

# Research update

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In this article we provide a brief update on some of the research papers and reports published in 2014 on career development, examining in particular some issues related to equality and employment, career adaptability and self-efficacy in career decision making. The research findings are presented and discussed with careers practitioners in mind. We also consider the validity of the findings and their relevance to careers practitioners.

## Introduction

A search of the best known career development journals and websites returned over 200 papers published last year on career development. Many of the publications relate to other countries including Germany, Italy, France, Lithuania and China. Popular topics in papers published with reference to the UK context examined the rise in self-employment, career counselling for transitioning military veterans and career counselling in the aftermath of the recession (O'Leary, 2014; Rausch, 2014; Greenleaf, 2014). Other papers assessed measures of career success and subjective interpretations of what 'career progression' may mean on a personal level (Thomas and Feldman, 2014; Stumpf, 2014). The selection of papers we discuss here has been chosen because it challenges some popular views about career development.

## Ethnicity and employment

The labour market statistics for 2014 showed that unemployment among British minority ethnic groups is consistently higher than those for the UK as a whole (DWP, 2014). It is a thorny issue as differences in employment outcomes are often discussed in

terms of negative stereotyping, racial prejudice and discrimination. A new study published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and conducted by Metcalf, Lalani, Tufekci, Corley, Rolfe and George (2014) compared the employment outcomes of people from African Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani heritage backgrounds in Glasgow, Leicester and Luton. One interesting finding was that, despite overall unemployment being similar in Leicester and Luton, people from African, Caribbean and Indian backgrounds were less likely to be unemployed in Luton than those in Leicester, while people from a Pakistani background were less likely to be unemployed in Leicester than in Luton. What appeared to be a factor in the perceived differences in employment outcomes were variations in job seekers' knowledge of British education and labour market systems.

The Metcalf *et al.* study indicated that it can be geographical place rather than ethnicity that influences employment outcomes. This finding supports that of the Sutton Trust report on *Advancing Ambitions* (2014). In this report, career advice was shown to be a 'postcode lottery' in that people who have less well developed networks and fewer family contacts can be at a disadvantage in areas where career guidance is poor. First generation immigrants who are in the process of building new networks can be particularly susceptible to regional variations in standards of career guidance. A recommendation made in the Sutton Trust report is that the National Career Service must ideally ensure that all schools have free access to professionally qualified careers advisers.

As a consequence of these studies, if we want employment outcomes to be spread more equally among the population, our view is that careers practitioners must recognise and work towards reducing regional variations in knowledge about education and labour market systems.

## 'Male career crisis'

A notion that received some attention in the literature is the 'male career crisis'. It is a term that tends to be used to describe working class men as 'passive victims' of adverse circumstances caused by deindustrialisation (Ackers, 2014). Ackers researched how some working class men experienced transition periods and found that, contrary to a widespread belief, the working class men in his study carefully adapted to and managed periods of transition in employment.

Far from being 'passive victims' the men showed agency and knew that work was not static and that being able to adapt to industrial change was part of a working life. Referring to working class men, whether wittingly or unwittingly, as 'passive victims', might create additional barriers to employment by reinforcing unsubstantiated negative conceptions. Ackers' study invites careers practitioners to question new research 'insights' and to query and examine the concepts and terms used.

## Career adaptability

The notion of 'adaptability' discussed in Ackers' study refers to people's willingness and capability to manage career changes that may result from industrial, economic or personal developments. Other research examined the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS). This scale is said to be useful for measuring the capacity to manage career transition (Zacher, 2014; Öncel, 2014; Tolentino, Sedoglavich, Lu, Garcia and Restubog, 2014). CAAS was generally considered to be a reliable career adaptability measure and was thought to have potential for being used in international career development research after having been tested in various countries (Zacher, 2014; Öncel, 2014).

Practitioners and career researchers, who used CAAS, thought it was a useful tool to measure adaptability (Tolentino *et al*, 2014). But it is questionable how valuable such a measure is, because 'career adaptability' is not a stable concept. Attempts to measure 'career adaptability' and psycho-social competences in managing career changes suggest that the problem lies with the person. But effectively blaming people and suggesting training interventions means unemployment is understood to be a personal or psychological matter

rather than a problem with advice offered by careers practitioners or with the labour market.

High levels of career adaptability are associated in various studies with a range of employment-related benefits which explains the efforts that are being invested into measuring the concept. Adaptability is seen as a predictor, for example, of job search success, employment prospects and entrepreneurial intentions (Guan, Guo, Bond, Cai, Zhou, Xu, Zhu, Wang, Fu, Liu, Wang, Hu, and Ye, 2014; Santilli, Nota, Ginevra and Soresi, 2014; Tolentino *et al*, 2014). Being able to predict employment behaviour in this manner is thought to give an indication of the career decision making process a person navigates. However, at the present time the usefulness of being able to measure career adaptability are unclear.

## Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy in career decision making, or the ability to make an informed decision about a career path to pursue in the process of securing meaningful employment, is thought to be influenced by the support a person receives and the career barriers a person faces (Wright, Perrone-McGovern, Boo, White, 2014). Careers practitioners, who take these and other influences into account when giving careers advice, may be able to help bolster self-efficacy in career decision making (Wright *et al*, 2014). Hsieh and Huang (2014) argue that careers practitioners can facilitate self-efficacy in career decision making. In their study they found a positive association between proactive personalities and self-efficacy in career decision making.

Interventions in the form of training designed to modify behaviour and attitudes are increasingly popular, because they are assumed to bring about meaningful changes in any desired direction. A study conducted by Bullock-Yowell, Leavell, McConnel, Rushing, Andrews, Campbell and Osborne (2014) showed, however, that interventions do not necessarily bring about the intended change. Bullock-Yowell *et al*. assessed the outcomes of a career decision making workshop they judged to be theoretically sound, relevant to the course participants and provided good information. The outcome was that people who attended the workshop seemed to have a few more

career decision-making difficulties than people in the control group who had not attended the workshop. It could be that the intervention had a negative result as a consequence of an increased awareness of the various factors involved in making effective career decisions.

## Conclusion

Career development research has got a lot to offer. It brings the practitioner up to speed with the latest developments, raises controversial issues for discussion and can advance knowledge and understanding about career development. Some of the more informative research papers and reports that we reviewed here, threw into question some popular views about career development. One was 'ethnicity' which is commonly thought to be a major influence on employment outcomes while it may be the geographical place where a person lives that is the decisive factor. Another popular view concerns the 'male career crisis' that is described in some literature as resulting from 'deindustrialisation'. The uncritical use of the concept can have negative consequences because it may mask agency and pathologises working class men.

Finally, we argue that careers practitioners and researchers need to be aware that new concepts can quickly become empty buzzwords. 'Career adaptability' appears to be one such potential buzzword that needs watching. It has become popular because it appears to be easier to psychologise unemployment and suggest training interventions than to look self-critically at current careers advice and labour market issues. Although some attempts have been made to measure the concept through the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale, we think, its practical purpose is unclear at present.

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