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Career conversations in coaching: the contribution that career theory can make to coaching practice

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Abstract

This paper responds to calls for an increased evidence base for coaching practice by exploring the contribution that career research and theory could make to this field. The paper summarises three small-scale studies focusing on career change undertaken by post-graduate students enrolled on an MSc in Career Coaching at a university in London. The studies explore the experiences of three groups of people who have recently changed career direction: female black African entrepreneurs, academic research scientists moving to industry, and people choosing a career in careers. The findings of the studies highlight the role of meaning and values, and the influence of others on career choice. The studies show too how the participants wrestle with subjective notions of career success, and that the impetus to make a career change comes from both a disenchantment with one situation and an attraction towards another. The paper concludes with some suggestions for coaching practice.

Practice points

The paper is relevant to all coaches who engage with conversations about careers within their coaching practice.

This paper aims to increase the breadth of theories available to coaches, focusing on empirical research and theories which inform an understanding of career development and career choice.

- Career changes are made when there is both a push away from the current situation and a pull towards an alternative option.
- Career choices are influenced by an individual's values, their sense of identity and the advice and opinions of others.
- Career theories and research can provide useful frameworks for career conversations with coachees.

Key words: career change, career choice, career coaching, career development

Introduction

Our careers consume a significant proportion of our waking hours, they help to create and reflect our social identities (Ibarra, 2005) and they have been shown to have a clear association with well-being in our lives overall (Rath and Harter, 2010). It is not surprising therefore that career issues, decisions and dilemmas feature frequently and heavily in many coaching conversations. A non-directive approach (Joseph, 2014) has long been advocated as the most effective approach to exploring careers (Ali and Graham, 1996; Egan, 2013). Other coaching techniques such as motivational interviewing (Stoltz and Young, 2013), cognitive behavioural coaching (Sheward and Branch, 2012) and solution focused coaching (Miller, 2017) have been shown to have a positive impact within career coaching, and approaches such as positive psychology, which have been embraced by the coaching community (Kauffman, Boniwell and Silberman, 2010) are showing promise within career coaching practice (Jacobsen, 2010; Yates, 2013).

The role that theory does and should play in coaching has been the subject of some discussion. Whilst the discipline of coaching psychology has traditionally distinguished itself from coaching more broadly through its emphasis on theory (Palmer and Whybrow, 2008), the status of theory within coaching is not a topic on which there is universal agreement. Spinelli (2010) describes the 'all-too-evident paucity of theory in coaching' (p.52) and puts forward an argument that there may be no need for a theoretical underpinning to coaching: it is a practical application and as such the expertise is in the skill and not in the underpinning theory. Bachkirova and Cox (2005) too note that theory does not always take centre stage in coaching but argue that this is problematic, and there have been calls within the coaching profession to strengthen its theoretical basis and embrace a theoretically driven and evidence based practice (Griffiths and Campbell, 2008).

The theories most often associated with career coaching are those which provide guidelines for approaches to practice, such as humanistic coaching (Hazen and Steckler, 2010) and cognitive behavioural coaching (Sheward and Branch, 2012). One additional strand of research which may be of value to coaches and coachees is that which focuses on career choice and development. Research in this sphere aims to help us to understand how and why people make career choices, and how career paths develop and evolve. An engagement with research of this nature can help coaches to understand the process of career choice and development, and can provide frameworks which help coachees to develop greater awareness of their own experiences.

In this paper we present a summary of three research projects conducted by students from the MSc in Career Coaching at the University of East London. The projects explore the role model influences of black African female entrepreneurs, the experience of scientists shifting from academic to corporate research and the motivation behind a career as a career practitioner (careers adviser or career coach). In the discussion which follows we explore how the findings from these and other such studies can inform and enhance coaching practice.

The research context

The studies included here were conducted by students on the MSc in Career Coaching at the University of East London. Students on this programme are asked to produce a 12000 word dissertation based on a piece of empirical research. The topics must relate to career development or career coaching and the students are given four months to develop a well-articulated research proposal, and a further eight months to conduct the project and write up the findings. The goal of

the assignment is to develop the research skills of the students and to equip them with an understanding of the research process: reviewing the literature, exploring ethical implications, collecting and analysing data and integrating their findings within the broader theoretical field. The studies, by dint of the tight and inflexible timescales and the inexperience of the researchers can be limited in their scope, their samples and their theoretical integration. But the goal is to train the student, and the new knowledge generated is a fortuitous by-product of the training process rather than the core aim. As a result, with rare exceptions, the dissertations submitted are not published. A paper such as this therefore provides an unusual and welcome opportunity to integrate some of the knowledge gained through these projects with the existing literature, and share the ideas with a wider audience.

A summary of each study will be presented in turn, which will include a precis of the methodology and an outline of the key results and this will be followed by a discussion which positions the findings of the studies within the literature.

Student Studies

1. Investigating role model influence in the careers of black African female entrepreneurs in the UK

Background: Career research has been censured for its Western bias, with critics noting the limited acknowledgement of collectivist culture in the mainstream literature (Leong, 2002). Researchers and practitioners alike must continue to realise the need for a theoretical framework of career decision making process that goes beyond the “European-American values of individualism, autonomy and the centrality of work in people’s lives”, (Kidd, 2002, p.49) and strike the right balance between the use of individualism and collectivism as frameworks when analysing prominent gender and cultural narratives from clients. This study responds to this call, exploring the career influences on Black African female entrepreneurs in the UK.

Self-employed entrepreneurs are not a homogenous group and women and those from minority ethnic backgrounds might find their motivation to be self-employed quite different from that typically seen in white British men. Women and men within the UK can be drawn to an entrepreneurial career for different reasons, with women more likely to cite societal family orientated reasons for becoming self-employed (Causar and Park, 2009). Harding (2007) suggests that women and those from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to create and value enterprises with socio-cultural benefits, which echoes the societal and family orientated identity values often noted within developing nations and non-western cultures (Ojo, 2002). The influence of ethnicity is seen too in the findings of Fielden and Davidson’s research paper (Fielden and Davidson, 2012) which suggest that the nature of business pursuits is greatly influenced by ethnicity. The draw to entrepreneurial careers seems particularly strong for Black African women in the UK. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM 2005) measuring total entrepreneurial activity among women in the UK by ethnic grouping found that Black African women are nearly four and a half times (18.9%) more likely than their white counterparts to be entrepreneurially active. The equivalent figure for white women is 3.6%.

Responding to Harding's lament that "too little is known of how women from BAME communities develop their entrepreneurial ideas" (2007 p. 6), this paper then explores the entrepreneurial career motivations of the UK's ethnic Black African women.

Methodology: The participants were women of Black African ethnicity who were full or part time self-employed or owned their own businesses, and lived in the UK. Participants were recruited through online business forums. Data were collected through a focus group and were analysed using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Key findings: The analysis revealed that the participants' choices to pursue an entrepreneurial career were influenced by environmental factors, life transitions and self-efficacy.

- *Environmental factors.* The participants all identified themselves as having been exposed to entrepreneurial activity either directly through family role models or indirectly by dint of the environment of their home countries, in which a challenging economic environment fostered a subsistent economy. Some also spoke of a cultural entrepreneurial trait which propelled them towards, and equipped them for, an entrepreneurial career, as one participant stated, "All Africans have an inbuilt entrepreneur spirit in them".
- *Life transitions.* For many participants, the impetus to make the switch to self-employment came from a transition in their person lives: motherhood, marriage or divorce.
- *Career motivation.* All participants demonstrated high levels of drive in terms of their career development, looking for opportunities to learn through others and through their own experiences. The career aspirations were broadly altruistic with participants focusing on success to support their families and community, to make a positive contribution to the world or as spiritual fulfilment

The findings provide a valuable insight into the impact that culture may have on career motivations.

2. Exploring the factors that affect a successful change from a career in academia to a career in industry: An interpretive phenomenological analysis

Background: A career as a scientist is highly prestigious (Zhou, 2005) and highly sought after (Science Careers, 2012). Despite the swathes of people vying for the positions, these roles are not without their challenges, and the punishing work schedules, ongoing pressure to publish and lack of job security are not to everyone's taste (Roelen, Koopmans and Groothoff, 2008). For some, the sacrifices required are not worth the benefits gained, and each year scientists make the choice to leave the academic environment in favour of the business world.

There is significant research which examines the reasons for career change and the experiences of career changers but the participants described in existing literature have worked in professional roles, management, administration, human resources, sales, marketing and customer services (e.g. (Hess, Jepsen, & Dries, 2012; Holmes & Cartwright, 1994; Muja & Appelbaum, 2012). There has been little mention of scientific career paths and a search of the available literature has provided scant information about scientists changing careers. It seems that there is little known about the reasons that scientists choose to change from an academic career to an industry career and the strategies that they employ in order to do so effectively.

An informational publication prepared for scientists who are in the process of deciding whether to move into a role in academia or industry has been published by the journal *Science* (Science Careers, 2012). It mentions that trying to decide which career path to pursue is one of the most frequently discussed topics on ScienceCareers.org. It also mentions that when surveyed in 2011, most individuals who obtained a Life Sciences PhD aspired to a career in academia but only a minority achieved this because of the increasingly limited availability of academic positions. This study aimed to shed some light on the experiences of science academics who have made the choice to leave academia and pursue their careers within the pharmaceutical industry.

Methodology: Semi-structured interviews were used to interview five participants working in various office-based roles across different departments within one pharmaceutical company in the UK. All had moved to the pharmaceutical industry from academia. The data were analysed using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Key findings: Four themes emerged from the data, which together explained the choices of the participants: working conditions, perceptions, the challenges of transition and perceptions of success.

- *Working conditions.* Participants were keen to leave the uncertain and demanding world of academia with its short term contracts, high competition for jobs, lack of funding and punishing working schedule. The higher salaries, stability and more reasonable work-life balance of the pharmaceutical world were an appealing contrast.
- *Perceptions of industry.* Participants were troubled by negative perceptions of industry from those in academia, although they reported more positive views themselves after having made the move.
- *Challenge of transition.* The participants found the transition from academia to industry difficult in a number of ways, and highlighted the social identity markers of dress and language as two barriers to their adjustment to their new role. They also discussed the implications of the shift from an all-consuming job in which they were emotionally invested to one in which emotional investment is neither required nor necessarily advantageous.
- *Perception of success.* On balance, the participants all claimed that they felt their move had been a success, but this was not unequivocal.

The choice to leave academia is not one undertaken lightly, and scientists can find the adjustment to a new career within industry difficult. In large part, the challenge of the transition lies in the fact that it is not just a change of environment but a shift in identity. The depth of feeling and the process of loss which career changers can face is important for coaches to understand in order to help coachees anticipate and manage the transition.

Study 3: Adviser advise thyself: how career practitioners make their career choices

Background: The focus of the careers professional is the career choice and career development of their clients, and the camera rarely pans round to the individuals within the profession itself. The academic literature can furnish the interested scholar with information about the career choices of a wide range of professional groups, but it is perhaps ironic that there is no academic research in the public domain which can give us any insights as to the motivations and influences of those who choose a career in careers. Beyond the irony, the lack of reflexivity within the career profession may be a cause for concern. Reflection on personal career development is an important aspect of

professional development and Patton and McMahon (2006) point out the importance of professionals understanding their own career influences so that they can support clients in the best possible way.

Myriad theories have been proposed to explain career choices or to provide frameworks to help individuals understand and improve their own career decision making. Theories variously focus on matching – finding the right sized workers for the right sized jobs (for example Holland, 1997), life stages, highlight the developmental nature of career paths and the range of different drivers which may influence individuals at different ages (for example Super, 1990), sociological or economic factors (Roberts, 1997), identity (Ibarra, 2005), chance events (Bright and Pryor, 2005) and making meaning (Savickas, 2012). Amundson et al. (2010) in an empirical study, identified three key factors which individuals identified when describing their own career choices: the economic reality, the people in one's life and the meanings that people are looking for within their work.

This research aimed to explore how career practitioners made their own career choices and what factors or experiences were most pivotal in encouraging them to pursue this professional path.

Methodology: Data were gathered from five career practitioners, all currently working in the UK, through semi-structured interviews. Although this was not a requirement of the study, all the participants were career changers, with the career practice their second or third career. This reflects the prevailing demographic characteristics within the profession. An interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to identify themes.

Key Findings: The participants described the factors which led them to make a move away from their previous roles, and which drew them towards career practice as a profession.

- *Disenchantment with current situation.* Factors which pushed them away from their existing roles focused on their low levels of existing job satisfaction, and a realisation of a mismatch between their interests and values and their current work role or environment
- *Attraction to an alternative option.* Internal factors which pulled them towards career work centred on values (making a difference, and working within an education context) and working conditions (working with people, one to one work and a desire for a varied job).
- *Influence of other people.* The views and advice of other people had an impact on the career choices of each participant.

The themes which were drawn out from the data in this study resonate with a number of career theories. Participants highlighted their quest for a job which matched their interests (Holland, 1997) and values (Brown, 1996), which suited their way of working, and highlighted the role which other people played in their choices (Schultheiss, 2003). Narratives such as these can bridge the gap between theories and practice, as the stories offer a tangible, real world interpretation of the more abstract theories.

Discussion

The three studies focus on three distinct groups of people (Black African female entrepreneurs, research scientists and career practitioners) but for each participant there is a career choice at the heart of their story. From an analysis of the three studies together, some key shared themes emerge.

Greenhaus, Callanan and Godshalk, (2010) identify that two of the key factors which commonly influence career change are dissatisfaction with the existing situation and the presence of attractive alternatives. This encompasses the twin ideas of push and pull factors, as individuals are motivated

both to leave their current role and to embark on a new path. This combination has been noted elsewhere in the literature, for example by Carless and Arnup (2010) in their study of career changers and by Cabrera (2007) in her exploration of women's career transitions. This dual force is seen in the stories of the participants of these studies too, as participants in all three studies were motivated to make the change by a combination of the awareness of a positive alternative (self-employment, a scientific career in industry or the careers profession) and the impetus of poor working conditions or a mismatch between the individuals' interests and values and those of their workplace. The female entrepreneurs also indicated that a life transition was a third kind of motivation, which echoes findings in the literature that a range of life events can have an impact on career paths (Haynie and Shepherd, 2011).

Alongside the push and pull motivations to career change, the findings of the studies share a number of common elements, namely the importance of values, the influence of others and perceptions of success.

The importance of values was evident in the motivation of the participants in each of the three studies. The significance of a match between an individual's values and those of the organisation in which they operate has long been established as a key influence in career choice (Brown, 1996) and as a prominent antecedent to job satisfaction (Edwards and Cable, 2009; Ostroff and Judge, 2007). The participants in this study emphasised the impact of a lack of congruence between their personal values and those of their organisation, and highlighted the importance of working in a role which they considered to be meaningful (Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010).

In the second study, which focused on scientists, the notion of values expanded to encompass the participants' professional identities. The participants in this study indicated that the move from academia to industry was a significant change reflecting a transformation of identity, and not just a shift in working environment. This conceptualisation of career choice as a choice of identity has become more prevalent in the career literature recently, which now acknowledges that a career decision is a decision about one's social identity (Ibarra, 2005). This emphasis on identity recognises the holistic nature of career choices, which are often inextricably bound up with other aspects of life (Savickas, 2012) and the profound impact which a career transition can have (Nicholson and West, 1988).

The influence of others emerged as a theme in all three studies. The black African female entrepreneurs felt the influence of their community, the scientists were aware of the negative perceptions that academics have of the pharmaceutical industry, and the career practitioners highlighted that advice from others had a bearing on their choices. Traditional career theories advocate the importance of independent career choices (for example Gati, 1986; Holland, 1997) but more recently career theories have begun to acknowledge the inevitability and value of other people's influence. Schultheiss et al. (2003) identifies that 94% of the participants in their study reported being influenced by others and Murtagh, Lopes and Lyons (2011) provide some evidence that the more people involved in a career decisions, the more satisfied an individual is likely to be with their choice. The influence of the black African community on the entrepreneurial motivation of the women in the first study here also reflects the sociological theories of career such as Law's theory of community interaction (Law, 1981) and Roberts' opportunity structures (2009). These theoretical approaches highlight the significant impact which the inter-relations between family background, education, labour market opportunities and recruitment practices have on individuals' choices. These influences may all have a bearing on an individual's career choice, and an understanding of the range of possible influences on one's own thinking can be invaluable.

One theme which arose in the findings of the second and third papers discussed above is career success. Ng, Eby, Sorenson and Feldman (2005) highlight the distinction between objective and subjective career success, defining objective career success as that which can be discerned by salary and status, and subjective career success as that which is measured by job satisfaction and one's perceptions of one's own levels of salary and status. The notion of career success as a subjective construct is important but sometimes difficult to grasp. The objective measures of career success are widely accepted and ingrained in society, yet have a limited correlation with job satisfaction (Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw and Rich, 2010).

Amundsen and his colleagues (Amundsen, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield and Koert, 2010) developed a framework to account for the influences on career decisions, as described by the decision makers themselves. The findings of Amundsen et al.'s study indicate that the participants based their choices on a quest for meaning at work, were influenced by the advice and views of others, and made a desired change if the economic realities favoured the move. The shared themes identified from the studies above closely map onto the first two elements of Amundsen et al.'s model (meaning at work and the influence of others). The third element of this framework, the economic realities, did not emerge as a theme in any of the studies. One explanation for its absence in the findings of these studies could be that for these participants, the economic reality is best conceptualised as a hygiene factor: the right economic climate may have enabled a move, but participants' desire to make the move was ignited by other factors, and it was those factors which were of most relevance to the studies. Indeed, the participants in the third study, which explored the motivations of career practitioners mentioned explicitly that the relatively modest salary they would meet in their new roles did not deter them from making the choice. This model could constitute a useful framework for career conversations in coaching to help make sure that coachees have considered their situation from a range of perspectives.

Conclusion

Career changes are clearly complex and the factors which lead to a change are many and varied. Yet perhaps most striking is the number of themes emerging from the data which are common across the three such varied groups of professionals. The themes all have some resonance with existing career theories and previous research, and provide some support for the theoretical direction of travel within career research as it moves towards the idea of career choices as holistic and identity-based and careers as a central tenet of a meaningful life.

In 21st century careers, changes are increasingly common (Carless and Arnup, 2010) and taking ownership of one's own professional development and career progression is now expected and required (Savickas, 2012). It is therefore timely for the coaching profession to consider its offer to coachees who are looking for a safe space in which to explore their career ideas. An understanding of common career change experiences may prove useful to coaches, allowing for a greater degree of empathy with their coachees, and providing frameworks which may lead coachees to greater insights into their own experiences.

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