

MORE THAN A GOOD CV

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We know students get jobs when they have job-tailored CVs, oodles of relevant work experience and interpersonal skills fit to charm the birds from the trees. But as anyone who trained as a career professional knows, there is more to careers than a good CV. Jane Artesse shares her wisdom on constructing holistic and meaningful approaches to career guidance from different theoretical strands. Jane is currently Principal Research Fellow at the University of Derby's College of Education (ICeGS).

Ideas about career development are drawn from various subject disciplines, notably psychology and sociology. Psychological theories are arguably of the greatest significance in terms of volume and impact upon the work of career professionals. Here, we consider three strands: differential, developmental and behavioural.

Differential approaches to career guidance presume that individuals possess different traits, qualities, interests and that the object of career support is to match students to the 'best fit' courses or jobs. Its appeal to common-sense perceptions is very strong; it seems implausible that individuals would choose occupations for which they were not well matched. Differential approaches require that the qualities of both individuals and occupations can be accurately measured, and that those qualities are sufficiently enduring to make the match effective over time. An underlying assumption of a differential approach is that subtle changes in occupational requirements and individual characteristics can be accommodated but that significant change in either requires re-assessment of the match.

The purpose of career support here is to assist individuals identify their qualities and interests, alongside an assessment of labour market requirements. Awareness-raising is achieved using the exploration of (work) experiences, social or cultural activities and educational achievement, together with interest inventories, aptitude

or psychometric assessments. Analysis of labour market requirements is made on the basis of systematic surveying and reporting of employing organisations.

Career support can be delivered via the curriculum or via one-to-one interactions and in both settings there is concern about achieving 'realistic' decisions, with students encouraged to choose from options identified on the basis of their educational attainments and labour market opportunities. The career professional's role is as an expert, impartial mediator, central to the process that guides the client into the 'best fit' training or educational opportunity or job. Change in aptitudes, attainments and job requirements locates differential approaches predominantly in the present; theorising that could accommodate development of a future perspective challenges the basis of differentialism.

Developmental approaches to career decision-making hinge upon dual notions of 'change' and 'readiness'. That individuals mature and change appeals to common-sense ideas about personal and social development. Key writers portray career development as phased with increasing levels of vocational maturity emerging as individuals pass through the stages of childhood, adolescence, adulthood and mature adulthood. Vocational maturity is associated with readiness to make career decisions and take career-related action as a result. Developmental theorists take account of individual differences by mapping individuals along a continuum of vocational maturity. Change is implicit but bounded by a sense of progression between stages in typically linear fashion. So a child's aspiration to become a pop star might be viewed as indicative of being at a 'fantasy' stage whilst a young adult's aspiration to the same might be viewed as 'tentative' or 'exploratory' if accompanied by participation in a pop band or direct experience in the music industry.

The career practitioner's role is to assist in the identification of a phase or stage of

development and to provide interventions aimed at 'moving the client on'.

Counselling techniques are frequently used with particular emphasis being placed upon the interpersonal skills of the practitioner in negotiation with the student and on the basis of the perceived stage of development. This facilitates a student-centred approach which is differentiated and can be delivered in curricular as well as individual settings. The provision of career support within a developmental approach is less likely to be dependent upon finding a match with the labour market and indeed may become separated from it.

Behaviourism has been used extensively to inform career guidance practice. Here the basic tenets of stimulus-response, action and reinforcement have been applied to account for how career decisions are made. This approach emphasises that career interests and aptitudes are shaped not only by direct experiences but by the actions of others and by the individual's interpretation of their own and others' actions. A personality theory known as 'social learning theory' has been used in career decision-making to describe how individuals acquire 'self-observation generalisations' (or self-awareness) and 'task approach skills' (or problem-solving abilities). Social learning theory reveals how knowledge about self (both learned and genetic) is integrated with information that is provided via reinforcing feedback. For example, self-observation generalisations might be reported as,

'People from my course don't usually do that sort of job...' or 'I have always been very active, I am told, since I was a child – that is probably why I enjoyed work experience in the building company'

Role models and iconic representations of occupations are learned and reinforced in particular social contexts and are said to become powerful influencers of career decision-making. Reinforcement of stereotypes are described as socially

derived (from exchanges with family and peers, the media) and the rational and irrational association of characteristics. For example:

'I wouldn't want to do an office job – office jobs are boring ...' or 'Public life is full of people who cannot be trusted – everyone knows that politicians make promises they don't intend to keep' or 'Social work appeals to me because social workers help people in trouble.'

The task of the career practitioner is to assist the client to test out whether previous social learning is accurate and to locate career motivations and goals. Practitioners might use counselling techniques together with provocation and challenge, to encourage clients to develop and extend their knowledge, for example, 'how do you know all office jobs are boring?'

The use of social learning theory and other behavioural approaches has been opposed by those who view the stimulus-response-reinforcement model as simplistic and failing to take account of the capacity of the client to process, interpret or reflect upon information about themselves and employment and educational opportunities. Critics of behaviourist stances have been prominent amongst educationalists and sociologists.

If psychological theorising emphasises individual cognitive and individual-in-group responses to the task of selecting a career focus, then sociological theorising emphasises the impact of social, economic and cultural environments on the way individuals and groups understand and act.

A fundamental reason for using sociology as a means of understanding career development is that the actions of individuals are bound to a context (or society) that can be described independently from the actions of any one individual. Sociological descriptions of career choice are significantly influenced

by ideas about social class and mobility and some authors see social structures as ascribing workplace relationships; i.e. where occupations are allocated rather than chosen. When described in this way, the passivity of behaviourism is eclipsed by the oppression of social structures. Labour markets (or 'opportunity structures') are part of wider social organisations and perceived as largely beyond an individual's control.

Sociological perspectives have been critiqued for their inability to accommodate the agency of individuals and groups as a part of the dynamic reality of participation in real communities.

Career support here is aimed to enable the client to appraise and review his/her 'world view' and to assess their own beliefs in relation to factual data about labour market opportunities and probabilities. A major task of career education and guidance is to support adjustment to and accommodation of available opportunities via the use of validated, accurate information. The skills of counselling would be required to help reconcile individuals' perceptions as they navigate often prolonged transitions into and through complex labour markets. Like other approaches, career support can be provided in both curricular and one-to-one settings.

Rationality: The belief that career decision making is rational underpins much government policy for career education and guidance in England. The inclusion of rationality is plausible and apparently desirable; few of us would claim to make irrational decisions about something as important as choice of occupation or course of study. However, there are writers who describe the emphasis on 'technically' rational decision making as misleading claiming that rationality is only possible to understand when in-depth knowledge of the individual (their aspirations, motivations, constraints, values and beliefs etc.) are understood as a whole. What might appear rational in

one set of personal circumstances can be viewed as wholly irrational given another set of circumstances. Some authors have argued that 'technical rationality' should be replaced by 'pragmatic rationality' as it more aptly describes the compromises, shifts and changes that individuals undergo in reaching important career decisions.

Careership: A sociological theory known as 'careership' includes the idea of pragmatic rationality and describes career decision making as a series of routines and turning points such as the end of a course or the completion of a temporary work contract. Routines represent the everyday experiences that characterise the transition (from education-to-work) and which shape the decisions made at turning points. This process has been described as 'career learning' and the boundary between routines and turning points is very subjective. Career learning is likely to emerge over time, as it is seen as a process and not a series of events (or decisions).

The practice of career support within a careership model is to encourage the expression of choice at key decision points and to encourage clients to engage with and interpret information available and to bring about career learning by encouraging reflection on experiences and to acknowledge the pragmatism inherent in the management of learning and progression.

Career adaptability conceptualises career development and transition as a process of adaptation, rather than linear development. This approach owes much to theorising known as 'career construction' which promotes different approaches to careers guidance interventions for individuals described as 'actors', 'agents' and 'authors' and demonstrates a model of career construction counselling that focusses on enabling the student to explore how her/his own career thinking has been constructed.