Reframing and re-telling: the changing identity of the careers guidance profession

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The aim of the article is to critically reflect on what may now constitute the occupational and professional identity of career guidance practitioners after a decade of rapid change, and in the face of further significant policy developments. It seeks to build on recent research, e.g. Colley et al (2010), in order to consider the effects of policy shifts, and their attendant managerialism, on the identity of careers practitioners in a wide variety of organisational settings. The article proposes that Bolman and Deal's Four Frames model (2003), with its holistic and constructivist basis, can be used to illuminate and critically examine the structural, political, motivational and symbolic aspects of change, including identity reformation. It concludes by suggesting that the various professional bodies that represent career guidance have an opportunity to re-appraise and redefine professional value and identity.

Introduction

The career guidance profession has been subject to rapid and substantial policy changes since the mid-90s. This article aims to build on recent research, e.g. Colley et al (2010) to consider the effects of such upheavals on the wider profession in England in order to examine what may now constitute the identity of the profession and its practitioners. It proposes that the use of metaphors and models that often illuminate organisational change may also be used to provide a holistic picture of the current state of the profession. The Bolman and Deal Four Frames Model (2003) has been used to examine organisational transitions in the public as well as well as private sectors, e.g. Lueddekke (1999); and will be applied here to consider the structural, political, human resource and symbolic

aspects of change. Part of the model's strength is its use of metaphors in ways that are consistent with a perennial impulse in human story telling: to explore and communicate the meaning of common experiences through the use of shared motifs, images, and archetypes (Booker, 2004). The article will also explore the ways in which ethical codes may provide the means by which the careers profession reasserts its claim to identity and expertise; and tackle the issue of 'indeterminancy' that can undermine the status of those in the 'caring' professions (MacDonald, 1995).

Pace of change

Firstly, I need to consider the sheer velocity of change in the policy environment as it has affected the career guidance profession. It is arguable that the profession has always needed (or been expected to have) a Janus-like face to look either in the direction of nation's economic needs by helping 'square pegs fit square holes'; or towards the welfare, even moral, needs of apparently large numbers of disaffected members of society (Peck, 2004). As the profession's face has turned from one focus to the other, some of the key turning points for the statutory sector have included the shift towards privatised careers companies in the early to mid-90s; and the 'Bridging the Gap' report by the Social Exclusion Unit in 1999, the consequences of which led to the formation of the Connexions Service in 2001. Further shifts, prompted by policies such as Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) and Youth Matters (DfES, 2005), returned the statutory duty for the provision of careers services to local authorities, leading to an often bewildering variety of service models in England (Watts and McGowan, 2007). This has stood in contrast to the 'one nation' approaches

seen in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. At the same time, services in FE and HE have also been subject to change. The impact of the Leitch Review (2006) and the Skills Agenda, aligned services with institutions' concerns with recruitment, retention and employability. With the advent of the Browne Report (2010), the latter is now a major corporate concern, particularly for HE. Services for adults in England have also been reconfigured, with the fusing of Learn Direct and Next Step into the Adult Guidance Service in 2010. And perhaps most far-reaching of all, the profession is still trying to accommodate the unwinding of the proposal to establish a new all-age service for England by April 2012 (DBIS, 2010), with arrangements to link the provision for schools and adults still being formulated.

'Framing' the changes: structural, political, motivational and symbolic

As these changes unfold, careers practitioners in whichever context find themselves in a landscape that is rather shaky, even molten in quality. To critically examine the implications of these changes for the profession and its identity, the article will consider each of Bolman and Deal's Four Frames (2003) in turn. Firstly, I will consider the Structural Frame, where organisations are viewed as 'machines', and resources are aligned and deployed to achieve corporate objectives. In this way, organisations, at their most straightforward, are entities by which inputs are turned into outputs that are required by policy makers, shareholders or stakeholders (Mullins, 2010). For career guidance providers, this has meant 'producing' low rates of unemployment and/or the active engagement of citizens in society. Perhaps the biggest structural realignment in statutory guidance was the advent of the Connexions Service, where careers advisers became Personal Advisers with new, holistically-based roles that were concerned with the health and welfare of young people, and not just their career choices. From this, involved, bureaucratic processes and structures were engineered to monitor services' and practitioners' progress against their NEET targets. This new performativity (Dent and Whithead, 2002) has also been felt acutely in Next Step Adult Guidance Services, where the completion

of action plans produces funding in line with targets identified in tightly-defined contracts. And as the face of the profession is turned back to career guidance, some services, e.g. those run by Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Partnerships Ltd. (CSWP Ltd.) have already implemented interim realignments, where careers advisers (no longer Personal Advisers) are now working on both adult guidance contracts and in schools.

Whilst realignments in FE and HE have not been as dramatic, more recent developments suggest more fundamental reconfigurations, particularly in HE. The importance of employability to universities' corporate strategy, and their market offer to prospective *customers*, has meant that some universities are reorganising careers services to produce the required employability output – ie, graduates into graduate level jobs. Roles such as 'Student Employability Coaches' have begun to mushroom as the added value the careers services bring to corporate strategy has come under greater scrutiny. When considering the historical basis of HE careers services (Watts, 1996), it could be argued that some services are being returned in part to the appointments-style model that predominated in HEIs up until the mid-1990s, where the 'expert power' (Reed, 1996) of the service rested on its ability to match final year students to graduate recruiters via the Milkround.

To develop the picture offered by looking through the Structural Frame, we may now consider the profession's change as viewed through the Political Frame. This is concerned with organisations as political entities, where their various agents or departments compete for resources, status and power. This is instructive, since in the early to mid-1990s, career guidance was subject to marketisation and 'New Right' thinking that was central to public policy at that time (Gothard et al, 2001). Career guidance providers and practitioners in England needed to engage with this power play in order to offer services and maintain their profile and viability as organisations. Some companies embraced this entrepreneurialism, and established wider regional or even national infrastructures to bid for contracts and to operate as part of local and regional networks and partnerships concerned with education, training and employment. Careers companies thus became hybridised

organisations (Mouwen, 2000) with duties to provide public services and the relative freedom to diversify their income sources. With the advent of Children's Trusts, this identity and power base was significantly changed. Some of the larger careers service providers, e.g. Birmingham and Solihull Connexions, were broken up and redistributed back into local authorities according to city or district boundaries. The net effect was a significant reduction in their political status, where many services became part of a large division within a local authority, where they had to compete for reduced resources or make cuts by stripping out staffing layers that were no longer needed.

Most recent governmental announcements (DBIS, 2010) concerning funding and arrangements for the new national careers service show the dramatic, even catastrophic reduction in the power of career guidance providers. The removal of legislative levers, e.g. the statutory duty of schools to provide career guidance and education, and of ring-fenced budget streams, will have very serious consequences for providers which had once embraced the opportunities afforded by marketisation. And the consequences for statutory provision as a profession may be as serious, since if schools are being expected to fund services from their existing budgets, then careers information, advice and guidance may default once again to teachers or other individuals on the premise of 'indeterminacy' (MacDonald, 1995) – that providing advice is an everyday skill that most sensible and reasonably informed people can offer. There is a very bitter irony here, too. The 'symbolic violence' visited on the profession by Connexions (Artaraz, 2006) has actually been continued with the removal of this now-discredited service. Instead of re-instating the primacy of career guidance with adequate funding streams, recent policy developments seem to have reduced the political power of 'statutory' career guidance still further.

The operation of Next Step services is a stark example of the ways in which IAG services operate within challenging structural and political contexts. Although DBIS has identified funding streams, contracts with guidance providers are such that where targets are missed, then penalties will reduce resources – especially money – for organisations where cash flow has now become more critical. The

need to secure action plans, and reduce the cost base, has meant that Next Step advisers increasingly operate from libraries, low or peppercorn rent retail units, or job centres.

The political challenges for services and practitioners in FE and HE may not be as dramatic, but are indicative of the kind of power play still required for IAG services operating within evolving structures. For services in FE and HE that have been embedded in wider Student Services departments, the political implications can be mixed. Career guidance practitioners may feel that their status and profile is affected by working alongside services that deal with students with 'problems', and by the fact that access to resources, and influential forums, is mitigated by the need to go through further management layers. However, the political advantage here may be the 'management by exception' (Mullins, 2010) rule, where the service and its practitioners may be given relative autonomy as long as they do not attract adverse publicity, e.g. complaints. As mentioned earlier, this relative buffer zone is now being increasingly disrupted by HEIs in particular where, in some cases, employability resources are being increased in return for direct impact on graduate employment rates.

A further dimension of the political challenge for services in FE and HE is one of physical location. One model is where careers services are part of a high profile, newly-built or refurbished campus hub. Here, practitioners' organisational role and identity is most certainly aligned with student support and the quality of student experience. A different model, which is also being increasingly adopted by universities, is to locate careers advisers in Faculties as an organisational signifier of the ways in which careers services are aligned with the particular concerns of a Faculty. In this way, the Faculty may be less concerned with the adviser operating in a central service which may afford a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998), and keener to see that the practitioner is helping students get jobs. These models again emphasise the dilemma between an orientation towards managerialist, organisationally-contingent objectives, or an approach which is client-centred and impartial (Banks, 2004).

The Human Resource Frame provides a lens through which the effects of the structural and political issues

discussed above on morale, motivation and esteem can be viewed. Colley et al (2010) have illustrated in some detail the perceived negative effects of the introduction of the Connexions' model on professional identity and esteem. These include role confusion; greater scrutiny; a sense that practitioners feel deskilled and devalued; and a lack of resources to perform these new roles. A particularly strong theme, too, was the ways in which practitioners also experienced ethical tensions and dilemmas between 'hitting targets' and providing client-centred services. Artaraz (2006) identified three types of adviser behaviour in response to these organisational demands: open resistance; subterfuge; or those who embraced the change. These resistance strategies to the ways in which professional identity was being defined and managed (Alvesson and Wilmott, cited in Hatch and Schultz, 2004) now seem particularly contingent on organisational settings in the light of recent and extensive cuts to former Connexions Services. It is more difficult to resist redundancies (and the sense of 'the lights being turned off' in some English regions) using similar subterfuge.

For adult guidance, such effects have not yet been researched as extensively as for those working in statutory services. However, the effect of the need to reach weekly action plan targets, constant performance reviews, and even capability processes on practitioners is not difficult to imagine. The other aspect is the experience of precarious practice, e.g. for those working on short-term contracts with no guarantees of continuing employment. The need for business managers to model their cash flow forecasts, drive staff towards targets and to either renew employment contracts or issue redundancy notices, is perhaps most indicative of the full force of marketisation in IAG services. Here, it seems that practitioner identity (such as it is) is very much tied to the organisation and the need to achieve targets.

Even in the light of the increased importance of employability to FEIs and HEIs, it is tempting to view careers practitioners there as having been sheltered from the kinds of effects noted above. However, there will be changes in morale, motivation and identity with the advent of greater scrutiny, accountability and new employability roles. Once again, the face of career guidance in FE and HE is being turned firmly

towards corporate pre-occupation with 'getting jobs for graduates'. In this way, the purpose and identity of careers service and its practitioners is being explicitly defined by the organisation. This is in contrast to the previous approach of 'management by exception', which afforded careers practitioners greater scope to work beyond organisational boundaries, e.g. for professional bodies and in local and national networks.

Next steps for career guidance?

It is tempting, and perhaps inevitable, to take a pessimistic view of career guidance, and its current importance, power, esteem and identity. This is despite re-assurances offered by ministers when announcing policy and new services; and indeed the adoption of the recommendations from the Dame Ruth Silver review of the profession (DBIS 2010; DofE, 2010). Viewing these changes through the final frame, the Symbolic frame, which focuses on the symbols, beliefs and cultures of organisations, may offer some conclusions as to the state of the profession's identity. One rather bleak conclusion is that career practitioners' identities have become structurally, politically and organisationally contingent. The performativity discussed earlier has produced, and may continue to produce, a number of organisationally-situated and reified symbols. For example, Connexions area managers within the same locality may have once competed to achieve the lowest NEET rate. In the same way, Next Step advisers are associated with the number of action plans they produce in a week. Advisers in FE or HE may also become the sum total of their targets, particularly as they may be compared to competitor institutions. The experience of ethical drifts, problems and dilemmas as noted by Mulvey (2002), where professional and organisational values clash, is likely to become the norm for practitioners. The shield of impartiality (or more accurately, services that are untainted by organisational convenience) may become too heavy to carry in an environment where, for example, new Academies are increasingly run as businesses, with apparently greater freedoms to deploy resources. Kantian notions of 'Respect for Persons' (cited in La Follette, 2007) that underpin client-centredness and impartiality may seem much less tenable than utilitarian pragmatism, or to express

this in another way, a triumph for neo-liberalism (Singh and Cowden, 2009).

Given the current uncertainty concerning the precise arrangements for the new all-age service in England, and the scale of redundancies predicted for the statutory sector, it is difficult to identify more positive signifiers for the profession and its identity. However, if we maintain our view through the Symbolic Frame, the very debate about professionalism, and professional identity, may offer some interesting clues as to where new service arrangements may take us. It is arguable that the symbols that signify the status of career guidance as a profession are of a different magnitude when compared to medicine or law, e.g. 'dining at Inns of Court', and the power of regulation and exclusivity wielded by the Law Society and the BMA. Moreover, there is a much stronger sense that doctors and lawyers may work in organisations but their final accountability and orientation, despite the growth of managerialism in the NHS (Alcock et al, 2008), is to their profession. By contrast, and as was evident particularly in the statutory sector (and increasingly in FE and HE), careers services became far more managerial from the mid-90s onwards, embracing more business-like structures and entrepreneurialism. Any 'opposition' to this was difficult for a number of reasons. 'The profession' has been represented by at least four professional bodies. Practitioners at the statutory level have undergone differing training routes and occupational socialisation, e.g. those with the DipCG, as compared to these who had been recruited as Personal Advisers and who had undertaken work-based qualifications. Further, services in HE have never had a common entry route, and the amount of advisers holding a DipCG, QCG or similar has been a phenomenon of the last decade. These aspects could therefore symbolise a profession that is rather fragmented and lacking political power.

From this, it could be argued that one future direction for careers practitioners is to confirm their status as skilled, semi-professional workers who can adapt to a wide variety of organisational needs. The extent to which this will play out is difficult to tell, but one option is for practitioners to work as consultants for schools to help them achieve their progression and achievement targets. In this scenario, impartiality may be less important than the practitioner being aligned

explicity with the *organisation*. Perhaps a signifier of this option is the level of interest in ICG workshops concerned with 'transitioning to the private sector'. In FE and HE, this may be expressed as practitioners acting as internal consultants and experts to academic departments: the expertise resting on their labour market knowledge which may yield substantial employer interest. It seems unlikely that the state will provide the level of funding which our professional bodies have called for; and so this may be a model which practitioners need to consider.

Another possibility, and one which may appear to contradict the above, is that the careers profession seeks to define itself as such: that is, more regulated and exclusive. Ministerial communications (DBIS 2010) and the Silver Review (DofE, 2010) seem to suggest that career guidance needs to be reprofessionalised and consider a register of practitioners. This in part seems to symbolise the need to refocus on career guidance as a reaction to apparent role confusions associated with the Connexions service. The identification of a minimum level 6 qualification level is also encouraging (although the extent to which DBIS will insist on this when issuing tenders for service contracts has yet to be clarified). Should the latter be the case, then large numbers of existing Next Step (and former Connexions Services staff) who hold NVQ 3 or 4 qualifications will need to step up to the new level; the mapping exercise for which has been completed by the OCR in conjunction with the ICG. What is interesting is that employer dissatisfaction with the previous work-based frameworks was partly due to lack of *guidance* skills shown by advisers, and the relative inability to probe beyond the immediate presenting issues.

This may allow the profession, and its representative bodies, to re-promote career guidance, and the training, experience and skills that underpin it. Put more simply, career guidance is not just something 'anyone can do'. Savickas (2003) issued a similar call by suggesting that the development of the career profession shouldn't simply be dictated by external forces. The ways in which other professional bodies symbolise this claim is by rigorous entry requirements; registers of professionals; and penalties for poor practice, e.g. 'being struck off.' The aim here is that a school, college or university should feel that

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its reputation is enhanced by having kite-marked, professionally accredited careers guidance services as part of its mission and strategy.

Conclusion

This article began by proposing that the use of models and metaphors may help to frame the rapid changes that career guidance has experienced over the last decade in particular. The Bolman and Deal Four Frames model (2003) has been used to consider the structural, political, human resource and symbolic aspects of the changes that the profession, and its practitioners, have experienced, particularly in relation to notions of identity. The article has also proposed that the perceived value and identity of the profession and its practitioners has suffered from being structurally, politically and organisationally defined and conditional. A potent symbol of this has been the ways in which the Connexions service was imposed and operationalised (and now apparently in the process of being dismantled.) Finally, the article has suggested that the profession may remain 'semi-professional', and embrace its contingent value to organisations; or seek to become *more* professional by acquiring the symbols of other professional bodies that identify, promote and reify the particular skills and value of practitioners' work.

The introduction also mentioned that metaphors enable human kind to tell stories. A final thought in this article is to ask: what narrative or story are 'we' telling about career guidance currently? What symbols and images do we want those looking through the Symbolic Frame to see? Do we want to present the view of a rather 'Balkanised' profession, with four separate associations? Or that despite cuts to services, our professional value as symbolised by *guidance* still burns with passion and importance to society's prosperity and well-being?

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