Academic Paper

The experience of coaching for permanently childless women: A heuristic inquiry

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Abstract

Childlessness may affect a woman's well-being and sense of identity, and cause feelings of loss and grief. I found no research on coaching for childless women. Using heuristic inquiry, I explored the experience of coaching in six participants (co-researchers), including myself. Findings suggest that coaching helped women cope with negative self– and societal–narratives; accept and change their perspective on a life without children; picture alternative futures; build confidence; achieve goals and rediscover themselves. Some women felt vulnerable and coach understanding, support and care were important, as were trust and co-creation. The research highlights the potential utility of coaching amongst childless women.

Introduction

Becoming a parent has been described as one of the most "universal, common and fundamental" assumptions that the majority of people make from an early age (Purewal & van den Akker, 2007, p.79). However, an estimated 20% of women born in the mid-sixties in Germany, the U.K., Austria, the Netherlands and Switzerland remain childless (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017).

The aim of this research was to explore the experience of coaching in permanently childless women, a topic for which I found no published literature. My interest in this topic arose from my own experience of remaining childless. Over the years, in a workplace context, coaching helped me explore my motivation, beliefs, behaviours and values. Knowing how coaching helped me professionally, I underwent coaching personally, to help me create a life I could enjoy without children. I was curious to learn about other childless women's experiences of receiving coaching, and whether it helped them.

There is more than one journey into childlessness, and the reasons may be varied (Gemmill, 2019; Buhr & Huinink, 2007). Childlessness can be considered as a continuum (Hadley, Newby & Barry,

2019), rather than a binary distinction between involuntary and voluntary childlessness. For some there is a definite lack of choice, i.e., they cannot conceive due to biological reasons, and for others childlessness may be due to ambivalence during childbearing years, or delay or postponement of childbearing due to many reasons, rather than making a definite decision to have or not have children (Keizer, Dykstra & Jansen, 2008; Rowland, 1998).

For simplicity, I use the term childless to describe the women who were the focus of my research. I excluded women who proactively planned never to have children, and remained happy with their choice. They may refer to themselves as *childfree* rather than *childless* (Gold, 2012; Day, 2020). I also excluded women who were still hopeful of having a child.

Literature

According to Wells and Heinsch (2019), in pronatalist societies, childbearing is constructed as an inevitable fulfilment of the female identity, and being permanently childless could be considered a nonnormative adult identity (McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, Wonch-Hill, Gentzler & Hathcoat., 2012). Childlessness may affect a woman's sense of identity (Archetti, 2019), and require emotional work from her to reaffirm her identity in mainstream groups (Exley & Letherby, 2001). Childlessness can impact a woman's self-esteem (Wischmann, Korge, Scherg, Strowitzki & Verres, 2012) and psychological well-being (Beyer, Dye, Bengel & Strauß, 2004), it has been associated with feelings of loss (Koert & Daniluk, 2017), disenfranchised grief (McBain & Reeves, 2019) and a lack of meaning in life (van der Geest & Nahar, 2013). Portrayals of childless women in wider society may lead to stigmatisation and feelings of exclusion (Archetti, 2019).

Despite the negative experiences discussed in the literature, research from different disciplines suggests that it is possible to build a fulfilling life being childless. I discuss these, and example coaching approaches which may facilitate them, below.

From the adult education field, Mälkki (2012) considered Mezirow's theory to explore how involuntary childlessness may trigger reflection and transformative learning, and found that reflection enabled meaning-making in childless women (Mälkki, 2012). Qualitative research of the lived experience of childless women (Wirtberg, Möller, Hogström, Tronstad & Lalos (2007); Koert & Daniluk, 2017) indicated that interventions that can help with self-reflection and meaning-making may be beneficial in adapting to childlessness. Adult learning has been said to underpin all coaching practice (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2018), and Askew and Carnell (2011) suggested that a transformative coaching approach, which involves reflection, may result in a change in a person's perspective and self-identity.

Not becoming a parent has been described as a transition, which is real and stressful (McQuillan *et al*., 2012). Boden (2013) suggested that processing the reality of a life without children involves reframing dreams, values, and as goals change, a sense of self. Developmental coaching has been used in life transitions, for example in becoming a parent (Palmer & Panchal, 2011), but not in relation to transition into non-parenthood. Bush, Ozcan & Passmore (2013) believe that at key times of change and transition, issues of meaning and identity arise, and that these issues are foundational to all coaching. Existential coaching (Spinelli, 2018) can explore issues related to identity and narrative coaching (Drake, 2018; Vogel, 2012) can help address stories clients may be telling themselves which affect their identity.

A cognitive behavioural self-help (CBS) program, based on cognitive behavioural therapy, focused on changing irrational thoughts, pushing away negative thoughts with positive feelings, formulating new, realistic goals and improving childless women's ability to reach them, was investigated by Kraaij, Garnefski, Fles, Brands and van Tricht (2016). Women randomly assigned to CBS plus minimal coaching (n=27), improved significantly on depression scores compared to those assigned

to a wait-list control group with no coaching (n=27). Limitations included the small sample size, a high number of dropouts (n=13), and the self-reporting of symptoms which may have introduced bias. The findings may not be generalisable to women who are not experiencing a depressed mood, however, they gave some indication of the effectiveness of CBS in childless women. In coaching, cognitive behavioural approaches are said to help clients engaged in unhelpful thinking or limiting beliefs about themselves (Williams, Palmer & Edgerton, 2018).

In their qualitative research of childless women, Koert and Daniluk (2017) found acceptance of childlessness was important in moving forward in life, and was an ongoing process involving acknowledging regrets; addressing fears; re-envisioning the future, and reordering and reprioritising life goals. Women who felt powerless to their circumstances had greater difficulty in coming to terms with their childlessness. Similarly, Wirtberg *et al*. (2007) found that those women who had not been able to accept and adapt had life-stories still dominated by and centred around their infertility and childlessness. Acceptance and commitment coaching has been proposed as a method to help with acceptance of uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, using a mindfulness-based approach, as part of the process of achieving goals (Skews & Palmer, 2016).

Goal adjustment was commonly mentioned as a strategy for coping with childlessness. Interventions focusing on goal adjustment were proposed by Kraaij, Garnefski and Schroevers (2009). They obtained data from 83 questionnaires completed by individuals with definitive infertility, of whom 71% were women. The results showed that disengagement from the goal of having children was related to lower levels of negative affect, and identifying alternative goals, and taking action to achieve them, were related to higher levels of positive affect. In a narrative study of childless couples who had had unsuccessful fertility treatment, redirecting creativity and setting meaningful and achievable goals, were identified as making a positive impact in adapting to life without children (Peters, Jackson & Rudge, 2011). Coaching may help with goal adjustment, and in practice goal setting is integral to many different coaching approaches, e.g., life-coaching, positive-psychology and solution-focused coaching (Cox *et al*., 2018).

Koba (2016) proposed feminist therapy as a humanistic approach to empower childless women to examine the way society impacts on their distress. She proposed therapists should help the client understand her symptoms as ways of coping in a patriarchal society, rather being dysfunctional. Coaching from a humanist perspective is based upon Rogerian person-centred principles and its belief of a person's inherent tendency to self-actualise. It places emphasis on the coach-client relationship as being important for growth and requires the coach to address all aspects of the person (Ives, 2008).

Based on the literature discussed above, I believed coaching had the potential to facilitate some strategies found to be helpful in childless women. Because of the lack of data on coaching in the context of my research, I did not limit the research to any specific coaching approach. In the next section I describe the methodology used in the research, followed by a discussion of the findings and their implications.

Methodology

I sought a methodology suitable for a subjective, interpretive approach and evaluated different qualitative research methods. I chose heuristic inquiry, following Moustakas' process (Moustakas, 1990), because it allowed me to incorporate my own lived experience into the research. Heuristic inquiry searches for the universally shared meaning of a phenomenon, maintaining the wholeness of the participants, rather than distilling the experience, which may lead to their voices being lost (Sultan, 2019).

I identified co-researchers through an organisation which provides support to involuntary childless women (Gateway Women, 2019), and through my own personal network. I used purposive sampling to select five individuals, referred to as co-researchers, who had experienced the phenomenon being researched (Sultan, 2019). As I was including my own data, using a pseudonym, the research included six women's experience in total (Table 1).

Table 1: Co-researchers' characteristics

Pseudonym	Sarah	Anna	Leila	Beth	Maria	Hannah
Age (yrs)	48	49	37	38	49	53
Path to childless-ness	Circumstance followed by unsuccessful fertility treatment	Circumstance followed by unsuccessful fertility treatment	Medical infertility and unsuccessful fertility treatment	Medical infertility and unsuccessful fertility treatment	Circum-stance	Circum-stance

Recreating the lived experience in heuristic inquiry can be fulfilled using a form of creative expression (Moustakas, 1990; Mihalache, 2019). I chose collage as a form of data collection because the language surrounding involuntary childlessness is focused on absence and visual methodologies can allow research participants to express their ideas without needing specific language or phrasing to explain (Hartman, Mandich, Magalhaes & Orchard, 2011). In semi-structured interviews, I asked co-researchers to describe the qualities or dimensions of their coaching experience, aided by their collage. In two additional questions, I asked co-researchers to describe what made them seek coaching and whether the time passed since coaching had affected how they viewed their coaching experience. I asked this latter question because for the co-researchers childlessness is permanent and I was interested in exploring whether coaching had made any lasting impact on them. I collected my own data by creating a collage, and through self-interview using the same questions. To reduce the influence of co-researchers experiences upon my own responses, I created my collage and scheduled my self-interview before I interviewed the co-researchers.

Heuristic inquiry involves six phases (Moustakas, 1990): initial engagement with the topic; immersion in the question; incubation from intense focus to allow tacit dimensions and intuition to form; illumination into conscious awareness of themes; explication of the core themes and essences of the experience, and finally a creative synthesis of the components and core themes, to illuminate and explicate the question. Figure 1 illustrates the steps I undertook during the research process.

I also employed the seven processes of heuristic research, which may be used non-linearly during any of the six phases (Moustakas, 1990): identifying with the focus of the inquiry; self-dialogue around my own relationship with the phenomenon; using tacit-knowing to unify various dimensions of the research; using intuition to bridge the tacit and the explicit; indwelling inside the experience to gain additional insights; focusing to facilitate a relaxed and receptive state to tap into thoughts and feelings; and understanding the experience from the internal frame of reference of the other (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019).

Because heuristic inquiry retains the essence of the person, the findings are explicated by writing co-researcher depictions and portraits. I analysed each co-researcher's data to compose an individual depiction of their experience, following which I analysed the data across co-researchers to identify dominant themes occurring in three or more co-researchers, and created a composite depiction of the experience. I then chose two co-researchers with the highest number of dominant themes in their data, thereby exemplifying the group, and created detailed individual portraits for them. Individual portraits illustrate how the essence of the experience can be shared both universally and individually. Finally, I integrated all results into a creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990), for which I chose to create a collage of collages to honour all of the co-researchers' contributions to the process. Due to the limitations of this article length, the depictions, portraits and

creative synthesis are not presented. The dominant themes shared across three or more co-researchers are discussed in the Findings section.
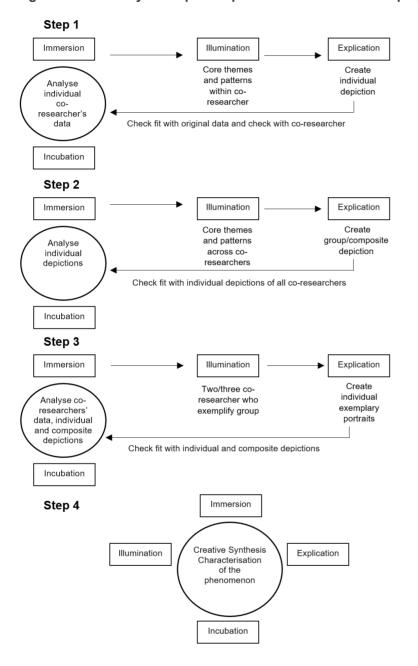
Figure 1: Data analysis steps and phases of the heuristic inquiry

Validity or credibility in heuristic research is established by repeatedly checking depictions against the data to ensure they accurately capture the meaning of the experience (Moustakas, 1990); I did this throughout the data analysis process. To enhance validity I asked the co-researchers to verify the comprehensiveness and accuracy of their individual depictions. Although in heuristic inquiry I was able to incorporate my own experience, I was mindful of possible biases influencing the outcomes (Mihalache, 2019), so I practised reflexivity during the research using a diary.

An ethical consideration was that discussing aspects of co-researchers' childlessness may have triggered memories of difficult events, and I was sensitive and empathetic to this possibility during the interviews, and ready to refer to counselling or other therapy if needed.

Findings

The path towards childlessness, coaching approaches, coaching duration and schedules varied amongst co-researchers, Table 2 presents the themes shared across co-researchers when discussing factors which led them to seek coaching.

Table 2: Seeking coaching - themes shared across co-researchers

Theme	Number of researchers
Needed action	6
Assumption of motherhood	4
Loss/grief	4
Proactivity versus counselling	4
Endings	4
Feeling low	3

The reasons for seeking coaching varied amongst the co-researchers, but they all had one theme in common; they were seeking coaching to help them take action in their lives. This was the only theme that I identified which was shared across all co-researchers.

Some co-researchers always assumed they would become a mother, and some were processing the endings of their dream. Loss and grief were themes expressed by some co-researchers, not only in relation to the loss of longed for children, but also the loss of close family members.

Four of the six co-researchers had previously received counselling. For example, Leila underwent a year of counselling which helped her, and she reached a stage when she felt like she needed to be proactive;

> …I felt like sometimes I was going backwards and never really achieving anything… and I needed something else to be proactive, so that's when I went to the coaching.

The themes related to the main research question of the co-researcher's experience of coaching, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Experience of coaching - themes shared across co-researchers

Theme	Number of co-researchers
Vulnerability	5
Coping with societal narrative	5
Achieving new goals	4
Changing perspective	4
Rediscovery	4
Creating a picture of the future	4
Co-creation with coach	4
Coach – Understanding	4
Coach – Support	3
Coach - Trust	3
Coach - Caring	3
Acceptance of reality	3
Change self-narrative	3
Build confidence	3

When recounting their experience of coaching, five out of six co-researchers discussed feelings of vulnerability due to the challenging issues they had faced. All co-researchers who discussed vulnerability also mentioned that they found their coach to be caring and/or supportive.

The theme of understanding was expressed by some co-researchers. As examples, Sarah was worried whether the coach would understand her situation, and Hannah did not feel understood by her coach when issues around childlessness were evoked. She was left with the impression that

the coach may have wanted her to "move on". Trust in the coaching relationship was important for some co-researchers to feel they were able to share and be honest.

Working with the coach to create outcomes, and finding a way to move forward together, was highlighted by some co-researchers. For example, Maria valued the ongoing relationship that she had with her coach "…we were learning together we were going through this journey together…".

Some co-researchers talked about their sense of identity as childless women, and some struggled with the perception of others, and a lack of representation in wider society:

> …society tells you that you should be a mother by a certain age…And if you're not a mother, what, what career have you, have you got? Oh, is that all that you do? …why don't you earn more money, and why don't you do more with your money? Leila

Coaching helped co-researchers with self-identity and societal narrative in different ways. For example, the coaching helped Sarah change how she viewed herself, and it helped Leila formulate responses to other people's questions about why she did not have children. Coaching helped Beth to develop strategies for events and situations when it would be likely that friends' conversations would centre around children. Maria was concerned with the lack of representation and inclusivity of non-parents within workplace policies. She described how, as she and her coach grew older together, she felt less relevant within the organisation. With coaching Maria found her voice and had ensured that this issue was considered in workplace reforms: "…now feel not only I have the courage to speak, but I am vociferous now…".

Coaching helped some co-researchers accept the reality of their life without children. For example, coaching helped Sarah to reflect upon and examine in more detail the feelings that she thought her pictured future with children would bring her. She started to accept and appreciate her present reality, and to become grateful for the "little things" in her life. Leila recognised that she found acceptance of a future she had not imagined or wanted was hard. She found the coaching helped her with this process.

With coaching, Sarah was able to change her perspective of her life without children; although it would be a different life to the one she had imagined; it did not have to be negatively different. Beth started noticing the things that she enjoyed and appreciated, which were available to her even if she wasn't a mother. She started to revaluate her perspective that parenthood was the only route to bring her fulfilment in life:

> …coaching kind of helped me with, I do kind of, I've quite a different perspective on just generally what is it to be like human and it not being just about […] being a parent or not being a parent... Beth

Coaching helped some co-researchers to create a different picture for their future. For example, in the coaching Leila wrote a letter to her future self, which helped her to start picturing a different future, one without children.

The majority of the co-researchers had always assumed that they would become a mother, but this goal was not achieved. Coaching helped some co-researchers to build confidence to try different things, to set different goals and achieve them. Leila built up confidence and explored different career options. Coaching helped Beth turned her thoughts about what she would like to do into the actions required to achieve those goals – for example, travelling to different countries. It helped her to practically overcome her perceived barriers in making some goals achievable. Hannah worked with her coach to set goals to progress and grow her business. She found the confidence to be able to start taking the steps to move forwards.

In addition to achieving new goals through coaching, some co-researchers rediscovered things that they used to enjoy, and started to bring those things back into their lives. Coaching helped Sarah to rediscover a topic that she had previously been interested in, and she embarked on a related course of study, and it helped Beth to rediscover things that she enjoyed in the past, and that she could still enjoy, despite the emotional pain she was feeling at the time. Leila wanted to return to how she used to feel, she felt the coaching helped in this process of rediscovering herself:

> *...that was, so what sums up my coaching so [coach's name] really helped me, to find, find me somewhere in it, you know?...And it was nice to feel those feelings again. Because when you go, oh my god, there I am.*

The time that had passed since coaching was received varied amongst co-researchers at the time of the interviews, and ranged from coaching still ongoing for one co-researcher, to coaching last received eight years ago. Dominant themes identified from the five co-researchers who were no longer receiving coaching are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Time passed since coaching - themes shared across co-researchers

Theme	Number of researchers
Using what was learnt	4
Led to changes	3
Importance of treating client as individual	3

Some of the co-researchers indicated that they still used what they learnt in coaching, after the coaching had finished. For example, Sarah remembers how coaching had helped her to view herself differently, "it's something I still carry with me at this point in time", and Leila mentioned how she was still using the techniques from coaching as part of the process of moving out of her comfort zone.

Coaching led to changes in some co-researchers' lives, that otherwise may not have happened – for example: starting on a course of study, making lasting changes in business, letting go of people in social circles, and trying different career options.

Reflecting back on their coaching experience led to additional insights for some of the co-researchers. Beth and Sarah valued being treated as an individual rather than feeling as if a formula or framework was being applied to them. In Hannah's case, not all of her individual needs were met, and the coaching "felt a little bit shallow".

Discussion

The findings indicated that for the co-researchers, coaching helped facilitate coping strategies that I had identified in the literature from other disciplines. In addition, the findings provided important insights into how the co-researchers felt during coaching, and coach qualities they valued. I discuss the findings in relation to relevant literature from other contexts below.

The stories of the co-researchers were in accordance with the literature which describe how a myriad of journeys and complex set of circumstances may lead to childlessness (Day, 2020; Keizer et al., 2008; Rowland,1998; Buhr & Huinink, 2017; Gemmill, 2019).

In the period leading up to seeking coaching, feelings of loss and grief were experienced by some co-researchers. This resonates with the loss of wished-for children described in the literature (Koert & Daniluk, 2017) and the loss of close family members. A disorienting dilemma such as bereavement is identified as a trigger for refection and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), and Mälkki (2012) found that such reflection occurred in response to the emotions that childless

women experienced. Therefore, it is possible that the culmination of events leads to reflection and a desire to make some changes in their lives.

Some co-researchers had undergone both counselling and coaching, and viewed coaching as being more action-oriented than counselling. Counselling may have helped co-researchers with complex emotional work, and the subsequent desire for coaching may have been necessary to deal with the "here and now", after having dealt with the "there and then" as Vaughan Smith (2019, p.15) describes. Moving between counselling and coaching is consistent with other qualitative research, not specifically focused on childlessness, which found that clients' intentions when they seek coaching is to be future desired-outcome oriented, and that clients may move between counselling and life coaching (Griffiths & Campbell, 2008). Griffiths and Campbell (2008) suggest the two approaches can be used collaboratively to serve clients, rather than competitively, and this could also apply to counselling and coaching for childless women. Coaches should be cognisant of any distress that may be brought into the sessions or triggered in sessions, and should deal with it sensitively (Vaugh Smith, 2019). Questionnaire studies of business coaching have found that triggering of issues in coaching, which could not be dealt with by the coach, was a negative consequence for 26% of coaches (Schermuly, Schermuly-Haupt, Schoelmerich & Rautenberg et al., 2014; Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019) and 23.4% of coachees (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2016; Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019).

As with coaching in other contexts, the findings indicate the importance of the coaching relationship. The journey of a childless woman leading up to coaching may include being affected by events that were out of her control. Some co-researchers described working with their coach in the coaching relationship, rather than being directed by the coach. This may indicate that the relationship was one of equals working on agreed goals together. In executive coaching, the coachee's self-efficacy with regards to learning and results was found to correlate to the coach-coachee relationship, a component measure of which was working towards mutually agreed upon goals (Baron & Morin, 2009).

Understanding, care and support from the coach were qualities valued by co-researchers. These qualities are associated with a person-centred approach in therapy (Corey, 2009), and literature has discussed the importance of these qualities within other coaching contexts. In executive coaching, understanding from the coach has been found to be one of the coaching qualities considered most helpful (de Haaan, 2008), and Bluckert (2006) advised that coaches should not be afraid to express the caring side of their natures. Qualitative research into factors which were important in forming the coaching relationship (O'Broin & Palmer, 2010), found support from the coach to be a key aspect.

The findings raise awareness of the potential vulnerability childless women may be feeling, and trust in the coaching relationship is important to allow them to be open about their experience. Alvey and Barclay (2002) explored trust in the executive coaching relationship, and proposed that the foundational risk in coaching frequently involved being vulnerable in front of another person. Trust allowed coachees to be open about experiences they may have been protecting, and allowed them to be vulnerable in front of the coach (Alvey & Barclay, 2007).

Some co-researchers struggled with their identity as childless women, the perception of others, and the representation of childlessness in the wider environment including the workplace. Koba (2016), in her research of feminist therapy, proposed empowering childless women to examine the way society impacted on their distress, rather than to view their symptoms as pathological. In a narrative study of childless couples after unsuccessful fertility treatment (Peters et al., 2011), some couples described how with time they were able to predict situations that may have provoked difficult emotions, and this helped them to minimise potential harm. In Malkki's (2012) study of the application of Mezirow's transformative learning theory in childlessness, she discussed how childless women may experience a lack of shared meaning with parents, and the comments of others led to them to reflect on others' assumptions and previously taken-for-granted shared social

expectations. Coaching helped co-researchers to find strategies to deal with situations and conversations and comments from others, thus helping them to deal with negative self- and societal-narrative.

Coaching helped some co-researchers to accept the reality of their situation, which has been identified as being important in the process of creating a fulfilling life without children (Wirtberg et al., 2007). Wirtberg et al. (2007) found that childless women who had accepted not becoming a parent were satisfied with their lives, and could even point out some advantages of not having children, indicating a change in their perspective of a life without children. I found some co-researchers were able to change their perspective about a life without children, with the aid of coaching. Coaching helped some co-researchers to create a different picture for their future than the one they had imagined. In their study of childless women, Koert and Daniluk (2017) reported how all the women eventually had to reach acceptance of non-motherhood and consider alternative versions of their future, despite their fears of what this may look like.

Manifesting an alternative version of the future involved identifying new goals for some co-researchers, and building the confidence to achieve the goals, both of which were facilitated with coaching. The strategy of goal adjustment and setting was widely mentioned in the existing literature on childlessness, to help people adapt to a life without children (Koert & Daniluk, 2017; Kraaij et al. 2009; Peters et al., 2011; Boden, 2013). With the help of coaching, some co-researchers were able to set and achieve new goals in terms of work, travel, hobbies and study. Kraaij et al. 2016 included goal adjustment and setting, and increasing self-efficacy to obtain them, as part of their CBS program for childless women. Building confidence and increasing self-efficacy to reach goals may be particularly helpful for some childless women who may have lost confidence in their ability to achieve goals after not achieving their goal of motherhood (Peters et al., 2011). Boden (2013) suggested that redefining life goals is part of the complex transition into non-parenthood and adapting to the reality of a life without children, and required adapting values, beliefs and "sense of self" (p. 24) as goals change.

With the aid of coaching some co-researchers rediscovered activities that they previously enjoyed, and one co-researcher referred to rediscovering her sense of self. Day (2020) described how the intensity of trying to become a parent, and processing the end of that wish, can lead to losing connection with previous joys in life. Bannink (2017), not specifically referring to coaching in childless women, suggested asking clients what made them happy or gave them joy in the past, and focusing on previous positive experiences, can be more useful than asking clients what they want, particularly when what they want might not be helpful for them. This may be true in the case of childless women, when what they wanted was a child, and this dream was no longer a possibility. Re-engaging in activities which made them happy in the past, may help them to accept and rediscover joy in their present lives.

When reflecting upon their coaching experience, some co-researchers fed back that coaching had led to changes in their lives. Examples given were: starting study, growing a business, letting go of people within their social circle, and trying different career options. Although in a different context, Smith, Van Oosten and Boyatzis (2009) discussed executive coaching's use for sustained, desired change, which may be in a person's actions, habits, competencies, dreams, aspirations, how they feel in certain situations and around certain people, and how they look at events in work or in life. Some co-researchers still used techniques that they learnt during coaching, perhaps indicating that they still faced some of the issues which brought them to coaching, and also that what they learnt was valuable enough to keep applying in their lives.

Conclusion

Before this research, the potential utility of coaching in this setting could only be based on extrapolation of potential helping strategies based on the lived experience of childless women, or interventions from other disciplines. In addition, the lack of coaching literature meant there was no information about how women seeking coaching in this setting may be feeling, the coach qualities that may be valued by them, or the type of relationship that may be appropriate in this setting.

This research makes an important and valuable contribution to knowledge and practice, as this is an area that has not been previously researched. The number of childless women has increased in recent decades (Berrington, 2017), and a recent report from the U.K. Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2020) indicated that this trend may continue, as it may do in other countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011; Stone, 2020). This could lead to an increase in the number of women seeking assistance in creating alternative life journeys without children. Childless women may not consider coaching as an option to support them, and coaches may not be aware of how coaching could support childless women. Increasing knowledge in this area may help to normalise coaching as an option to support childless women in creating meaningful lives moving forward with childlessness.

The co-researchers who participated in the research had differing paths to childlessness, were at different points in their personal journeys of life without children, and sought coaching for varied reasons. So although they represented a diverse range of lived experience, the findings are not generalisable to the experience of all childless women receiving coaching. The time varied since the co-researchers received the coaching, from still ongoing to coaching received eight years ago, and memory bias is an issue associated with retrospectively collected data (Manzoni, Vermunt, Luijkx & Muffels, 2010). Asking the co-researchers to create a collage to represent their experience of coaching before the interviews may have helped them in recollecting the experience (Allnutt, 2013).

Future research could explore different coaching approaches and techniques and it may even be possible to develop a coaching model based on these findings and explore its effectiveness using action research. The coaching relationship could be explored further including the coach's experience of coaching childless women. Research could also focus on specific topics - for example: reframing narrative, career options, personal development, and long term-impact of coaching. This research, and future research, could also be extended to childless men, as there is growing awareness of how childlessness affects men. such as a sense of loss and exclusion, and adaption methods, e.g., reappraising their beliefs about themselves (Hadley & Hanley, 2011).

Heuristic inquiry is said to have the potential to transform both researcher and co-researchers (Sultan, 2019). As a result of the heuristic inquiry process, and listening to co-researchers' experience, I felt inspired in my advocacy for childless women. For example, I proposed that childless employees' needs should be considered in my workplace's diversity and inclusion policies. I feel that before starting my research, despite the work that I had done personally on creating a life without children, I would not have had the courage to do so.

Sultan (2019, p. 147) states "heuristic research is empowering and emancipatory in that it gives voice to those who may have kept their personal experience to themselves…[it] is intrinsically amenable to advocacy efforts through its inclusion of often marginalized experiences and voices". I hope within coaching practice and research, that this work provides advocacy for childless women and their unique experiences.

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