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Promoting research and reflective practice in career development

NICEC

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NICEC STATEMENT

The Fellows of NICEC agreed the following statement in 2010.

'The National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC) was originally founded as a research institute in 1975. It now plays the role of a learned society for reflective practitioners in the broad field of career education, career guidance/counselling and career development. This includes individuals whose primary role relates to research, policy, consultancy, scholarship, service delivery or management. NICEC seeks to foster dialogue and innovation between these areas through events, networking, publications and projects.

NICEC is distinctive as a boundary-crossing network devoted to career education and counselling in education, in the workplace, and in the wider community. It seeks to integrate theory and practice in career development, stimulate intellectual diversity and encourage transdisciplinary dialogue. Through these activities, NICEC aims to develop research, inform policy and enhance service delivery.

Membership and fellowship are committed to serious thinking and innovation in career development work. Membership is open to all individuals and organisations connected with career education and counselling. Fellowship is an honour conferred by peer election and signals distinctive contribution to the field and commitment to the development of NICEC's work. Members and Fellows receive the NICEC journal and are invited to participate in all NICEC events.

NICEC does not operate as a professional association or commercial research institute, nor is it organisationally aligned with any specific institution. Although based in the UK, there is a strong international dimension to the work of NICEC and it seeks to support reflective practice in career education and counselling globally.'

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TITLE

The official title of the journal for citation purposes is *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling* (Print *ISSN 2046-1348; online* ISSN 2059-4879). It is widely and informally referred to as 'the NICEC journal'. Its former title was *Career Research and Development: the NICEC Journal*, ISSN 1472-6564, published by CRAC, and the final edition under this title was issue 25. To avoid confusion we have retained the numbering of editions used under the previous title.

AIMS AND SCOPE

The NICEC journal publishes articles on the broad theme of career development in any context including:

- Career development in the workplace: private and public sector, small, medium and large organisations, private practitioners.
- Career development in education: schools, colleges, universities, adult education, public career services.
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It is designed to be read by individuals who are involved in career development-related work in a wide range of settings including information, advice, counselling, guidance, advocacy, coaching, mentoring, psychotherapy, education, teaching, training, scholarship, research, consultancy, human resources, management or policy. The journal has a national and international readership.

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Manuscripts are welcomed focusing on any form of scholarship that can be related to the NICEC Statement. This could include, but is not confined to, papers focused on policy, theory-building, professional ethics, values, reflexivity, innovative practice, management issues and/or empirical research. Articles for the journal should be accessible and stimulating to an interested and wide readership across all areas of career development work. Innovative, analytical and/or evaluative contributions from both experienced contributors and first-time writers are welcomed. Main articles should normally be 3,000 to 3,500 words in length and should be submitted to one of the co-editors by email. Articles longer than 3,500 words can also be accepted by agreement. Shorter papers, opinion pieces or letters are also welcomed for the occasional 'debate' section. Please contact the relevant issue co-editor(s) prior to submission to discuss the appropriateness of the proposed article and to receive a copy of the NICEC style guidelines. Final decisions on inclusion are made following full manuscript submission and a process of peer review.

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Membership of NICEC is also available (£75 pa or £50 pa for full-time students). Members receive the journal, free attendance at NICEC events and other benefits.

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Overview of this issue

Welcome to the October 2018 issue of the NICEC journal. The articles below were contributed in response to an open call for papers. It is once again a pleasure to report that innovative, creative, and engaging scholarship is thriving in our field.

Peter Plant, Inger Marie Bakke and **Lyn Barham** get the ball rolling with a timely call for 'geronto guidance' for older people. They are particularly interested in the support that is available around retirement arguing it is currently something of a blind spot in terms of a genuinely lifelong guidance system.

The second article from **Lisa Law** continues the theme of age and change. It uses an action research strategy to evaluate the delivery of a workshop for older students at a UK university. The workshop demonstrates a creative and successful example of practice for this key client group.

Charles Jackson argues for the value of career surveys drawing from his work with trainee doctors and medical students. The surveys, it is suggested, highlight the importance of the human touch and talking directly with other people about career issues. The article finishes with a set of conclusions about the value of career surveys.

Steve Mowforth extends the use of survey to small-scale qualitative research with generation z students at a British university. He argues that contemporary scene has moved on from attitudes and beliefs associated with what he terms the industrial state.

Julia Yates reports on some contemporary techniques in career coaching. These include visual tools, role play tools, possible selves technique, passengers on the bus technique, pre-designed frameworks, and client-generated maps.

Debra Osborn and **V. Casey Dozier** argue for the value of cognitive information processing theory in relation to interventions. They provide two case studies to illustrate the approach.

Ingrid Bårdsdatter Bakke, Erik Haug and **Tristram Hooley** provide a timely update on guidance developments in Norway. They propose an innovative approach to combining face-to-face and online guidance based on career learning and instructional design.

Our final article by **Cathy Brown** and **Tracey Wond** is devoted to the topic of career capitals. Two contrasting conceptions of capital are critically assessed. Drawing from this, they propose some ideas for the development of career capital using a case study.

This issue concludes with a book review of *Graduate Employability in Context: Theory, Research and Debate* edited by Ciaran Burke and Fiona Christie.

Phil McCash, Editor

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'The world is your oyster': Exploring the career conceptions of Gen-Z students

Steve Mowforth

If generation-Y were considered digital pioneers, generation-Z (born after 1995) are true digital natives. The oldest of this cohort are now completing their undergraduate studies. This article reports on a HECSU funded, non-experimental, exploratory study intended to provide insight into how generation-z view the concept of career. In addition, it considers what - if any - are their career concerns related to the effects of technological and social acceleration. It will also reflect on the topic from the perspective of some career theories.

Introduction

As CEAIG professionals, our practice is grounded in a set of theoretical approaches established, in large part, during the so-called *Industrial State* era (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999) - a period equating loosely to the latter half of the twentieth century and characterised by comparative stasis and linear career trajectories. By contrast, we are now in what Arthur, Inkson & Pringle (1999) refer to as the *New Economy* – a global, technologically accelerating and significantly knowledge-based economy that is said to be increasingly VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous).

Given this contemporary career landscape, I wanted to gain some insight into what might be the common career conceptions of generation-z (hereafter gen-z) undergraduate students at Coventry University. Whilst the results of this small-scale qualitative enquiry are not necessarily generalizable, its conclusions will be of interest to fellow practitioners in different contexts. As a secondary objective, it is intended that the present study may inform a possible large-scale quantitative project.

Much has been written about the apparent agency of individuals pursuing their career in the contemporary employment landscape, e.g. Arthur & Rousseau (1996), Hall (2004), Lo Presti (2009), Savickas (2011). A common view is that the organisational career and *job for life* is in decline, that geographical, psychological and organisational boundaries are becoming more permeable, and that individuals today have greater agency in managing their own careers. Some research, however, questions this received wisdom, e.g Baruch & Vardi (2016), Lyons, Schweitzer & Ng (2014), Clarke (2013). For the purposes of this project, however, my interest is more aligned with popular perceptions than empirical research, since the former are more likely to be the influences that gen-z will be subject to.

Background

An overview of the literature suggests that a considerable number of gen-z studies consider a US context (of 37 Google Scholar results US=18, UK=2). Given the parity with the UK in terms of educational systems, internet/social media access and generational cohorts, it is assumed here that the literature will maintain a significant degree of relevance across the two nations and - perhaps to a lesser extent - with other technologically advanced countries. The birth years of gen-z are commonly considered to span from around 1996 to the present. Steele Flippin (2017) delineates preceding generations roughly as follows: Traditionalist (1922-1945), Baby Boomer (1946-1964), Generation-X (1965-1980), Generation-Y or 'Millennials' (1981-1995). According to Steele Flippin, gen-z is distinct from its preceding generation due to having lived through a particular set of world events; having never experienced a world without social

media; having instantaneously accessible information; and having been parented by generation-X and millennials, with their 'go figure it out for yourself' (p.5) approach to parenting; in contrast to the Baby Boomers' *helicopter* style. Stillman & Stillman (2017) point to the collaborative working style of millennials in contrast with a more independent inclination of gen-z, whom they observe are: '… focussed on preparing for careers at a young age' (p7). Seemiller and Grace (2016) identified a set of shared personality characteristics through their *Generation Z Goes to College* study. They found their US gen-z participants to be: loyal, compassionate, thoughtful, open-minded, responsible and determined. In her large qualitative study of UK gen–z, Combi (2015) observes in her foreword that they are: 'growing up in a world shadowed with economic uncertainty, shrinking job prospects, widening social inequality and political apathy'. Combi's social research encompasses the gamut of gen-z in terms of age, socioeconomic background and educational level, whereas Steele Flippin (2017) focuses on the workplace and Seemiller & Grace (2016) examine university students.

Methodology

Second year Coventry University undergraduate students were invited to join the study and were selected to form a representative sample (n=23) in terms of gender, nationality and faculty. Each participant was assigned to one of three one-hour focus groups (of which analysable content was around 40 minutes each). The sessions were video recoded and later transcribed by me using the listen and repeat (speech-to-text software) method (Park & Zeanah, 2005; Matheson, 2007).

Thematic analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and began with a set of deductively identified themes originating from the focus group stimulus questions. As the analysis progressed certain additional themes were inductively generated. Codes were revised and modified throughout the process and attention was given to consistency of coding. Themes were reviewed and refined recursively. In some instances analysis was semantic - whereby what was spoken could be taken at face value; in other cases latent meaning required interpretation - which inevitably was subjective. Whilst occurrences of the various coded categories were counted to provide some sense of scale, a higher frequency does not necessarily imply significance.

Analysis and discussion

The principal aim of the study was to gain some insight into how the participants view the concept of career. More specifically, whether their notions about career reflect the modern employment landscape or, conversely, to what extent might their thinking about career remain anchored in an industrial state paradigm. In analysing the data, this overarching aim generated an associated question: are gen-z driven primarily by a desire for fulfilment and self-actualisation, or rather one of achieving stability and security (the former commonly being associated with the *New Economy* and the latter with the *Industrial State*)? Related to this question is another concerning motivational drivers to adopt a flexible career mind-set: are participants' concerns primarily associated with circumstantial disruption (e.g. structural/technological, frictional and cyclical unemployment) or rather, a more *protean* (Hall 1976, 2004) outlook favouring personal values as a motivator of career transitions? In the focus groups there was only one clear-cut acknowledgement of this duality: 'Sometimes I think they find themselves in the situations and sometimes they just want to change'. Participants' career conceptions were further explored from the viewpoint of career theory.

Influences

Twenty-one specific sources of influence were identified, of which the one with the highest frequency (family) is considered here. In addition to these relatively well-defined influencers, a separate category covering *social knowledge, cognitive process or passive perception*, which had 59 occurrences, became apparent. It could be argued that some codes (such as *desire to meet celebrities*) cannot be considered influences *per se*.

There were 27 instances of family members as an influencer and within this category were mentioned, *uncle* (1), *father* (7), *mother* (7), *both parents* (12), *grandfather* (1), *brother-in-law* (1), older sibling (1), cousins (1). Out of the 26 occurrences of parental influence, seven indicated explicit encouragement to

effectively *follow your heart*: 'they always told me to do whatever I like, no matter what everybody else says', and: 'You go for it. I missed my opportunity but you go for it.' There were an additional three instances of parental support for participants' volition. There was one occasion where a participant indicated that they had asserted their own volition over that of their parents and there was one expression of parents deterring from particular jobs.

There were 59 instances indicating influence derived from s*ocial knowledge, cognitive process or passive perception*. An example within this category is: 'I feel like now everyone is trying to just keep doing better and better and better. Whereas, back then [*Industrial State* era] it was kind of like, "we're stable, we're fine" kind of thing'. Across all three groups there was a general sense of positivity in relation to the job market: in group three, for instance, three participants responded positively to a suggestion that the job market was currently buoyant. In the media and fashion industries there was an awareness of the importance of building a portfolio, accumulating a track record and networking, and of job hunting being more involved than in other sectors. There was no mention of formal LMI (although some may have picked up sector knowledge from course tutors, for example) or formal engagement with CEIAG.

Comparison with the Industrial State career landscape

I identified four occasions when a participant expressed career conceptions explicitly reminiscent of the *Industrial State* career paradigm, for example: 'it's like if there's a business, you start at a level and then you see yourself working up to becoming a manager and then maybe you go further to CEO' and: 'I've always thought [originating from parent's experience] you stick in your current job'. In group one, participants were asked what they understand by the term *a job for life*. Some participants associated it with older generations. For others, the interpretation was more aligned with contemporary options and choices. Across all three groups participants were invited to compare their perceptions of the career landscape fifty years ago with that of the *New Economy*. There was some recognition of career stasis having been aspirational (and perhaps of life commitments having been a driver of that). There was a perception from one or two participants that people from older generations were inclined to apply their own experiential framework in communicating their expectations of gen-z: 'personally I feel like a lot of people from the older generation feel like *well I did it and so can you* and it's not that easy'. Some felt that job opportunities were greater in the past due to relative absence of credentialism. For most, there was a perception that widening access to HE has opened a broader range of opportunities. There was recognition that in the modern career landscape more frequent job transitions are likely:

> I feel like the concept of a career though is sort of going out the window nowadays because there's that statistic [participant expresses some uncertainty later] where like people our age on average will have like ten to fifteen different jobs in their life whereas people from the generation before had like five to ten sort of jobs in their life.

Technological and social acceleration

The term *technological acceleration* is commonly aligned to an observation that technology is evolving exponentially (e.g. Ford, 2015). Frequently, discussion concerning techno-acceleration revolves around the effects of automation on those work processes traditionally carried out by humans (see Mowforth, 2017a). A related and overlapping concept is Rosa's (2010, 2013) social acceleration whereby certain social processes, driven by various factors, are increasingly speeding up, giving rise to a sense - in varying degrees - of alienation, exhilaration and stress.

Discussion concerning technological acceleration was limited to group one. A mechanical engineering student (P1.1) introduced the topic of exponentially accelerating automation, raising the issue of self-driving trucks in the US and truck driver protests. He processed this line of thought, effectively evoking the phenomenon of creative destruction (here, redundant processes spawning new ones) which, in dialogue with another participant, led him to consider that: 'You're going to need to be able to transition from one thing to the next. In analysing the transcript,

these contributions were evocative of Holland's RIASEC *differentiation* indicator (Spokeman, 1996). The conversation between these participants considered a perceived need to be able to transition from one occupational area to another due to technological disruption (see Mowforth, 2017b). P1.1 highlighted the problem of high differentiation in those circumstances: 'once you've done a fashion degree you're not going to go and start practising law' and later stated: 'If you're a taxi driver or lorry driver you'd have to transition from driving to maybe into a service industry'. P1.4 (also a mechanical engineering student) responded: 'Sorry but you can't just transition to being creative when you're not creative'. P1.1 summarised by saying: 'more diverse skills in the workforce is going be needed in the future. You're going to need to be able to transition from one thing to the next'. P1.4 appeared to suggest that automation will benefit employers to the detriment of workers but concluded that ultimately it will serve to increase education and be a 'good step for humanity'. The conversation was effectively considering individuals' degree of natural differentiation. That is to say, how in those circumstances low differentiation (interest and ability distributed across the RIASEC types) could be beneficial, whereas high differentiation in a declining occupational sector may be disadvantageous). Further exploration of this theme may benefit from consideration from a specialist/generalist perspective.

There was a sense, primarily in group three, of an awareness of social acceleration within their own experience. The broad themes identified from those conversations were: critical importance of subject choice decisions (during secondary education), GCSEs (increasing workload and pressure), competition, concurrent necessity and desire to be ambitious, credentialism, academic inflation, and increasing stress/pressure.

- …there is some sort of pleasure from being ambitious because there kind of has to be because […] being ambitious comes with a lot of stress.
- Like you have to decide what you want to be when you're 30 when you're 14. And if you don't that's it, you're screwed.

Participants' definitions of career

At various points, participants were invited, explicitly or implicitly, to provide their own definition of what a career is today. Broadly along a scale from *Industrial State* to contemporary conceptions the following codes were applied: an eventual means to support retired parents; (promotional) ladder (x3); long-term sector (x2); specific goal (x2); defining theme; mixture of work and education; (themed) doors to knowledge acquisition; stepping stone; job choice; many jobs - possibly in diverse fields; flexible goals (x3); degree not essential (enjoyment important); for some money, for others want/love/enjoy; enjoyment 1st, money 2nd, promotion 3rd; the notion of career is evolving; is related to one's brand/lifestyle; self-actualisation once stability is achieved (previous generations satisfied with stability); aspiration (rather than stability); doing what you want/love/enjoy (x4).

To summarise, there were a few definitions that were evocative of an *Industrial State* conception of career, although most of these, it could be argued, are also characteristics of typical modern careers. Midway, there were suggestions of choice, flexibility and personal development. At the opposite end of the spectrum were those definitions that were suggestive of career being conceived as a facilitator of personal fulfilment. I got a sense of strength of feeling in certain of these instances. One participant was effectively describing Maslow's hierarchy of needs (prompted by me) in expressing that self-actualisation was the ultimate goal, and that in order for this to happen a degree of career stability is required.

- …once you've got a degree you've got that much debt you may as well go forth with that particular career
- …doing something that you really love and it gives you total satisfaction

Following your heart/doing what you want

This theme arose in the *parental influence* and the *definitions* sections above. Excluding occurrences in those categories, there were a further seven explicit instances of the theme elsewhere, e.g. 'And then it comes to us and we are like, *no, I want to be happy. I don't want to just be stuck in a job for life, I want a career*,

I want options and choices.' In addition, there were several implicit references.

Protean career orientations

Hall (2004), with reference to Hall (1976), summarises his concept of the protean career as 'one in which the person, not the organization, is in charge, the core values are freedom and growth, and the main success criteria are subjective (psychological success) vs. objective (position, salary)'. He suggests that protean orientation is both trait and state and can be enhanced through the development of two metacompetencies: adaptability and self-awareness. In the present study, those contributions suggesting an element of protean orientation were evaluated under two dimensions as described in Briscoe & Hall (2006): values-driven and self-directed. I equated the values-*driven* element to seeking self-fulfilment, as analysed above. In addition to coding instances suggestive of a self-directed outlook, I counted examples of *who is/should be in charge of an individual's professional development* as an indication of *self-direction*. A few occurrences indicated it was the employer's responsibility. For most, it was either a combination of employer and employee, or the individual taking ownership of their development. From this evidence of *values* and *self-direction*, I concluded an indication of protean-orientation within the groups.

Boundary crossing

Two conversations were indicative of the boundaryless career concept. In their introductory chapter to *The Boundaryless Career*, Arthur & Rousseau (1996) describe boundaryless careers as '…the opposite of "organisational careers" - careers conceived to unfold in a single organisation' (p.5). The extent to which the modern career landscape can actually be referred to as boundary-less is a moot point (e.g. Baruch, 2012; Baruch & Vardi, 2016).

The first sequence of interactions on this theme was in group one. The conversation was considering an observation that CAD and similar software are common to both mechanical engineering and fashion, and - effectively - that automation is a driver for boundary crossing, for instance: 'You wouldn't think that maybe fashion and engineering are particular linked. But […] like you say, the barriers are sort of softening' and: '…a lot more people transition into more creative stuff because you can't get a computer to like design or draw some clothes because it doesn't quite work'. The second occasion was in group two and focussed on geographical boundary crossing. A participant suggested that once graduates are established in their career they can say to themselves: 'Well, you know what, I'm doing business here. I can go to Japan or another country, or America and decide to start a life there…' and further commented: '…there are less boundaries now.' There was an indication that a facilitator of this boundary crossing was considered to be communications technology.

Acquisition of career knowledge

Bloch (1989) asserts that 'The individual, who is always seeking (at some times more actively than others) to solve the problem called career, is receptive to information which appears useful' (p.122). Individuals map new information onto their own mental career framework. Bloch states that these sources of information can be *systematic* (provided formally) or *unsystematic* (acquired from a host of sources in the environment). The latter is the case with the information derived from social and environmental sources as analysed, above. Given that none of the participants made reference to systematically delivered career information, I suggest that, in this context, authenticity of information being accessed by students is a matter of concern for Higher Education CEIAG.

Conclusion

In summary, the most prominent themes arising from the above analysis are: *an (effective) protean orientation*, *(some) insight into the effects of technological and social acceleration*, and *supportive parental influence*. From these factors I summarise that the participants' career conceptions are, generally, more aligned with contemporary (and popular) notions of career in the *New Economy*, than with the *Industrial State* era (during which some of their grandparents and older parents will have forged their own careers). There was some awareness of permeable occupational and geographical boundaries. Participants' conceptions appear to have been shaped by everyday social interaction rather than the formal delivery of career information, via CEIAG services for instance. It is noteworthy, given the growth

of the internet, that we, as careers professionals, are no longer the gatekeepers to the body of *official* information. Indeed, Thambar (2018) highlights the decline of this asymmetry.

In comparing their values with those more typical of the *Industrial State* era, it appears that fulfilment trumps job stability. On the whole, I got a sense of positivity and did not pick up any major concerns about their future career development. It is interesting, for example, that there was no mention of Brexit, nor of the more techno-pessimistic predictions around structural unemployment that currently figure in the media (automation being perceived by participants as *disruptive but good*). Social acceleration was seen as both exhilarating and stressful. It was unclear (with the exception of the concern around GCSEs) whether career values were related to self-actualisation as an end in itself or rather with superordinate goals aligned to personal values.

These are not, of course, concrete conclusions grounded in hard evidence. This small scale, qualitative enquiry can only be a snapshot and its themes may not be representative of the sample itself. Indeed some themes may have arisen from relatively few individuals or from relatively few occurrences. The study's secondary objective is to inform a possible large-scale qualitative project which would provide more substantiated results.

As a first attempt at a formal research project I have found the project both challenging and rewarding. It has been a steep learning curve but I'm looking forward to the next one with the benefit of this experience!

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