

Academic Paper

Coaching during late career reinvention: The Discovering Model

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Abstract

Most of us will be living and working longer, but what if we want to do something very different during the later years of our working life? Research suggests that workers face unique issues in their late career, yet there is little formal research into career coaching experiences and implications for practice. Using grounded theory methodology, data was analysed from fourteen participants, (seven individuals who had reinvented their late career and seven coaches with extensive experience). Three main features emerged and form the basis of a practitioner model presented here. Potential implications for coaches have also been identified.

Keywords

Late career, reinvention, grounded theory methodology, discovering model,

Article history

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Introduction

Economists are reporting that the ‘100 year life’ is already upon us, bringing a whole range of challenges and opportunities resulting from longer working lives (Gratton and Scott, 2016). Additionally, the Office for National Statistics in the UK reports that the over-50s are the fastest growing population of workers. They also report a dip in happiness and a spike in anxiety at mid-life suggesting it can be a challenging time (ONS, 2018). Pension ages are increasing in many countries, and legislation is being introduced to protect older workers with governments encouraging people to work longer.

Careers research suggests workers in their late careers face unique career and psychosocial issues, (McNair et al., 2004; Watts et al., 2015; Erodogan et al., 2011; Feldman, 2007; Newman, 1995; Post et al., 2012) but there is very little empirical research into what this might mean for careers support let alone the newer discipline of coaching. According to psychologists Wang et al, this is an area in need of more research. They suggest that studies into the “antecedents and consequences of career renewal for individuals in their mid and late careers has been neglected” (Wang, Olsen and Shulz, 2013 p104).

The purpose of the study was to contribute to the limited body of knowledge for coaches working with people during late career reinvention. Whilst this paper is practitioner focused (with greater emphasis on findings and implications for coaches), there is also a summary of relevant literature from related disciplines and an overview of the research methodology and limitations.

Literature and definitions

Whilst the specific literature for coaching during late career reinvention is very limited, more exists in related disciplines such as counselling, education, business, change, leadership, psychology and medicine. For this research, a breadth of literature was reviewed to help determine the potential relevance and contribution of a study as well as to define terms for this relatively new and potentially growing topic. For this article, key literature is synthesised in relation to the main terms - late career, reinvention, and career transitions and support.

Late career

The word 'career' originates from the middle French and Latin words meaning street and road and was historically mostly associated with the professional classes. Currently theorists, business writers and government researchers are using more inclusive definitions such as: the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989).

Life-stage theorists have long argued that mid-life is associated with changing psychological needs. For example, Levinson's eight life-stages theory includes a 'mid-life transition' stage from age 40 to 45 and a 'questioning and modification' stage from age 50 to 55 (Levinson, 1978). Within the growing careers and public policy literature, 'late career' is frequently described as having some distinctive challenges (McNair et al., 2004; Watts et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2013; Erodogan et al., 2011; Feldman, 2007; Ng and Feldman, 2010; Newman, 1995; Post et al., 2012). It has been reported that individuals in late career place greater emphasis on creating work and family balance (Baltes, 1980; Barham, 2008), the desire for a better work climate, autonomy and finding meaning (Wang et al., 2013; Erodogan et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2015).

Conversely, other researchers report diverse characteristics of older workers with very "different circumstances, needs and preoccupations" (Watts et al., 2015 p9) and advocate not muddling age and career stage as people can be at an early stage within a new career path (Wang et al., 2013). Some do not consider it to be a discreet stage as the priorities, challenges and self-confidence at age 50 are affected by the accumulated choices, successes, and experiences earlier in life (e.g. Feldman, 2002).

For this research, 'late career' is considered to be the point after which individuals themselves believe they are moving into the final chapter(s) of their working lives. In practice, there was an association with age in line with other studies and all were over 45.

Reinvention

Heppner proposed three alternate but distinct types of work change: a task change, a position change and an occupation change – involving a completely new role and set of tasks (Heppner, 1998). For a significant change or transition, writers use different terms such as 're-imagining' (Burns, 2015), 're-inventing' (Ibarra, 2004), re-crafting' (Mintzberg, 1987), 're-orienting' (Bridges, 2004), 're-framing' (Brown, 2015), or 'renewing' (Wang, Olsen and Shulz, 2013) careers, but they consistently argue there is a psychological transition that goes beyond or alongside responses to external changes, frequently referencing Bridge's three-stage transition model (Bridges, 1980). For this research, it was assumed that 'reinvention' is likely to involve a significant occupation change and a psychological transition.

Career transitions and support

As thinking about careers is shifting, so are views on career development and career transitions. Traditional theories and techniques were based on predictability (work, personal traits and life / career stages) and were criticised for their rigidity, male bias and US dominance. More recent models emphasise uncertainty, flexibility and change such as Hall's 'protean career' with frequent movement, the ability to change forms and a systemic view of work and career (Hall, 2002). Or the 'boundaryless' career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). These theoretical models feature in many career coaching handbooks but as Parker points out "there is little empirical support for boundaryless career theory and none linking it with coaching outcomes" (Parker, 2017 p425). The influence of personal and situational determinants is also increasingly acknowledged.

The readiness to manage role adjustments or career changes (predictable and unpredictable) has been called 'career adaptability' by Savickas et al and developed into a career adaptability scale (Savickas et al, 2009). The validity of this scale has been confirmed by studies in several different countries (Soresi, Nota & Ferrari, 2012; Tolentino et al, 2013; Maggiori, Rossiter & Savickas, 2015) and empirical research has found that adaptability is correlated with readiness to change but not confidence to change (Ghosh & Fouad, 2015). Research, however, is rather limited. There appears to be no consensus about what adaptability actually is and this scale definition has been criticised for being too broad for practitioners (Gloster, 2013).

The concept of career guidance was developed in North American schools from the 1900s (Hazen & Steckler, 2014) and "tries to facilitate transitions in and out of work and learning by providing insight into relevant work and learning opportunities" (Gloster, 2013 p175). Career coaching is a more recent discipline, only being discussed since 2000, and there remains no common definition (Hazen & Steckler, 2014; Parker, 2017; Yates, 2014). Yates distinguishes career counselling from career coaching by suggesting that counselling "infers a particular style of support that might help clients to resolve conflicts or understand patterns of behaviour", whereas career coaching is "seen as a practice that can benefit all, not just those who are struggling, and is a mechanism to help people who are doing well" (Yates, 2014 p3).

For the purpose of this research, it was not assumed that late career reinvention coaching is necessarily career coaching – but rather coaching to support late career reinvention which could have been coaching with a whole variety of coaching approaches.

In choosing 'late career reinvention', several other terms were considered including: career change in the third age (Ford, 1996); older worker career transitions (Barham, 2008); and changing work in later life (McNair et al., 2004; Johnson, Kawachi and Lewis, 2009). 'Late career reinvention' was chosen because it was the best at succinctly describing the topic without being too prescriptive or familiar to potential participants.

Methodology

A qualitative and inductive research strategy using grounded theory methodology was chosen to reflect the absence of existing coaching research in this area, enable conceptualisation (of the most important features) and support theory building (to develop a framework for coaches). This was also consistent with a social constructionism paradigm of careers, reflecting a belief in a dynamic interaction between individual sense making, the social context, and wider factors that can influence career actions and choices such as suggested career paths, selection criteria, professional development structures, or gender biases. The link to grounded theory is well captured by Charmaz, who asserts that "the aim of constructivist grounded theory is to learn how people make sense of their situations and act on them" (Charmaz, 2000 p517) so goes beyond sense-making. For this research, the interest was in how clients make sense of their late careers, what they did to reinvent them, and the most important features of coaching along the way.

Several grounded theory approaches were reviewed before the updated Corbin and Strauss approach as it maintains rigour and combines with recent influences of constructivism (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

Participants

There were fourteen participants, and all had experience of late career reinvention coaching. seven were individuals (clients) who had reinvented their late career and seven were coaches with extensive experience of coaching others through late career reinvention (with several hundred clients between them). All were volunteers, in work, and part of an extended professional business network. Efforts were made to ensure a mix of gender but in practice there were more females than males (5:2 for both groups). Whilst this is a relatively small participant population, it is consistent with expectations.

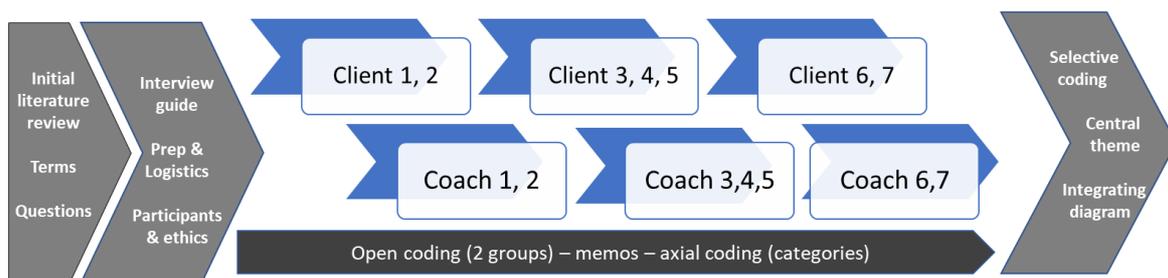
Data collection and analysis

Individual, semi-structured telephone interviews were chosen – offering a safe environment and location flexibility. Appropriate measures were taken to ensure participants knew what to expect and to provide confidentiality and anonymity. They were also free to withdraw at any stage. After each interview, the recording was transcribed and returned to the participant with the option of making changes.

Coding and analysis began after the first interviews and continued throughout. Memos were used to explore the data at regular points and subsequent data collection iterated. Data analysis involved the three levels of coding typical of grounded theory - firstly, open coding (breaking the data into manageable chunks), then axial coding (analysis and grouping of codes and categories for relevance to the research focus – constantly comparing to assure mutual exclusivity and data saturation) and selective coding (reviewing the categories to arrive at the central theme from which a proposition was developed).

Data for coaches and clients was analysed separately at each stage before being analysed together to support consideration of similarities and differences across the two groups.

Figure 1: Methodology summary



Ethics and limitations

The research adheres to Oxford Brookes University's 'Code of Practice Ethical Standards for Research involving Human Participants'. Specific attention was paid to anonymity and data protection (for recordings and transcriptions). The risk of influence of existing knowledge from related disciplines on the current study was mitigated by ensuring the interview format was sufficiently open and the analysis was reviewed and challenged by others. Whilst there are

limitations to the scale and diversity of this study, the methodology was rigorous and appears to make a valuable contribution to the body of coaching knowledge.

Findings

According to the participants, late career reinvention is a journey that takes time (between 3 and 8 years), can involve many twists and turns (i.e. is non-linear), brings big questions as well as practical challenges, and is only recognised as reinvention in hindsight.

In terms of the coaching, three main features emerged. It is important to note that they were common to both groups but with some differences in perspective or emphasis. In this section, sub-categories within the main features are indicated with *italics*.

Box 1: A summary of the main features of coaching during late career reinvention

- Discovering - journeying to be more of me
- Systemic readiness
- Dancing with fear and self-confidence

Discovering - journeying to become more of me

The overarching theme of late career reinvention and associated coaching is 'discovering'.

As clients work on the issue that brought them to coaching, they are discovering as opposed to just exploring or deciding. The initial issue is rarely the full scope of the work. It is a multi-layered, non-linear process with people who are far from blank pages (at this stage of their career and their lives). Rather than hoping to become someone they are not, or deciding between different options, they are wanting to be more of themselves – '*more of me*'. They are often interested in other reinvention stories, but this is more about validating their own journey than wanting to replicate others.

The coaching is in service of this 'dis-covering' by helping and stimulating clients to think holistically and differently about themselves, supporting fresh insights or perspectives and helping them go beyond their immediate symptoms. It is wide ranging and about the whole person as opposed to being just work or career related.

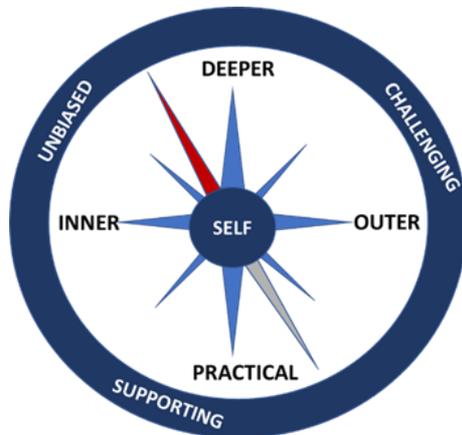
"The journey was all an excuse just for me to be who I was meant to be"

"The initial symptoms will show up in the context of the work, but they also tend to be asking questions across the spectrum of their lives"

A compass metaphor illustrates the variety of the conversations and the need to navigate non-linear, multi-layered conversations covering all four different aspects of self-discovery (four poles):

- 'Deeper self' - e.g. Who am I now? What is my purpose? What matters most?
- 'Practical self' - e.g. Am I financially ok to do this? What new skills will I need? How can I build my network or CV?
- 'Inner self' - e.g. What are my values? What is my body/unconscious telling me matters? Are my repeating patterns or beliefs getting in the way?
- 'Outer self' - e.g. Will others see me as odd? What can I learn from others? How do others see what I bring? What are the risks to my wider family?

Figure 2: Discovering compass



The unique value of the coach relationship was reported to be as a companion who is an *'unbiased, challenging supporter'*. During the journey, clients may have other 'companions' such as partners, friends, or colleagues but they are not considered to be unbiased for a whole variety of reasons. The client seems to be the prime navigator and 'holds the compass' – they are the ones journeying, are present for the whole journey and ultimately make the choices. The coach has a key role in assisting the navigation – prompting further discovery in appropriate ways and ensuring major aspects of the journeying process are not missed. This viewpoint potentially positions the coach in a non-expert capacity walking alongside the clients.

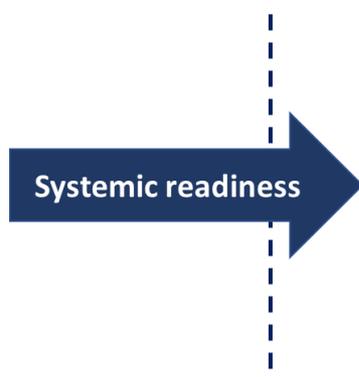
"It was about having someone who would approach it professionally, that I could trust, and know that it was my decision as opposed to being influenced by somebody else"

"It's probably the only space where they give themselves permission to speak freely because their partners would probably have a fit as there might be a lot of money coming in - big holidays, big houses, big cars"

Systemic readiness

'Systemic readiness' refers to aspects about the individual or their wider system that can affect their readiness, willingness, or ability to reinvent their late career. The data showed it was most relevant at the start and end of reinvention and there was a sense of a boundary to cross.

Figure 3: Systemic readiness



Individuals seemed to feel its importance more emotionally and described the necessity to take a jump or a leap of faith. Coaches stressed the importance of paying attention to the whole system

and addressing the risks to that system - potentially a more detached position.

There can be a wide range of influences that can be present both in terms of risk and a felt sense of readiness – hence the notion of systemic as opposed to individual readiness or alignment.

'Sufficient dissatisfaction' was a precursor to readiness. For some, dissatisfaction grew gradually (a slow burn) but for others it was triggered by an event or circumstances. It also seemed to influence what people pay attention to (clients initially found it easier to know what they didn't want or what is missing as opposed to what they did want or need) and whether they go on to reinvent (some reappraise their dissatisfaction through coaching and deliberately choose their current path). Interestingly, no-one suggested that they were 'satisfied' after the reinvention – proud, liberated, lighter, looking toward the next change – but not satisfied.

"Leading up to being dismissed I was doing too much and getting very very dissatisfied"

"They typically find it easier to answer a question like - what do you definitely not want from your next role?"

"I'd say about 30% go down a very different route. Some say things like 'I needed to pause and then choose from a more conscious place' as opposed to just following some kind of formula that seems to be playing out in their life"

A further consideration was whether their *'basic needs'* would be OK, but not necessarily increased. Whilst these varied according to individual circumstances, the dominant need seemed to be financial security with both coaches and clients referencing it extensively.

"I did have to do a lot of weighing up with my coach to do that - I was leaving 18 years of stability, pension, bonus and all that security"

"It's very easy I think, to jump on the bandwagon of our clients' enthusiasm for doing something but the impact of it can be wider than them – it's important for me to explore systemically their system and the risks and then make a choice fully informed"

The views and expectations of others can also be powerful, especially those close to the client. This influence can be conscious or unconscious, visible or hidden. In this study, the sub-category *'is everyone ready enough?'* refers to the need to pay attention to wider influences and associated risks. It also reinforces that one person's perception of readiness is likely to be different to someone else's.

Dancing with fear and self-confidence

The third main feature that emerged was an interplay between fear and self-confidence that is both *'dynamic and changing'*. It appears not to be direct or inverse as they can grow and decline at different paces and both can be a driver (affect) and a response (effect). It may be helpful to consider the metaphor of a dance between two partners – but where the leader of the dance can switch, the type of dance can change, and they can also dance individually while the other watches in the background.

Initial fears included fear of being irrelevant, becoming my parents, being useless, or being stuck forever. Later fears might be fear of making the wrong decision, being in limbo, not being good enough, being vulnerable, uncertainty, changing, not changing, or not being able to pay my bills.

"Is it too late, am I too old, has the ship sailed? I haven't done anything that makes a real difference yet"

“Later there can be the fear of will I be good enough, everyone else is already qualified they've been doing it for years, will anybody want me?”

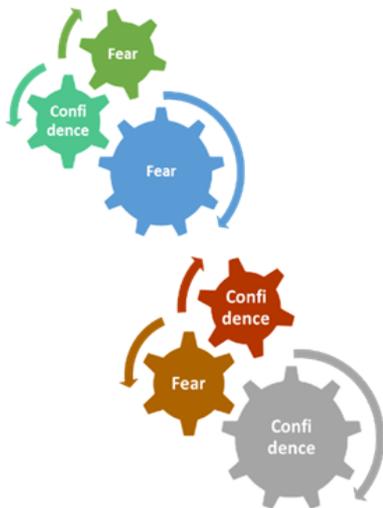
Self-confidence was also reported to be dynamic in nature - varying by individual and/ or over time. There was a suggestion by some coaches that confidence might be more of an issue for women and where the change is forced, but this was beyond the scope of this study.

“There is a lot of confidence building - which I do get in all the coaching, but it is really common in a redundancy situation – building self-esteem back up first of all before they can even think about being capable of something else”.

It was anticipated that emotions would be an important part of late career reinvention and this is consistent with the wider literature on transitions. The prevalence of fear and self-confidence, and indeed an interplay between them, was not expected until it emerged from the data.

Figure 4 is an illustration with fear and self-confidence shown as multi-coloured gears. This is a metaphoric representation to demonstrate that both can affect pace by accelerating, slowing or stopping reinvention and that they can be varied and changing in nature.

Figure 4: gears of fear and self-confidence



In the research, the concept of fear stimulating fight, flight, or freeze effects emerged very early. The gearing effect of self-confidence appears to be more subtle, and sometimes more generalised – for example, that it's OK to reinvent my career at this stage or that 'I'll be OK'.

“It's terrifying and exciting at the same time and I'm still thinking how the hell am I going to pay my gas bill? But it is really nice, and I feel a bit liberated by it as well”

On revisiting the literature, there was some support for fear and self-confidence as affect and effect. For example, Keegan asserts that fear is not necessarily a negative force and “can be challenging, exhilarating forcing us to do something” whilst also noting “it is hard to find studies that demonstrate an enhancing effect in the workplace” (Keegan, 2015 p76). It has also been argued that self-esteem can be both a positive force propelling change and growth in the client, but it may also inhibit and limit (Maxwell & Bachkirova, 2010).

Overall, the client experience was captured by one participant as a hermit crab metaphor:

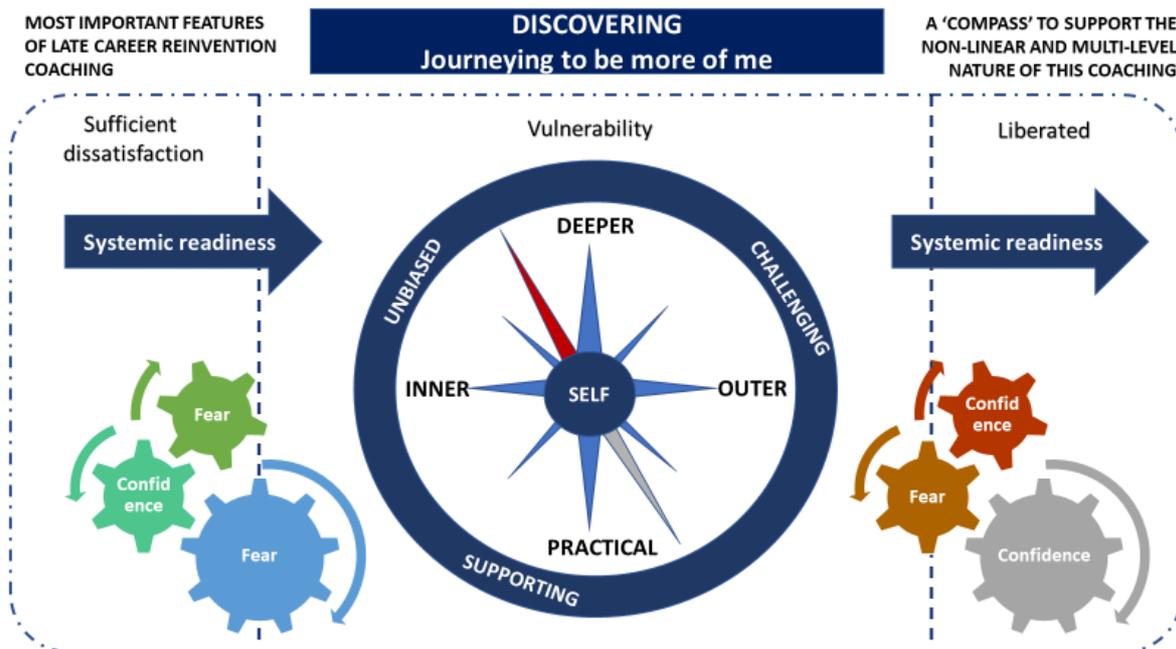
“It’s like being a hermit crab which needs to go into a larger shell. There’s the part where you take a leap and come out, you’re really vulnerable, then you scuttle on and occupy more space. It’s about having to let go. Then of course it doesn’t stop - you know you can stay in the shell for a time but there will be a call to shift out of it again”.

Integrating framework – The Discovering model

Developing an integrating diagram is recommended by Corbin and Strauss as part of their grounded theory process and is the product of many iterations and testing. The diagram below aims to integrate the key research findings and illustrate how the categories that emerged fit together.

The three main features are clearly shown. Discovering - journeying to be more of myself is at the heart of the diagram – illustrated by a compass - and is the dominant feature of the coaching work. The compass face shows the different directions that coaching conversations take at different times and the need to navigate working at several different levels. The coach stance - an unbiased, challenging supporter – runs around the whole compass. Systemic readiness particularly features at the start and end of coaching, as individuals consider a whole range of conscious and unconscious factors in their own and their wider systems influencing their readiness. Dancing with fear and confidence is a feature throughout the whole journey with the coloured gears symbolising the variety and pacing affect and effects. The emotional states across the top – sufficient dissatisfaction, vulnerability and liberated – are an example of the internal psychological transition that can be involved.

Figure 5: The Discovering model



Implications for coaching practice

In this section, four aspects of the research findings are highlighted in relation to potential implications for coaching practice.

Discovering (as opposed to exploring or deciding)

Participants observed that coaching with the aim of discovering involves a different approach than exploring or decision making. 'Dis-covering' involves uncovering things that were previously not seen or understood – present but may not be presenting. There might be reasons (conscious or unconscious) as to why things were covered. Coach participants commented that coaches need to be respectful, aware of their own 'stuff', and alert to potential risks of dis-covering.

The concept of decision-making has been dominant in careers literature (including career coaching) for a long time. In the context of this research, however, decision-making was not a key feature and both coach and client participants warned against focusing on one decision or one solution too soon. Several coach participants suggested that coaching approaches which worked with the whole person and helped them to 'get out of their heads' were very useful. Examples given of broader coaching approaches were developmental coaching, existential coaching and person-centered coaching.

Unbiased, challenging supporter

Clients really valued this lack of bias and believed that most, if not all, of the other people around them were biased in one way or another. For many of the coaches in this research, working with clients who are wanting to make a change is inspirational and interesting both personally and professionally. Several coach participants acknowledged that their interest may challenge the 'unbiased' aspect with a potential risk of encouraging or advocating reinvention unconsciously. They addressed the risk through effective supervision.

Holding a 'challenging supporter' position when coaching may itself be tricky. In his work, de Haan described a playing field of coaching approaches along two continua producing four quadrants (de Haan, 2008):

- suggesting ---- exploring
- confronting ---- supporting

This research suggests coaches need to be able to occupy or move between both ends of de Haan's confronting ---- supporting continua. Yates argues that career coaches can occupy all four quadrants and whilst "coaching practitioners would tend to resist the suggesting/confronting quadrants", challenging can be an important part of career coaching if done, for example, from a position of unconditional positive regard (Yates, 2014 p1).

Navigating wide ranging conversations

The findings showed a wide variety of topics in the coaching conversations and the compass emerged as an illustration of this variety. In practice, this compass could also support the coaching conversations – for example, during contracting as coaches can be clear about their own experience and approach and any associated boundaries or as a signpost for aspects that may or may not have been considered.

A future development of the compass could be to support coaches in their choice of approach for different types of conversation. For example, an 'inner-self' conversation may benefit from a values identification tool or a 'practical-self' conversation may involve signposting resources which might be helpful. Additionally, for an 'outer-self' conversation a system mapping exercise could assist them or for 'deeper-self' conversations, existential approaches may be appropriate.

Position and proximity to dancing with fear and confidence

A varied and dynamic interplay between fear and confidence emerged from this study quickly and consistently. In relation to coaching practice, the main implications relate to the positioning of the coach in relation to this 'dance'. According to the participants, there is a need to clearly and respectfully reflect aspects of the dance (including possible patterns) back to the client – by the coach sharing what they notice and experience in ways that provide fresh insight. Additionally, they advised considering how the fear (or confidence) could be serving the client at any given point as opposed to deliberately or automatically trying to address it. To be able to 'reflect or illuminate the dance' in this way, and avoid introducing bias, several coach participants stressed the need to 'own your own stuff' through professional development and good supervision. I would 100% support this advice and gladly pass it on here.

Both coaches and clients observed that there is relatively little written about late career reinvention and that coaches could help signpost resources for clients who wanted to learn more and normalise the process and their experience of it in a wider context. Client participants found other people's stories interesting and supportive – not because they felt their journey was the same, but as a general confidence builder, reminding them that they weren't too weird and that they would be OK.

Future research

In terms of future research, the literature review identified gaps in related areas such as role transition coaching or developmental coaching at mid-life as well as specifically into late career reinvention. Whilst there are some large-scale government sponsored studies into late career, they are still very recent and tend to focus on career guidance as opposed to coaching. Specific explanatory research would be useful to support or challenge some of the suggestions made especially in other contexts, cultures or with different groups. For example, there is little literature or research into the notion of an interplay (dance) between fear and self-confidence. This could be an interesting seam of research for coaching in general. Similarly, the category of 'systemic readiness' highlighted for me a lack of research into coaches taking a wider systemic perspective to coaching in general.

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