Why LMI? Questioning the role of labour market information in career guidance

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Abstract

This article surfaces debate in the literature around the role of labour market information (LMI) in career education and guidance. Building on questions of whether LMI is peripheral or pivotal in career services (Bimrose, 2021) the paper aims to synthesise the argument in the existing literature around LMI. Utilising an approach informed by Bacchi's *What is the problem represented to be?* (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2019), the paper asks how and why LMI has been positioned by some interests as central to career interventions, and the implications of this positioning. It also asks whether there are alternative ways of imagining the role of LMI and explores their implications for policy and practice.

Keywords: Career information; labour market information; labour market intelligence; career guidance

Introduction

In recent years the question of Labour Market Information (LMI) has received growing attention in the research literature. This includes work that has sought to identify the role of LMI in career guidance (Bimrose, 2021; Milosheva et al., 2021), and that which has aimed to identify good practice in the use of LMI in career education and guidance (Alexander, McCabe, & De Backer, 2019; Bimrose, 2021). Critical perspectives on LMI have also explored and problematised definitions of LMI (Staunton, 2022), and sought to identify how LMI can be used in socially just forms of careers provision (Staunton & Rogosic, 2021). A number of publications have also directly addressed questions of how central LMI should be in career guidance and career decision making (Bimrose, 2021; Milosheva et al., 2021). This paper seeks to extend these arguments by looking at the positioning of LMI in the existing literature, asking how and why LMI is positioned as important, and considering the implications for practice.

In order to structure this paper, Bacchi's *What is the Problem Represented to be?* approach is utilised (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2019). Bacchi's approach invites a critical analysis of policy through asking six specific questions:

1. What's the 'problem'…represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?

2. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?

3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?

4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be conceptualised differently?

5. What effects…are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?

6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been and/ or how can it be questioned, disrupted and replaced? (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2019, p. 20)

This paper draws on existing evidence in the literature relating to LMI in career guidance and asks these six questions to critically interrogate the role and position of LMI and to open up some questions about alternative ways of thinking.

LMI – what is the problem represented to be?

Applying Bacchi's approach to the LMI literature, we can ask what is the problem represented to be? In answering these questions it is notable that despite a significant body of literature on LMI, the majority of this work simply starts with the assumption or the claim that Labour Market Information (LMI) is central to the practice of career guidance (Alexander et al., 2019). Typically the literature focuses on what information is being provided, rather than how information can be best used in career services (Milosheva et al., 2021; Staunton, 2022). Where previous literature has often focused on the 'what' of LMI, Milosheva et al (2021, p.12) argue that it is often informed by a '"lack of information" assumption – a belief that insufficient career information is at the root of career indecision, and that the provision of more career information will resolve career conundrums.' The lack of information assumption is paralleled elsewhere in the literature by concerns in deficit of *quality* of information (Alexander et al., 2019), which is accompanied by similar assumptions, that improving the quality of information will improve career decision making. The 'problem' is therefore one of poor quality or quantity of information which, if resolved, is anticipated to improve career decision making.

Assumptions underlying the importance of LMI

The 'problem' as it is presented comes with several assumptions. In particular the focus on quality and availability of information positions career decision making in a certain way: as a rational choice whereby individuals weigh up their options rationally in relation to the information they have and make a decision accordingly (Grubb, 2002). Here, it is notable

that in many publications the importance of LMI in career guidance is tracked back to Parson's foundational work in the field (see for example Kumar & Arulmani, 2014; Staunton & Rogosic, 2021). Writing in 1909 Parsons proposes that choice of a vocation should be based on knowledge of oneself and 'knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities and prospects in different lines of work' (Parsons, 1909, p. 5), and 'true reasoning' in relation to these two areas. This is commonly known as 'matching theory'. The dominance of matching assumptions in much of the literature on LMI (Staunton, 2022; Staunton & Rogosic, 2021), results not only in a position whereby decision making is presumed to be rational, but also suggests that career decision making is primarily based on 'matching' labour market needs to career interests, that information is neutral and unproblematic (Staunton, 2022), and that information processing of individuals is straightforward (Milosheva et al., 2021).

How has the representation of the problem come about?

In understanding how LMI has come to be seen as so pivotal by some interests, it is also useful to explore Offer's (2001) justification for the importance of labour markets in career guidance. This is frequently cited: see, for example, Barnes & Bimrose (2010); Bimrose (2021); and European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training. (2016). Offer (2001, p. 76) argues that what makes career guidance 'distinctive' is the 'application of, and reference to, expert knowledge and understanding of the labour market and its functioning'. The idea of 'distinctiveness' positions career guidance as something different to counselling or other forms of helping. Offer goes on to extend his argument: 'careers guidance, in relation to counselling, we might argue is an applied discipline in a way analogous to engineering's relationship to physics and maths… the argument that guidance makes an effective and measurable contribution to the labour and learning opportunity markets is still essential to the political survival of the species' (2001, p.76). Although this extended argument is less often referenced in the literature, it does represent Offer's key point – that LMI is important because it is key to aligning labour market interests and individual interests in career guidance. Here his argument is closely aligned to the policy tradition in the career guidance literature that sees the career guidance having a dual role, addressing both labour market needs and individual needs (Hooley et al., 2018; Watts, 1996). In the literature on LMI it is instructive to note that LMI has had a particular prominence in the policy related literature (Milosheva et al., 2021), and indeed, to a certain extent that the language of LMI itself is aligned to the language of policy makers, rather than individual decision makers or careers practitioners (Alexander, McCabe, De Backer, et al., 2019).

Thinking about how the language of LMI is aligned to policy interests, it is useful to note the growing dominance of neoliberal ideologies in the way that career guidance is positioned politically (Hooley et al., 2018; Sultana, 2014). Neoliberalism, with its overarching assumption that the best way to improve outcomes for a population is through pursuing economic success (Harvey, 2007), positions career guidance as fundamentally about assisting individuals to secure economically rewarding outcomes, and thereby to also support the functioning of the economy by improving the stock of human resources and reducing under-utilisation of skills. From such a perspective, being able to 'match' individual interests into appropriate 'gaps' in the market supports both individual achievement and market functioning, and LMI is a key means by which to do this.

What are the alternatives?

Having explored some of the rationale for the importance of LMI, Bacchi's questions invite us to ask: 'what is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?'.

Firstly, the idea that career decisions are rational decisions has been widely challenged (Grubb, 2002; Hartung & Blustein, 2002; Krieshok et al., 2009). There is also a lengthy history of theoretical perspectives that have developed alternative models of career decision making since Parsons' work. Alternative models for example, have explored the socially and contextually embedded nature of career decision making, for example Krumboltz' learning theories (Krumboltz, 2009; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996), Law's Community Interaction Theory (Law, 1981, 2009) and Hodkinson and Sparkes' Careership theory (Hodkinson, 1998, 2008; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). These different approaches all emphasise how an individual's understanding of their options impacts on their career decision making. However, in all these approaches this knowledge is not developed through a neutral process of information gathering but is rather developed by socially and contextually situated individuals – including through work experience, role models, family experiences, social connections, and networks.

From these theoretical perspectives simply attempting to 'correct' an individual's understanding of their options with information provision is problematic given the relative strength of these socially situated, embodied and experiential knowledges. Further, scholarship on how individuals *use* information has demonstrated the complexity of how individuals acquire, process and act on information (Milosheva et al., 2021). Research into LMI has shown how information on its own has limited impact on decision-making (Alexander et al., 2019), and that information from 'hot sources' (e.g. information provided by family or friends) is more often impactful than formal information sources (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008). Further, rather than formal, statistical information (that narrow definitions of LMI often imply), it is more often information in the form of 'inspiration' that is impactful (The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2016), or 'career intelligence' which is information personalised to decision makers (Barnes & Bimrose, 2010; Howat & Zaidi, 2010). Thinking from these perspectives, then, the 'problem' is not so much information – quantity or quality – but rather how people come to understand their career or labour market options as socially situated individuals.

The second core assumption around LMI is that career decision making happens as a 'match' between individual career interests and labour market options, an assumption particularly dominant in the policy tradition of career guidance. However, the policy tradition is only one tradition of thinking about career education and guidance, with the psychological and emerging emancipatory traditions suggesting quite different ways of thinking about the roles and functions of career guidance (Hooley et al., 2018). In the psychological tradition for example the focus of career education and guidance is more firmly on individual outcomes, potentially including wellbeing outcomes (Robertson, 2013). These approaches highlight for example that positive outcomes for individuals may not always be the economically 'best' outcomes – for example an individual may sacrifice pay or status for the sake of lifestyle or other priorities. These ideas appear in Super's (1980) notion of life roles for example, or Schein's (1990) idea of the 'lifestyle anchor' for career

decisions. Thinking about career decisions within wider life decisions suggests that the information needs of individuals are likely to be radically wider than narrow definitions of LMI typically identify. Indeed in some of the careers literature it is notable how narrow definitions of LMI are often replaced by broader terms such as '*careers and* labour market information' [italics added] (Hooley et al., 2010a; The Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014) encompassing occupational information and educational information. Arguably, however, information needs of career decision makers may be considerably wider still, including topics like lifestyle, housing and accommodation availability, benefits provision, childcare options and availability, impacts of health conditions, and transport for commuting (Alexander, McCabe, & De Backer, 2019).

Another key challenge to ideas that career guidance has a role in serving labour market needs comes from the emerging emancipatory tradition. In the context of growing precarity in the labour market, scholars have recognised what is good for the labour market may not always be good for individuals (Hooley et al., 2018). Where these needs are in conflict, resisting the pressure to meet labour market outcomes may be perceived as an ethical imperative. This potentially changes how careers advisers should think about LMI in their practice. Some work addresses alternative uses of LMI in pursuit of social justice goals, by opening up labour market functioning to critique (Alexander, McCabe, De Backer, et al., 2019; Staunton & Rogosic, 2021).

What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?

Having explored problem representations, origins, assumptions and alternatives, Bacchi's approach encourages us to think about the effects of the problem representation. With regards to LMI the key impact is that this problem representation supports certain forms of career education and guidance delivery.

The clearest impact is in how career services and national career systems have often invested heavily in information resources. Development of free to access careers resources on the internet is often pursued on the basis of increasing efficiency of career guidance provision and decreasing cost-per-user (Hooley et al., 2010b). Information resources are imagined to replace, or at least reduce demand on, more costly one-to-one guidance services.

However, with the recognition that 'information' on its own may not always be sufficient (Alexander, McCabe, De Backer, et al., 2019), and inequalities in access to online information (Howieson & Semple, 2013), potentially other forms of service become important. Career education, and wider careers programmes in schools which include employer engagements and work placements have all been positioned as having key roles in increasing access to knowledge and information. Kashefpakdel and Percy (2016, p. 229) for example identify the economic benefits of career education, specifically identifying the social capital value of employer engagements whereby 'teenagers engage with the labour market to gain *access to information* found to be more authentic, useful and persuasive than rival sources of knowledge' [emphasis added]. Educational approaches to promote social justice may include using LMI as part of group activities designed to facilitate the

development of critical perspectives on the workplace (Hooley et al., 2018; Precarious Workers Brigade, 2017). Therefore a focus on the value of education is emphasised both in policy and emancipatory traditions of career practice, with education being seen as a key means of gathering information and knowledge, and developing critical awareness.

Perhaps a more problematic implication of the centrality of LMI in policy perspectives is how one-to-one career guidance is positioned. In the literature on LMI, guidance services are primarily identified as valuable for 'personalising' and targeting LMI to ensure that it is most impactful. However, such a position potentially still relies on fundamental assumptions around matching and overlooks the complexity of career decision making as a process that involves lots of wider lifestyle considerations, and which is made by socially and contextually embedded individuals. In practical terms the dominance of matching approaches positions career guidance interventions as relatively simple, short, and often one-off interventions (Bimrose, 2006). Such a position is potentially problematic, limiting the scope, and potentially impact, of career guidance practice. This argument will be elaborated in the following section of the paper.

Disrupting LMI

The final questions that Bacchi invites us to ask are: How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced?

The discourse of LMI has been produced largely in the policy literature. Given that career guidance is predominantly publicly funded (Watts, 1996), challenging the centrality of LMI in career decision making may be viewed as risky for undermining the rationale for public funding. In his argument for the importance of LMI, Offer (2001, p. 76) states that 'if no-one who received careers guidance could hold down a job or earn a living thereafter, there would be little basis for supporting it out of public funds…'. However, there is an alternative here: what if the policy rationale for career guidance was not aligned primarily with economic policy but, say, health or wellbeing policy? How would this change the objectives of career guidance practice? The potential for career guidance to have a wide range of health and wellbeing benefits and an argument for a stronger alignment of career guidance to health, or indeed other policy portfolios has, for example, been made by Robertson (2013, 2021). Here we could argue that the 'policy tradition' of career guidance is actually a tradition that stems from one kind of policy alignment, with other alignments being possible. These different alignments would potentially understand the information needs of individuals as much wider than the labour market and might lend themselves to different models of practice.

Another disruption to the discourse of LMI, has stemmed from the theoretical literature already discussed in this paper, which positions career decision making as a much wider and more complex process than matching models would assume. Understanding career decisions as complex and embedded in wider life-decisions has implications for service design and delivery. Although knowledge of the labour market (developed through career education and information services) is likely to be valuable, individuals may still

face challenges in thinking through their own life-situations, choices and dilemmas. And it is in exploring and overcoming complexities and dilemmas in decision making that career *guidance* practice potentially has a key role. Taking these arguments forward, it is instructive to note that if the centrality of LMI in careers practice is disrupted, then so too is Offer's argument about the 'distinctiveness' of career guidance from other forms of helping. Indeed, we might debate definitions of careers work as guidance, coaching or counselling practice (Bimrose, 2006), with literature that explores career counselling and coaching potentially allowing greater scope for understanding the complexity of clients' stories, dilemmas and barriers (Yates, 2014, 2019). In these models, not only is career guidance practice not necessarily assumed to be a short one-off intervention, but potentially more in-depth, but also the use of information is positioned differently. Knowledge of the labour market is typically identified as important for career counsellors or coaches to have, but primarily this is used to inform practice including assessment of client needs, rather than being directly provided to individuals (Alexander, McCabe, De Backer, et al., 2019). As client-centred forms of practice, it is also the case that counselling and coaching models adopt a much wider understanding of the kinds of information needs of individuals, recognising for example the ways that decision making is embedded in wider life choices.

Disrupting discourses of the centrality of LMI in career services potentially, opens up different understandings of careers practice. These understandings recognise the depth and complexity of the work, and the distinctive contribution that guidance (as opposed to education or information services) can provide in helping individuals process complex decisions. Disrupting discourses of LMI also potentially has some value for career professionals, who are often trained in counselling models of practice, for example Ali and Graham's (1996) career counselling approach is widely used in the UK (Hooley, 2022). Further afield, constructivist approaches to practice are widely adopted across the globe, with these approaches paying little attention to LMI (Staunton & Rogosic, 2021). De-centring guidance practice away from LMI, may support professional career guidance practice, and reduce the potential for professional dilemmas and challenges for careers staff when entering workplaces that are framed by public policy assumptions (Douglas, 2011; Reid & West, 2011).

In disrupting discourses of LMI, career guidance practice can become framed as in-depth person-centred work supporting individuals to make decisions based on their own needs and desires – a framing that is well established in the psychological tradition of thinking about career guidance. This approach is potentially more aligned to models of practice and professional identities of careers practitioners.

Conclusions

This paper has utilised Bacchi's 'What is the Problem Represented to be?' approach to explore understandings of Labour Market Information in career education and guidance. This analysis has shown that ideas of the value of LMI are closely related to policy perspectives on career guidance and have been aligned to theoretical approaches of 'matching'. By exploring rationales, and alternatives, this paper has argued that knowledge of career options is fundamental to career decision making. However, where the provision

of career information and education services are important to assist with building knowledge, the function of career guidance should be understood quite differently.

Disrupting the idea that LMI is necessarily central in career *guidance* provision – as opposed to information or education services – aligns understandings of career guidance away from policy traditions towards psychological traditions of understanding careers provision. This is important partly because it aligns with commonly taught models of practice based on counselling or coaching. Although there is potentially some conflict with policy interpretations of career guidance, where LMI is central, the paper has also identified how disrupting discourses of LMI potentially opens up different policy alignments for services including areas such as health and wellbeing.

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