Academic Paper

Coming of Age in the 2020's: an ancient story retold?

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Abstract

My study was based on in-depth interviews with 6 young adults who had recently moved from education into graduate training schemes in the shadow of the Covid-Pandemic. I set out to understand their experiences and how coaching had been used by their organisations to support their needs and meet their expectations. My chosen approach for analysing the data was Narrative Analysis, a less commonly applied methodology within coaching research.

Taken together, the stories of the graduates provide a snap shot of 'Coming of Age' in a contemporary workplace setting. A significant observation was that this group of graduates entering the workplace is not so very different from their predecessors despite the challenges of accelerating social and technological change. A thread that ran through the narratives was the pivotal role of the guide, used here in its broadest sense to mean someone who provides an external source of wisdom or direction, whether they be family, friends, managers or coaches. The graduates' need for belonging: to feel included, accepted and valued by their new social group and the organisation was significant in my findings. These basic developmental needs of young adults have often been overlooked in the coaching and career literature. Coaching and Managers adopting a relational, coaching style were found to contribute to their sense of belonging in their organisations. There is a need for coaches and organisations to be more attuned to individual perspectives.

Introduction

Classically, 'Coming of Age' describes the process of a young person finding their feet in the adult world. It is a deeply embedded social construct dating back to the Odyssey which continues to resonate today (Suad, 2003; Benyahia et al., 2006,. Arnett, 2006). The archetypal Coming of Age story, told in the first four books of Homer's Odyssey, describes the inner journey of Telemachus

from adolescence to adulthood and the crucial advice and guidance of Athena, disguised as an old man called Mentor, in overcoming external obstacles, self-doubt and isolation (Rieu,1946).

At a time when young people today are already facing the multiple challenges of entering adulthood, they also have had to contend with impact of the Covid-19 pandemic combined with economic and technological volatility (Ng et al., 2010, Laloux, 2020). I wanted to understand if the stories of transition from university to the world of work reflected changing expectations and social realities. How different is the current generation of graduates from their predecessors and how may this understanding be used to develop effective coaching responses?

A large amount of the literature about current graduate expectations of the business workplace is based on large datasets, derived from anonymised questionnaires. In these studies, context, based on historical events and first person narratives, is often missing. The 'Millennial' and 'Gen Z' stereotype at times refers to entitled, self-seeking or work shy graduates – an inaccurate and unhelpful narrative in the context of graduate development. Recent studies of graduate starters tend to focus on the organisational perspective rather than that of the graduate, concentrating on their broader recruitment and retention goals (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Baska, 2019).

The current discourse around careers promotes 'employability' as a basis for career success, with companies calling for 'work ready' graduates with 'employability and career management skills' (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Swarbrick, 2021). Hall's Protean career concept and the boundary-less career model (Hall, 2004; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) overwhelmingly portray the protean careerist as the 'winner' in the employment marketplace; self-reliant, flexible and happy to move between organisations (Sullivan & Baruch 2009, Leach, 2015). Pressures on new graduates to conform to this paradigm are not inconsiderable. Coming of Age in a contemporary workplace setting, then, is often seen through the lens of the challenges faced by employers today and their employment requirements. Less has been written about the transition into the workplace from the graduate's point of view. The voice of the young person is often missing from studies.

Literature

Managing the high expectations of the current generation of graduates is a particular focus in the Business and HR management literature. They are portrayed as an anxious, entitled generation with high aspirations around training and development and career advancement (Twenge, 2007; De Vos & De Hauw 2010; Ng et al 2010; Ahman et al., 2010; Hasluck et al., 2012). They seek a sense of purpose, prefer a workplace aligned with their values and are highly individualistic (Adkins & Rigoni, 2016; Cooper, 2020). They aspire to close, egalitarian relationships and open communication and feedback from supervisors (Lockwood et al, 2009, Mackenzie, 2017). Other organisational research, however, does not accept that there is much convincing research evidence with 'significant intellect' to back up the concept of generational difference and we risk indulging in stereotypes (Mackenzie, 2017, Drake, 2021). The values and attitudes informing the expectations of young adults today are no different to previous generations - similarities across much of the literature concerns employees' desire for individual treatment, autonomy, meaning and purpose (Meredith et al., 2002).

Low levels of organisational commitment and a shorter term focus, with work taking place in short, sharp bursts, characterise working patterns today (McKinsey, 2017). Trends in the employment market bring this sharply into focus with the current discourse around 'The War for Talent' (Brown et al., p. 64). Young graduates have a wide range of options open to them, particularly in sectors such as technology, manufacturing and the service industries which have met labour shortages since the Covid-19 pandemic (Fielding, 2022).

Business and HR research points to a rethinking of careers, long term goals and greater emphasis on work/life balance (CIPD, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic emphasised and accelerated existing workplace trends and spurred on 'The Great Resignation' when large numbers voluntarily left their jobs, bringing about a profound shift in how and where we work (Kaplan, 2021; CIPD, 2022). Other commentators point to 'the Great Rethink' not being the important issue. The spotlight should rather be on employers and policy makers to create quality work with lots of flexibility to allow employers to attract and retain employees (Krugman, 2021).

Much of the career building literature points to a shift in the psychological contract between young employees and their employers (Rousseau, 2004). No longer 'relational', emphasising loyalty on both sides, the contract has become 'transactional' (Hobsbawn, 2022). Employers can no longer guarantee employment and provide their employees with opportunities for career advancement and challenging work assignments, often referred to as 'employability security' (Hall & Chandler, 2005, Fieldling, 2022). Young recruits now expect to work on challenging projects in cross functional teams which have been shown to increase their growth and development whilst beginning their socialisation in the organisation (Duffy et al. 2015).

As part of this newly defined transactional contract graduates no longer promise loyalty to their employers but do commit to high performance. Some maintain that these broad trends relating to the psychological contract are exaggerated; others suggest that emerging contracts mix aspects of both the traditional and relational perspectives (Kram, 1996; Hall & Moss 1998). What is undeniable is that the psychological contract has shifted in a way that encourages self-reliance and individual career management (Hiltrop 1996). Graduates today expect to be able to develop their own skills and disciplines which they recognise as being highly transferable in the current employment market (Fielding, 2022).

Joining an organisation in 2019-2020 was a particularly turbulent and challenging time for the graduates. The successive lockdowns and working from home directives during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted and, in some cases, completely changed the nature of their induction programmes. Challenges posed by the lockdowns on mental health included reduced motivation, loss of purpose and, anxiety as a result of the imposed isolation (Hossain et al, 2020; Catling et al., CIPD, December 2021; 2022). Mind found that 60% of young adults said their mental health deteriorated during lockdown because of isolation from others (Mind 2021).

Pressure is now on employers to adapt their HR practices to address the individual needs of their young recruits. As a result, coaching is increasingly considered a meaningful intervention in the retention of graduate employees. Anxiety, ambition, and challenges of modern life have 'combined to create a market for men and women who could provide, for a fee, a service that older generations have once performed for younger generations as a part of the social contract' (Naughton 2002, p.7). Coaching in its modern form has emerged from a synthesis of many fields including adult learning, consulting, change management, the human potential movement and psychology (Western, 2017). Its roots lie, however, in a long tradition of soul guides and psychological helpers, which dates back to The Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena, 'Mentor' to Telemachus, son of Odysseus (Rieu,1946).

Graduates today expect personalised learning and development approaches in the workplace. This can best be provided through coaching with its focus on the individual (Harvard Business Review, 2015). Academic literature frames coaching as a way to enhance the psychological contract between employer and employee and research finds that it supports alignment of values, fit with the organisation and career development (Solomon & Van Coller-Peter 2019). Coaching has also been found to result in better communication and improved relationships with colleagues through raised awareness and better understanding of strengths and motivations (Kombarakaran et al. 2008; Biswas-Diener, 2009).

There is empirical evidence linking coaching with improved performance but also offering intangible benefits like better staff morale, engagement, teamwork and collaboration (Sorensen, 2002; Anderson et al., 2009). However, coaching is not always perceived as being effectively used in organisations. Various views of why this may be range from failure to value coaching at a strategic level in the organisation (Lindbom, 2007), an over emphasis on speed and action at the expense of reflection, to suspicion by managers due to the extra work involved (Agarwal et al., 2009; Evans, 2011). Building a 'coaching culture' has been described in terms of adopting a top down, systematic approach of embedding coaching in the organisation (Boehle, 2007; Hawkins, 2008). It has equally been described as an organic, systems approach starting at the grassroots level (Clutterbuck & Megginson 2005).

It can be difficult to distinguish coaching from other dyadic helping interventions, in particular mentoring (Mangion-Thornley, 2021). Coaching tends to focus on shorter term, goal orientated interventions and is a 'personalised, rapport-based quality conversation…where authenticity, realism and self-congruency are vital parts of the coaching conversation' (Grant, 2017, p.38). Mentoring commonly involves a more experienced professional guiding, giving advice and developing a more junior colleague in a longer term relationship by focusing on tasks and objectives (Gibb, 1999; Coutu & Kauffman 2009). Similar skills are required for both, and excellent mentors use coaching approaches, in particular listening, empathy, communication and feedback (Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004).

Whether it be achieved through coaching or mentoring young graduates expect to have a close relationship with their Manager. A coaching style approach can provide relational depth, a sense of warmth and acceptance, that they are seeking (Mearnes and Cooper, 2005). Academic research within the coaching field suggests that this relational depth cannot be achieved through any particular method or technique. Rather, it is 'the quality of the relationship' itself which has been found to be the most important variable within the coaching encounter to have an effect on successful outcomes (Assay & Lambert, 1999; Bachkirova & Borrington, 2018, p. 7).

As coaching practice evolves new perspectives or 'third generation' approaches resonate and seem particularly relevant during our turbulent times. De Haan (2008) writes of rapid societal changes leading to anxieties from our need to be increasingly autonomous and self-reliant. He calls for integrated coaching approaches, founded on principles of psychotherapy which move away from a focus on techniques and models and focus on the perspective of the relationship between the coach and coachee.

Methodology

Context of the study

I based my study on in-depth telephone conversations followed by a face to face interview with 6 recent graduates. My aim was to build rapport and create the conditions for storytelling. All of my participants had joined their organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic and had been coached.

I adopted a relativist constructivist philosophical position (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kolb, D.A., 1984, p.38). Narrative Analysis was my preferred methodology. As a 'profoundly relational form of enquiry' of accounts in storied form it allowed me to explore questions of identity and personality (McAdams, 1993; Clandinin, 2007, p. 15; Riessman, 2008). It also encouraged me to consider the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which experiences of the graduates were shaped. (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, pp. 42–43). The institution's ethics procedure was adhered to at all stages of the research.

Participants

The criteria I used to identify my participants were as follows:

- They had commenced a graduate programme between 2020-2021
- Their employers were large, commercial organisations with established Training and Development programmes employing Coaching and Mentoring

Within these criteria sampling was purposive (Gentles et al. 2015). The graduates had different educational, socio economic, familial and geographical backgrounds. All were given Greek pseudonyms.

Figure 1: Participants

Angeliki
24, born in Derbyshire, only child. Parents divorced when she was teenager. Angeliki: 'Divorce removed a comfort blanket from me'. Father a lawyer, mother self-employed in property. Privately educated at mixed boarding school. Bristol University. History degree. Now a graduate trainee at a large asset management company, London.

Katerina
23, born in Lincolnshire. Katerina has 1 step brother and 1 step sister. Mother a cook and father self-employed in telecoms. Katerina: ' I was a lot more academic than my family' and first to go to university. Local secondary school. Sheffield Hallam University. Finance and Banking degree. Currently a graduate trainee at a manufacturing company, Sheffield.

Sophia
24, born in Buckinghamshire, one older sister. Father self employed and mother stayed at home to raise the children after working in computing. Sophia: 'my parents are very supportive, they never pushed'. Her sister is the 'arty' one, Sophia, the 'academic' one. Attended Girls Grammar School. Always in top streams for Maths and Sciences. Integrated Masters at Warwick University in Maths. A graduate trainee at an international engineering consultancy, Hertfordshire.

Dimitri
25, born in Devon. Only child. Parents divorced when he was young and brought up by his mum. Dimitri went to a private school which was fully funded with an academic scholarship and means tested bursary. Dimitri: 'my education was a game changer – I was so lucky'. B.Sc. Political Economy, London University. Masters International Management at Exeter. Currently a graduate trainee at an international IT consultancy business, Bristol.

Maria
24, born in Buckinghamshire, one older sister and a younger brother. Mother trained as a nurse and now works in mental health support, father a self employed photographer. Maria: 'I had middle child syndrome, was the most outgoing and a rule breaker'. Attended the local secondary schools. Coventry University. Degree in Business Management. Now a graduate trainee at a large manufacturing company, Oxford.

Eleni
24, born in Oxfordshire, one older brother. Parents divorced when she was young and brought up by her mother. Mother trained as a midwife and father an accountant. Attended the local secondary school where she was actively involved in a range of sporting, social and fundraising events. Eleni: 'Ive always wanted to get on and make the most of life.' Surrey University. Degree in Business Management. Currently a graduate trainee at an international management consultancy, Berkshire.

Data Collection

Following Mishler's model of the 'facilitating' interviewer I engaged in conversations to ensure that they could develop their narrative accounts (Mishler,1986). This approach was particularly relevant to the aim of my research; my participants and I worked together co-creating detailed accounts, a

combination of narrative and meaning attached to it. I took particular care to build rapport and ensure the psychological safety of my participants.

My approach included using an outline of four broad open ended questions to ensure that certain topics were covered. These primary questions were informed by the literature review with multiple probing questions listed under each primary question. Whilst not being a slave to the order in which questions were asked, my approach ensured a certain consistency and outline structure to the interview process (Patton, 2002; Elliot, 2005; Riessman, 2005).

Data Analysis

In Narrative Analysis the stories themselves become the raw data. As a researcher I began to look at the data in the context of identifying a plot, seeking a connection between the events and the characters and their sense-making process. In this process I was influenced by reading 'The Stories we live by' (McAdams, 1993). I followed Creswell's narrative thematic analysis process from organising the data to coding through to the development of themes (Cresswell, 2014). This was complemented by structural analysis where the focus is on the way a story is told or put together allowing me to identify different genres in the narratives (Labov, 1969, Langellier, 1989; Riessman, 2008). My use of narrative vignettes and quotations, common in Narrative Analysis, have been redacted for the purposes of this article in the presentation of my findings.

Findings

Figure 2: The Coming of Age Journey

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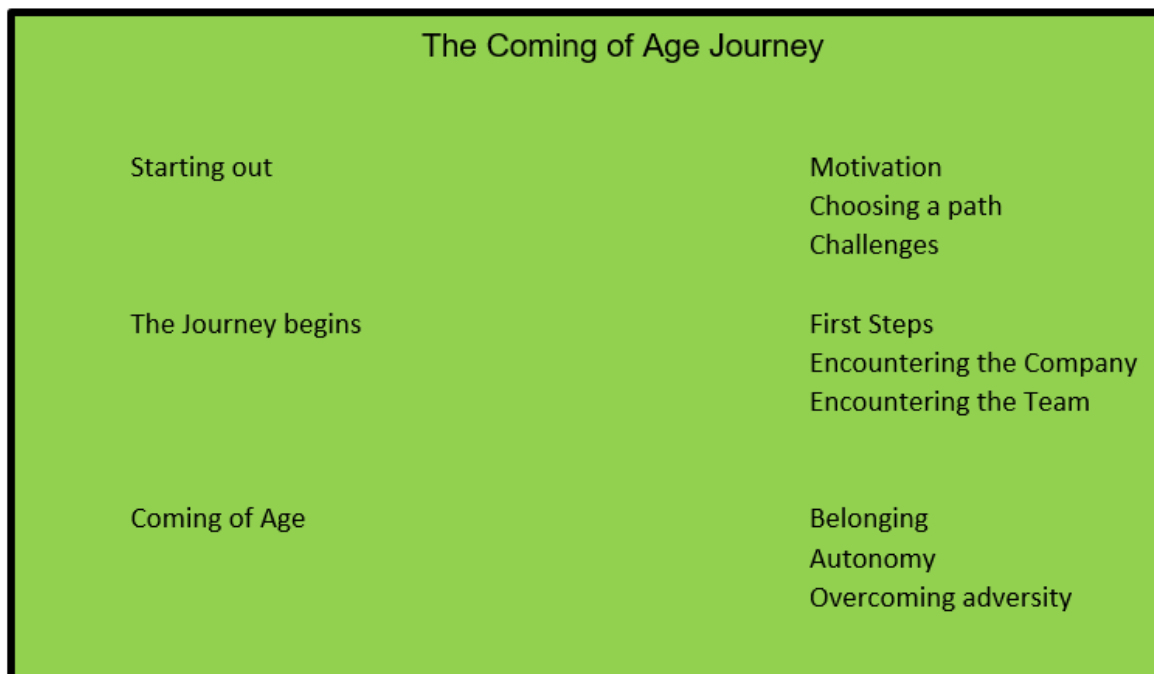
'What a tall and splendid man you have grown. Must be brave as Orestes'. Athena talking to Telemachus (Odyssey 1. 295)

Starting Out

Each narrative described a different set of internal drivers and external influences which affected approaches to career evaluation, planning and job search. The search for belonging and autonomy created a tension – the desire to move away from familiar social structures and find independence alongside the need to establish themselves as part of new groups. This is reflected in a process of trial and error as the graduates strived to discover a balance between the two. The role of the guide is filled by a range of actors who provide support and direction to our graduates. For some it is their family and friends, for others it is their manager or coach.

Search for Belonging

Some graduates found a greater sense of belonging in their new work environment than they did at university. Maria, for example, had felt alienated at university where 'people…came from quite privileged backgrounds and had things handed to them on a plate'. The graduate programme was an even playing field where she felt she belonged, judged on her ability to do the job, not the 'currency' of her background.

For others, there was greater continuity and the graduate programme enhanced existing social networks. For Angeliki, her narrative presented her choice of university as inevitable '…everything in my life was pointing towards coming down here… I would have felt like I was going against all of my friends if I hadn't come.'

Like Maria, Angeliki is where she wants to be but for different reasons. Dimitri, on the other hand expresses his excitement about 'finally becoming a young professional'.

Search for Autonomy

Maria expressed her desire for autonomy as a move away from dependency – away from her previous apprenticeship scheme to the more 'adult' choice of a graduate trainee scheme. Others, with stronger social instincts, were keen to move to larger cities. Angeliki was 'craving this London lifestyle'.

For Katerina, applying for a graduate programme was a default decision, perhaps intended to keep her options open, '…after graduating I thought I've just got to do something…'The one option she was not willing to consider, however, was staying at home, feeling an urge to 'strike out on my own'.

Choosing a path

The narratives captured the range of different approaches taken by the graduates when choosing their path. Some described a clear sense of pre-defined purpose and direction. Some had influential guides, notably parents, who provided them with a strong sense of direction and access to professional networks. Angeliki: 'My dad suggested I speak to the people at (company name) because he knew I'd really enjoy a career in this sector given my outgoing personality'. At times these narratives convey a sense of entitlement and privilege, walking along paths which started while still at school or university. These transitions appeared smoother than for those without the help of a guide.

Other narratives suggest a path determined by a sense of vocation. A sense of confidence about their path emerges clearly from the languages used - 'passion for learning' and 'cutting edge work.' Sophia describes the mentoring style of her Manager and how he encouraged her interest at work:-

'I felt really cared about…he took the time to check I was integrated into the team and that the work was stretching'.

Dimitri described his path in less clear terms. His is a story of the confident adventurer ready to deal with the challenges ahead, happy to take risks as long as he has a sense of forward momentum. Dimitri: '…because of Covid I just took the first offer…it was my backup, my second choice'. He is clearly aspirational, adapts and improvises, his path becomes clear by happenstance. Dimitri: 'I didn't feel connected or have any affection for the (first) organisation and was applying for other places…I knew that what I wanted was out there and I had to keep looking…' Katerina's story describes someone at the mercy of external circumstances '…I was used to a lot of upheaval at home, especially when I was younger…I didn't get my first choice uni… my placement was cancelled because of Covid'. Her narrative is one of resilience and flexibility, overcoming early disappointment and disruption with minimal parental input.

Challenges

The narratives describe a variety of personal challenges including isolation and high expectations. A sense of isolation is a fundamental part of Coming of Age stories where the protagonist is, by definition, alone as they enter a new adult world. Recalling the tension between the desire for autonomy and belonging described earlier, some narratives recall a lost explorer, arriving in a strange new world. Maria: 'I was excited but kind of terrified at the same time…'

The detrimental effects of isolation from friends, family and teams at work during the Covid-19 pandemic are presented as having long lasting effects: Sophia: 'Covid just ruined that camaraderie we had as interns. It isolated us when it took over'.

Isolation also affected engagement with work, creating a sense of alienation from the organisation. Unable to build face to face bonds Dimitri described his induction into the company 'by PowerPoint' as 'unimaginative and uninspiring'. Katerina, on the other hand, experienced internal isolation, afraid of speaking out about her struggles with mental health, fearful of exposure and judgement. Her narrative is one of the self-conscious ingénue. Katerina: '…you're trying to prove yourself here so if you start opening up to someone about mental health they might think less of you…'.

Self doubt and confidence

The narratives do not dwell overly on self-doubt. However, some expressed self-consciousness, a lack of confidence and difficulty 'to find a voice'. Others acknowledge that being shy or nervous can be a drawback in a large organisation. Dimitri: 'I have the confidence to raise things with my manager. If you were a bit more timid I don't know where you would turn to in my organisation…'. Katerina describes her grad coach at work as arbiter: '…you don't get that judginess…it may be that your manager isn't someone you want to speak to…'

High Expectations, fear of failure

For many, being accepted onto a competitive graduate programme represented the culmination of years of study and application, the pinnacle of aspiration. Angeliki: '…my company are definitely trying to poach the sort of talent from Russell group unis, the sort of people who may go into consulting or finance'. There was a pressure, not only to study for professional qualifications but to perform a job in a competitive environment and a degree of self-reliance was expected. The pressure of being under scrutiny and evaluated by line management and HR is described in the stories. Eleni: '…they drill the fear into you, it's really intense'

Others acknowledge the detrimental effects of this pressure. Maria: '…I realise now that I was putting way too much pressure on myself. I had been quite anxious but became really unwell and couldn't sleep and was having panic attacks…I thought I'm going to lose my job and get kicked off

the grad. scheme…I just really struggled with the social isolation…' Seeking the help of an external life coach gave her the courage to broach the subject with her Manager at work.

'You are no longer a child: you must put childish thoughts away' Athena talking to Telemachus. (Odyssey 1. 295)

The Journey begins

The graduates' narratives convey a strong motivation to seek out the 'right' environment and be surrounded by likeminded groups of people. Some were even prepared to change graduate jobs early in their journey to belong in the groups they felt an affinity towards. Others were unapologetic about their desire for standing or status within their peer groups.

Encountering the company

Some stories describe a degree of alienation from the company's culture, turned off by outdated and prescriptive messaging. They convey a sense of disappointment by the generic inductions and 'one size fits all' training. Words and expressions like 'signposted…''no follow up' indicate a frustration with the lack of relational engagement with management. Sophia's story is mixed:'… some of our grad scheme training has been patronising…it doesn't feel patronising with my coach, it feels developmental.

There is an impression of 'them and us' in some narratives where the graduate does not quite feel 'in step' with the culture and senior management describing them as 'quite old'. Outdated, prescriptive messaging is picked up by other stories, albeit with different emphasis. Maria's narrative is one of a rebel railing against the company's out of touch messaging. Maria: '…they kept talking about leadership…I don't even know if I want to be a leader…' Sophia's narrative conveys a feeling of being stifled by static management structures, limited career development and thwarted opportunities. Sophia: 'You sort of get promoted and sit at a certain level, sit there and if you want to be a manager you might progress but then there's a stopping point…'. Similarly, Dimitri's narrative expresses disenchantment and a level of alienation from the culture of his first employer, the Civil Service. Dimitri: 'its slow, not pacey like the private sector. It definitely seems to attract a certain type of person'. Finding a good cultural fit will enhance his sense of belonging in an organisation.

Encountering the Team

Whether or not the stories express an alignment with the organisation's values, their relationships with their colleagues provide an important sense of attachment. This is perhaps reminiscent of the comradeship of soldiers fighting for each other rather than any wider strategic objective.

Katerina's narrative reflects estrangement and alienation owing to the size of the organisation. Katerina: For me it's not about the company, it's about the immediate group of people I work with.' When a context grows too large beyond our capacity to grasp it can be destabilising. Others are more positive and emphasise relational engagement with their managers, Sophia: '…he always put others first…he tries to put people forward which I think is really important for a graduate…'. The narratives throw light on the complex social networks within large organisations. For some, making good friends with immediate colleagues is enough. For others, they are overwhelmed by the choice and there is a degree of 'Fear of Missing Out', which causes them anxiety. Angeliki: '……I missed out… my social life at work was just the graduate scheme social events as opposed to the team social events which everyone else was being exposed to…'

'Mother…I know the meaning of these actions now, both good and bad. I had been young and blind'. (Odyssey 18.283-6)

Coming of Age

Finding your place in the world of work marks a milestone on the journey from youth to adulthood. The graduates' aspirations around belonging and autonomy are 'resolved' in their Coming of Age narratives by overcoming the obstacles that they encountered on their journey.

Belonging

The narratives addressed belonging in different ways; some emphasised the importance of the peer group, others were more concerned with finding their place professionally. For some they are of equal importance as suggested by Sophia's narrative which communicates a strong sense of collegiate engagement: Sophia: '…I just fell in love with the team, we just clicked and it felt right… our team can be creative in our own bubble protected by the Head of Department'

For her, a sense of belonging is based on a shared sense of purpose and passion for the work. The 'creative bubble' evokes the sense of a 'place' where Sophia feels she can express herself creatively.

Angeliki articulates her sense of belonging differently. Angeliki: 'Yeah, I feel like I really fit in. I know that some people like don't fit in but I'm pretty much what this company traditionally stands for: I'm white, I'm middle class and I was privately educated, like it doesn't really get anymore [company name] than that'

This narrative conveys a strikingly direct and honest statement of elite privilege. Angeliki's character is embodied in the company's traditional values. 'Fitting in' refers to being surrounded by people from the same socio economic and educational background - '…white, middle class and privately educated…'She acknowledges that others don't fit in so easily. This does not mean that they may not have a sense of belonging. Rather it is a way of acknowledging that her own background has eased entry into the organisation and made her feel comfortable and accepted.

Achieving Autonomy

Finding meaningful work brings purpose and helps define social roles and social status. A number of narratives express a pride in their new found status as a responsible adult and acknowledge the positive effect it has had on their psychological growth. Angeliki: '…at work it's definitely not a mummying situation now'. Others are willing to make risky decisions to maintain control of their destiny. Dimitri's narrative is one of individual autonomy involving transactional relationships with his employers. Speaking with a similar confidence and forthrightness about her plans, Eleni knows she will be in high demand and 'scouted' when she gains her professional qualifications. These narratives contrast with the others whose focus is more on achieving a sense of belonging and vocational satisfaction.

Overcoming adversity

Maria's narrative is one of a courageous and ultimately victorious battle against the challenges of isolation, self-doubt and high expectations. She faced a significant mental health crisis, exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic and associated lockdowns. Finding a new sense of fulfilment in her work was key to her reenergised narrative where she described her work giving her a sense of 'purpose' and being part of a greater whole during the pandemic. This captured the millennial zeitgeist of wanting to 'make a difference' and expressed a desire for 'meaningful' work.

Other narratives did not express triumph over adversity in such vivid terms. Nevertheless, overcoming isolation and / or initial self-doubt when joining a graduate programme was scattered through most of the narratives. For example, Katerina expressed confusion about her job role, how it fitted into the organisation's structure and uncertainty about her career path. Katerina: '… speaking to may grad coach gave me the confidence to try and connect with others in different departments in my company'. Sophia talked explicitly about the challenges of finding her voice and, like Katerina, found the assistance of an external guide important in giving her the confidence to do so. Sophia: 'understanding that your ideas are important and could be pushed forward is half of the job about being on the grad scheme…I realise now that I lacked self-belief…coaching has made me realise that confidence is my hardest challenge'.

This mature reflection on her journey in many ways articulates what Coming of Age represents and emphasises the critical role a guide can play.

Discussion

Findings from my study suggests that the graduates' quest for belonging reflects a timeless human endeavour - a sense of belonging is a fundamentally important part of what makes us human (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Slavich 2020; Vaillant 2012).

The graduates are, above all, highly motivated by social factors in joining and staying with their organisations - they want to feel included, accepted and valued. Belonging is of particular importance to young adults at this stage of their lives (Allen et al., 2018) – their drive to belong is conveyed in many different ways through their stories. The motivation to seek and belong to particular groups is rooted on shared points of commonality (Karaman & Tarim 2018; Akiva et al. 2013; Moallem, 2013). In some of the narratives, this comes out as a desire to be surrounded by people from a similar socio economic background, driven by strong social instincts and 'belonging motivation' (Leary & Kelly, 2009). In others, the common factors are related more to the work itself and/or a sense of shared values and responsibilities.

Taking on a role of responsibility is an important rite of passage into adulthood. The narratives convey that work itself can instil a strong sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The graduates thrive when surrounded by team members with a shared passion for their subject. Vocational fulfilment and finding acceptance among professional peers play an important role in the progress of the individual (Duffy et al. 2015).

The narratives present belonging as the opposite of loneliness, disconnection and social isolation (Ahmed et al, 2020). Stories of isolation and disconnection from teams during the Covid-19 pandemic were described leading in some cases to extreme anxiety (Hossain et al, 2020; Catling et al., 2022; Mind 2020). Some conveyed a sense of alienation, disenchantment and a lack of 'fit' with organisational culture and processes. Here the organisations were portrayed as cold, dispassionate and out of touch with accounts of a lack of personalisation during the induction process, outdated prescriptive messaging and archaic management structures (Deloitte, May 2022). In others, the employers were more in tune with the needs of the graduates, offering flexible working practices and periods of continued study (Ng et al. 2010, Laloux, 2014).

Each Coming of Age narrative is unique in the individual's response to organisational deficiencies. These range from a 'Protean' or careerist response, where the graduate leaves a job they are not satisfied with, to a determination to overcome the difficulties. In the latter case the graduates' 'belonging motivation' places a greater emphasis on communal values where frustrations can be compensated for by stimulating work, shared goals, team working and supportive managers (Leary & Kelly, 2009).

Gaining the respect, approval and communicating successfully with the hierarchies at work is central to the graduates' sense of belonging. The narratives underline the central role of the Manager who acts as coach (Assay & Lambert, 1999; Bachkirova & Borrington, 2018, p. 7). They cast light on the tone or stance adopted by management towards the graduates and the power dynamic inherent in the relationship. In some cases, the relationships are reminiscent of a duckling following their mother around; frustrated and somewhat annoyed that they are neither getting sufficient attention nor receiving meaningful guidance. In others, the Manager assumes a more benevolent parental role, offering relational depth and providing stimulating and fulfilling work (Sorensen, 2002; Anderson et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Current career and coaching literature emphasises the importance of protean approaches in enabling the professional progression of the current generation (Sullivan & Baruch 2009, Leach, 2015). My findings indicated that a protean approach is a significant strand in the narratives of some of the graduates but not a dominant theme. Rather, considerations of 'Belonging' – expressed through cultural fit, social compatibility, communal values and fulfilling work – were presented by the narratives as having greater priority. This serves to reinforce the strong link between belonging and well-being (McElroy et al. 2021).

First-hand accounts of the obstacles and challenges that the graduates encountered as they adapted to a contemporary culture of work highlighted their desire for tailored developmental support and career management guidance. My study included graduates from different backgrounds. Some were the first in their family to go to university and may have lacked the parental advice and points of reference that others take for granted. This is a reality check and offers a fresh perspective to the career literature which promotes 'employability' as a basis for career success and which calls for 'work ready' graduates (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Swarbrick, 2021).

My findings indicate that incorporating coaching and career counselling opportunities to ensure that the developmental needs of the young recruits are catered for is a necessary investment to ensure staff retention. Facilitating opportunities for social connection is also crucial for this age group and for developing a sense of belonging (Allen et al. 2018). Organisations need to develop cultures of openness and employ processes able to predict and respond when young graduates are struggling with work load, crises of confidence or anxiety. The narratives indicated that this has often involved a trusted Manager.

Findings overwhelmingly show that graduates seek a relational as opposed to a transactional style of management. This involves sufficient engagement and individual approaches to learning and development (Mearnes and Cooper, 2005). My study provides some compelling examples of good and bad practice in the context of Manager as guide. The ability of a manager to inspire trust and understand the needs of the individual are critical. Not all organisations have the capacity, culture or resources to supply this support.

Employers have a duty of care to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees which includes mental health and well-being. However, this only sets a minimum standard (Mind report, 2021). My findings highlighted the negative impact of social isolation and work stress on mental health on graduate trainees. Managing high expectations and fear of failure was a common theme in the narratives, perhaps not surprising as the graduates are all high achievers. However, I found that if negative thoughts, resulting from perfectionism and an overly self-critical voice, get out of control there can be serious mental health consequences.

The narratives show that, for some, there was a suspicion and a reluctance to share worries, fears or anxieties with the HR department, management or even colleagues. A 'safe space' is associated with impartiality and independence. This is where coaches and line managers can offer a valuable role, acting as an impartial guide, focused on the needs of the individual (Naughton 2002, p.7).

Implications for methodology and theory

By choosing a narrative analysis methodology and framing it within a Coming of Age story, my study offered insights into the graduate experience which cannot be gained through anonymised questionnaires. Much of the research on belonging has focused on adolescence and the developmental significance of this period of life, looking at students and their school based experiences, relationships with peers and emotional connection with their school (Abdollahi et al 2020, Arslan et al 2020, Yeager et al 2018). The narratives remind us that belonging is a prime motivator for young graduates entering the workplace and is critical to their wellbeing (Allen et al. 2018, McElroy et al. 2021).

My study offers insights into the graduate experience at a unique point in time and highlights the difficulties that graduates face today. Adapting to organisational life after university and developmental challenges were undoubtedly made more acute by the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and the uncertain economic, social and political context.

Limitations

The main limitation of my study is that my qualitative study had a limited range and number of graduates. The search for suitable graduates took longer than anticipated which may suggest a degree of self-selection bias in the final group of participants. This makes generalisation of my findings across the population impossible.

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