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A professional identity for career guidance practitioners?

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This article summarises the key findings from my PhD which has been conducted at the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick. Using Grounded Theory Method, its aim was to explore the nature and extent of a common professional identity of careers guidance practitioners in England in the wake of rapid policy change. My conclusions are that practitioners do share a professional identity, and tell a different story of their agency and esteem. In this way, my research also contests the pessimistic discourses that inform much of the recent literature concerning the profession (and professions more widely).

Introduction

Since the advent of the Connexions service in England in 2001, much of the *discourse* regarding career guidance has been concerned with the deleterious effects of policy on the profession and its professionals. Colley et al. (2010) identified the unbecoming and deprofessionalisation of the new service on (formerly-named) career guidance practitioners. More recently, Watts (2014) has been particularly scathing about the ways in which the Education Act (2011) betrayed the profession. Roberts (2013: 251) went further, and labelled the government's approach to career guidance as 'attempted murder.' Bimrose et al. (2013) also expressed a persisting view of career guidance: that it is fragmented and Balkanised, with *organisationally-defined* practitioners who lack a common professional identity.

These discourses could indicate a weakened profession and demoralised practitioners. There have been positive developments, e.g., the establishing of a (more unified) professional body in the Career Development Institute (CDI) in 2013; and, revised statutory guidance for schools and colleges in England (DfE, 2015a; 2015b). However, as Gough (2017) argues, there is a complete lack of any workforce development for career guidance in England.

Where does this context leave career guidance professionals? Bimrose and Hearne (2012) identify the ways in which practitioners can develop resilience in the face of change and performativity. Mulvey (2013) encourages practitioners to adopt a kind of existentialism (a 'bloody-minded' adjunct to resilience). Neary (2014) examined the role of continuing professional development (CPD) in reclaiming practitioners' professional identity (though, in my view, this assumes a general rather than a more specific definition of identity as it relates to career guidance). These choices reflect a kind of retreat to the idea of 'work fit' practitioner: resilient, independent, and doing her or his best within their service setting.

An alternative perspective; and a different story to tell

As a former practitioner, service manager, senior member of a professional body and now an educator, my reaction to the arguments above was: there has to be a different story to tell about the profession and its practitioners. The discourses and perspectives above were, for me, too limiting, informed by objectivist, deterministic principles, or by a kind of ontology in general (Stones 2005) that assume more general definitions of professionalism and professional identity. My PhD has sought to address these issues: I wanted to find out if practitioners shared a common

professional identity; what its features may be; and the extent to which they were still exercising their agency, and constructing meanings from their everyday practices (Giddens 1984).

My theoretical approach to addressing these questions was based on strong structuration (Stones 2005) – that is, the *precise* nature of the relationships between agency and structure, and the *particular* meanings that are both generated and expressed. The advantage of strong structuration (ibid.) is that it extends beyond the limitations of Giddens's (1984) and Bourdieu's (1989) concepts to offer a more sophisticated model that considers wider societal factors, day-to-day organisational structures, the actions taken by people in their context, and the meanings that are generated (Stones 2005).

Methodology and Methods

As the aims of my PhD were concerned with exploring the lived experience, I adopted an interpretivistic methodology (Sarantakos 2005). Further, the *generative* aims of exploring and defining a shared professional identity, meant that Grounded Theory Method (GTM) was the most appropriate for developing a substantive theory from the ground up, so to speak. As for the particular discipline of GTM, the Strauss and Corbin approach (1990; 1997) offered a combination of a rigorous method and a set of procedures for translating data into codes that could form the basis of my theory.

To elicit the data, I chose semi-structured interviews as my method, particularly as my skills as a practitioner would transfer to the data gathering process. This method, too, is flexible enough to allow the researcher to explore points offered by the participants, whilst still offering a consistent framework to enable data analysis (Rubin and Rubin 2005).

My purposive sampling (Bryant and Charmaz 2007) was consistent with my chosen method; and the criteria was based on the following:

- Practitioners who delivered careers information, advice and guidance in schools; FE colleges; HEIs; and adult guidance settings in the West Midlands. This geographical region is diverse and features a wide range of services
- Individuals who held a variety of career *guidance* qualifications, including the NVQ 4 in advice and guidance (in its various iterations); the DipCG; the QCG; and also the AGCAS Diploma
- I did not insist on a minimum period of experience, since I was interested in how perceptions of professional identity arose from those who were newly qualified, as well as being more experienced

A key procedure in GTM (Strauss and Corbin 1990) is *theoretical* sampling. I operationalised this by selecting five participants from those who I recruited in accordance with the above criteria. After interviewing each, I analysed the data for any emerging patterns, or initial open codes (ibid.). In line with GTM, I then sampled further participants who met my criteria, and whose narratives may also develop, enhance and challenge my initial codes (Charmaz 2014). Sampling and coding continued until I reached theoretical saturation with my data (Strauss and Corbin 1990); that despite seeking exceptions, I was receiving consistent responses to my interview questions. My final sample size was 19 participants, composed of three from HE; four from FE; five from schools; six from National Careers Service; and one from a targeted service aimed at disadvantaged young people.

Generating my substantive theory drew on Strauss and Corbin's (ibid.) approach to coding. In particular, I was interested in the *axials*, or dimensions, of the emerging categories are explored. From the final stage – selective coding – I generated the higher level of categories on which to base my thesis. There were: motivation to enter the profession; job satisfaction and dissatisfactions; and professionalism (foundations, definitions and making meanings); with the very latter aspect being crucial to the generation of the substantive theory.

Data and discussion

Researchers often attest to the sense of humbling privilege afforded by listening to participants' narratives (Rubin and Rubin 2005). I did not meet practitioners who seemed beaten down by the

sovereign forces of policy and managerialism (Mackey 2007). For the following categories, I have identified some of the key highlights from the data.

Motivation to enter the profession

Career guidance appeared an attractive profession to the participants. Over half (n=11) sought an active change to their career, by moving from work that they felt was too managerial, to a career that valued people. Just under one-third (n=6) also indicated the positive effect of encountering careers practitioners on their decision to enter career guidance. Far from being put off by any negative views of the profession, the participants saw it as representing more ethical and simply more interesting work. As one participant noted: "I had a bit of a change in my life goals…I was looking to give something back rather than making loads of money." Of further interest was that those who worked in schools (n=5) did so because of a positive choice to work with young people. One participant expressed this in proud, almost defiant terms: of how much she liked the work despite the "negative press schools and young people get…I love it…I love the environment."

In addition, some of the participants (n=5) volunteered the view that part of the appeal of career guidance was that, in their view, it is a *profession*. As one participant who had moved from a business environment indicated, "careers (sic) guidance seemed a profession, offered a training route and progression, a portable qualification, and could work in different contexts." Once again, I was surprised how esteemed career guidance as a profession was by the participants.

Job satisfactions and dissatisfactions

As I began the interview process, I expected to hear a fair degree of dissatisfaction from the participants, either with their job, the profession, or both, in line with the discourse highlighted earlier. Yet, I simply didn't find this, with only a small minority (n=2) expressing any equivocations about their role. All expressed very readily that their main satisfaction was in enabling and supporting clients to make appropriate choices. This view is but one example of the sentiments I heard: "it's feeling like I have helped someone at the end of the day and had quite a bit of success getting people into job outcomes and getting positive feedback from clients." This comment, too, summed up a view shared by all the participants: "It's just about making a big, big difference and I love it."

One satisfying aspect that *was* common to all participants was negotiating with managers, teachers, academics and other service professionals to agree the purpose and nature of service delivery. Indeed, all expressed a strong sense of satisfaction in promoting the profile and importance of career guidance to their respective institutions, even if, as one participant from a school confirmed, the prospect of negotiating with quite senior managers could be daunting. Interestingly, those in schools (n=5) held a common sense of pride in agreeing the services individually: that is, each practitioner was on her or his own in the school to lead the charge for guidance. This is in contrast to those from FE and HE (n=7), whose sense of satisfaction was also found in the feeling of collegiality and support from being part of a wider service. This commonly-held view in these settings was illustrated by one participant, who felt a strong sense of being part of a "professional community" where "peer discussion and support are quite open."

Only three participants expressed any sense of dissatisfaction with their role. One participant from HE felt a little constrained by the "conveyor belt of CV and application form checking", especially during the autumn term. Two participants from NCS settings highlighted what might be seen as *predictable* dissatisfactions, with the pressure of performativity regimes leading to a sense that clients were becoming the means by which the service earned its funding. This was in contrast to their strongly-held belief in client-centred work. Indeed, client feedback helped to keep them motivated.

Professionalism: Foundations

This next category concerned the participants' perceptions of what defined and constituted professionalism. What struck me here was how consistent and firm the responses were to the question of what underpins their work. All noted the role that qualifications played in their sense of being a professional. As might be expected, those with the

QCG or DipCG (n=12) were very clear about the importance of the qualification to their practice. Here are some examples of their comments:

"The QCG underpins everything I do" – from a HE setting

"Careers guidance theories almost natural within me now, especially reflective practice when interviewing clients" – from an FE setting

"A lot of it (the QCG) underpins my interviews…I always think about what I want to achieve in terms of interview styles, what level of learning I am looking to achieve with the client." – from a school setting

What might be expected is that those with NVQ or QCF level qualifications might not feel as qualified or credentialised. Indeed, one participant from an FE setting, who had gained the NVQ4 rather quickly when working for Connexions, felt that it was delivered in a "tick box way as if I just had to get it out of the way because the employer needed me to do it." As a result, she felt that it was a lesser qualification in comparison to colleagues with the QCG. However, those with the QCF at level 6 or NVQ 4 (n = 7) did express the value of these qualifications to their work with clients, and in ways that were similar to those with the QCG as noted below:

"It acts as a source of reference that I have standards to work to in everything I do, I try to match my work to the standards and it keeps me on my toes." – from an FE setting

What I found common to all accounts was the importance of qualifications to the growth of a professional core: one where client-centred, ethical, reflective practice was absolutely paramount. The participants articulated the importance of the qualifications to developing ethical practice, rather than any allegiances to particular theories of career choice. When asked about the latter, one participant indicated that these theories were important to developing a client-centred approach, because they "make you think about how complex things, choices are…you can't put people in boxes, you have to listen to their stories and make sense…it is more ethical that way."

Professionalism: Making Meanings and Identity

Having explored the importance of qualifications to the participants' sense of professionalism, I then discussed their perceptions of the profession and their professional identity. All of them believed that career guidance is a profession; and without exception, all of the responses were positive and immediate. Similarly, they all felt that they had a professional identity, as illustrated by one participant: "Because you have to have professional qualifications to get to that level, higher level qualifications, and I guess you are perceived by others as a professional and part of a wider profession."

As well as ethical and client-centred work, one aspect of their professionalism and professional identity that was shared by all was the nature of their expertise. Again, one of the participant's views best sums up those held by all:

"I think everybody thinks they can give careers guidance, and everybody tries to, but careers guidance is completely impartial and independent and…can give the full picture of labour market information, and full consideration of the personal circumstances so that they can navigate their pathway, whereas unqualified people don't have the right information."

For the participants, this knowledge did three things. Firstly, it allowed them to establish a profile of expertise in their organisational setting. Secondly, this profile allowed them to feel similarly esteemed, particularly in educational settings, to teacher, lecturers and managers: put simply, the practitioners felt that they 'knew things' that other professionals did not. And thirdly, in the words of one participant, this expertise allowed practitioners to "add value to the success of the organisation, for the outcomes of young people, and I am recognised for my role as an expert as well as being for the learners."

Linked to this notion of ethical expert – and this feature of identity also surprised me – is the extent to which practitioners acted ethically in all areas of their

work, not just with clients. The values underpinning respectful, client-centred practice were also embodied in the ways in which the participants worked with colleagues, partners, managers and stakeholders. As one participant from a school setting put it: "so maybe it isn't just about the job, it's how other people see how I *do* the job." This individual was very clear that, when negotiating a service level agreement in a school, she did so with high personal authenticity and integrity. She was *professionally identified* by these beliefs and her ways of acting and being.

A shared sense of professional identity?

Seen through the lens of strong structuration (Stones 2005), these stories captured the ways in which knowledgeable, committed, and motivated individuals actively engage and shape their everyday contexts to develop a common professional identity. This identity is the 'different story', with the following common elements, whatever the context:

- A common motivation to work more authentically and ethically to support people with career choices in ways that benefit society;
- Shared job satisfactions in implementing these motivations and values;
- The belief in the importance of high-level qualifications, delivered ethically, to the profession and practitioners;
- The importance of deep and broad expertise in careers information and LMI;
- The certainty that career guidance is a profession; and that each has a professional identity
- Embodying ethical practice in all areas of work, not just with clients

All of the participants recognised how influenced their work was by government policy, especially those in schools. However, this seemed a realistic and not a pessimistic view, given the high level of motivation and satisfaction that featured in the participant's narratives. That one participant based in a school could say "I love my work, I love all of it, working with the young people, making a difference…I just love it" captures much of the identity and *spirit* of practitioners whatever their context.

Conclusions

My thesis makes an important contribution to advancing our knowledge of career guidance, the profession, its development and its practitioners.

My contention is that much of the discourse concerning the profession has tended to focus on rather deterministic and structural perspectives. These consider career guidance as being subjected to fluctuating policies and governmental expectations, with little control or political leverage. Further, the research has tended to focus on practitioners in school settings, without an overview of the profession as a whole. Practitioners may therefore appear subject to the sovereign forces of policy and managerialism (Mackey, 2007); with few options other than to develop their resilience or existentialist ontology.

By contrast, my thesis has used the concept of strong structuration (Stones 2005) to challenge more generalised assumptions about practitioners' identity and morale, and to explore the *precise* relationships between agents and their contexts. In so doing, I adopted a rigorous research method (GTM), to explore and develop from the ground up, and from an ontology in situ (Ibid.), the meanings that practitioners produce and express from their everyday contexts. Far from being a fragmented, Balkanised (Bimrose et al. 2013) profession, all the participants expressed a strong and common sense of a professional identity. I consistently encountered highly motivated and organisationally savvy practitioners rather than demoralised or de-professionalised individuals. Further, my research has considered practitioners from a variety of contexts, and still found a shared identity. I recognise that the study still has limitations, in that it didn't involve practitioners from private practice, outplacement or talent management; and the identity of latter offers further avenues for research.

The existence of a common professional identity surely tells a story of career guidance practitioners that challenges the prevailing discourse considered in the introduction. They are knowledgeable social actors, not cultural dopes (Giddens 1984), who are aware of their expertise, influence and professional identity.

Perhaps our challenge as researchers, educators and members of a professional community is to

tell a different story about the profession, and the professionalism and the professional identity of those who work within it.

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