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Academic Paper

The Value of Conceptual Encounter methodology in exploring women's experience of identity work in career choices and transitions.

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Abstract

Conceptual Encounter, a constructivist research methodology, was first introduced by de Rivera in 1981. Its key output is a conceptualisation that contributes to an 'ever-broadening map of human experience' (de Rivera & Kreilkamp, 2006, p.24). As there are limited existing studies using this approach, the purpose of this article is to describe the researcher's experience of using and adapting the methodology to co-create with research partners a model for coaching practice. The research topic, women's identity work in career choices and transitions, features frequently in coaching sessions and has been the subject of studies in career counselling and psychology, but in the field of coaching it has 'yet to emerge, and presents as an opportunity for future research' (Parker, 2016, p.419).

Keywords

Conceptual Encounter, constructivism, co-creation, identity work, career transitions,

Article history

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Introduction

Career choices and change, and the process of transition into a new role or situation, feature frequently in coaching sessions. We know from the work of Ibarra (2003), Yates (2017), Caza et al., (2018) and many others in the fields of careers and psychology, that work-related change involves identity and identity work. Yet these concepts rarely feature in coaching literature or education (Parker, 2016; McGill et al., 2018), despite the fact that researchers have noted that identity often forms the subtext or background canvas of a coaching session, without being named (Brown, 2017, 2015). In her research on the link between identity and coaching practice, Butcher (2012, p. 123) noted that while 'concepts around identity were integral to the coaching process and dynamic', coaches were uneasy about working overtly in the area of identity. Some have claimed that a tendency to under-specify the concept may have limited its usefulness in practice (Brown, 2017). I wanted to introduce the concepts of identity and identity work to coaches, to create a bridge between the theoretical concepts involved in this topic and coaching in practice. The goal of my doctoral research and subsequently this article, therefore, was to co-create, with working women, an accessible coaching model based on their experiences of identity work in career choices and transitions.

Literature review

It was Ibarra's (2003) Working Identity that made me realise that the area of identity and identity work in career transitions needed to be in a coach's toolkit. An extensive literature review included each of the concepts involved in the research question: identity, identity work, career, transition, gender. It became clear that until recently, executive coaching has tended to approach career transition from a skills and performance perspective rather than engaging with and supporting the more fundamental issue of shifting identities (Parker, 2016). This was the research area I wanted to explore in my Doctorate of Coaching and Mentoring. I found that while there was literature available on identity, identity work, career transitions and gender, there was very little on coaching these concepts – and even less on coaching these topics with women. I felt this area of identity and identity work needed to be part of a coach's toolkit, so I set out to create an accessible coaching model, which would support coaches in addressing this important area. It has been established that women's experience of the process of identity work in career choices and transitions is even more complex and challenging than men's, due to biology and our gendered society (Ely and Meyerson, 2010). Given this, my research was confined to women in UK-based organisations.

Research design

As a social constructivist, I wanted to work in an inductive way, led by the data and using thematic analysis to interpret meaning in women's accounts of their experiences. My research design needed to be congruent with the exploratory, interpretivist and generative nature of the research aim and objectives. Interviews were more appropriate than surveys for this topic, engaging the research partners through dialogue, capturing personal accounts and interpretations in order to generate a rich description of women's experiences of identity work in career choices and transitions. Trust and rapport would be needed in order to create a sense of safety for the research partners and to encourage reflection, openness and an ability to articulate experiences that may not have been previously brought to consciousness or revealed. Researchers such as Oakland et al., (2012), O'Neil et al., (2008) and Savickas (2002) agree that conversation is the most effective way to explore processes such as transition: 'Understanding the process of adaptation to change requires an approach that can access personal and complex subject-matter' Oakland et al., (2012, p.4). Quantitative surveys, which limit the scope of input from participants, could not produce the wealth of deep, open, honest and above all human, 'thick' description (Geertz, 1973) needed to gain an understanding of identity and identity work for coaching practice (McMahon et al., 2012).

The choice of a research methodology: Conceptual Encounter (CE)

The goal of the research was to generate a model mapping women's experience of identity work in career choices and transitions, in order to support coaching practice. In my experience as an executive coach, I have found that a model can provide a good starting point for a conversation. A model can represent the complex, concurrent experience of both wanting to be the same as others, and to be unique (Brewer, 2003), and provides a basic language for a description of what is happening for the client ¬– 'this bit reflects my experience, this bit doesn't'. Research partners including Annie also felt a model 'helps organise your thoughts during transition – controls the chaos'.

Several qualitative methodologies were considered in the search for one that could achieve the aim and objectives of this research and reflect my own constructivist worldview, in which knowledge is never fixed but continually developing in response to an iterative process of exposure to experiences, theories and understandings. A heuristic approach (Moustakas, 1990) was rejected because I would not be exploring the phenomenon alongside my research partners; rather I needed to direct them to an examination of their unique experience. Action Research (Argyris et al., 1985) was not appropriate; again, it required me as the researcher to participate fully in the experience under investigation, and for the experience to be concurrent. Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) and IPA (Smith et al., 1999) were considered, but these strategies require the researcher to enter the research with as few pre-determined ideas as possible, bringing an open mind to the data. Experience of the phenomena from my coaching practice, together with my initial research into the literature, had encouraged me to form initial ideas on the topic.

Conceptual Encounter (CE) is distinct from other methodologies in that, in addition to the written exploration of the topic, an essential component of the research findings is the co-creation of a conceptualisation or model of the phenomena studied. The research process is unique in that it begins by drawing on a combination of the researcher's own experience and existing research and literature to create an initial model, or conceptualisation. The researcher's influence is then mitigated by input from a research partner describing their own experience of the phenomena, challenging or modifying the initial conceptualisation 'through successive insights as it repeatedly encounters the experience of different persons' (Noon, 2017, p.7).

Each interview begins with an exploration of a research partner's experience of the topic in question. Data is recorded, to be transcribed and analysed after the interview. In the second half of the interview, the evolving conceptualisation is shown to a research partner or focus group, and they are invited to accept, reject or add to the elements of the model. After the interview, the researcher analyses the data and takes in the modifications to the model, and then takes that modified model to the next research interview. In this way, the model iteratively evolves. This process of collecting, analysing and interpreting the data and integrating experiences continues, until the model makes explicit what was previously implicit; achieves saturation; and is 'elegant and parsimonious' (de Rivera and Kreilkamp, 2006, p. 8). In this way, the conceptualisation generated by the researcher and her research partners becomes a genuine co-creation and is a synthesis of theory and evidence. The researcher becomes the 'orchestrator and facilitator of the inquiry process' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p.214), while research partners 'are the active organisers of their experience' (Kegan, 1994, p.24). Despite such key involvement, de Rivera stresses that the researcher – as the only person with experience of the full range of encounters – must take full responsibility for the final model (de Rivera and Kreilkamp, 2006).

In his claim for the validity of this relatively new methodology, first published in 1981 (de Rivera and Kreilkamp, 1981, now primarily accessible online, 2006), de Rivera describes it as a powerful method that 'can probably be used in any area of enquiry' (p.13), and draws attention to its adaptability and flexibility. CE studies have been published on subjects as diverse as 'The Experience of Anger' (de Rivera, 2006), 'Elation, Gladness and Joy' (Lindsay-Hartz, 1981), 'Self-deception in Coaches' (Bachkirova, 2015) and 'Presence in Coaching (Noon, 2017). While de Rivera had initially acknowledged uncertainty as to whether the methodology could be used to uncover how an experience develops, he later resolved those doubts in a CE study into the process of construction of False Memory Syndrome (de Rivera, 1997). The output of CE research is not a definitive theory or a predictive model, but an evolving structure that enables us to share an experience with others. It presents a map, an experiential landscape, an articulation that may help others to recognise the experience, to feel less alone with their feelings and to 'accept the psychological events of ordinary life' (de Rivera and Kreilkamp, 2006, p.3).

CE studies are scarce compared to those using other methodologies. While this limits the number of existing studies to draw on, it also presents an opportunity to tackle a research topic from a novel and distinctive perspective. Research partners were empowered by the invitation to shape an

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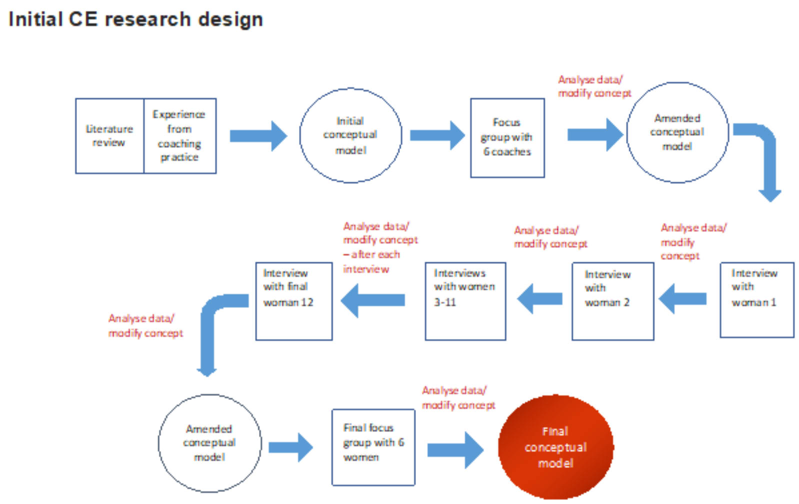
evolving conceptualisation such that it would reflect their unique experience of the phenomenon, knowing that their insights would contribute to a broader, more universal representation.

Fieldwork design and final sample

My original plan was to hold one initial focus group of six coaches prior to the one-to-one interviews, with the aim of extending the researcher's initial model, challenging it (Noon, 2017) and deepening and thickening the concept (Geertz, 1973). The next stage of the research design was based on eight to twelve one-to-one interviews with executive women aged 25-55 from organisations based in the UK, who have experienced a career transition in the last two years. Finally, another focus group of six executive women (not previously interviewed) would be conducted, to see whether the dynamics of the researcher-research partner relationship might be usefully altered by group dynamics to allow more freedom from the influence of the researcher. I hoped that combining individual interviews with groups would result in the richest data. After the focus group of working women, the model would be amended for a last time. Fig. 1 (below) illustrates the initial proposal for the evolution of the conceptualisation.

Figure 1: Initial research design.



The final sample was in fact 53 research partners, and comprised two focus groups of 6 coaches who assisted with my initial model, and 41 working women from a wide variety of sectors. Many factors were involved in the increased numbers. While initially concerned about finding willing participants, there was an enthusiastic snowballing effect; reluctantly, I had to turn volunteers away. I found the process of interviewing far more enjoyable than I had expected, and was inspired by the open and moving accounts of identity work in career transitions. I was conscious of experiencing my own identity work as I developed from a coach to a researcher, focusing less on wanting to help an individual, and more of joining with my research partners in a venture that could be of service to many women. In retrospect, I can see that continuing with interviews was also a way of delaying the next stage of my research, where I would have to work solo on the daunting task of turning the mass of data into incisive Findings. As each individual story was so rich, I could probably have achieved a similar result with fewer participants.

My research partners were representative of those liable to be offered executive coaching by their organisations - the sample was relatively highly educated and privileged, high earning, and relatively confident. Only 5 out of 53 participants were from ethnic minorities, which is a limitation of this study. However, 'if a given experience is possible, it is also subject to universalisation' (Haugh, 1987 cited in Willig, 2001, p.17); and this research is intended to be the beginning of a conversation and exploration, rather than prescriptive or predictive.

Data collection

The interviews were lengthy (1.5-2hrs) in search of 'descriptions of events which are full and explicit and accurate' (de Rivera and Kreilkamp, 2006, p.17). They were all conducted between December 2018 and November 2019, face to face and by phone. Telephone interviews extended the geographical reach of the study and ensured researcher and participant safety; however, there was also value in being in the same room as the research partners in terms of establishing rapport and witnessing body language. This research was carried out shortly before the Covid pandemic affected the UK; had it been conducted later, video technology could have been used to replace face-face meetings and would have been ideal for the interview process.

Learning from a pilot focus group

Several coaches from my network volunteered to take part in the research, so I decided to have two coaches' focus groups, one to act as a pilot group. The pilot taught me valuable lessons about how to get the best out of focus groups and interviews. The National Centre for Research Methods was a valuable resource in highlighting potential issues such as the tension between minimizing my presence and the simultaneous requirement to manage the group; groupthink; domination by one participant; and the possibility of group culture interfering with individual expression (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). A key lesson learned from the experience of the pilot group was the value of an introductory call with the participants prior to the interview to establish rapport and trust, and to introduce the concepts and definitions from the research question. This was partly in response to the pilot group tending to interpret the focus of the study as 'how to succeed' in career transitions, rather than 'exploring the identity work that women experience' while considering them.

Practical lessons were also learned, such as the need to have a back-up tape recorder, the problems of dealing with refreshments while managing the group, the need to begin and end formally, and the difficulty in controlling input from the group to give everyone a fair hearing and yet to finish at the agreed time. It was also an opportunity to hone my interviewing skills. Listening back to the recording, I recognised my tendencies to interrupt, talk too much, lead the answers, adopt the role of 'expert' and many other shortcomings. The pilot also revealed a conflict between the tension I felt about accepting criticism and amendments to the initial CE model I had created, and my desire to embrace new viewpoints, experiences and ideas. As the interviewing process went on, I found myself becoming less protective of the model (which by then had become a co-creation) and actively hoping for new input. The coaches in the pilot group all signed consent forms, so the findings of both coaches' focus groups were included in the study and resulted in valuable amendments and extensions to the initial concept.

Structure of the interviews

In line with de Rivera's Conceptual Encounter methodology, interviews were semi-structured, with a range of open questions forming the basis, though not a fixed template, for the discussions. This allowed for exploration and probing of respondents' answers to the open questions, as well as flexibility in the order and extent of the questions posed. It also gave participants the opportunity to pursue an avenue of particular significance to them. An element of structure was provided by the methodology, which divided the interview into two parts: first, a rich description of a participant's concrete experiences of a career transition or choice, and the accompanying identity work; and second, the introduction of the evolving abstract conceptualisation and the research partner's response and amendments to it (de Rivera and Kreilkamp, 2006).

The purpose of the first stage of the interview was to elicit a retrospective description of specific experiences of previous voluntary career transitions, and in particular their most recent or current one. Once confidentiality had been explained and assured, participants were open about their experiences and rapport was quickly established, enabling easy but in-depth dialogue and a willingness to explore personal issues. A useful icebreaker was to ask them for three words and a metaphor that described their experience of career transition, which helped them to focus and recall. The few instances where research partners showed inexperience with questions of identity or an unwillingness to explore their personal feelings were of interest in themselves, and led to reflexive reviewing of how the discussion could have been better managed. Conversations in this first part of the interview gave the respondent the opportunity to explore their unique experiences, and therefore ranged across the many factors involved in such transitions, including internal and external, psychological and material, emotional and philosophical. Participants were asked to describe any specific stages they could identify in the process.

In the second part of the interview, research partners were shown the conceptualisation in its most recent evolution. Here, I was aware of the risk of confirmatory bias, the desire to please or to simply accept the work that had already been done. In wondering how to counteract these issues, I corresponded with de Rivera, who suggested I show more than one transition model to help introduce the respondents to the notion of conceptualisations, and to offer alternatives that would provide a context for their responses. Three well-known transition frameworks were shown to respondents: Bridges, (1991); Fisher, (2000); and Prochaska et al., (1992). This offered an opportunity to start critiquing models, and meant that when asked to respond specifically to the conceptualisation of identity work experienced during career choices and transitions, research partners were more confident to express their views.

Interview questions evolved, as the research progressed, to explore new areas of interest generated by the research partners, particularly their thoughts around their identity and identity work. Questions were constructed to be brief and open, enabling the research partners to respond authentically and openly. This helped to achieve rich, insightful and honest conversations.

I considered the question of power held by the researcher in the interviewing situation. Using semi-structured interviews gave the respondents some freedom to interpret the open questions and to take the interview in the direction they chose, but the structuring and shaping of the CE interview limited this agency. I was sometimes conscious of a tension between allowing an interviewee free rein and the risk of not covering all the questions, or not having enough time to focus on the conceptualisation in the second half of the interview. I was careful to allow the research partners choice as to whether to answer all the questions, and to give them the lead in investigating or avoiding areas of sensitivity to them.

Thematic analysis and coding

Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary coding approach for this CE study. Consideration was given to the choice between content analysis (a descriptive approach using quantitative counts of the codes) and thematic analysis (a more qualitative, detailed and nuanced account of data). Given the personal, exploratory nature of the topic, it was decided that a description of the latent rather than the manifest content (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) would be a more meaningful contribution to coaching practice. Thematic analysis searches for repeated patterns of meaning across a data set and supports an ‘organic approach to coding and theme development and the active role of the researcher in these processes’ (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p.297) congruent with the inductive nature of the methodology and my social constructivist stance.

Interview transcripts were uploaded to the Maxqda software tool for qualitative analysis. As this was a CE study, early themes had been considered in the creation of the initial model, before interviewing began. From this stage onwards, I was very aware of my own filters, biases and perspectives in the interpretation of the data, careful to represent the women’s input accurately and not to assume I understood what they were feeling.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis was a useful guide in helping to structure the analysis of the transcripts: familiarise yourself with the data, assign codes, search for patterns and themes; review themes; define and name themes; produce the report. For this CE methodology, the process was flexed: analysis was undertaken after each interview and the results from the encounter applied to the conceptualisation before proceeding to the next interview. I tried to organise the interviews at 2-3 week intervals to allow time for consecutive analysis and coding of the transcripts, but last-minute changes to timings by the participants sometimes meant that I had to work from my notes and hand-written adjustments to the model.

From the accounts of women's personal experiences of career transitions, themes and sub-themes emerged and were developed inductively, moving iteratively between the recordings, transcripts and the evolving model to ensure that meaning was preserved and captured. Notes on my reflexive learning and responses, recorded in a diary, became an invaluable part of the sense-making process and supported reflection and analytical questioning (Schwandt, 1994; Noon, 2017). A clear stance was taken to ensure that themes emerged from the data, rather than searching for themes from the initial conceptualisation: the purpose of the methodology is to capture evidence that extends or modifies the model. The challenge with this decision was to keep in mind the research question and not to get side-tracked by data that was fascinating but outside the scope of this study (a challenge that was not always successfully met and which periodically necessitated a stringent editing process). Coded segments were then allocated into the relevant stage of the process.

As the interviewing continued, the number of codes and sub-codes increased, and the model and its accompanying questions were modified accordingly. As well as coding each new interview, additions and changes to the coding necessitated reviewing of earlier data to check for missed references, so the coding became an iterative process of revisiting and revising. In general, full paragraphs of data were coded rather than just key phrases, in order to preserve the meaning and context of what was said.

All transcripts were read and reflected upon a number of times, both in print and on screen. Changing the reading medium somehow prompted new insights and perspectives. During the coding process, recordings of the interviews were played to gain a fuller awareness of the respondents' state of mind about topics discussed and to check for accuracy in those transcripts that had been externally transcribed (about two-thirds of the scripts). Handwritten accounts made at the time of interview were also considered, as was my research diary. At the beginning of the interview process I attempted to record progress of how the conceptualisation developed in a chart, together with key themes, metaphors, similarities and differences, challenges and extensions (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). However. this proved impractical as the interviews were so rich that the document quickly became unwieldy. Thereafter I relied on documenting input directly onto print-outs of the model during the interview, which I labelled and filed, as well as revisiting the transcripts and coded segments from the interview. Amendments to the conceptualisation were made by hand, or in PowerPoint, depending on the extent of the changes and the time available. While amendments continued throughout the process, key transitions in which the accumulations of modifications led to significant changes to the model occurred at three stages during the fieldwork process, and these were recorded in the chapter describing how the conceptualisation evolved.

Towards the end of the interviewing process, fewer new themes emerged and amendments to the conceptualisation became repetitive. After 32 one-to-one interviews, saturation was assumed to have been reached. Themes were finalised and extracts from the data selected to demonstrate a coherent and integrated response to the research question while preserving nuances (Willig, 2001). A final reading and recoding of transcripts extended the number of codes and sub-codes, which were then reconfigured and realigned a number of times. Final amendments were made to the model and accompanying questions.

Modification to the methodology

A modification to the CE methodology was made. In my research into Conceptual Encounter, and as a non-academic, I had found some of the conceptualisations in existing CE studies hard to decipher. I wanted to produce a practical and accessible model for use in coaching practice, by coaches or their clients. Research partners specifically alluded to the benefits of simplicity for them: Amina, for example, commented: ‘I like it. I think it’s clear. I like the fact it’s not overly complicated; it’s quite simple, easy to follow’.

Early in the process I had the idea to refer to concepts in the form of a coaching question, rather than simply labelling them. For example, story-telling is considered a key element of identity work (Ibarra, 2005; Fachin and Davel, 2015; Petriglieri et al., 2018; Bachkirova 2020). This was confirmed through the repeated occurrence of storytelling in the research interviews, and was represented twice in the questions accompanying the model – the first question in Stage 1, ‘What’s my story up to this point?’, and the final question in in Stage 4, ‘What’s my story now?’. As other concepts arose in the interview, they were transformed into questions with the research partner, or during later consideration of the data. For example, the issue of social identity was captured as ‘How do others see me?’; happiness became ‘Am I happy (enough)?’; and possible selves were explored through many questions including ‘In my wildest dreams, who could I be?’. Purposeful, open questions are considered a key factor in coaching, as they unlock possibilities by encouraging conscious exploration, articulation, ownership and agency of the experience (Hardingham, 2004; Savickas, 2013).

Findings

Findings were presented in two sections. The first described the evolution of the abstract conceptualisation, co-created with the research partners (see Fig. 1 below). In response to de Rivera’s invitation (de Rivera and Kreilkamp, 2006, p.1) to ‘join with us in mapping personal experience’ through the use of the CE methodology, the resulting 2-page conceptualisation was entitled: ‘The MAP (Me-As-a-Process) Coaching Model: women’s identity work in career choices and transitions’. It went through many iterations, building on the work of existing research and models by Ibarra (2003), Yates (2017), and many others. The final spiral design, inspired by Prochaska et al., (1992), was appreciated by Anita:

> *Seeing a spiral representation of change takes away the fear of having to go back to the beginning and start again... Everything you go through, whether you succeed or not, is valuable, it shapes you and informs you and makes you grow – even if it is painful. (Anita)*

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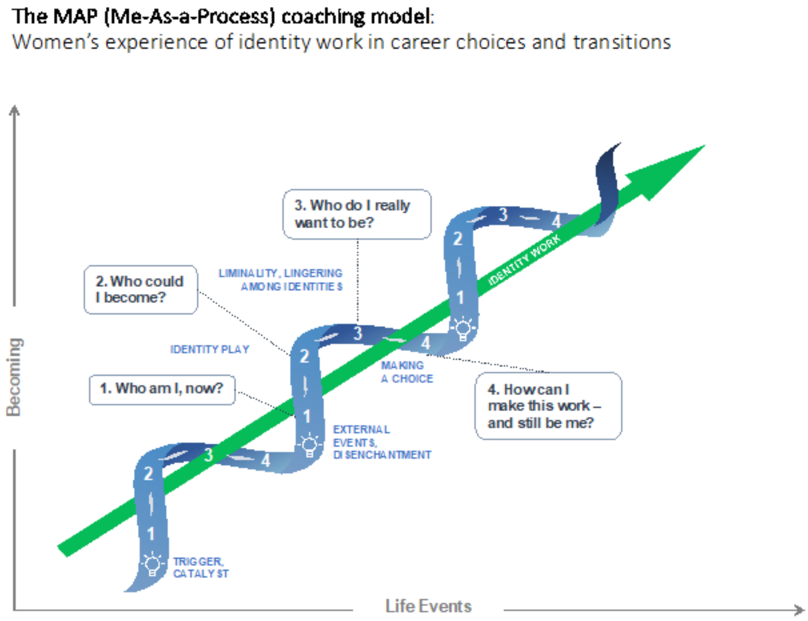
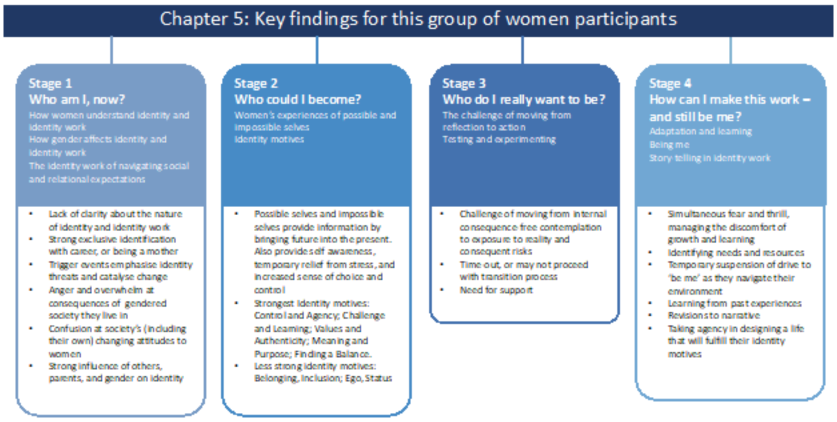
Figure 2: Findings part 1. The abstract conceptualisation and accompanying coaching questions, co-created with research partners (2pp).



The second part of the Findings, the presentation of the 'concrete' data from research partners, is the responsibility of the researcher alone. I struggled to find a clear and compelling structure, so I reviewed how it was done in other CE studies, including Goodman (1981), Lindsay-Hartz (1981), de Rivera (1997, 2006), Bachkirova (2015) and Noon (2017). These studies all approached their Findings in very different ways, but were consistent in relating the presentation of data to the themes of the model. As the model was structured by the stages of identity work in career transitions, I used that format and presented the salient themes emerging from each stage, as shown in Fig 3.

Figure 3: Findings part 2: Key themes from the data analysis, presented through the stages of the model.



The thesis and model will be accessible via RADAR and on ETHOS https://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do.

Discussion: Strengths and weaknesses of the CE methodology

Using Conceptual Encounter methodology to co-create the output of the research was a joyful experience. Collaborating with my research partners prompted conversations that were authentic, rich, and insightful (Noon, 2017; Goodman, 1981). As the researcher, I found it an engaging and rewarding experience, and particularly valued CE's flexibility which allows for creativity in achieving the desired research output. Research partners reported that they found it empowering to co-create a model that could continue to evolve in other environments, to support other groups and individuals.

It is hard to deny that working with an initial model at the outset of the CE methodology poses a risk of confirmatory bias affecting the results (Noon, 2017; Bachkirova, 2015). While this bias is mitigated by the modifications of subsequent research partners, a different initial model might reveal different results. In a Reference Note, de Rivera and Kreilkamp (2006) suggest that it is not necessary to begin with a conceptualisation; one could be developed during the course of the investigation, based solely on the research partners' experiences. However, the advantage of the initial conceptualisation lies in anchoring it in the existing research. Further, there is an element of honesty in exposing initial ideas; it is unlikely that my work coaching career transitions would not have generated some pre-conceived notions on the subject.

A limitation, not specific to CE, was my lack of design ability. I engaged a designer to create in PowerPoint the design I had drawn up, but I was conscious that greater fluency with design and computer skills might have optimised the result or even influenced the Findings, just as language enables thinking and meaning-making (Savickas, 2013).

The act of attempting to encapsulate an experience in a conceptualisation could also be seen as a limitation. Burr (2015) discusses the essentialism that occurs in psychology, and how it can be a form of reductionism, entrapping, labelling and disempowering people. The CE model or 'map', although itself created from a social constructivist stance, could be seen as an attempt to clean up the messiness and variance of human experience, to capture and freeze 'a complex phenomenon in terms of simpler or more fundamental elements' (Burr, 2015, p.7). De Rivera and Kreilkamp (2006) counter this by clarifying that the conceptualisation is an investigation of psychological processes, rather than a predictor or controller of behaviour. It is a provisional map of some instances of the phenomena, not a definition of how things happen. ‘All that one can hope for is to gain some insights into the complex patterning that exists’ write Guba and Lincoln (1988, cited in Fetterman, 1988, p.95). As a coach, I defend the notion of a conceptualisation on the grounds that a model of a psychological process can stimulate conversations which clients may be otherwise unable or reluctant to articulate. It helps to bring to consciousness what may otherwise be a sub-conscious process (Bourne and Ozbilgin, 2008).

The use of retrospective interviews may have influenced the results. Retrospective data collection runs the risk that the participants forget the detail of the process and outcome, and may with hindsight forge a narrative more suited to their current sense-making activities (Duffell and Lawton-Smith, 2015). It is equally possible, however, that the full meaning of an experience only becomes clear with time.

Final reflections

In this relatively new field of Coaching and Mentoring studies, there is a need to understand personal, subjective experience before theory can be generated. The purpose of this study was to provide a model to support coaches and clients as they consciously engage with the complex, holistic and ongoing identity processes that accompany and define career transitions. Conceptual Encounter (CE) was ideal for this: it invites participants to explore their subjective realities of an experience and become research partners in the co-creation of a conceptualisation that maps it. Both the researcher and the research partners contribute not only to the content of the research, but also to the creative thinking that generates, manages and draws conclusions from the research (de Rivera and Kreilkamp, 2006). The model created by the research process is not predictive or prescriptive but exploratory and tentative, subject to ongoing revision as more input is received. It is an emergent methodology, an iterative process, a negotiated consensus. This fits perfectly with a constructivist approach.

Use of Conceptual Encounter also responds to Caza et al.’s (2018, p.904) call for diversifying methodologies used in studies of identity work, to increase understanding of the ‘outcomes of identity work and their underlying mechanisms’. While varied methodologies have been applied to areas associated with this study, this CE study, co-created with the research partners, brings a fresh perspective to the subject and generates an accessible model with which coaches can support their clients as they experience the identity work in career choices and transitions.

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