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Understanding potential career changers' experience of career confidence following a positive psychology based coaching programme

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Abstract

Changes in the labour market over the last decades have led to an increase in the number of career and job changes individuals are likely to face in their working lives. Previous literature indicates that a high level of confidence can help individuals to make career changes. This research involved five participants who took part in a coaching programme prior to changing their careers. The programme consisted of four positive psychology interventions based on a proposal of core confidence as a higher order construct composed of self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis showed that participants perceived their career confidence before the programme as low, incorporating negative affect and self-doubt. After the programme participants demonstrated increased career engagement, self-awareness and a positive and optimistic outlook. The analysis revealed that change was effected through the development of hope, change in cognitive processes and coaching as a catalyst. Implications for the definition of career confidence, and for positive psychology and career coaching practice are considered.

Key words: career confidence; career change; self-efficacy; hope; optimism; resilience.

Practice Points

This article is aimed at coaches who work with clients who are considering making changes within their careers.

The article puts forward a four stage approach to coaching drawn from positive psychology and explicitly aimed at increasing clients' career confidence. The qualitative analysis of the data indicates that the coaching approach has a considerable impact on clients' levels of self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience. The findings also explore the construct of career confidence and provide an in depth understanding of the participants' experience of career confidence.

The paper provides support for the use of positive psychology interventions in a career coaching context providing:

- a model for practice
- a contribution to our understanding of the construct of career confidence
- some evidence of a coaching model which leads to enhance client confidence and motivation

Introduction

Research by Rath & Harter (2010) shows that only 20% of people are happy at work. The Guidance Council (Hughes, 2004) estimates that each year approximately 1 in 10 people (approximately 2.5 million) in the UK intend to change their career and that this is likely to double over the next 20 years. There is little academic research on career confidence, yet it is an important area to understand particularly in relation to career change: the more confident an individual is in his or her abilities, the more psychologically ready he or she is to take on a challenging task such as changing careers (Higgins, 2001). The emerging field of positive psychology may furnish us with a fruitful approach for career change support because of its synergy with coaching (Kauffman, Boniwell and Silverman, 2010) and the clear overlaps between the focus of positive psychology and the constructs which make up career confidence (Stajkovic, 2006).

The literature review will delve into the definition of career confidence, explore its link with career change and consider how positive psychology interventions can support the development of career confidence through a coaching programme. Results of the study are discussed with reference to the literature along with implications for our understanding of confidence and for positive psychology and career coaching practice.

Literature Review

“Confidence is important because it matters to people. By studying confidence as a mechanism that psychologically enables one’s potential we may be better able to discover the best people have to offer especially in today’s turbulent world” (Stajkovic 2006 p. 1221).

There is no single agreed definition of career confidence in current academic work. Typically, it is viewed as a single construct, often synonymous with self-efficacy (for example Betz, Klein & Taylor, 1996; Paulsen & Betz, 2004). Savickas and Porfeli (2012, p. 664) within their Career Adapt Abilities model espouse this unidimensional interpretation of career confidence describing it as “the extent of certitude that one has the ability to solve problems and do what needs to be done to overcome obstacles”. Stajkovic, (2006) exploring the confidence needed to manage careers in “today’s rapidly changing workplace” (p.1209) provides a more encompassing definition, suggesting that core confidence is a higher order construct composed of self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience. Stajkovic’s notion of core confidence is not domain-specific, but he sets his proposal within work motivation theories and highlights the concerns that workers may have over job change and job loss. He suggests a link between core confidence and subjective wellbeing. Subjective wellbeing is thought to comprise five essential elements (career, social, financial, physical and community), the most potent of which has been shown to be career wellbeing (Rath & Harter 2010).

Stajkovic suggests that core confidence is both a malleable state-like belief that refers to a particular domain of functioning and a more stable trait-like belief that may generalize to other domains of related activity (Stajkovic, 2006). One individual, for example, might have high levels of confidence about their ability to write reports effectively but low levels about all other aspects of their role, and their levels of confidence in their report writing might ebb and flow from one day to the next. Alternatively, another individual might be, more broadly, a confident person, with consistently high levels of confidence across all aspects of their lives. This is a key distinction. It makes Stajkovic’s

theory particularly pertinent to this project as it does not limit the participants to considering only how they feel about a specific action related to career change but allows them to also consider their broader and more enduring beliefs about their ability to change career.

Within academic research the word 'hope' has a specific and closely defined meaning. Snyder et al. (1991, pp. 570-571) suggest that "Hope is defined as a cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful: a) agency (goal-directed determination) and b) pathways (planning of ways to meet goals)". It is this definition which Stajkovic (2006) uses for his model and which will be used in this paper. Self-efficacy is defined as a belief regarding one's capabilities to execute a specific task within a given, specific context (Bandura, 1997). Optimism represents "a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future – one which the evaluator [the individual] regards as socially desirable, to his/her advantage, or to his/her pleasure" (Tiger 1979, p. 18). Resilience is the quality which allows individuals 'to withstand – or even thrive on- the pressure they experience in their lives' (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013, p.12).

Career change refers here to the movement to a new occupation or profession that is not part of a typical career progression (Rhodes & Doering, 1983). Ornstein and Isabella (1993) state that career change occurs less frequently than job change (movement to a similar job or a job that is part of a normal career path (Carless & Arnup, 2011)), and is not well understood. It is complex, incorporating a number of different processes and a range of skills, including research, career exploration, career choice and decision making, the process of job search, self-regulation of emotions, coping with rejection, ability to overcome barriers, self-motivation, goal setting, outcome expectation, agency and control, ability to transfer skills and learn new career language. This, not surprisingly, can be daunting for many people. Compounding the challenges associated with the complexity of the decision is the weight of a transition which concerns identity. Ibarra (2005) proposes a model of transition in voluntary career change which posits that individuals disengage from a central, behaviourally anchored identity whilst exploring new possible selves, and then once the transition has taken place, integrate an alternative identity. The holistic nature of career change can increase the potential for loss if the change is not considered a success, and this can make the process of career decision making more testing for the individuals (Hastie & Dawes, 2010). It is useful here to refer to the transtheoretical model of change (TTM) (Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992), applied by Barclay, Stolz and Chung (2011) to the context of career change (Table 1). The TTM was developed for use within a health context, and it explains how individuals preparing to alter their health behaviour (for example, giving up smoking) progress through the stages of pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance. The application of the TTM has broadened from its health-based origins and is widely used in personal counselling (McConaughy, Prochaska & Velicer, 1983). Barclay, et al. (ibid), reflecting the current acknowledgement that career choices are holistic (Savickas, 2015; Zunker, 2008) propose that applying the TTM model to career change could deepen our understanding of the career change process. Barclay et al. match each stage of the TTM with corresponding behaviour or attitudes seen in career changes and provide career practitioners with a useful framework. Table 1 provides a summary of the alignment between the TTM stages and the natural career change process.

This research is focused on stage 2, contemplation of career change, when the individual becomes aware of some of the reasons underlying their unhappiness and starts to consider the possibility of

change (Prochaska, Diclemente & Norcross, 1992). Career changers also experience a range of emotions as they focus on increasing confidence in decision making and understanding the ramifications of change (Barclay, Stoltz & Chung 2011). In this stage people are open to new information but may also be when they feel most vulnerable, and therefore where interventions to increase career confidence may be most effective.

Table 1: The Transtheoretical Model of Career Change

[Table 1 near here]

The literature tells us that the elements of Stajkovic's (2006) conceptualisation of career confidence (self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience) all have benefits to those seeking to change career. Self-efficacy is perhaps the most well documented of these, with substantial evidence of the impact of self-efficacy on career choice (for example, Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1996) and career development (Kanfer, Wanberg & Kantrowitz, 2001) in a wide range of contexts. Positive correlations too have been identified between self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Judge & Bono, 2001). Optimism has been shown to help with resource development (Scheier & Carver, 2003), and the development of networks and social support (Brissette, Scheier & Carver, 2002) and a linear link between optimism and job satisfaction has been identified (Munyon, Hochwarter, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2010). Hope has been described as a form of positive work engagement (Simmons & Nelson, 2001) and higher levels of hope have been shown to lead to increased job satisfaction (Duggleby, Cooper and Penz, 2009) and Matos, Neushotz, Griffin, & Fitzpatrick, (2010) found a positive correlation between the resilience and job satisfaction of nurses.

Evidence too suggests links between these elements and successful career changes. Bimrose and Hearne (2012) highlight the value of resilience for career change, and a positive correlation between the goal setting element of hope and job search outcomes is well documented (Saks & Ashforth, 2000). Positive emotions such as optimism have been shown to enhance creativity and relationships (Frederickson, 2009), both of which have been shown to improve the chances of making a successful career change (Kanfer, et al., 2001; Van Hove, Van Hooft & Lievens, 2009; Wanberg, Kanfer & Banas, 2000).

Having summarised some of the literature which highlights links between the confidence and career change, the review will now turn to practical interventions for those seeking to change career.

A positive career coaching intervention

Positive psychology was introduced to the academic community in 2000 (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) as an 'academically rigorous antidote to the pathology driven paradigm which had dominated the discipline [of psychology] for nearly a century' (Yates, 2013, p. 46) and aims to develop an in-depth understanding of well-being within individuals and institutions. The bi-directional links between career and subjective well-being have been clearly established, with evidence that those thriving in their careers are more than twice as likely to be thriving in their lives overall (Rath & Harther, 2010) and research indicating that constructs at the heart of positive psychology such as strengths, resilience and optimism have been shown to have a positive

correlation with positive career outcomes (Harter & Gurley, 2008; Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010). Yet despite clear empirical evidence of its potential value, and calls in the literature for a pluralistic approach to career practice (Bevan, 2009; Morrell, 2004) positive psychology is yet to be established at the heart of mainstream career research and practice (Yates, 2015),

Research by Perdrix, Stauffer, Masdonati, Massoudi and Rossier (2012) shows that one to one career interventions are consistently cited as the most effective types of intervention in the field. Brown & Lent (2012) acknowledge that counselling interventions may be employed to assist clients to develop the confidence, among other things, necessary to make career choices with the objective of strengthening the confidence to pursue their aspirations. Stajkovic calls for a coaching programme that attends to all four variables, "to succeed, a person must have the right mix of core confidence ingredients that work together. To fail, only one of them needs to deteriorate" (2006 p. 1220).

There is a clear association between Stajkovic's four variables of core confidence and the emerging field of positive psychology. Stajkovic's work builds on Seligman's (2002) notion that "happiness comes from identifying and cultivating your most fundamental strengths and using them every day in your work" (p.18). "Good coaching helps clients to discover their skills and resources and fits with the premise of positive psychology: helping clients identify their strengths and find ways to use them more often in all aspects of their lives" (Hefferon & Boniwell 2011, p. 209).

Positive psychology, at the subjective level, is concerned with valued subjective experiences: wellbeing, contentment, and satisfaction; hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Jacobsen (2010) states that positive psychology contributes numerous strategies for increasing overall life satisfaction that are easy to do, straightforward and similar in strategy and aims to those already used by many career counsellors (Jacobsen, 2010; Yates, 2013). One widely used example is the Three Good Things exercise, which has been shown to have a lasting impact on happiness (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). In this exercise, clients are asked to identify three incidents each day which have been positive and to reflect on their particular role in their positive experiences.

Fredrikson's (2004) 'broaden and build' theory finds that where positive emotions such as joy or interest are experienced the individual is more likely to be creative, see more opportunities, be flexible and open to relationships; all factors that are necessary when contemplating career change (Mitchell, Krumboltz & Levin, 1999). As Stajkovic states, "Having high confidence makes it more likely that people will initiate action, pursue it, and sustain persistence because they feel certain that they can handle what they desire to do or needs to be done." (Stajkovic 2006 p.1209).

In sum, the literature confirms that the four elements which combine to form career confidence each make a positive contribution to successful career change, that one to one interventions are an effective medium for career support, and that there are clear overlaps between positive psychology and the four elements of career confidence. Together, this evidence indicates that a programme of career support which draws from positive psychology may be an effective mechanism for enhancing career confidence, leading ultimately to a higher chance of an effective career change.

This study therefore explores the impact of a coaching programme based on positive psychology interventions on participants' career confidence and seeks to further explore the relationship between positive psychology and career coaching. Specifically, the research questions are:

How will adults contemplating career change experience career confidence?

How will that experience be affected by a positive psychology coaching programme?

Methodology

Much of the existing literature within this field has been quantitative. Whilst research within the quantitative paradigm has the advantage of being able to establish large scale, generalizable correlations, it risks overlooking the lived experience of the participants. An interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data could be considered crucial to developing a full understanding of a topic (House & McDonald, 1998). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the research method for this study as it was thought that this would deliver the richness and depth of data needed to impact the discussion around career confidence. IPA subscribes to a social constructivist epistemology which holds that reality is constructed through language and created through the interaction between the researcher and participant (Madill and Gough, 2008). The approach embraces the notion of double hermeneutics which describes the dual interpretative process exists in which the researcher interprets the participant, as they interpret their own experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA recognises the researcher plays an active part in the process and the focus on research reflexivity makes it particularly suited to a study such as this, in which the principal research fulfils the dual role of practitioner and researcher (Willig, 2013).

Participants

Five participants were recruited who all met the research criteria, namely that they should be mature professional or semi-professional adults, who were all contemplating career change. Although the study was not limited by gender, only women applied for the project.

The participants were recruited from the principal researcher's existing network using purposive sampling. Twenty-one people demonstrated an interest in participating, but a brief examination of their situations revealed that only five met the criteria. Three of the participants were already in jobs but wanting to change career, and two participants were on career breaks, either volunteering or studying in the area in which they hoped to work.

Table 2: Participants

[Table 2 near here]

Procedure

A four session coaching programme using positive psychology interventions was developed by the principal researcher. The programme included a range of techniques which have been shown in previous literature to enhance the relevant constructs. The programme began with strengths, in order to build the participants' initial career confidence by focussing on what they were good at (Kosine, Steger, & Duncan, 2008; Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006). To build hope, the second session encouraged the client to visualise their best possible future self and to identify the steps and resources needed to achieve this (Strauss, Griffin & Parker, 2013). The third session focused on raising optimism through managing negative thoughts and promoting positive ones (Meevissen, Peters & Alberts, 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005), and the final session raised participants' awareness of their existing resources to build resilience (Padesky & Mooney, 2012). The researcher/coach and participants met every 4-6 weeks over a six month period.

Table 3: The Positive Career Coaching Programme

	Approach
Session 1: Strengths	Identification of and reflection on 5 core strengths Participants used a strengths card sort to identify their 5 core strengths and examples of how they had used those strengths. They then identified specific times and ways to experience using those strengths in a different way or with different people.
Session 2 : Hope	Visualisation of best possible future self Participants completed a guided visualisation of their best possible future self post career change, and identified goals and pathways to achieve the vision.
Session 3 : Optimism	Exploration of optimism levels Participants explored their optimistic outlook, and were introduced to techniques to use to increase their optimism through managing negative thoughts and focussing on positive experiences, including positive affirmations, cognitive behavioural techniques and the 3 good things.
Session 4: Resilience	Reflecting on resilient strengths and strategies to cope with change Participants identified examples of resilience from their experience and reflected on elements that had contributed to their resilience identifying strategies to apply to cope with future change.

Data collection

Initial data were gathered through a written description of each participant's perception of their career confidence before the coaching programme took place. After each coaching session participants were encouraged to provide a statement by email explaining how they felt about their confidence following the session. In the email they were asked 'Please can you just send me a note about your career confidence since the session, bearing the following questions in mind. Have things felt different when thinking about your career change? If so, how are they different? How would you describe your level of career confidence at the moment? Has this changed since the session? Any other comments in relation to your career confidence/change.'

This use of additional written data responds to the criticism that interviews as a research method are overused (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997) and rely too heavily on oral communication to gather information.

One month after the final coaching intervention a semi-structured interview took place with each participant either face to face or by Skype. To minimise any bias resulting from the dual role of coach and researcher, the participants were urged to be constructively critical of the programme. Open questions were used and participants were encouraged to discuss how they felt about their career confidence when contemplating career change and how the coaching programme had affected them. Questions such as 'When you thought about career change before the coaching programme what were you worried about?', 'Can you think of a situation where your confidence might have been knocked but wasn't?' were used.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began during the semi-structured interviews to establish an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts and written submissions were read several times and using the IPA idiographic approach (Smith et al, 2009), descriptive notes were made with one account being analysed first, before the other accounts were looked, and examined in relationship to this first account. The second stage identified the emergent themes from the transcripts and early notes. The themes were re-ordered into clusters or those at a higher level which incorporated the primary themes. The primary researcher had a dual role as researcher and practitioner. Mindful of the potential risk of bias, every effort was made to stay close to the data, and the codes and themes were discussed by the two authors in some depth.

Results

A number of superordinate shared themes were produced which captured the essence of the participants' experience of career confidence. These were split into 3 distinct areas. The first area was participants' experience of career confidence before coaching, which incorporated the sub-themes of negative affect and self-doubt; the second was the participants' experience of career confidence during and after the coaching, which included the sub-themes of increased career engagement, increased self-awareness and positive and optimistic outlook for the future. The third

consisted of the themes which enabled the change in career confidence, which were identified as the process of developing hope, a change in cognitive processes and coaching as a catalyst.

Table 4: Summary of Results

[Table 4 near here]

1. Before the coaching.

1.1 Negative affect – the strongest of these emotions was fear and was expressed by all participants. It was linked to specific aspects of the change including:

- failure *'I worry that I'm going to screw up'*
- making the wrong decision *'what if it turns out to be not what I'd hoped'*
- the unknown *'taking a step into the unknown is a difficult prospect'*
- doing something new *'I do not have any career confidence in that area and it seems like an unobtainable goal'*
- leaving the familiar *'I feel rather afraid to venture out of my comfort zone'.*

The participants experienced a sense of anxiety when thinking about their career change, and expressed worries or concerns about factors such as age, their skillset, financial implications or the amount of time the change would take. They felt these impacted their career confidence as they viewed them as barriers that could potentially stop or inhibit their career change as one participant said *'I often talk myself out of things by throwing up obstacles'* and, for three of them, the financial implications were foremost in their minds when contemplating the change.

Feelings of unhappiness or being unfulfilled in a current role had an impact on three of the participants' career confidence. They felt stuck and unable to move forward: *'I feel very unhappy in my job but I also feel my confidence to change career after so long is low'.*

1.2 Self-doubt – all participants expressed elements of doubt about their ability to either change career or be successful in their new career. This manifested itself in concerns about their lack of knowledge, lack of experience, their credibility in the new career and how they would fare in competition with better qualified candidates. This feeling was summed up: *'I lack the experience in a very competitive field, I was aware of my transferable skills and all my you know previous career experience that would help I was worried that that would be really difficult just to get anywhere'.*

2. During and after the coaching.

2.1 Career engagement – the participants showed a marked change in their engagement with their potential career change. Participants reported that the coaching increased their clarity about their career direction saying that *'it just made me more focussed on where I wanted to go'*, and that *'it's sort of in a way unjumbled lots of things in my head'*. They were also much clearer about what they wanted from their new career, with one stating that the coaching *'helped to provide more clarity on exactly what it is I'm looking for in existing roles'* and *'I know what I don't want from a career and am shaping up more of an idea of what I do want'.*

2.2 Increased Self Awareness – all participants experienced a marked increase in self-awareness particularly around their strengths as a result of the career coaching, reporting that the conversations helped in *'working out what my key strengths are for what I'm doing'*, and that *'even*

discussing my strengths has made me feel slightly more confident'. Participants felt that the coaching had an impact on their feelings within their current work: *'it did give me more confidence in my current role and made me value myself more and what I offered the organisation so I think it kind of increased my confidence in both areas'*.

The participants also reported that the coaching led to increased assertiveness, commenting *'I feel confident I can talk about my career'*, and *'I was very firm and said this is not what I want whereas before I wouldn't I probably would have gone along (to the interview)'*.

The increase in their self-awareness seemed to increase their sense of self-worth, *'it made me realise my own strengths and my own worth'*, and enable them to value their skills more and see how they could use them in their change. It also for three of the participants increased how they felt they performed and their confidence in their current roles. They showed increased self-belief illustrated by comments such as *'now I feel like I would achieve it'* and *'it has given me confidence already I do feel like I can hold my own in a conversation about work and business much more than I could have done before the summer'*.

2.3 Positive and Optimistic Outlook for the Future - All participants reported experiencing increased positivity, and although they still had some fears, they were more able to focus on the positives when thinking about their career change. One participant's comments that since the coaching *'I'm feeling more positive than I ever have before about a potential career shift'* and another that a change in her behaviour had been noticed by others: *'one of my colleagues said that my language had changed -the way that I talked about things was different to how it was before so some of the words or phrases I used would be more positive'*.

The positivity was also accompanied by an increase in conscious awareness of their thoughts and actions after the coaching, with one participant highlighting *'I'm more conscious when I'm going down a negative route and I can pull myself out of it'*, and finding herself *'putting out of my mind the negative thoughts and counter balancing them with a positive thought'*. The techniques used to dispute negative thoughts, develop a grateful practice (an increased focus on the positive elements of life) and reflect on resilience seemed particularly effective.

3. Themes which enabled the change in career confidence.

A number of themes emerged which appeared to enable this change in career confidence to take place:

3.1 Developing hope – This was not simply about feeling hopeful it was about planning. Participants reported that the coaching had given them the momentum to making plans: *'I had to think about my transition plan and my goals'* and taking action: *'I've been more actively looking for new roles... it is good to feel that you're being proactive, I'm planning I'm thinking ahead anyway so I've got a bigger picture'*. These elements seemed to be a significant factor for all the participants. The goal setting and planning part of the programme shifted their thinking and provided a practical and tangible start to their change *'I'm taking steps I'm now at the point where I am doing all the things that I said I was going to do to achieve my goal and they are becoming reality now'*.

3.2 Change in Cognitive processes – All participants reported a shift in how they managed their inner critics as a consequence of the coaching programme: *‘when I get presented with something that’s just so different from anything I’ve done before I’m thinking this is a good opportunity rather than this’ll all go wrong’*, and that the coaching increased their ability to change their negative thought patterns *‘just not getting caught up in these negative thought cycles’*.

Participants became better at thinking about bad events or experiences in a more objective way *‘what would be the worst situation and then trying to give myself the opposite kind of thoughts’*. They were more aware of their thought patterns and the value of maintaining a conscious awareness of the factors that would help them *‘I will keep in mind...resilience and optimism’*, and the benefits of consciously changing their thought patterns *‘an element of wanting to stop that thought rather than not caring that I was going down that thought’*.

3.3 Coaching as a catalyst – The subthemes identified above illustrate that effect that the participants felt the content of the coaching conversations had on their feelings and behaviours, but a separate theme emerged which reflected the impact that the very fact that they were engaging in coaching had on them. The coaching itself, the participants felt, acted as a catalyst by increasing their knowledge and motivation, changing their perspectives and giving them a sense of progress with one participant describing its motivating effect: *‘I needed a push to get going in the direction’*, and another that *‘it has given me the boost... the confidence to get going’*. All the participants reported enjoying the coaching process, of feeling supported and, this sense of movement appears to contribute to their confidence.

The participants, following the coaching, were all still enthusiastic to make a change, and participants reported that the coaching interventions had an impact on their readiness for change. When asked about their readiness for change before the coaching process all participants felt it was low, with participants reflecting *‘I really wanted it but I didn’t believe I could achieve it’*, and *‘I didn’t really see it as a viable option so I wasn’t putting that much effort into thinking about it’*.

However, when asked about their readiness for change following the coaching programme all participants reported a significant shift, stating *‘I do feel positive I can do it’*, and *‘It makes me feel that I can actually seriously visualise you know my life and the family’s life changing and actually looking at a timetable as opposed to thinking this would be nice to do’*.

Discussion

The study provides some support for Stajkovic’s (2006) proposal that career confidence is a higher order construct, composed of self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience, and findings from the research suggest that positive psychology interventions could be a valuable addition to the career coach’s repertoire.

Implications for Career Confidence

The research suggests that the definition of career confidence is a complex one both in theory and in practice. For the individuals contemplating career change, while they did not choose the language of Stajkovic’s (2006) Core Confidence higher order construct proposal to articulate career confidence, they felt the four factors of self-efficacy (articulated through strengths), hope, optimism and

resilience resonated with them and seemed all encompassing. They felt that all four variables needed to be addressed to have impact, which would lend support to Stajkovic's assertion (2006) that an individual needs all variables to be in place to feel confident.

The first variable of his proposal is self-efficacy. Bandura (1977, 1997) highlighted that performance accomplishment, the most powerful intervention for self-efficacy, is an individual engaging in the targeted behaviour and reflecting upon their success. The participants had the opportunity to experience this in the Strengths exercise and all reported an increased feeling of positivity as they reconnected with their core strengths and successes. Focussing on strengths within the workplace has been shown to have an impact on overall well-being and satisfaction (Yates 2013). Self-efficacy itself has also been shown to play a key role in career choice and career development (for example, Kanfer, Wanberg & Kantrowitz, 2001; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1996) and the value that the participants placed on self-efficacy lends support to the claims that self-efficacy has a role to play in effecting career change.

Hope played an important part in the research, not only as a variable of core confidence but also as a particular factor in the increase in career confidence experienced by the participants. Snyder in his hope theory (1995) asserts that hope is made up of the willpower and energy to get moving towards a goal, and the perceived ability to generate routes to achieve specific goals. The visualisation undertaken in session two of their best possible future self, post career change, allowed them to see and describe their goal. 'Goals need to be vivid and fully describable. When a concrete goal becomes imaginable this alone can unleash the person's sense of energy to pursue the goal, as well as the capability to generate pathways' (Snyder 1995, p. 358). The energy release certainly seemed to contribute to their increased positivity and momentum. Goals have been shown to have an impact on a range of factors associated with career change including increased motivation (Strauss, Griffin & Parker, 2013), resilience (Locke & Latham, 1990) and the ability to identify the steps needed to achieve them (Robinson, Davis & Meara, 2003), and the findings from this study confirm the importance of clear goal setting for career changers.

All participants demonstrated a conscious change in how they processed experiences and managed their thoughts around their career change, developing a self-reflective capability and increasing the two remaining variables, resilience and optimism. Stajkovic and Luthans (1998) acknowledge the influential contribution of thought processes to human motivation, attitudes and action. Bimrose and Hearne (2012) also highlight that adults engage in both career transitions and career change by developing coping responses and behaviours such as resilience and career adaptability.

All four elements of the positive psychology career coaching programme increased how confident the participants felt about their possible career change. While the study is limited to only five people, it would suggest that confidence is something more than just self-efficacy, and would lend support to Stajkovic's (2006) proposal that confidence should be viewed as a higher order construct incorporating self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience, rather than a single variable itself.

Implications for Practice

The pairing of positive psychology and career coaching is a developing area (Yates, 2013), and this research provides some support for its potential as an effective partnership. The development of a

positive and optimistic outlook was a key indicator in the participants' increased career confidence and their readiness for change. Fredrickson (2009) suggests that being in a positive frame of mind with higher levels of confidence an individual is more likely to take action, move forward, take risks and generate ideas.

The research also suggests that there is an interrelation between positivity and career change. Hirschi (2011) indicates that having positive views of oneself can impact on career change through the development of a clear sense of one's career goals, identity and purpose. Betz (2004) highlights the importance of perceptions of confidence in career choice, showing that low self-efficacy may limit the range of career options an individual considers or the success with which career options are achieved. All participants demonstrated increased self-awareness, which is known to play a part in career decision making, and in career change (Patton & McMahon, 2006) and which has been shown to be interrelated with career confidence (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Encouraging clients to cultivate positive thoughts and emotions can help ensure that they think creatively and expansively about new career opportunities instead of getting stuck (Jacobsen, 2010).

The participants embraced the interventions and achieved cognitive, affective and behavioural shifts in a relatively short space of time. Participants agreed that all of the interventions were useful and worked well together and it is exciting to see the impact they have had on the participants when used together.

In addition, the findings from this study suggest that career coaches can use the techniques to enable clients to increase readiness for change. The value of this is highlighted in Gati and Asher's (2001) PIC model. This separates career decision making into three stages: pre-screening, in-depth exploration and choice, the authors hold that the readiness to make a career choice must be in place before entering into the career choice process.

Limitations and Future Research

The study explored the particular experiences of the five participants, all of whom were women, reported retrospectively. A follow up study could be undertaken to determine whether the positivity and change to cognitive processes has lasted, and whether career change has been successfully completed by the original participants. Further research could usefully explore participants' experiences following each of the four interventions and it would be useful to see whether these results could be replicated in a larger scale study.

As one of the themes that affected the participant's experience of career confidence was coaching acting as a catalyst, it would be interesting to have a control group who experience four coaching sessions using other coaching interventions to see whether it is the positive psychology interventions that made the difference or simply the coaching experience.

The principal researcher in this study acted as both practitioner and researcher. This dual role carries with it a risk of bias, as the participants may temper their responses in the interviews, and the data may be subject to unconscious bias during the analysis phase. Mindful of these risks, the researchers adhered closely to the guidelines for research reflexivity (Smith et al. 2009) and discussed the data

throughout the analysis phase, to ensure that the themes which emerged reflected the participants' experiences.

Conclusion

This study highlights that the experience of career confidence prior to career change can be impacted by a coaching programme using positive psychology interventions based on Stajkovic's proposal of Core Confidence as a higher order construct (2006) (self-efficacy (strengths), hope, optimism and resilience). Prior to the coaching, participants experienced low readiness for change, negative emotions and self-doubt about their potential career change. During, and following the programme, self-awareness increased particularly around their strengths. Participants became clearer about their career direction and decision making and were more engaged with their career change. They developed a positive and optimistic outlook for the future and started to believe change was possible. Participants reported that having a plan, goals and pathways was a factor in their feelings of increased career confidence. They have all developed and embraced new ways of thinking allowing them to focus on positive rather than negative thought processes and have gained perspective on events and experiences. They see the benefit of practicing gratefulness, optimistic thinking, challenging their inner critic and reflecting on their resilience. Finally the coaching programme itself acted as a catalyst for them, forcing them in a supportive way to articulate their thoughts around change, make plans, set goals, undertake research and make commitments to themselves around their change. Their readiness for change also increased alongside their career confidence.

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Table 1

Stage	Typical Characteristics Experienced by Career Changers
Stage 1: Precontemplation	Experiencing discouragement Loss of interest in work Letting go of old work identity
Stage 2: Contemplation	Growing awareness of job dissatisfaction Concern for the future Initial thoughts and expressions of doubt regarding a possible career change Weighing pros/cons Emotional expressions Increasing personal control/self-efficacy
Stage 3: Preparation	Increased motivation to change careers Willingness to explore interests/skills
Stage 4: Action	Managing stress Redefining self Consolidating, advancing
Stage 5: Maintenance	Building co-worker relationships End of educational pursuits Holding on, innovating

Table 2

Participant	Current/previous career	New career or area of interest
Participant 1	Event Manager	Copy Editor
Participant 2	Quality Manager	Learning & Engagement in the Heritage sector
Participant 3	Grants Officer	Counsellor
Participant 4	HR Manager	Working with young people/ex-offenders
Participant 5	Legal PA	Jewellery Designer

Table 3

Approach	
Session 1: Strengths	Identification of and reflection on 5 core strengths How to use strengths in a different way
Session 2 : Hope	Visualisation of best possible future self Goals and pathways to achieve vision
Session 3 : Optimism	Exploration of optimism levels Managing negative thoughts and focussing on positive experiences
Session 4: Resilience	Reflecting on resilient strengths and strategies to cope with change

Table 4

Experience of career confidence before the coaching
Negative Affect
Self –Doubt
Experience of career confidence during and after the coaching
Increased Career Engagement
Increased self-awareness
Positive and optimistic outlook for the future
Themes which enabled the change in career confidence
Developing hope
Change in cognitive processes
Coaching as a catalyst

