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# Understanding the experience of midlife women taking part in a work-life balance career coaching programme: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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## Abstract

Midlife women currently have the highest ever presence in the workplace with many juggling work with demanding home lives. Women are reporting increased dissatisfaction with their work-life balance yet few studies exist exploring how practical interventions might help. This action-research involved five female participants, based in London, on a career coaching programme designed to improve work-life balance. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis suggested the programme offered a safe place to support women in reconciling work and life roles with their individual values and needs. Through increasing positivity and resilience the coaching enabled participants to define and shape a better work-life balance.

**Keywords:** midlife women, work-life balance, career coaching, interpretative phenomenological analysis, women's careers

## Introduction

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that almost one in two (48.4%) adults in Great Britain feel low satisfaction regarding their work-life balance (ONS, 2012). In the decade prior, good work-life balance was recognised as crucial to people's wellbeing (DfEE, 2000). Government initiatives were launched to encourage organisations to provide flexible working schemes and childcare provision and to encourage employees to manage time allocation successfully between the demands of home and work activities (Joshi et al., 2002). Although beginning to attend to logistical issues, this approach fails to recognise balance as hinging on individual desires, values and circumstances, alongside a lack of recognition that certain groups of people are likely to have idiosyncratic life demands and structures.

One such group are midlife women who typically have more home and family responsibilities than men (Hakim, 2004; Tajlili, 2014). This research defines 'midlife' as thirty-five and fifty four years old and is consistent with early research exploring the challenges professional women in this age range face (Lippert, 1997; Gordon & Whelan, 1998). Midlife women face challenges such as limited childcare options, caring for elderly parents, sustaining career development and finding time for their own self-care, leading to a plethora of competing demands (Burke & Mattis, 2005; Tajlili, 2014; Hakim, 2004). This study is intended to clarify how career coaching, a multi-dimensional individualised intervention, can assist in supporting midlife women to achieve a satisfying work-life balance.



In this paper, work life balance is defined as ‘an individual’s ability to meet their work and family commitments as well as other non-work responsibilities and activities’ in accordance with the definition used by Delecta (2011, p.186).

This literature review will conceptualise work-life balance with consideration of current research on the topic. It will outline key theories and research about midlife women and explore how career coaching specifically might be a useful intervention for encouraging a better balance. The methodology and procedure will be explained and the findings of the data analysis presented. Results of the study are discussed in accordance with the literature and as to how they influence and extend our understanding of career coaching practice and work-life balance. The paper will end with an acknowledgement of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

## Literature Review

Discourse around women’s work-life balance is at a high (Tajlili, 2014; ONS, 2012; Cohen, 2015). According to Cohen, writing in *The Guardian* (2015, para.15) “Today women speak of work-life balance as an ethical imperative; an aspiration that strongly influences how they think about and arrange their lives” and this acknowledgement of the importance of the opportunity to combine work and home lives is echoed in the empirical research (Maniero & Sullivan, 2005). However, women encounter conflicting physical and emotional demands that act as barriers to achieving a satisfying work-life balance (Hakim, 2003, 2004; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Yates, 2014). Moreover, policy makers have been criticised for overlooking women’s values, preferences and goals in relation to achieving desirable work-life balance (Hakim, 2003).

Offering an interesting interpretation of how women experience work-life balance, Clark’s (2000) work-family border theory conceptualises women as daily border crossers, travelling between work and family territories. She proposes the intertwining of these two areas are influenced by individual agency and meaning. This framework can help women navigate these two worlds and foresee possible role conflict. Clark (2000) also views the temporal and physical separation of work and family life, in relation to work-life balance, as reflecting overspill from an era when women were traditionally assumed as homemakers and men as breadwinners (for example, Parsons & Bales, 1955). This perceived divide of roles is no longer reflective of modern society. Career women are now in previously male occupied roles where work demands restrict how closely women’s needs and desires are met (Gordon & Whelan, 1998).

In addition to problematic working structures, Burke and Mattis (2005) propose it is during midlife when women are exposed to conflicting societal signals regarding identity, career and family. Currently, midlife women’s careers are under-researched, with some researchers suggesting that the current focus still favours men’s career issues - women’s midlife career stage is seen as neither positive nor challenging (Burke & Mattis, 2005). This study proposes the opposite as true. Midlife women report feeling unsupported, unhappy and suffering higher levels of stress than men whilst trying to balance different work and family roles (Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Reitman & Schneer, 2003). Many women who leave the workplace to raise children struggle to return and make career decisions that prioritise financial demands or cultural expectations. This can result in women experiencing dissatisfaction, distress, low self-esteem, limited quality of life and dysfunctional social behaviour (Parasuramen & Greenhaus, 2002; Greenhaus & Powell 2003; Grzywacz, 2000).

Delving into career theory, Super’s (1980) developmental self-concept model was first to acknowledge that individual self-concept changes in relation to life roles and experience. He identified midlife as a stage defined by ‘establishment/maintenance’ within which individuals negotiate lifestyle factors with roles as parents, workers and members of society. Niles, Herr and Hartung (2001) expanded this idea, suggesting balance is individualistic - defined in relation to

self-concept. If our conceptualisation of career success is shaped by our individual values, self-concept and goals, work-life balance may benefit from clarifying which roles and goals are central, and which are peripheral for an individual at that point (Heslin, 2005).

Daily re-balancing of roles in response to home, family and work demands have led women to adjust behaviour, values, mental models and relationships in an attempt to maintain an equilibrium (Gordon & Whelan, 1998). This research offers further evidence to refute the simplistic notion of allocating more time to leisure activities is at the heart of achieving fulfilling balance (ONS, 2012). In addition, Lippert's (1997) research suggested that more roles don't necessarily have a negative impact; rather, the perceived quality of experiences and interactions influence women's wellbeing. Lieblich's (1986) findings reinforce this reasoning suggesting that men solve role conflict through meaning whilst women resolve it through attending to and improving relationships.

Hakim (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006) recognises the diverse lifestyle choices made by modern women between family and work as demonstrated through her persuasive research on 'preference theory'. A strength of this research is it attends to how women make life and activity choices in context - acknowledging they are situated socially, historically and economically. Moreover, it avoids treating women as homogeneous, passive beings (Wright, 2005). Preference theory explains women as consciously adopting one of three lifestyles; an adaptive lifestyle that balances home and work; remaining home or working full time or remaining childless (Hakim, 2006). Hakim (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006) estimates 60-80% of women in western societies inhabit the adaptive group, where pull factors between work and home may perpetuate the stress women experience (Wright, 2005).

Complementing preference theory are research findings that point to women prioritising children over career but who also recount a fulfilling career as being of importance to them (Bielby & Bielby, 1989; Gaunt & Scott, 2016). Women revealed having a single work or home identity in isolation as not enough to obtain high levels of meaningfulness (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Grady and McCarthy (2008) interviewed eighteen mid-career women on issues of work-life integration and identified, using thematic analysis, meaningful and challenging work and flexibility in working hours as key to obtaining the balancing work and family. Moreover, the researchers discussed meaningful work as individually arbitrated.

Career decisions made at midlife may coincide with children being older and more independent, allowing women to consider returning to the work place or to re-evaluate suitability of their current job role (Burke & Mattis, 2005). Maineiro and Sullivan's (2005) kaleidoscope theory outlines how career decisions and their wider impact on balance is the greatest driver for women's decision in midlife. This theory supports the suggestion that women's negotiation of work and life roles are driven by a holistic worldview at this life stage. It highlights the complex interrelated decisions necessary when moulding work-life balance.

Having summarised some of the wider literature focussing on work-life balance and womens careers, the review will now turn to research exploring practical interventions with women around issues of balance. Research to date of this nature has tended to centre on single case studies. Tajlili's (2014) case study exploring women's career intentionality and work-life integration informed her proposition that university career counsellors should raise awareness of the challenges women encounter balancing career and family life with female students. However, female students are rarely experiencing such conflict at this time and therefore it may not feel relevant at this life stage. Engaging with support during times of transition or conflict may be more impactful. Another study by Wright (2005) explored the effectiveness of coaching strategies used with a midlife woman experiencing work stress. The findings of this study are limited in their valuableness due to them detailing only the coaches' reflections of the experience. With both studies, exploring more than a single woman's experiences would increase usefulness for evaluating how best to help women managing their work-life balance.

Having established the challenges of work-life balance for midlife women and issues of fundamental importance to women at this stage, the review will next consider how career coaching may assist in attaining fulfilling work-life balance. A clear definition of career coaching is currently contentious in the field due to coaches adopting an eclectic mix of approaches (Yates, 2011; Yates 2014). For the purpose of this study, it is defined as a number of one-to-one conversations aiming to improve and explore an individual's professional performance, values and decisions with the intention of increasing wellbeing. It adopts a positive, solutions focused approach and makes use of a range of tools, exercises and theories (van Nieuwerburgh, 2013; Whitmore, 2013; Yates, 2011).

Coaching programmes that focus on retaining and reengaging women before and after maternity leave are increasingly popular in the corporate world (Filsinger, 2012; Liston & Chapman, 2009; Cormier, 2007; Bussell, 2008). However, this support is offered for a short period of women's working lives, when their children are babies. A career coaching programme that is inclusive of other stages of women's careers, such as midlife, a time when role conflict appears to be prominent, could help retain, develop and support a wider demographic of women.

Hudson (1999) describes career coaches as containing five functions for their clients: facilitating change, clarifying values and beliefs, identifying important social roles and recognising emerging developmental changes. Skiffington and Zeus (2002) highlight the benefits for people having career coaching as stress reduction, alignment of vision with colleagues and increased emotional intelligence. However, Green and Green (2007) point out that the literature on career coaching is descriptive and highlights positive features, an assertion that has been corroborated through this study's literature review. This presented an opportunity to address a research gap by shining a spotlight on how individuals experience career coaching, specifically when focussing directly on issues of work-life balance.

The coaching programme designed for this study is founded on Passmore's (2010) integrated coaching model, which uses an amalgamation of coaching approaches to meet clients' individual needs with the evidence emphasising the individual subjective nature of midlife women's work-life balance. This model positions the coaching relationship as humanistic and is founded on the conditions conceived by psychologist Carl Rogers (Yates, 2014). This model could offer women space to explore their feelings securely whilst promoting change (Bryant-Jefferies & Joseph, 2008; Passmore, 2010). Boniwell (2007) disseminates the use of positive psychology (PP) in partnership with coaching to increase positive emotions and wellbeing and the programme delivered for this research includes two PP interventions based on this premise (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). This study therefore builds on existing research and literature by exploring how a career coaching programme focussing on midlife women's individual values, priorities and definitions of meaningfulness is experienced in relation to improving work-life balance.

## Methodology

This was an action research study which involved an intervention – a career coaching programme, and data which were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using an interpretive phenomenological analysis. The first author fulfilled a dual role as researcher and career coach.

Action research was introduced by Lewin in 1946, who suggested that an effective approach to learning about social phenomena was through an attempt to effect a change. Lewin suggested that action research should be both about solving problems and generating new knowledge. Learning should occur throughout the process of the research, and integral to action research is the idea of involving stakeholders. Lewin worked towards improving industrial practices (the original aim of action research) but this methodology is now used in a range of contexts, and is considered a

suitable approach to improving individual practice (Melrose, 2001). Huxham and Vangen (2003) describe a dual purpose which can be observed in action research, suggesting that whilst the researcher is motivated to achieve the research ends, the intervention is driven by the needs of the client. In this study, the career coaching interventions were designed to solve the work-life balance problems of the participants and the interviews afterwards were concerned with generating knowledge of the experiences of the participants during the coaching programme with a view to improving the practice of the principle researcher / coach. The stakeholders, the women participants, were involved as coachees in the coaching intervention and then as research participants during the semi-structured interviews.

At the heart of this study was the desire to explore and capture subjectivity; the interplay between participants' individual beliefs and experience in relation to an integrative career coaching programme. This approach makes ontological assumptions that situate the research within a relativist, phenomenological paradigm (Langdrige, 2007; Smith et al, 2009). Constructivist perspectives of this kind understand people as social beings creating and being created by the world around them. Findings represent an interpretation of a subjective construct, (Creswell, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). It was imperative that the research method could capture and interpret each participant's lived experience authentically.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised in order to elicit rich, deep data about how the participants' experienced the coaching programme. IPA, grounded philosophically in phenomenology, allows for rigorous exploration of participants' perceived experience ideographically, whilst permitting pattern identification across all accounts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA was able to accommodate the action research approach chosen for this study through its location of researcher as having multiple roles (Smith et al., 2009).

The researcher is attempting to make sense of the participant, who in turn is trying to make sense of the coaching programme, with IPA recognising this double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009). IPA also acknowledges that the participant and researcher influence each other throughout the research process and understands the researchers attitudes, feelings and intentions as part of this dynamic (Langdrige, 2007; Smith et al, 2009). A coaching relationship encourages an empathetic position and IPA appreciates this experience of understanding the participant from this viewpoint whilst being mindful of never truly being able to do so (Smith et al., 2009).

## Participants

Five women between the ages of thirty-five and fifty years old living in East London were selected as participants. All participants expressed a strong desire to improve their work-life balance. Although not a pre-requisite of the study, all were mothers of babies or primary school children. Recruitment was through a local online parenting forum. An email was sent asking for people interested in taking part in a free work-life balance career coaching programme. Over sixty women expressed interest and the researcher selected the first five who fell into the study's midlife age criteria. Two participants were on maternity leave anticipating returning to work, one participant worked part time, one participant was currently not working and one participant was self-employed. Each participant completed a questionnaire about their work status, feelings about work-life balance and expectations of the programme. This information was purely for preparation by the researcher / practitioner.

**Table 1: Participants**

| Participant | Current/previous career | Circumstance at time of coaching programme   |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 1           | Journalist              | Not working, two school aged children        |
| 2           | Charity Co-ordinator    | Working part time, two school aged children  |
| 3           | Development Director    | On maternity leave, two children under five. |
| 4           | Lecturer                | On maternity leave, one child under one.     |
| 5           | Marketer/Coach          | Self-employed, two school aged children      |

## Procedure

A three session integrative career coaching programme was designed and developed. The sessions were grounded in a humanistic approach whilst drawing on exercises and techniques from PP, solutions focussed coaching and cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) selected when deemed appropriate to the needs of the participants. The researcher/coach and participants met every two weeks over a three month period.

**Table 2: Work-life balance career coaching programme outline**

| Session | Aim                                                                                                                                             | Tools/approaches/ exercises                                        | Inter-sessional task            |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1       | To establish rapport, understand present perception/feelings about work-life balance.                                                           | Humanistic, Career style role model question                       | Letter from the future exercise |
| 2       | Gently explore 'thinking errors' and beliefs. Question individual values, priorities as clarified since first session. Build career confidence. | Humanistic, CBC and solutions focused, ABC model, miracle question | Three good things               |
| 3       | Preparing for long-term change. Reflect on successes so far. Identify further support needed. Action planning.                                  | Humanistic, Strengths cards, SMART action plans                    | n/a                             |

## Data Collection

Each participant undertook a face-to-face semi-structured interview one month after the last coaching session. Open questions were used to elicit rich descriptions of the participants' experiences. Care was taken to explore the full experience by asking how the coaching affected them and their work-life balance during the sessions as well as in between the sessions and after the programme. Questions such as 'could you describe what happened during the session in your own words?' 'Throughout our coaching period, did you notice any changes in your activity choices or social relationships as a product of our time together?' and 'how do you think it has affected your work-life balance if at all?' were asked.

Participants were encouraged to share their experience in light of the dual role of researcher as coach. The interviews concluded with a debrief explaining how the interview material would be used, including reemphasis of their right to withdraw at any point in the process.

## Data Analysis

Analysis began by carrying out transcription verbatim of all five interviews. Once complete, each transcript was read several times making describing notes in the right hand margin. This was carried out with breaks between each participant to ensure accounts remained true to the individual interviewed. Line-by-line thematic analysis was carried out using wide margins for coding. Descriptive notes were made on each transcript before further condensing and grouping emergent themes in the left hand margins. The researcher then opened a separate Word document to re-cluster shared emergent themes across all accounts. These were then re-ordered into primary themes in an additional Word document with line numbers referring to the original transcripts.

## Results

Three predominant themes encapsulating how the participants experienced the career coaching programme emerged from the analysis. The first theme, career coaching as a safe space, included three subthemes - to explore freely, to be authentic and to make mistakes/try new things. The second theme, transformation of work and life roles incorporated aligning with core values, a psychological shift and making practical changes as subthemes. Finally, the third predominant theme, increased positivity and resilience, acknowledging changes to their emotional landscape with subthemes during and beyond the coaching programme.

**Table 3: Summary of results**

### **Career coaching as a safe space**

To explore freely  
To be authentic  
To make mistakes/try new things

### **Transforming work and life roles**

Aligning with core values  
A psychological shift  
Making practical changes

### **Increased Positivity and Resilience**

During the coaching programme  
Beyond the coaching programme

## 1. Career Coaching as a safe space

### 1.1 To explore freely

All participants described the sessions as a place where they could safely explore feelings and thoughts they had about work-life balance - *'a free platform and a safe platform in which to share those thoughts'* Participant 2. *'I think it enabled quite a freedom'* Participant 1.

The participants identified these feelings of safety as linked to three aspects of the coaching:

A gentle questioning style: *'asking open questions that allowed me to talk about my experience and what I was going through and what my worries were'* Participant 3.

A non-directive approach: *'It was the fact that you weren't trying to lead the sessions in one direction or another'* Participant 1.

A non-judgemental stance: *'I know that you're not supposed to be judging me so that felt good'* Participant 3.

Having freedom to explore encouraged participants to experience their situation from fresh perspectives - *'I'd finish talking about that and I'd be like "oh wow I hadn't thought about it like that" or "ok yeah, I'll talk about it from this point of view" and that was great. That was really, really useful'* Participant 2. It also led to increased clarity about their work-life balance - *'It's when you realise the obvious that you never saw before'* Participant 5.

### 1.2 To be authentic

The sense of safety felt by participant's facilitated authentic thought and expression within the sessions - *'I felt safe enough to be brave and just speak'* Participant 2. *'I could talk frankly about my fears and what I felt my limitations were and it was really nice'* Participant 3. These coaching conversations lacked the level of censorship participants normally employed in their interactions with others - *'until this experience I've always been careful. Not wanting to say the wrong thing in case it's wrong or it offends or it wasn't what that person was expecting'* Participant 2. This dimension of the coaching relationship was acknowledged as unique by the participants - *'its impossible to have a conversation like we have with anybody in your life'* Participant 1.

### 1.3 To make mistakes/try new things

Most participants also found the safety perceived in the coaching reduced any fears they had about making work-life balance changes - *'even if what I predict will happen doesn't happen it doesn't mean that I've messed up, or that I've got it wrong. It just means that something different happened'* Participant 1.

Participants appeared to psychologically shift away from the binary thinking of right and wrong decisions to a more open and exploratory frame of mind - *'I'm not going to get it wrong. We are not working through a series of questions to get the right answer'* Participant 2.

Making mistakes became an acceptable part of the process - *'I could make a mistake and it would be ok, I felt safe to be that person'* Participant 2 *'I didn't feel I'd been wrong in making that statement'* Participant 1. *'I think that the fact that I got that so early on was quite liberating'* Participant 4. The participants identified these feelings as triggered exclusively by the coaching programme - *'I don't think there are many situations like this really in adult life'* Participant 2.

## 2. Transforming work and life roles

### 2.1 Aligning with core values

As participants explored their work-life balance, an increased awareness of their individual core values emerged - *'it does remind you about what your core values are'* Participant 1. *'It was just reiterating what was important'* Participant 5. The participants began assessing how strongly their values were expressed in their current work-life structure - *'I had to ask the more serious question "is this ok for me?"'* Participant 2.

The sessions also accentuated decisions about home and work activities that clashed with core values - *'what am I stressing myself for when I'm not earning any money and taking my time away from the kids?'* Participant 5. Similarly, where decisions had been made based on the externally imposed expectations of others - *'just the realisation of what I'm doing it for?'* Participant 5. *'I told myself "what would life be like if I wasn't trying to be intellectual?"'* Participant 4. Having space to reconnect with core values appeared to be a liberating experience - *'I suddenly felt free'* Participant 2. *'I guess free me up a little bit?'* Participant 5. Participants described these cognitive changes as a direct result of the coaching relationship - *'it was having you there to validate what perhaps I'd thought but wouldn't allow myself to believe in a sense'* Participant 4.

Making sense of work-life balance through the lens of each participants' core values increased readiness and motivation to make changes to how they balanced different roles - *'by the time we got to session three I had had the courage to begin to make those changes'* Participant 2.

## 2.2 A psychological shift

During the programme participants began to redefine the boundaries around the different roles and selves they inhabit. This included integrating previously considered separate selves into one new emerging identity - *'I knew that there were always two parts of me there's the working X who goes to work and then there's the other creative X so in these sessions I feel like I've shifted... because it feels like actually one feeds into the other'* Participant 4. *'That's me, that's my life isn't it? It's work and it's life'* Participant 5. *'I think I realised is that your work is inherent to who you are'* Participant 3

Participants began to reinvent their model of work-life balance as more holistic - *'it's a big deal that we...work is children and life, it is the whole package, it isn't just about our careers anymore'* Participant 3. *'You talk about your work its like "well I do it, I earn money" but actually it is the ladder to your emotions, your feelings, who you are, your personality'* Participant 5. Having the opportunity to explore their work lives in relation to the demands of family life felt advantageous for these participants - *'that was valuable for me - to be able to talk about the whole thing'* Participant 3 *'Its had a psychological shift that I never thought would happen'* Participant 4.

This psychological shift meant participants left the programme with a stronger self acceptance - *'its given me the confidence to say, "Ok everything you do doesn't have to be based on how you will be viewed"'* Participant 5. Additionally, participants transitioned from viewing successful work-life balance as rooted in time management of activities, into an individually defined subjective construct - *'you were able to help me see that its not about "well if you've got x number of hours for yourself that should = x amount of happiness"'* Participant 2. *'Instead of viewing it as something I really ought to do, to earn more of a living, suddenly that was transformed into – there are things I'd like to do'* Participant 1.

## 2.3 Making practical changes

Participants used the insight gained within the sessions about values and identity to make individually driven changes regarding how they structure different life roles. They identified changes to make at work - *'bring me into contact with people. I'd really like that'* Participant 1. *'It unlocked questions about my work set up and the changes that I may have wanted to make there'* Participant 2. *'If I hadn't done this [the coaching] then the changes that I have made in the last few months would not have happened'* Participant 4. Most prioritised quality time spent with family - *'do some classes with her and make sure I spend that quality time with her'* *'its made me resolve to cross the park with my daughter to school every day instead of jumping in the car'* Participant 1.

The participants experienced decreased feelings of guilt about meeting their own needs and increased self-care activities - *'I've never actually had that time and I see other women do it. Why can't I? I mean no wonder my body has been collapsing'* Participant 5. *'I am going to do stuff but I'm doing it for me'* Participant 2. *'I've got to look after myself'* Participant 3.

## 3. Increased positivity and resilience

All participants described a strong increase in positive emotions as a result of participating in the coaching programme.

### 3.1 During the coaching programme

Participants reported peaks of positivity during the sessions – ‘I felt very positive, very, very positive ‘on a high’ I can’t explain how explosive it is’ Participant 4. ‘I came out the session feeling really positive’ Participant 3. ‘I came out feeling uplifted’ Participant 1.

They described moments of calm - ‘freer and more relaxed’ Participant 2. ‘It was also a bit of relief, a release’ Participant 4. ‘More relaxed, lighter’ Participant 2. Participants attributed these changes to having space to verbalise their feelings and thoughts - ‘everything was coming out of my mouth and I’m like “actually this isn’t so bad”’ having that time to talk about me was really positive’ Participant 3.

Participants shared feeling more confident - ‘It gave me the confidence that maybe I’m not just talking nonsense’ Participant 3 ‘I feel confident’ Participant 4. ‘More confident...in what I was doing’ Participant 1. This growth in confidence appeared to arise from the coach feeding back the participants’ own positive comments in the session - ‘you were very positive about me as a person and that was really nice’ Participant 3. ‘Hearing from you...saying “you talk really passionately about what you do” you said positive things about the situation and it made me think positively, it made me more confident in myself’ Participant 4.

### 3.2 Beyond the programme

Participants reported feeling higher levels of resilience after the programme. They described the programme as giving them tools to reframe their perceptions and feelings about their work-life balance - ‘it has helped me to think differently about things and realise that my work-life balance isn’t that bad’ Participant 3. ‘I’m braver now’ Participant 2.

It allowed them to adopt a more objective viewpoint when experiencing negative feelings and thoughts - ‘I am still completely shit scared about taking on this new role but I think you’ve made me realise that it is just about the fear and a lot of it is because I’m not at work’ Participant 3. This included consciously adjusting thinking patterns - ‘I was able to say to myself “are you happy with this behaviour yes or no?” and I said to myself “no not really its not ok” and then “are you prepared to speak up to see if something could change?”’ Participant 2. Participants linked the positivity they experienced from the programme to gaining new coping tools - ‘you’d enabled me to have the very positive experience whilst coming out with very useful tools’ Participant 1. In some cases, this led to a dramatic change in the individuals’ world view - ‘I might not have realised that there are lots of positives to be found in really more or less everything’ Participant 1.

Positivity induced by the coaching sessions contributed to feelings of hopefulness about their future work-life balance – ‘I felt very much more positive and hopeful’ Participant 1. ‘When I think about what I’m going to do I feel that positive pleasure instead of the sort of rather worrying “oh I haven’t done that yet”’ Participant 5.

## Discussion

The results of this study provide new insight into the benefits of career coaching for women seeking to improve work-life balance. Findings suggest that the strong sense of security and support the coaching space evoked allowed participants to think authentically, openly and creatively about their current life structures and roles. The participants also reported using the sessions to understand and link their individual values with their work-life balance decisions. The programme led to participants visualising a clearer, positive future work-life balance whilst empowering them to make practical changes. Additionally, the coaching sessions served as a conduit for increasing hopefulness about future work-life balance as well as raising participants’ confidence, positivity and resilience.

In the early stages of the programme, many of the participants perceived good time management and organisation as being key to work-life balance as paralleled in recent government policies and research on the subject (DfEE, 2000; ONS, 2012). However, further thinking in the sessions led them to recognise that even when on paper they had a good balance of activities, feelings of dissatisfaction prevailed. It emerged that each participant placed differing value on contrasting working structures, activities, time allocations and roles. This establishes work-life balance as being a complex and personal construct for midlife women. During the coaching, participants considered how well-matched their current activities were with their values and how any incongruity affected their subjective experience of those activities. This appeared to be a powerful reframing process for understanding how they were experiencing work-life balance and identifying areas needing improvement.

The theme of safety featured across all the women's accounts of how they experienced the coaching programme and was attributed to its success. Clark (2000) and Burke and Mattis's (2005) research on women feeling restricted by traditional gender roles could be one explanation as to why feeling safe was important. In the data collection they discussed how successful they perceived themselves in relation to culturally delineated expectations about women's roles at work and home. For some this was uncomfortable, a personal reflection that was only shared and verbalised in the safety of coaching. At times, participants expressed feelings of fear and guilt about how others perceived their work-life roles and the decisions they make about balance. This supports Leblach's (1986) and Lippert's (1997) proposition that women are influenced by their social relationships when organising and adopting life roles.

When participants were asked about the specific elements of the coaching that permitted safe examination of values, they described qualities resonant of the humanistic core conditions: empathy, unconditional positive regard (UPR) and congruence, as well as a non-directive coaching approach (Rogers, 1957; Passmore, 2010; Yates, 2014). They described being free to express their feelings, thoughts and values during the coaching interaction without needing to take into consideration other people's agendas. This research therefore situates safe exploration of values as being important for understanding work-life balance with integrative career coaching being a secure platform for this type of cognitive work.

The participants described a mirror-like aspect of the coaching relationship. This seemed connected to the coach's use of paraphrasing and summarising skills, aiding them to be more accepting of their own thoughts and feelings (van Nieuwerburgh, 2013). As the coach responded to their articulations about work-life balance with UPR and empathy, this encouraged authenticity in their verbalisation, as well as treatment of themselves on the same terms. These findings strongly support Passmore's (2010) proposition that building a coaching partnership using these conditions can foster the self-growth and acceptance necessary before attempting change. All the women emerged with a greater sense of self-acceptance and resilience regarding issues of identity and work-life balance. Furthermore, negotiating such complex, challenging issues on their own is unlikely to have resulted in the same level of positive change for participants compared to their experience in the coaching.

Clark's (2000) evocative 'border crossing' woman was robustly present in the women's discourse about the demands required for them at work and home. Some participants described inhabiting different roles as stress inducing as proposed by Gordon and Whelan's (1998) and Reitman & Schmeer's (2003) research. However, the data collection also elicited that it was an inability to be fully present and engaged in each role that caused most unhappiness, rather than the act of switching between roles. These findings support Lippert's (1997) conclusions on the effects of role management on wellbeing and suggest that women who are able to experience high levels of engagement with value-driven activities and roles are likely to consider themselves to have a good work-life balance. This is a contrasting approach to the methods utilised by policy-makers, which at present concentrate on assisting women logistically with role management; for example, increasing

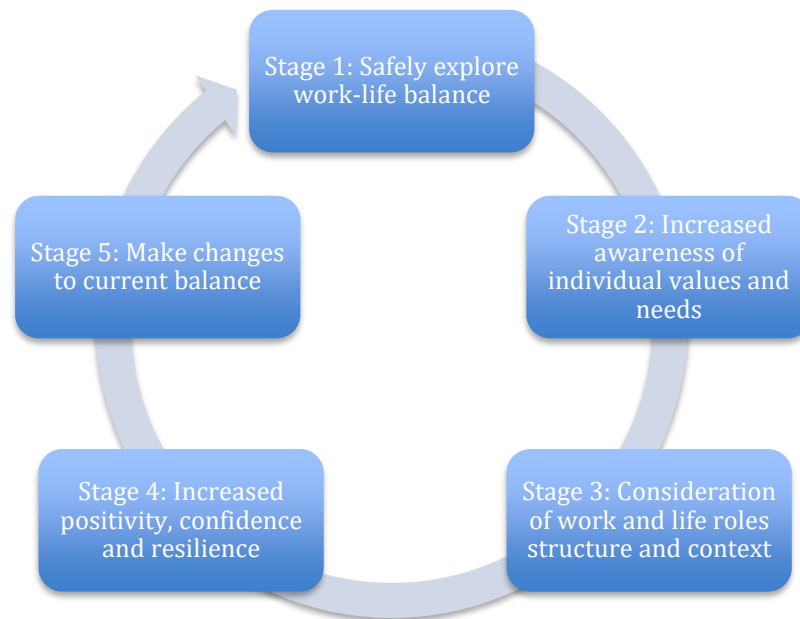
childcare provision in order to improve their experience of work-life balance (ONS, 2012; DfEE, 2000). These findings suggest that a more useful alternative would be to support midlife women in engaging richly with value-driven activities and relationships, leading to better balance satisfaction.

The research results complement and enrich knowledge generated about midlife women's careers by Hakim's (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006) preference theory and Maineiro and Sullivan's (2005) kaleidoscope theory. All but one participant in the programme inhabited Hakim's adaptive position and the women felt pulled between work and home stresses (Hakim, 2006). All participants expressed obtaining balance as being of upmost importance (Maineiro & Sullivan, 2005). However, the participants sometimes perceived themselves as having low agency in determining balance, instead focussing on the expectations of others above their own when allocating their time. Participants described neglecting their own self-care prior to the coaching. As well as contributing to their overall dissatisfaction regarding work-life balance, this finding could possibly support issues of low self-esteem from midlife women as outlined in previous research (Parsuramen & Greenhaus, 2002; Greenhaus & Powell 2003; Gryzwacz, 2000). It is also notable that when the coach shared knowledge about preference theory and kaleidoscope theory with participants this appeared to help rationalise the stress the women faced and offer another pathway to relief. This suggests that more shared discourse about women's particular experiences of balance could be one route to alleviating the anxiety, and that career coaching is a suitable channel for doing so.

Moving to the final theme, the discussion considers the increased positivity and resilience experienced by the participants. Each woman described taking part in the programme as positive during data collection. The findings showed that participants found calmness and ascribed this to having space to think and talk in the sessions thereby offloading some balance stress. Secondly, participants described a wider reaching positivity, as demonstrated by the sub-theme beyond the coaching programme. Further interpretation could link the strength of this increase to the PP interventions carried out by participants as inter-sessional tasks. The positive interventions encouraged participants to consciously express gratitude and savour experiences between sessions (Emmon & McCullough, 2003; Yates, 2014). Whilst executing these interventions, participants described slowing down and engaging more fully when performing an activity, resulting in a more satisfying experience. They reported practising the interventions helped them cope better with immediate balance issues and helped them feel hopeful about a better balance in the future therefore showing an increase in resilience.

Having outlined and attended to the themes individually, the discussion offers an interpretation of how they interlink and create a framework for understanding the participants' experience of the programme. It appeared to move participants through a sequence of psychological stages: a period of safe exploration and awareness that induced clarity around values and desires, consideration of work and life roles and demands, followed by raised positivity that then allowed them to take action to move towards a satisfying balance within their individual life parameters. Some participants described repeating the cycle with adjusted behaviour gained from progressing through the cycle once and trying new structures. The resilience and positivity experienced by participants was a central part of the coaching programme for moving participants into an upward spiral, towards a better work-life balance.

**Chart 1: Cycle of participants journey through the career coaching programme**



It is important to highlight that, although the content of each cycle stage was individually defined based on the different aspects of each woman's life, the cognitive process was the same for all.

### Implications for career coaching practice

Findings from this research illustrate the importance for women to have a supportive space in which to consider their work-life roles relationally. The findings suggest that for all participants, the coaching relationship provided a safe environment that was pivotal to unlocking how they felt about their work-life balance.

The participants in this study reported humanistic coaching skills as key to authentically and safely exploring work-life balance issues. This implies Passmore's (2010) integrative career coaching approach is well positioned for facilitating midlife women's desire to make adjustments based on her discoveries. This framework allows the coach to move the client beyond increased awareness and heightened positivity into either an action planning stage or selecting tools from CBC depending on what is presented (Whitmore, 2013). The key benefit of moving beyond a purely humanistic approach is shifting the client from 'knowing' to 'doing'. In the programme delivered for this study, this approach had a powerful impact on women's perceived and actual agency for managing work-life balance and participants reported the coaching programme as being the only intervention that offered such support.

This study makes a strong case for career coaches taking a positive, client centred approach that allows a level of flexibility regarding content to adjust and cater to each client's needs. This can be related to the participants' report that a non-judgmental, non-directive approach allowed them to safely engage with their work-life balance circumstances. It makes an argument for the integration of PP knowledge and interventions into coaching with clients who seek to increase their wellbeing and engage fully and positively with work and family activities. The experience of women in this study included helping individuals visualise and move towards a self-determined positive future as well as deepening social relationships and positivity. These findings complement the aims of career coaching practitioners (van Nieuwerburgh, 2013; Whitmore, 2013; Yates, 2011, 2014) and

suggest coaches would benefit from drawing on this partnership when designing similar programmes.

## Limitations and Future Research

The sample size of five participants has limited use for generalising these research findings as dictated by the qualitative approach selected. In terms of transferability, there is a limit as to how explicit a researcher can communicate coaching session content, the nature of the coaching relationship and the participants' circumstances. It is hoped that the research context provided in this paper enhances transferability, allowing practitioners to make their judgments about its findings in relation to their own coaching work with midlife women.

All participants were mothers, a bi-product of how the researcher decided to recruit participants. It could be beneficial to run the same programme with groups of midlife women who weren't mothers but represent Hakim's (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006) three preference theory groups. This could explore and identify any unique ways career coaching could help women with contrasting life structures improve work-life balance. Another research opportunity for building on these results would be a follow up study after having finished the coaching programme. This could determine what actual changes to their work-life balance participants had made, as well as whether the reported psychological and emotional shifts were sustained over time.

During data collection, the dual role of researcher/coach could have limited participants' desire to offer a critical, unedited view of the coaching programme. Participants, having developed a strong and positive rapport with the researcher as a result of the action research design, possibly omitted negative experiences during the interviews to maintain a good relationship. This limits the impact of this study on career coaching research in line with Green and Green's (2007) findings that most literature to date focuses heavily on the positive outcomes of career coaching. Future research could rerun the programme using a separate researcher to gather and analyse the data to ensure participants produce an accurate account of their experience.

## Conclusion

The results of this study indicated the career coaching programme supported the participants in finding a better balance by adopting an integrated approach. The humanistic, non-directive focus allowed tailoring of session content to benefit each woman's set of demands, values and life structures.

The women perceived the coaching relationship as safe, exploring their inner-most thoughts and feelings about work-life balance. This sense of safety enhanced clarity about individual values and allowed them to define a desirable work-life balance. The coaching and inter-session tasks helped participants develop a positive and proactive outlook resulting in increased resilience.

The results of this research contribute to current knowledge about how integrative career coaching can benefit individuals whilst also offering insight into how midlife women experience work-life balance. With women's career and home lives unlikely to become any less complex, it is important that policymakers, researchers and coaching practitioners continue to research interventions of this nature in order to improve women's wellbeing and overall life experience.

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