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Reimagining career guidance: towards a pluralistic perspective

Abstract

Difficulties concerning the identified mis-match between supply and demand sides of the labour market are discussed. The variability of career guidance services for young people across Europe is illustrated together with policy initiatives in some cases leading to problems of professional identity and limited support to clients of the service. The risks associated with a monoculture of 'one size fits all' approach to guidance practice are discussed. The principles of pluralistic approaches to counselling are discussed with the suggestion that this might prove to be a fertile way forward for career guidance practice.

Youth unemployment in the European Union is not a new phenomenon. Youth unemployment has been double or even three times the rate of general unemployment in Europe for the last 20 years. 5.6 million young people are unemployed across Europe, and a total of 7.5 million are neither in education, nor in employment. Also, while young people are eager to work, more than half of those without jobs say they simply can't find one—while at the same time businesses across Europe insist they struggle to find young people with the skills they need. (Mourshed, Patel, and Suder, 2014)

From the perspective of many young people, they do not feel supported by the societies in which they live. For example, a McKinsey survey conducted in 2012 asked young people a combination of attitudinal and behavioural questions to understand how they thought about the transition from education to employment. For those who see themselves as successful (when most do not) this seems to be because they actively manage their decisions about their education and career. The analysis highlights significant numbers who feel disheartened ('I know enough to not care'), those who are disengaged ('I don't care to know more') and those who are struggling ('I want to know more'). (Mourshed, Farrell, and Barton, 2012)

Reports concerning career guidance practitioner competencies indicate a variable picture across Europe too. For example, The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training published a report about practitioner competencies across Europe. The core message of this report is that there is a huge variation across Europe in terms of professional training available, competences and qualifications acquired through such training, roles and functions carried out by guidance practitioners and settings in which guidance services are offered (Barham 2009). In some countries policy decisions have

restricted the nature of support young people can rely upon. For example recent researches undertaken on working models of careers guidance indicate a crisis in the delivery of services, certainly in England. As Reid and West argue (2011: 399)

‘...in a situation where guidance work has become more complex it appears that preparation for the work may have diminished, being restricted to a powerful and instrumental discourse in guidance in the UK...’,

The pressure from successive governments for services to deliver a target driven service has led to what Reid and West describe as a ‘technicising’ of the guidance sector where they argue opportunities for creative strategies in supporting clients with career decisions are perceived as potentially risky enterprises (Reid and West, 2011a). Policy initiatives relating to ‘targeted’ services have also been based upon questionable premises; for example, assuming that those not in education, employment or training are a homogenous group (Furlong, 2006). Within England, changes in the delivery of career guidance have also resulted in many advisers feeling de-skilled and at risk of losing their professional identity (see, for example, Neary, 2014; Hooley and Watts, 2011; Bimrose, 2006 and Colley, 2009). The need for high quality career guidance support is arguably greater than ever; however the devolving of the role in England to school based services has resulted in inconsistencies in delivery (Haynes, McCrone and Wade, 2013). Of course the biggest losers in these developments are arguably the clients of the services themselves. If advisers have to work within strictly limited constraints in terms of outcomes and method then the danger is that ‘one size fits all’ thinking will come to dominate practice. This, in spite of evidence that what is needed in times of increasing complexity for guidance to be delivered by skilled practitioners who are reflexive, open to learning new approaches and able to learn from theory with a view to supporting their client groups in a variety of ways (McCrone et al. 2010; NFER, 2013).

Given the complexity of career decision making at this time, there is a need to look again at the nature of career guidance support and re-imagine what might constitute an effective service to young people. As a starting point there is a need to recognise that individuals have different needs at different points of time. Motivation will vary between individuals, but also *within* an individual depending upon current concerns (Miller and Rollnick, 2013).

Decision making styles adopted by individuals also have a factor. Drawing upon their longitudinal study of the effectiveness of career guidance with adult clients, Bimrose and Barnes also note:

‘The extent to which individuals espouse an evaluative, strategic, aspirational or opportunistic approach to making decisions about their career progression is crucial to understanding the particular types of support required from guidance practice’

(Bimrose and Barnes, 2008:vi)

For some a placing service based on matching against abilities may be what is required; others will require support with more complex decisions involving reflection, self-assessment and career planning. A ‘one size fits all’ approach is clearly inappropriate. Many writers have been critical of prevailing models of guidance systems concentrating as they do around a matching model, variations on the trait-factor paradigm. It has been argued that the matching model was introduced within industrial societies at a time of relatively high employment. It assumes that individuals when matched to an appropriate occupation will have a strong work ethic and be happy with the match; hence society and the individual will benefit. There is also the assumption of a relatively stable labour market (Bimrose, 2009). The trait-factor approach has faced increased scrutiny over recent decades. In particular the notion of ‘career’ has changed significantly (see, for example, Young and Collin, 2000). Questions have also been asked of the applicability of the model in terms of its non-engagement with issues relating to gender differences (Bimrose, 2001), culturally varied groups (Moblely and Slaney, 1998) and individuals from socially deprived backgrounds (Meara et al, 1997).

The issue is to ask what might usefully develop career guidance practice. Various contributors have argued the case for approaches such as person centred approaches (Bozarth and Fisher, 1990) using narratives (Savickas, 2013; Cochran, 1997; Reid and West, 2011b; Brott, 2001; McMahon and Patton, 2006), cognitive behavioural approaches (Sheward and Branch, 2012) integrative models (Egan, 2013) and Motivational Interviewing (Beven 2009). All of these perspectives on practice may be useful in different ways; some will be a better fit than others for any individual circumstance.

At this point it may be helpful to draw upon evidence from research findings in counselling and psychotherapy. These are cognate areas to career guidance and counselling, ‘distant cousins’ to borrow Yalom’s terminology (2005: xii), in that they contain a variety of approaches from client centred through to directive methods, and are all concerned with helping individuals finding a way forward in their lives. Some key findings are:

- 1) Different clients want different things from a counsellor or therapist. For example, in a study offering a choice to depressed clients in primary care; a choice was offered. Would clients prefer non-directive counselling or cognitive-behaviour therapy? 40% of clients chose non-directive therapy (King et al., 2000).
- 2) Clients do better in their preferred therapies. In their review of 26 studies, Swift and Callahan (2009) demonstrated that clients who received their preferred treatment had a 58% chance of showing better outcome improvement, and were half as likely to drop out of therapy. These findings have a resonance with the research on career decision-making, as cited earlier (Bimrose and Barnes, 2008)

Pluralism in counselling is an attempt to move away from individual modes of helping (e.g. person centred, cognitive-behavioural, narrative etc.) in their different modalities. Instead the approach(es) should derive from client's wants and clients' needs (Cooper and McLeod, 2011)

The question that needs to be asked here is: how is pluralism any different from existing models of guidance practice? Arguably the influential Egan 'Skilled Helper' model and developments of the model (e.g. Hambly, 2008; Reid and Fielding, 2007) are examples of integrative approaches drawing their inspiration from a range of sources, including person centred counselling, cognitive behavioural ideas and decision making theory. However, there can be a tendency here for the practice to involve replacing a single model with something very similar despite having elements drawn from a variety of sources. For example, Egan's problem management approach advocates a highly specified set of procedures for helping clients addressing their concerns about life and career (Egan 2013).

Of course, without doubt, there are already many career counsellors and guidance workers who think and practise in pluralistic ways but they have always tended to be over-shadowed in the public policy arena by more singular, single model thought and practice.

What might a pluralistic approach to career guidance look like?

Pluralism is a demonstration of an ethical and political commitment to respecting, valuing and being inclusive towards other worldviews, of other career and guidance practitioners and our clients. Proponents of pluralism in counselling and therapeutic practice have described pluralism as a form of humanistic-existential ethic in which there is 'a commitment to conceptualizing, and engaging with people in a deeply valuing and respectful way.' (Cooper, 2007:11) Drawing upon the work of the philosopher Nicholas Rescher, the philosophical assumption supporting the notion of pluralism is defined as 'the doctrine that any substantial question admits of a variety of plausible but mutually conflicting responses' (Rescher, 1993:79).

With respect to career guidance, a pluralistic standpoint holds that a many different models of working are valid and that there is no need to try and reduce these into one, unified model. This might be illustrated by a case study.

Case Study: (all names anonymised) Jane is a bright 17 year-old who has no qualifications as she needed to be at home to look after a chronically sick parent, which she is continuing to do. She is seeking advice about what she can do to earn some money to support the household. She is worried about her lack of qualifications and very concerned about what the future may hold for her, and was doubtful she had anything to offer a prospective employer. The support Jane did receive was an interview that looked at current vacancies- that was it- no attempt was made to discuss with Jane what might be most helpful for her. The adviser simply addressed the initial presenting issue. This might have been satisfactory to a point- but as it stood there were no suitable vacancies, according to the adviser, and Jane was asked to return in two weeks' time. There was no attempt to engage with Jane on broader issues relating to herself or her future.

For a skilled guidance worker, the issue might have been approached in a wide variety of ways. There might have been an attempt to prioritise what was most important for Jane- it may be that advice about vacancies might indeed have its merits, but perhaps not as useful as it could have been if the discussion paid no attention to possible future scenarios. The adviser might have instead gently challenged the notion that Jane had nothing to offer, using tactics drawn from cognitive behavioural principles, for example the need to challenge negative automatic thoughts; alternatively the support could have proceeded from a client centred, solution focused or narrative perspective. A skilled practitioner will have many possibilities to draw upon. Some advisers may have preferences that lead them to use similar tactics with a range of clients. Others will have developed their own eclectic approach drawing from a range of theoretical orientations.

How does pluralism differ from this? A pluralistic approach would involve engagement with the client at various stages of the encounter to ascertain what might be most helpful. In a way this is an advanced version of contracting with the client concerning her preferences in working together with the adviser. This discussion would concern not only the goals the client may have, but also the type of approach preferred. To facilitate this, from pluralistic counselling practice come a range of tools from relatively formal questionnaires pre and post interview to informal questions about preferences about the type of support. This therefore is a type of meta- dialogue (Cooper and McLeod, 2011) inviting clients to explore what they want from therapy (*goals*), and how they may be most likely to achieve it (*methods*). This is *not* doing whatever a client initially asks for and then sticking to it regardless...but rather it is dialogue, a subtle, complex, on-going process which draws

on expertise of both client and adviser -and acknowledges the limits of both perspectives. The best support will come through this co-construction of perspective and methods.

These ideas, drawn from evidence from the cognate area of counselling research have several implications for policy and practice. From a policy perspective there would need to be a move away from prescriptive notions about the functions of career guidance and a renewed respect for career guidance and counselling as a professional role. From a practice perspective the development of a pluralistic approach would have important implications for the training of careers professionals.

The development of truly pluralistic practice would require the revisiting professional training (Neary, 2014), and the political will to develop sustainable provision of career guidance that recognises its potential for individual and societal benefits.

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