Coaching millennial leaders: Life stage versus the times we live in

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a study focused on the experience of coaches when coaching millennial leaders (where millennials are those people born 1980-1999). Following a hermeneutic phenomenological approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), four coaches were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Findings relate to the life stage of the coach compared to their millennial client, which resulted in coaches often playing the role of mentor; or to 'the times we live in', with millennial clients interacting with the world differently from their coaches, which affected coaches' ways of working and work-life balance expectations.

Key Words: Coaching; millennial; Generation; Leader, Work-Life, Mentor

Introduction

The members of the latest generation to enter the workforce are known as 'millennials'; those people born between the years of 1980-1999 (Twenge & Campbell, 2012). Millennials have received a great deal of press coverage in recent years with claims being made about their characteristics, what they are good at and not good at. Whilst the claims are 'attention-grabbing', they are not based on research. Typical recent headlines include The Boston Globe's 'A generation of idle trophy kids' (Graham, 2013) and Time magazine's 'The Me Me Me Generation' (Stein, 2013a), both, on the surface, denigrating a whole generational cohort. Now that the oldest people within the millennial cohort are in their thirties (up to the age of 35) some hold leadership positions. Given that leadership development is recognised as a means to support organisations to be better performing (Center for Creative Leadership, 2008), a number of millennial leaders are now likely to be engaged in leadership development; this may include coaching which is recognised as being an effective means to develop leaders (Thach, 2002).

Given the popular media interest in millennials and the prevalence of related articles, I felt that there was a risk that coaches could be influenced inappropriately about potential characteristics of their millennial clients, which could affect their coaching of them. As such, I became interested in researching the experience of coaches when coaching millennial leaders. I hoped to gain insight into how coaches understood their experience and whether they shared, unprompted, differences from coaching other generational cohorts. As a coach, I was interested in the coaches' reality and what might resonate for me, believing that other coaches may be interested in my findings, given enough rich description to be able to decide for themselves any applicability or transferability by assessing the relevance of the research to their situations (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

In the following sections I share the key literature relating to this subject before explaining the methodology followed in the research. I then share two aspects of my findings related to life stages of coach and client and 'the times we live in'. In the discussion section I explain some possible implications for coaches before moving to the conclusion.

Literature

There is a limited amount of directly relevant research about the experience of coaches when coaching millennial leaders; the literature reviewed in this paper is from related areas exploring some of the potential influences of such coaching experiences.

Firstly thought, it is important to be clear on what is meant by millennial generation. The label millennial (also known as Generation Y') relates to a commonly known name for a specific generational cohort. A generational cohort can be defined as:

> [. . . people] passing through time who come to share a common habitus, hexis and culture, a function of which is to provide them with a collective memory that serves to integrate the generation over a finite period of time (Eyerman & Turner, 1998, p. 93).

The theory is that generational cohort is shaped by significant events experienced by its members at young adulthood (around 14-24 years of age). The most well-publicised generational cohort labels in the western world are: Traditionalists; Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964); Generation X (born 1965-1979); and Millennials born between 1980-1999 (Twenge & Campbell, 2012); or Generation Y (Clark, 2010; Asthana, 2008; Holland, 2013). While there is broad agreement about date periods of generational cohorts, there are differences stated about start and end year and some authors believe that the generations overlap by about 3 to 4 years (Zemke et al., 2013).

In considering research focused on the coach in relation to the client, Feldman and Lankau (2005) found that the background characteristics of the coach, (e.g. age, education, work experience) may influence the perceived credibility of the coach as well as the client's openness to being coached. It is likely currently that the majority of coaches of millennials will belong to older generational cohorts (Judge & Cowell, 1997; Gale et al., 2002), such as generation X or baby boomer.

Coaches can benefit their clients by considering distinctive behavioural characteristics and then adapting from readily accepted coaching methods accordingly, for example when coaching high achievers (Jones and Spooner, 2006), culturally diverse executives (Coultas et al., 2011), or narcissists (Kearney, 2010). As such the work attitudes and organisational behaviours of millennials may be relevant and what is known through research is explored below. Honoré and Paine Schofield (2009) explored the impact of learning and technology influences on the millennial generation and proposed that this generation have missed out on the opportunity to hone skills in thinking critically, exploring deeply and reflecting in general. Prensky (2001a; 2001b) theorised that this is a result of millennials being 'Digital Natives' who, as students, have likely read for 5000 hours but played video games for 10000 hours and watched television for 20000 hours, resulting in different ways of processing of information and hence different brain structures from previous generations (Rock and Page, 2009). Implications for coaching could be that millennials seek support in developing decision-making skills and mindfulness development. Other consequences of the different ways of processing information include the apparent ability to parallel process rather than sequentially process, as well as having superior 'rule-discovery' skills through observation, trial and error and inductive reasoning (Prensky, 2001a); such characteristics could be recognised as strengths in millennials to be capitalised on through specific coaching interventions (Kauffman et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

Honoré and Paine Schofield (2009) found both strengths and development areas in relation to the apparent maturity of millennials, with strengths being that millennials are 'street-wise' with global-awareness while potential development areas include self-awareness and emotional intelligence. While researchers speculate that these tendencies may be more age-related than cohort related, the development areas could be a potential focus for coaching with current millennial leaders.

A further potential development area for millennials is the ability to digest developmental feedback in a professional way. Honoré and Paine Schofield (2009) indicate that millennials are able to give criticism but can have difficulty in receiving criticism. Espinoza et al. (2010) believe that millennial defensiveness is tied to a desire to achieve. From a coaching perspective, this could imply that solutions-focused models and appreciative inquiry could be beneficial by providing a positive approach while sensitively addressing development needs (St. Claire-Ostwald, 2012; Cavanagh & Grant, 2010).

U.S. based research concerning the preferred leadership characteristics of millennials indicates that millennials value determined, ambitious leaders who 'challenge the system and create change' (Arsenault, 2004, p.137). Ironically, millennials may be reluctant to take the risks involved with initiating change for themselves: Honoré and Paine Schofield (2009) emphasise the influence of 'helicopter parenting' in which parents fight their child's battles for them, resulting in limiting the child's risk-taking opportunities. Leadership requires a measure of risk-taking and so millennial leaders may ask a coach to support them in being able to face into risks (O'Neill, 2007).

Twenge and Campbell (2008) used cross-temporal meta-analysis to compare like-age personality, attitude or behaviour scale data samples of 1.4 million people in different years (between the 1930s and 2008). One of their findings is that narcissism levels have increased for millennials when compared to previous generations (Twenge *et al.*, 2008). Narcissists are skilled at becoming leaders but potentially negative behaviours can include difficulty in getting on with others and lack of empathy (Twenge & Campbell, 2008), risky decision making (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007), experiencing more variation in performance (Stein, 2013b), and putting their own needs before those they lead (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006); thus there are many potential focus areas that could be presented to a coach of a narcissistic client. A second finding is that between 1962 and 2002 college students became more external in relation to their locus of control (Twenge *et al.*, 2004). The most recent college students in the 18,000 measured between these dates are millennials. As those with an external locus of control ('externals') believe that their fate is down to others or luck, they are more likely to blame others if things do not go their way and lack a sense of personal responsibility (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Also, externals are more likely to indicate that they are depressed (Mirowsky & Ross, 1990). It is possible that the increase in externality may explain why millennials are said to prefer to work in collaboration with others (Twenge &Campbell, 2008). Potentially, millennial leaders may need coaching to support them in standing alone and being accountable and such coaching may need to be organisationally instigated (Blau, 1987).

There is evidence to suggest that both coaches and clients recognise the importance of the coach adapting to the client (O'Broin & Palmer, 2010; Ives & Cox, 2012). This implies that it may be helpful for the coach to be self-aware regarding their own preferences and style (which potentially includes generational cohort traits) as well as being aware of the preferences and style of their client to support an effective coaching relationship, and in order to understand their experiences of coaching.

Methodology

The philosophical stance that I subscribe to is interpretivism, based on a constructionist epistemology. Constructionism is a view that knowledge and meaning are constructed through the interaction between people and the world that they experience (Crotty, 1998) and this view aligned with my research intention to explore the coaching of millennial leaders, to understand the coaches' meaning making, their feelings, and their insights about their experience. I selected a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach enabled me to gain an understanding of the participant experiences from their perspective,

as well as to critically question the interview text to explore meaning that the participant may have been less aware of (Smith and Osborne, 2003).

The key research objective was to explore the experience of coaches who coach millennial leaders and their understanding of such experience, with a particular focus on where the coaches felt their experience was different from that of coaching leaders from other generational cohorts. Supporting research questions focused on how coaches experienced: the coaching process; relationship building; setting coaching focus areas; and how they and their clients 'showed up' in coaching sessions. The aim was to follow where the coaches wished to lead the conversation, only using questions if the coaches were reticent in sharing. I hoped to be able to subsequently notice any themes that naturally arose where the coaches felt that their experience was different from that of coaching leaders from other generational cohorts, rather than directly asking questions related to difference; my intention was to help the coaches avoid making connections to generational difference stereotypes that they had heard and to more naturally surface their experiences.

I selected four research participants. All were female, belonged to generations pre-millennial, focused on executive coaching and had between 7 and 20 years' coaching experience. Three coaches were American and one was British.

Social research has seen ethical issues receive more attention in recent years (Langdridge, 2007) with a focus on ensuring that research participants are treated in a way that protects their confidentiality and keeps them from harm. I shared a Participant Information Sheet with my interviewees that enabled them to understand the purpose of the study, what would be required of them, issues of confidentiality and how the results would be utilised. I explained that quotes from interview participants would be used anonymously and information provided relating to participants would be kept confidential, which is important in any research but particularly so for coaches who would be talking about their clients. I made it clear to the participants that, in talking about their coaching, they should ensure that their clients remained anonymous.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews of 90 minutes in order to enable the gathering of detailed, rich, but concrete description of the participant's lived experience (Finlay, 2013). The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

I aimed to stay true to the IPA guidelines of Smith et al. (2009) in analysing the data by engaging with each interview transcript individually to note, reflect and identify themes before then looking for patterns across all four analyses. I represented resulting themes through a master table, checking for sufficient recurrence across cases. I found the process of moving away from and then closer to the data powerful; as I repeated the process I found that the connections across the whole became more detailed while simultaneously raising more questions that I wanted to explore against relevant literature.

To ensure methodological rigour and research quality I followed the approach outlined by Yardley (2000) who suggests four quality criteria: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance.

Findings

1. Relative life-stage of Coach and Client - Coaches adopting the role of mentor

Coaches were not directly asked how their coaching may have changed to accommodate millennial leaders but it became apparent that the coaches reacted to having millennials as clients, particularly, and mostly unconsciously, through taking on the role of mentor. While coaching and mentoring definitions vary and overlap, typically mentoring is often associated with expert

knowledge sharing while coaching is not (Garvey, 2010). The adoption of this type of mentoring role appeared to be related to the context within which the coaches find themselves due to their life-stage in comparison to their clients.

All four coaches talked about mentoring, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, in describing how they work with millennials and examples were given to indicate that the nature of the relationship between the coach and the millennial clients made mentoring more of a possibility. Two of the coaches linked the mentoring role to their client's opinion of them as wise experts with one suggesting that the client was protective of her in that role saying *"she saw me as the expert and she wanted to keep me as her mentor."*

A range of mentoring topics were shared through the conversations about the focus areas of coaching including specific topic areas such as management and leadership (both working with managers and being managers or people leaders), emotional intelligence (e.g. giving feedback, being in touch with feelings) and ways to better manage work-life balance issues. For example in the following quote, the coach describes supporting a client who was considering leaving her employer rather than tackle some issues that were making her unhappy:

> *Clients think that they are being very direct and they're not about it so we'll spend a lot of time talking about how you give feedback, how to lead up and how to give feedback to employers about what they need.*

Coaches also spoke of more generic mentoring: *"I think on the one hand I think they are essentially less experienced so some of it is providing some guidance, some basic stuff."*

This example shows that the coaches make sense of the need to mentor by relating it to the millennial client, however, the relative age of the coaches to their clients may be equally as responsible for the mentoring role being adopted; coaches seemed to recognise the generational age difference in a way which reminded them of familial relationships or triggered parental-type behaviour. One coach indicated that thinking about her millennial clients reminded her of a conversation with her mother and brought out a need to protect her client:

> *You kind of think gosh everyone's got similar kinds of challenges and thinking in what ways can you somehow share some of the wisdom of life early on. I remember my mother saying to me when I was probably a teenager, 'I wish I could pass on to you my knowledge of life so that you don't have to go through all that painful learning'.*

Another mentioned that she could be her client's Mom, and referred to her client as 'girl' underlining the generational difference. She shared how her client had appreciated that she had experience of what she was going through and could offer 'validation': These examples bring to mind the way a mother might relate to a teenage son or daughter in that most parents want to protect their child from pain and stress, or validate their feelings to help the child build a secure sense of self (Hall and Cook, 2012).

Given that millennials may have missed out on the opportunity to hone skills in thinking critically, enquiring and reflecting (Honoré and Paine Schofield, 2009) and that they may lack a sense of personal responsibility (Twenge et al., 2004; Twenge and Campbell, 2008), it is possible that the coaches may reinforce such characteristics by being drawn into a mentoring role too frequently, reinforcing a parent-child dynamic. The coaches may reduce the learning of their client if they provide guidance too readily, rather than enabling their clients to sharpen their own critical reasoning (Boyatzis and Jack, 2010). It seems that some coaches are aware of the need to be cautious about dispensing advice as shown in the following extract:

> *I really was just trying to ask good open ended questions and certainly didn't want them to perceive that I was in anyway telling them what to do or giving advice, yet I would make suggestions here and there.*

The coach indicates sensitivity to being seen as giving advice but still feels that it is appropriate at times. However, there sometimes seems to be a tension for the coaches where they show an understanding of the need for caution but talk frequently of working in more of a mentoring style. Sometimes, they catch themselves and correct e.g. *"My sense of the people that I've been coaching if you coach on something 'well these are the things that you need to do'... that they decide to do sorry,"* Sometimes, their own opinions about what might be appropriate for the millennial seep through even as they indicate that they are holding themselves back from sharing with them, as in this case below for a coach talking about the expectations of her millennials compared with that of the millennials' managers:

> *I don't want to be saying 'hey just pay your dues, get used to it' but what is realistic in what the expectations are ... I do think it is true that a lot of their managers are thinking well it took me 20 years to get to where I am, I don't want to promote this person right away.*

There is a sense here that the coach agrees with the managers described but is trying to find a way to raise the millennial's awareness; she explained how she used questions to do so but while this enabled her to avoid giving direct advice, her questioning approach had its foundation in her own opinions.

Sometimes the coach is strongly in the mentoring role and gives direct advice sounding like a directive from a parent to a child as in this example where she is explaining to her millennial client the importance of face to face communication with colleagues seated nearby over electronic communication: *"You have to force yourself to communicate with them and actually walk over if you really aspire to have a management role in this company."*

Arnett and Schwab (2012) propose that there is a new life stage entitled 'emerging adult' between the ages of 18-29. Currently, many millennials are in that life stage, one which enables young people to gradually become more independent from their parents. Depending on where the millennial leader might be in their transition from emerging adult to young adult, there may be more likelihood for a millennial client to rely on a coach providing mentoring until the client fully accepts responsibility for themselves which is one of the key markers of adulthood (Arnett and Schwab, 2012).

Wherever the millennial clients were on the emerging adult to young adult transition, the coaches may have benefited from considering their experience as a thought-starter rather than as 'the blueprint for success' (Liston-Smith, 2011, p.101), in order to best support the millennial in taking personal responsibility.

2. The times we live in – how coach and client interact with the world

Coach and client expectations about how to behave in today's world were evident in two themes from the research – in how coach and client expected to take part in coaching and in their expectations about work-life balance.

Taking part in coaching

Three coaches explained how the ways in which their millennial clients expected to 'take part' in coaching were not what they might have expected and it required them to make changes to their approach. The cause of the changes was mostly different for the three coaches, but what was similar was that these came as a surprise to them and took some adjusting to, or some expectation management. Changes appear to be linked to generational differences in preferences. One coach

found that clients wanted frequent contact with her and that she would receive text updates between sessions which she was not used to.

> *There's a lot more texting and emailing. You know it's challenging for me as a coach because they like the contact. […] it's requiring me to be more flexible because I didn't have that built into my world. […] I'm assuming it's about that contact.*

Research on emerging adults (18-29 years old) indicates that they like on-going contact – many still have close relationships with their parents and contact them at least a few times a week if not every day (Arnett and Schwab, 2012); it could be that millennials are used to texting all of their contacts in this way or it could be related to the apparent 'parental' role that seems to play out at times between the coach and the client.

Another coach made adjustments related to dress code. She explained how her millennial clients have a more casual dress code which was surprising to her within a business coaching context:

> *So we start off with breakfast as the introduction to meeting participants that you're working with and I sit down at the table and my two participants are coming for breakfast and they walk up in Bermuda shorts and flip flops and I have to say it was the first time I'd ever had a breakfast of that nature and the casualness of walking into breakfast in flip flops. It was definitely a contrast.*

As a result, the coach adjusted her own dress code, finding a middle ground although she questioned herself about whether she was on holiday or in a business environment implying that the business casual dress code still did not sit entirely comfortably for her. Our dress supports the expression of our identity (Twigg, 2009); the coach's coaching persona is outwardly visible through the dress that she decides to wear. It seems that the change in attire was at odds with how she saw herself as a coach.

For two of the coaches, millennial expectations of what was acceptable regarding rescheduling of meetings required discussion and adjustment. While scheduling difficulties may be a part of many coaches' lives, these coaches described experiences where such rescheduling was very last minute and didn't take account of the impact on the coach. For one coach there was a sense that not only did this behaviour from her client cause her some inconvenience but that at first she was offended by it.

The final example of a change that took some adjusting to came from a coach who talked about how many of her millennials prefer a casual, public environment, such as a Starbucks café, over their offices: *"I am astounded by how well they can think and concentrate and sometimes cry or scream just sitting in Starbucks with someone sitting right next to them"*. She explained that while her clients are fine in such a setting she found it distracting and worried about confidentiality:

> *I can feel temperature, I can hear the music, I can tell what the person at the counter is ordering and I'm not at my best coaching because there's so many distractions that are hard for me to filter out but it's so important to my clients.*

Prensky (2001a) explains that millennials are better at multitasking because of their 'digital native' upbringing and so are likely to be able to filter in and out the stimuli that are meaningful for them. The coach ('digital immigrant') finds this much tougher. Even though she knows that she is not at her best coaching she tolerates the client's preferred choice of venue.

In considering these coaching adjustments, it can be seen that the coaches find ways to move towards their client's preferred way of working. Such a client-centred approach may only be beneficial to the client when the coach is comfortable with the adjustments, as logistical barriers

may inhibit coaching effectiveness (Wycherley & Cox, 2008). Potentially, coach and client may find a mutually beneficial approach through ongoing communication about coaching effectiveness and the needs of them both.

Work-life balance expectations

This theme is related to work-life balance of the millennials and how the coaches experienced their millennials talking about this issue. The coaches emphasised how much of an issue this is to their clients and described life-course challenges that the clients are going through, which seem to exacerbate the issue; and explored how business coaching seems to necessitate a more holistic approach involving what might also be termed life coaching, as life and work become more interwoven for the millennial generation. They also noted differences between their senior clients and millennials with respect to work-life balance.

Work-life balance is perceived to be a large, recurring focus for the millennial clients, with one coach saying *"we talked a lot about work life – it's just such a big issue... work life."* Three coaches questioned why work-life balance is such an issue for millennials and all three coaches shared that they thought the issue primarily related to life stage as this comment illustrates:

> *If we're looking at millennials, you know, it does seem to be that we're looking at people who are likely to be forming long lasting relationships, likely to be forming families, and likely to be accelerating in their careers. So they are actually juggling a whole bunch of things.*

The coaches shared different ways in which the work-life balance issues manifested themselves for their clients. One coach shared how her client has a capability issue which meant that he was struggling with how to focus at work and that this was carrying over into his personal life. Another shared how a choice made by one father to better the life of his children was resulting in increased travel for the father: A third shared how her clients' needs for work-life balance affected the choices that he made at work when considering a role that required a geographic move: *"He has a new child, his wife works, … he's not getting paid enough to pack up and work elsewhere and, you know, they're near her family, and so .. the childcare . .she has a really meaningful job."* This example may be one that is both related to life-stage (the need for child care) as well as present day career patterns given that the majority of couples with dependent children in the U.K., U.S.A. and Canada today are now dual-career and such couples are a growing trend globally (Masterson and Hoobler, 2014). It is possible that coaches would benefit from being aware that their millennial executives may be more likely to raise related issues for coaching conversations.

The subject of work-life balance was also raised by three of the coaches in relation to the organisational commitment of their millennial clients. The coaches talked about their experience of coaching their clients about whether to leave their current organisation or stay. For example, in the extract below:

> *It is surprising how many of them start with 'I think I want to leave my work' … 'I think I want to quit my job' […] they'll talk about 'well here's why' and almost always it will be some sort of family issue or disrespect or not being understood or not having the opportunity to contribute in the way they want.*

It seems that the organisation has to work for the millennial leader in a number of ways which include not only making a contribution but also enabling them to have lives outside of work. Work-life balance is one of the most well-publicised values of the millennial generation and while the millennial leader wants time for their life outside of work, they will not forego career advancement in order to achieve such a life, preferring to change company to get both (Espinoza et al., 2010). Work and family life influence each other (Clark, 2000) and some research has found that employees become more loyal to an organisation if they achieve higher work life quality (Rouzbahani et al., 2013) so it is perhaps not surprising that organisations that do not support

employee's needs for work-life balance have been found to impact their employee's perceptions of work-family conflict and ultimately to impact turnover (Masterson and Hoobler, 2014).

The organisations that had hired the coaches I interviewed seemed to recognise the need to support their clients with work-life balance issues, which are sometimes seen to be more a topic for life-coaching than for executive coaching (Grant and Cavanagh, 2010). This was evidenced by the examples given by the coaches on how their coaching for work-life supported better work performance or enabled retention. One coach helped her client consider how she could look for promotion and still maintain the work-life balance that she wanted: *"Can you look at growing your skills and still keep in focus the family time?"* Another took time to understand her client's issue at home and at work and then focused on building capability in the home environment that could also benefit the work environment.

Interestingly, the coaches expressed some of their own opinions about work-life balance which could stem from their own experience in the workforce before becoming coaches, as well as what they observe in their senior leader clients:

You know how people come to work - it's more of our lives than any other thing we do, other than sleep, and most of my clients work more than they sleep. So we end up being married to our work and when you look at our lives we spend more time at work than anywhere else.

Another coach indicated that a client told her that she never did work at weekends and her response was that she didn't know anyone who didn't do work at weekends. While these coaches indicate that employees end up married to their work or suggest that everyone works at weekends, it is unlikely that their opinion is shared by millennials given their strong work-life balance value (Espinoza et al., 2010). Baby Boomers had such a strong work ethic that their additional work each week on average added a month per year to their work lives (Espinoza et al., 2010). There is potentially a risk that the Generation X or Baby Boomer experience of work shapes their coaching in a way that blinkers them to alternatives for their millennial clients. Espinoza et al.(2010) caution older generations to watch out for the 'bias of experience' (Espinoza et al., 2010, p. 51) and not compare millennials to themselves and their work experiences at the millennials' age which can lead to resentment and, perhaps in coaching, well-intentioned but inappropriate steer.

The coaches also considered if there was any difference between millennials and their older, more senior executives when it comes to coaching them about work-life balance issues. One coach felt that millennials have more responsibilities and life challenges than her older executives, while another thought that millennials are more aware of the issue. One coach observed a difference in how work-life issues present in coaching between her millennial clients and her older executives:

I hear a lot about millennials wanting to involve more of their lives, to be whole at work and at home and I don't think they separate the two so they want to be able to bring more of their work into their home and their home into their work and have more of a flow with that. If I have older clients, they may talk about grandkids or their kids getting married or their own marriages or divorces, it's a separate and distinct event and we might talk about it and process that and then go back to the work place things and with millennials it weaves in and out.

Clark (2000) found that where there are cultural differences between work and home domains employees will communicate less to supervisors about life issues. It is possible that, if not talking to supervisors, millennials may not be able to reconcile their difficulties and instead choose to seek a better work-home cultural fit in another organisation. Coaches may potentially be able to play a valuable role supporting millennial leaders with work-life balance issues, not only through coaching but simply by listening to their concerns (Clark, 2000).

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to explore the experience of coaches who coach millennial leaders and their understanding of such experience. I was drawn to this objective due to noticing an increasing number of media headlines relating to the work attributes, behaviours and values of millennials. I would encourage coaches to reflect on their own beliefs about millennials in order to review whether the insidious nature of popular media claims has shaped their opinion.

Additional considerations for coaches with similar experiences and contexts to those interviewed include that where coaches are of a different generation to the millennial client they may find themselves drawn to mentoring their clients. Millennials may need to develop critical thinking skills and this coupled with their 'emerging adult' status can mean that they will be happy to accept advice from the coach as mentor. Coaches need to be aware that this may not be in the client's longer term best interest. As coaches, a recognition that the millennial generation has been shown through research to have an increasing externality in their locus of control may mean that there is a reinforcing dynamic between coach and client where the client looks to the coach for answers and the coach mentors the client in return. With greater awareness of the possibility of such a dynamic, it will be important for coaches to consider what type of approach might be in the best, longer-term interest of the client.

A further consideration is that coaches may find that the ways of working of millennials may differ considerably from their own. It may be worth sharing expectations and agreeing to communicate throughout the coaching engagement about the perceived effectiveness of millennial-preferred ways of working. For example, if the millennial client is using text messages as a means of communicating between coaching sessions but this is not appropriate from the perspective of the coach, interim ways of working checks may be beneficial as well as the more traditional, final coaching evaluation, in order to enable mutually beneficial adjustments to be made.

In addition, the coaches in this study were conscious of really listening intently to understand their clients and yet perhaps were less intent on understanding themselves in relation to their client. It may be important for coaches of millennials to understand themselves with respect to the beliefs they hold about the tacit 'rules of engagement' in life and work in order to provide their most effective coaching. For example, coaches may benefit from recognising the importance of work-life balance as a value of the millennials and how millennials interweave work and life. By reflecting on their own beliefs about work-life balance coaches could be more aware of these as they coach millennials in order to listen openly and support the choices of their clients.

Limitations and future research

I had anticipated that it would be relatively easy to source coaches with experience of coaching millennial leaders given that millennials at the time of the study had a maximum age of 34. However, I had difficulty in obtaining research participants who had coached more than two or three millennial leaders, in part because it appears that there are fewer leaders in organisations from the millennial generation than I had anticipated. Future research may benefit from the passage of time which should see coaches working with increasing numbers of millennial leaders as the leaders reach their mid to late 30s.

A second limitation became apparent due to the focus of the research objective. Phenomenological research focuses on the lived experience and meaning making of the research participant which can result in a double hermeneutic as the researcher makes sense of the participant's sense making (Smith et al., 2009). With the research objective to focus on the experience of coaches in coaching millennial leaders, it was often the case that the interviewees described coaching situations where they were making sense of how their clients were showing up,

resulting in effect in a triple hermeneutic as I made sense of the coach making sense of their client. I aimed to bring my interviewees back to their experience of the coaching, not just the client, through my questions but this was sometimes difficult.

As explained, coaches were often drawn to mentoring their clients and this appeared to be related to a parental dynamic. I am curious as to whether this was related to the coach being seen as a mother figure and how the experience might be different for male coaches in otherwise similar contexts. It would also be interesting to see if the coaches' experience of coaching millennial leaders in relation to work-life balance and the sense of their clients' strong work-life value continues to be their experience 10 years from now, as the leaders at the top end of the millennial age range begin to move into a different life and career stage. Perhaps the expectations of the coaches with respect to work life balance will start to become more prevalent with millennials, or perhaps the millennial generation will shape the working world, and potentially the role of the coach within it, through a more holistic and intertwined work and life experience.

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