to the characteristics of the students, nor have I specified the European country of the fifth participant.

Table 1: Characteristics of the sample group

Participant	Gender	Age at start of FTMBA programme	Nationality
1	Female	33	Indian
2	Female	28	Indian
3	Female	29	Chinese
4	Female	33	Indian
5	Female	45	European

I conducted in depth one-to-one interviews with the five participants, and these were further enriched by using photo elicitation during the interviews. Harper (2002) argues that the use of visual media as well as words enables different types of information to be accessed, because images "evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than words" (Harper,

2002, p. 13). He describes how photographs have been used to examine the social identity of a range of individuals, and as my study was concerned with self-understanding, I felt this method could further thicken and ground the interview data (Bryman, 2016, p. 476). So, I asked my participants to bring to the interview session a photo or picture which represented their thoughts and feelings about the coaching.

I transcribed the interviews myself and analysed and coded each transcript to identify the key themes. I then looked across all five cases to identify connections and generate three super-ordinate themes. I was aware that the role I held at the time could impact on my interpretation of the data. Not only did I work in the same institution that I was investigating, I was a key stakeholder, being both a coach and responsible for the career coaching programme. Smith, Larkin and Flowers (2009) encourage the use of reflective practices to help the researcher to put to one side their pre-conceptions, enabling them to focus on the material the participant is presenting. With this in mind, I kept a reflective diary, noting initial impressions, judgements and insights. This helped me to consider how to separate out my own voice from that of the participant.

Findings

Three super-ordinate themes emerged as a result of the analysis. Table 2 shows how each theme is nested within the superordinate themes.

Table 2: Master table of themes

Super-ordinate Themes	A new sense of self	Managing personal transition	A safe holding space
Themes	Enhancing self-understanding: *'a sparkling light'*	Impetus for change: *'the world is not that one where I live, but much bigger'*	A safe place: *'cosy warm feeling'*
	A more empowered self: *'the next day you will start afresh'*	New strategies to support transition: *'being more assertive makes you more confident'*	A unique relationship: *'not something that you just get very easily'*
			Skills of the coaches: *'Actually, it's very skilful'*
Examples	Making sense of the past	Drive to break free	Connection and trust
	Personal validation	Ownership of development	Neutral relationship
	Future vision	Assertiveness, leadership and influencing	Listening
	Letting go of limiting assumptions and beliefs		
	Confidence and energy to meet goals		

I shall provide a short summary describing the essence of each theme, and then illustrate how it applied to the participants in my study.

A new sense of self

A dominant theme which emerged was about how the coaching supported the participants in making sense of themselves. The coaching sessions consistently offered a new perspective on participants' sense of self and the analysis identified two key headings: enhancing self-understanding and building a more positive view of the self.

Enhancing self-understanding 'a sparkling light'

The participants all described how the coaching enabled them to better understand themselves. Typically, it helped them to make sense of their past decisions and, as a result, served as a form of validation. They also gained a clearer view of their strengths, capabilities and interests, all of which could inform future decision making. Pat summed this up very well:

Pat:

> I think by doing all these coachings, […] I learn better about myself, because by telling my stories to them, and reviewing my experience, actually, and with their help to dig into some details, I really understand more about who I am, what I like, what I'm good at and what I don't like and which part I'm not good at, and by understanding this, it really help me to understand all the decisions I make in the past and why I am here now, there are always some reasons, and by understanding all those, it will help me actually to make further decisions in the future.

This understanding helps her to feel positive about the decisions that she has made in the past: "*every major choice, every major choice I make in my life is actually quite right.*" The phrasing she uses indicates that she has looked back on her past decisions through the lens of her new understanding, and made a judgement about herself, that she was 'right'. Implicit in this judgement, is the suggestion that there may have been the view – held by herself or others, that some of her choices were 'wrong'. When asked how she felt on gaining this new insight into herself she said:

Pat:

> It's sort of like […] oh, a sparkling, a sparkling light oh, actually I was, I was like that, that moment of, of realisation? …I didn't have that question, but knowing that, it really make my path clear, and make me see myself clear, so it's a good moment I think.
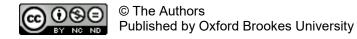
The participants drew links between understanding the past and their plans for the future:

Louisa:

> …with the career coaching, I was able to identify why I took certain decisions earlier, what were my career anchors, and then strategise for my future career ambitions or goals.

It is interesting to see how much importance the participants gave to understanding *why* they had made certain decisions in the past. My sense is that they may have felt some pressure to justify those decisions to themselves and others. Whilst it is not fully clear how much of this pressure was self-generated, it does appear that being able to come to terms with their past decision making helps them to achieve some sense of personal validation.

The participants described how these foundations of enhanced self-awareness helped them to clarify their visions for the future. The coaching helped the participants to consider and to

value their intrinsic motivators, and to use this as a foundation for thinking about their career options:

Emma:
> *I had never really looked at it like this, because I thought, OK, the career is probably supposed to mean money and position and everything, but then internally you do have other needs which you do not, explicitly recognise unless you see something like that,* [reference to the career planning workshop].

These accounts show how the coaching helped the participants to recognise the importance of enjoying work and finding it interesting and fulfilling. There was a clear theme about becoming clearer about the destination, and students often used metaphors such as 'journey' and 'path'. This is not surprising, given they had all chosen to study an MBA in order to make a significant transition. Overall, I got the sense that the coaching helped to give them the permission to be a more complete version of themselves. This is explored further in the next section: building a more empowered self which was facilitated by letting go of limiting beliefs.

A more empowered self – 'the next day you will start afresh'
The participants described how the coaching helped them to build a more positive view of themselves. This often involved letting go of past beliefs and assumptions and/or others' expectations. They valued the reassurance they gained from the coaching, that they were 'OK', and this resulted in a stronger sense of self, confident to take fully owned decisions. This increased independence was particularly apparent in the participants aged in their 30s. The participants described how their enhanced understanding resulted in a changed self which was more empowered to face the future. The changes included more confidence, resilience and energy, all of which could be used to help them meet their goals.

All the participants found term one to be very demanding and Anamika describes how the coaching helped her to challenge her normal approach of critiquing herself:

Anamika:
> *I was very self-critical at that time, […]. But then, I discussed that with my coach, and she helped me to understand that it's not always that you have done something wrong, it can be the situation, it can be somebody else's mood.*

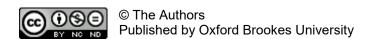Moreover, she linked her experience on the MBA to past patterns of behaviour:

Anamika:
> *then I was reflecting on the session, I felt that that's pretty true about me in general, it was not just because of term one, […] that has happened to me in previous circumstances as well, and I used to feel drained out, and I used to be continually, being self-critical, which I should probably stop doing, is what I realised.*

Once she stopped being so self-critical, she realised the benefits:

Anamika:
> *I think that, in the second term, I was much better, […], instead of being very self-critical, I was like, OK, fine whatever the situation comes, it happens and then it finishes off and the next day you will start afresh. That approach has actually helped me quite a lot to preserve my energy and do lots of things that I wanted to do.*

For Louisa, it was about letting go of cultural expectations:

Louisa:

> *from the background I come from, it's more expected that I am not much assertive about things, so I have to shift from that, to be more assertive, and more forthcoming. Yeah, and that's one area that I've worked on, on the executive coaching.*

Whilst my older participant – Anna, spoke about increasing her self-understanding, she did not specifically mention letting go of others' expectations or self-blame. It maybe that these aspects were particularly pertinent for the students in their early 30s, which would be consistent with theories about adult development – i.e. moving from 'early adulthood' (Levinson, 1986) into a more mature state.

Managing personal transition

Transition, and the sense of moving forwards towards a new future or destination, was a key concept for all the participants. Within this super-ordinate theme, I found two key groupings: the impetus for change – which drove the decision to study the full-time MBA and the support that the coaching provided in terms of the development of new strategies to facilitate a successful transition.

Impetus for change – 'the world is not that one where I live, but much bigger'

All five participants described an inner drive for change which grew after a period of relative stability before coming onto the MBA. All of them described how they planned to use the MBA to help them evaluate their current lives, explore possibilities for change and shape a new future.

There was a sense that the participants saw their former lives as being limited or closed in some way, and that they wished to use the MBA to open up new possibilities.

Anna:

> *I felt [sigh] a little bit closed, the environment, it was exactly the same people everywhere […], always the same people, who visited, and I felt that the world is not that, that one where I live, but much bigger.*

Louisa described how she wanted to stay in the same profession, but to increase her impact by having an international career:

Louisa:

> *I could see that working at a global level would give me a lot of exposure, different ways of working, and could give me a global career, and I could have a larger impact.*

There was also the sense that having a break would enable the participants to take stock of their lives and themselves and help them to make decisions for the future:

Pat:

> *I've been working all the time so I was a bit exhausted, from eight years of time, […], when people get married there's a seven-year itch, and that happened [laughs], to me and my work, and I was thinking […] maybe it's time to get a break and, just stay away from work and to think about my life and maybe do something different.*

The picture painted by these accounts is that each of the participants felt that they were ready to break free of the limitations of their former lives, that they wanted to take some time out to take stock of themselves and to make a transition which would help them expand their lives, develop themselves and increase their sphere of influence. The next theme focuses on

how the coaching helped the students to develop strategies to successfully manage these personal transitions.

New strategies to support transition – 'being more assertive makes you more confident'

Working with the coaches enabled the participants to develop a range of new behavioural strategies to support their desired transitions. This theme is closely linked to becoming a more empowered self. As participants let go of previous limiting beliefs about themselves, they became more open to developing new behavioural strategies. They developed behaviours to help them interact more effectively with others, become better leaders and increase their chances of making a successful career change.

Louisa talked about the benefits of developing her assertiveness, which she attributed to her work with her executive coach:

Louisa:

> Being more assertive makes you more confident, you are able to contribute to a group, […] and put forward your point of view and your ideas as well. And I want to be a leader in regulation, so I think for leaders, being assertive is very important.

Louisa's example shows how systemic the coaching experience can be. Earlier we saw that the coaching helped her to challenge certain cultural assumptions which could block assertive behaviour. Here we see that developing her assertiveness skills has built her confidence which, in turn, helps her to see herself as a leader.

A safe holding space

The exploration of self and the development of new behavioural strategies would not have been possible without a sound coaching relationship and the final theme explores this further. There was a marked difference between the participants' experience with their co-coaches as compared to their experiences with the 'professional' coaches – i.e. the executive and career coaches. The support received from the executive and career coaches was much more impactful, and I shall focus on the benefits of that support in this article.
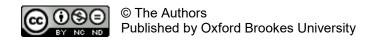
A safe place – 'a cosy, warm feeling'

A recurrent theme was the warmth, trust and support that the students experienced when working with their career and executive coaches. This, in turn, had a positive impact on their own mood and appeared to be a source of strength to help them challenge previous beliefs and assumptions.

A unique relationship – 'not something that you just get very easily'

The participants recognised that their coaching relationships offered something special that was different to the support they might receive from their friends, family members and colleagues. It also appeared to be quite different to the relationships they had with their co-coaches. They all valued the lack of personal agenda held by the career and executive coaches:

Emma:

> it has been about having another perspective and being able to talk to this person who has no stakes but who's completely willing to give you their time, to just understand what you're going through. […]. And I think that's not something that you just get very easily.

Skills of the coaches – 'actually it's very skilful'

Without fail the participants appreciated the skills shown by the executive and career coaches. Listening stood out as the key skill, and this enabled the coaches to help the participants analyse issues and identify common threads in the challenges they were facing and in the stories they told about themselves.

Anamika:

> *both of my coaches, they have got amazing listening skills [laughs]. […] the sense of being heard by someone is something which is self-motivating.*

The participants' accounts demonstrate the power of effective listening skills. Perhaps the most important impact was the feeling of being valued and respected, which in turn created a sense of trust which encouraged them to be open. This safe holding space appeared to be important for the participants as they explored their understanding of themselves in a time of transition.
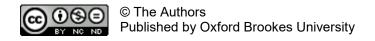
Discussion

The findings serve to support much of the existing literature, and the accounts of the participants help to further illuminate *how* coaching helps students to develop their self-understanding and *how* it provides support during personal transition.

Coaching helped the participants to enhance their self-understanding and develop a more empowered sense of self. Rather than exploring different possible selves (Ibarra, 2003), letting go of a 'false self' (Dubouloy, 2004), or letting go of the past (Bridges, 2004), our students made meaning of themselves by making sense of and coming to terms with the past. This enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and *why* they had made certain decisions or felt a strong drive to make a change. Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) suggest that it might be helpful to integrate old and new identities in a time of transition and it could be argued that the coaching helped our participants to do just that, by helping them to better understand their past decision-making. The personal validation and self-awareness that this brought enabled them to develop further their new sense of self.

Ibarra (2003) purports that a deeper understanding of the self can arise from challenging underlying basic assumptions, and indeed the participants described how the coaching helped them to let go of limiting beliefs and assumptions. There was certainly a sense that the coaching helped to free the individuals from the expectations of others, enabling them to choose their next career based on what they wanted, rather than what others wanted for them. The sessions provided the non-judgemental support which Dubouloy (2004) highlights as being essential if students are to make such independent choices. However, his reference to the coach being like a "good enough mother" (2004, p 477) contrasts with the participants' view that it was because the coaches were neither friends nor family that they could be neutral.

This research adds to the very few studies which link adult learning theories with coaching. It highlights that, for some students, life stage transition could be an important factor – both in terms of prompting the decision to study for an MBA, and in terms of adding to the psychological demands placed on the student during the programme. The findings support the concept of Age 30 transition (Levinson, 1986) and demonstrate how coaching can facilitate growth during an important life stage.

This study develops the limited evidence base regarding coaching programmes offered to MBAs. It builds on the findings of Mosteo et al (2016) by reinforcing the role that coaching can play in helping students to clarify their visions of themselves for the future. Coaching

helped the participants to understand their intrinsic motivators and hence build a clearer vision of their desired future. This served to energise them to work towards their goals. Furthermore, the coaching sessions facilitated the development of a range of positive behavioural strategies which enabled the students to meet their goals and achieve personal growth and development.

On a broader level, this study is a response to Polly Parker's plea (2017) for more research exploring coaching and career transition together. Coaching helped the students to build their confidence, along with a greater understanding of their personal motivation, their strengths and how to use their network. In other words, the sessions helped the participants to develop the essential career competencies of 'knowing why', 'knowing how' and 'knowing whom' (Arthur, Claman and DeFillippi, 1995).

Finally, this study's depiction of the systemic nature of coaching helps to explain *why* coaching can be such a powerful intervention. I really did get a sense of the students becoming a more complete and rounded version of themselves, with more confidence, resilience and energy. In this respect, I could clearly see the concept of an ever developing and unfurling sense of self as described by Smith, Larkin and Flowers (2009, p. 19).

Conclusion

This study sought to understand how students experience coaching during a FTMBA programme and to answer three specific questions:
- to what extent is life stage transition apparent in Cranfield FTMBA students?
- how does coaching enable FTMBA students to make meaning of their sense of self?
- how does coaching support FTMBA students during a time of transition?

With regards to the first question, the participants' accounts of their reasons for choosing to study the MBA were consistent with life stage transition, i.e. they all wished to take stock of their current lives and themselves, and to make decisions which would shape the next phase of their lives. In terms of the second question, the participants described how the coaching enabled them to make sense of and develop further their understanding of who they are, resulting in a more empowered self, focused on achieving their new career and life goals. As for the third question, the safe holding space provided by the coaching was described as a key source of support which enabled them to deal with the psychological adjustments inherent in transition and to develop new strategies to help them realise their future vision.

Limitations and future research

In accordance with the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis, the approach taken to sampling was idiographic. Only five students were interviewed, drawn from a cohort of 57 students, so I cannot make generalisations about their experiences and assume they are representative of the rest of the cohort. Future studies might build on this by exploring the coaching experience for male students as well as students of different ages. A further limitation of the research is around the timing of the interviews. The students were still in the midst of their transition at the time of the interviews. This meant that their experiences of coaching during the MBA were very fresh in their minds, however, it would be interesting to add a longitudinal dimension to this research, by following up with the same students once they become alumni and have completed their career transition.

Implications and recommendations for coaching practice

Based on the findings, I would recommend that coaches take note of the important role they can play in providing a safe holding space for clients as they manage personal transition. This study would indicate that three elements are significant when providing such support, and these are to do with *how* the coaching is conducted: ensuring that there is a clearly defined coaching contract; working to provide a neutral and non-judgemental source of support and demonstrating attentive listening skills. Coaching supervision is essential to enable coaches to review their approach in terms of these three areas.

In addition, there are implications for *what* might usefully be explored in coaching sessions when supporting individuals through transition. Exploration of past decisions, feelings and experiences is likely to provide a useful source of data for enhancing self-understanding. For career coaching, helping the individual to clarify and prioritise their intrinsic motivators and career vision is clearly important, and for anyone seeking to make a change, the coach can play an important role in listening out for, and helping the individual to challenge limiting beliefs and assumptions. Moreover, coaches can help individuals to develop new behavioural strategies.

Finally, for myself as a practitioner it has been heartening to hear how much the coaching has meant to the participants. Sometimes as a coach I wonder how much difference I can make, especially when clients are feeling particularly lost and there is no clear resolution at the end of the session. However, hearing the accounts of the participants has really helped to reinvigorate my own sense of purpose as a coaching practitioner.

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