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Paper Title: Career Counselling Across the Lifespan

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Abstract

The concept of a 'career for life' no longer exists in a world of rapid economic and social changes. In today's society a person's career path may not be as clearly defined as previous generations and will have different meanings for different clients. Whilst stage theorists view career decision making as a developmental process (Super, 1953, 1990, Erikson, 1959, Levinson et al, 1978, Gottfredson, 1996) they may not fully address the fundamental aspects of career counselling clients who have to manage complex life roles, unemployment, redundancy, ill-health, rehabilitation and retirement.

This paper will discuss current qualitative research through client case studies that highlight some of the complex issues experienced by adults. The role of the career guidance counsellor, in supporting clients through career transitions and periods of emotional crisis, will also be explored. Finally, new paradigms that propose constructivist approaches in current career guidance practice will be examined (Savickas, McMahan & Patton, 2006).

Introduction

Changes in work practice as a result of globalization, advances in technology, economic instability and shifting demographics are having a significant impact on the nature of working life at present. People now have to rethink their careers on a continuous basis requiring skills to adapt and manage change across the lifespan. These developments are also impacting on the work of career guidance practitioners who support and guide adult clients in a changing economic landscape.

Current research in the field of career guidance challenges the traditional psychological paradigms, which have their basis in positivist epistemology, in favour of subjectivist epistemologies that reflect the nature of individual career progression in a constantly changing environment. McMahan and Patton (2006:3) argue career theories have so far largely been developed within organismic and/or mechanistic worldviews. However, in a number of social sciences, including career psychology and counselling psychology, a contextual worldview is now being advocated which focuses on the world simply as 'events' in a unique historical context. This contextualist worldview is reflected in constructivist epistemology which emphasizes the process rather than the outcome, and challenges the traditional stage-based views of human development.

While traditional life-stage development theory (Super, 1953, 1990, Erikson, 1959, Levinson et al, 1978, Gottfredson, 1996) is still highly relevant it may no longer adequately explain the career development process of adults requiring lifelong guidance in a constantly changing labour market. McNair et al (2004:7) find that two-thirds of people in the workforce experience job changes, with one in five making two or more changes, over a five year period. Furthermore, while the likelihood of career change declines with age, one third of people in their sixties are likely to change again before retirement.

In light of such evidence, this paper will address current research in the field of adult guidance by briefly examining theoretical developments in guidance counselling, the nature of adult guidance practice and the evidence presented in three case histories of adult clients who have had to renegotiate their career paths at different points in their lives. In particular, the three clients, who received guidance in an Adult Educational Guidance Initiative between 2001 and 2003, reflect the issues and needs of the individual client and the complexities of adult guidance practice.

Theoretical Developments in Career Guidance Counselling

Historically, theoretical perspectives of career counselling and career development have their roots in psychological approaches. In particular, stage theorists viewed career decision making as a developmental process with limited attention given to the external forces in peoples' lives, i.e. economic, societal (Super, 1953, 1990, Erikson, 1959, Levinson et al, 1978, Gottfredson, 1996).

However, these approaches have been challenged in recent times causing theorists to re-examine the role of guidance to help people develop skills for lifelong career management in a changing society (Kidd, 2006:73). New paradigms and models are required in practice that enable clients to draw meaning from the role of work in their lives, negotiate a lifetime of job changes and self manage their careers in the future, (Savickas, 2006:8).

In the last few years, constructivist approaches have come to the fore in career guidance counselling in the form of personal construct psychology, biographical hermeneutics and the narrative paradigm (Savickas, 1997:150). Constructivism enables clients to become more active agents in their own lives (McMahon & Patton, 2006, Reid, 2006, Savickas, 1997, 2006). Referring to Kelly's theory of personal constructs as a

foundation, Amundson (2005) states, “the suggestion is that people construct meaning in their lives through their decisions and their actions. The goal of counselling is to help people describe and critically re-evaluate their personal career constructions”, (p.92).

To help adults deal with lifetime education and work transitions career theory now needs to be more interactive and dynamic in practice (Kidd, 2006:48). Kidd proposes a model of career development skills that incorporates *career decision-making*, *career management* and *career resilience*. It attends to a number of elements for the individual including; relationships with economic and social institutions, construction of unfolding careers over time, decision-making on progression in work and learning, and emotional resilience in the context of uncertain labour markets and diverse career options. In particular, *career resilience* involves the capability to cope with the highs and lows of working life which is likely to be maintained through the person’s feelings of confidence, hope, flexibility, self-esteem and self-reliance (Kidd, 2006:48).

However, in critique of the “European-American values of individualism, autonomy and the centrality of work in people’s lives” Hansen’s Integrative Life Planning (ILP, 2001:1) offers a more holistic integrative approach. It stresses the need for creativity and flexibility in work and life management in times of change and transition. Furthermore, ILP strongly emphasises the role of career counsellors as advocates and change agents in the guidance process.

Adult Guidance Practice

Increasingly, in adult guidance practice, clients are presenting with a diverse range of complex issues as a result of problems related to; securing and maintaining employment, re-location, divorce, ill-health, rehabilitation and retirement. Such complexities, allied with the changing nature of work and the psychological and emotional problems of clients, create particular challenges for career guidance counsellors. Within this context, the importance of career adaptability, which consists of both an attitude that helps in coping with and adjusting to change and the actions necessary to plan for and choose work for individual needs, is now relevant in practice (Ebberwein et al, 2004:3).

Because career and personal concerns are often interlinked clients can find imminent change and decision-making extremely daunting. They may be depressed, anxious and fearful for their future. In extreme cases, individuals who have experienced or

are experiencing re-called trauma symptoms may have problems developing an effective work personality, coherent vocational identity, and effective career thoughts (Strauser et, 2006:356). As a result, clients can experience difficulties in drawing on the necessary psychological resources to maintain their career resilience.

In guidance practice, a counselling approach, derived from therapeutic counselling, is used to support clients in such situations. A particular strength of the counselling approach is that it enables the practitioner to work alongside the client, taking into account individual needs, abilities and expectations in the context of transitional labour markets (Ali & Graham, 1996:9). In addition, it allows practitioners to recognize the limits of their expertise and the boundaries between career counselling and other forms of therapeutic intervention should clients need to be referred on to other agencies.

Case Study of Guidance Outcomes: Three Clients' Stories

As part of an interpretive research study in Waterford Institute of Technology a number of adults who received career guidance in 2001 and 2003 were interviewed. All of the research participants were clients of the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults and had already been involved in a previous quantitative study. The following is a synopsis of three client case histories which reflects the career transition process experienced by adults in our current labour market.

Client A sought guidance for a career change in her early thirties. At the time she was depressed and was receiving counselling. She believed it was directly linked to her unhappiness in her job. She felt “stuck” and unfulfilled, and had ongoing problems with her voice that were directly related to her profession. After a number of sessions she decided on a post-graduate programme that would allow her to move sideways into a new career.

Unfortunately, due to problems with the course accreditation, the programme was suspended for two years which stopped her in her tracks as her career break had been approved. During the interim period she had to rely on unpredictable subbing work while in a state of *limbo*. The delays and setbacks coupled with financial concerns caused continuous stress which affected her health. However, during the research interview she admitted she did not feel ready for education in 2003, rather “ready for change, of some description and it is only by looking back now that I can see that I am in a more ready position now to study”.

She had changed considerably since her first guidance appointment and seemed more definite about what she wanted to do with her life. She was calmer, happier, confident, and became animated when she spoke about her intended course of study stating “when you are in a job you can be frustrated, you are working so hard and it can be hard to look outside the box”. Despite the resultant stresses she had learned a lot about herself realising “I am flexible, can face challenges, and trust that things will work out”. With her course due to start in Autumn 2006 she felt her mind was “in a better place for study”.

Client B, who is in his fifties, needed guidance on applying to college as a mature student. Due to a serious illness that had affected his brain function he was categorized with a long-term disability forcing him to opt-out of his previous employment and re-train for something more suitable. As he had to reconsider his future he returned to adult education to “gauge to see whether I was capable of retaining information or not”. For him, the next step was a third-level qualification in computing.

At the time of the research interview he had gained a Higher Certificate where, because of the low take-up on the course, he was the only student on the programme for two years. However, he “lasted the two years anyway and saw it through, toughed it out” and decided to progress to an honours degree. There was a marked difference in doing the degree which he found had “gone to another level” and “is much more difficult”. Because of his disability, and his difficulties with some subjects, he has developed his own unique skills and methods to enhance his understanding and retention of information.

Ten years ago he had to learn “everything again from scratch” and believes he “got back into education at the right time” because there was a danger of “learning bad habits during his rehabilitation”. His goal now is to get a qualification and start his own business. He felt extremely proud to have reached this point in his learning which had, at times, been a particularly stressful and lonely journey.

Like the previous client, *Client C* is also in his fifties and a recent third level graduate. At the time of seeking guidance he “didn’t know where to go, didn’t know where to turn to” and needed help on returning to education to improve his employment prospects. After years of lowly paid jobs, recovering from addiction and supporting a large family he “realised that the only kind of a job that would be anyway financially beneficial to me was if I had an education”. He was “looking at the bigger picture”.

Despite having a completed secondary education behind him, prior to going to college as a mature student his “self-esteem was absolutely nil” and he “was doubting his ability” to learn and progress. Nevertheless, he secured a last minute place on a Foundation Course for adult learners and entered WIT, which, up to that point, had been “a no-go area” for him. From there he progressed to a degree and subsequently achieved a long-held dream to help other addicts. He now works in a responsible position with the homeless as a social care worker in the city.

During his degree he found college life extremely difficult as he had to work part-time to support his family. Time management was a major issue as “I tried to juggle so many things” and it put “a strain on me, near the end I was under pressure and my tolerance was very very low and I was glad when I passed my finals”. Having achieved “a lifetime’s ambition, I am proud, I know my family are proud” and he feels he is “about half way up the scale of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs”.

In summary, these three vignettes emphasise the relevance of guidance counselling for adults coping with career transitions at certain stages in their lives. The three clients presented with different psychological and emotional issues that required specific interventions to support them in their decision-making and future career planning. At different times in their lives, all three of them were required to reframe their thinking about their current and future situation. Significantly, during particularly stressful times, each discovered inner strengths that allowed for the development of new skills and increased self confidence.

Conclusion

Through an interpretive methodology, research into the significance of adult guidance to help clients renegotiate their career paths a number of times throughout their lives is proving that practitioners can no longer rely on the traditional paradigms of the past. In the current climate there is a danger that such approaches can be prescriptive (Kidd, 2006:39). This is evidenced in the stories of clients B and C who find themselves in their middle years re-training for new careers, at a time when according to developmental theorists they ought to be heading towards retirement.

Instead guidance needs to be dynamic in its support of the adult client facing repeated career transitions in the future. Clients who engage in guidance and learning

undertake a brave journey of personal development and change that is constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed over time. Guidance practitioners can expect career counselling to be challenging, and must take an approach that integrates both career and noncareer issues (Ebberwein et al, 2004:9). Furthermore, they need to be aware of their limitations and refer on appropriately if the client's needs are not being met through guidance intervention.

Lucy Hearne is a Guidance Counsellor who worked for a number of years in the Irish Adult Educational Guidance Initiative. She is currently pursuing a research MA in the School of Education, WIT, for which she was awarded an Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences Scholarship in 2006.

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