

Towards a critical realist theory of labour market information

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Despite the importance of Labour Market Information (LMI) to career practice, there is a surprising lack of theory that focuses on LMI and how it supports career guidance. Building on previous work, especially by Staunton and Rogosic (2021), this paper will argue for a move toward a critical realist account of LMI that sees it as historically and politically positioned, rather than objectively verifiable on its own terms. This opens up new possibilities for how career practitioners can make use of LMI and fresh avenues for theory and research.



Introduction

The principle of learning about the world of work can be seen in the careers literature as far back as Parsons' (1909) argument that understanding opportunity is central to career management, alongside understanding self and understanding decision-making. This focus on understanding future opportunities is implicit in a career as a discipline concerned with transition and so understandably, has been picked up as a concern in the careers literature. That said, Milosheva et al. (2021) and Staunton and Rogosic (2021) have argued that opportunity awareness and the linked content of labour market information (LMI) have been paid comparatively little attention in the careers literature. Staunton and Rogosic (2021) go on to argue that LMI has been under-theorised, and that traditional understandings of LMI often link with matching theory and logical positivism, as well as a lack of focus on the links between LMI and social justice (Staunton and Rogosic, 2021; Staunton 2021). This article develops this argument with a particular focus on critical realist theory as a starting point to understand what

is LMI. This article is based on the premise that LMI claims to give a view of the world of work that helps individuals to navigate it successfully for their careers. This in turn is based on ontological claims, that LMI describes what work is like, as well as on epistemological claims, that LMI helps you to access this reality. Therefore, critical realisms' account of ontology and epistemology creates a foundation to explore these issues.

Logical Positivism and LMI

Logical positivism (Passmore, 1943; Schlick and Rynin, 1948; Blumberg and Feigl, 1931) is a broad movement in philosophy and the sciences focused on the confidence that natural phenomena can be reduced to universal laws. These laws can be tested and evaluated. Though the term is not often used in career development, the paradigm helps us to understand some common conceptions of LMI. Mollerup (1995) has argued that LMI needs to adhere to various quality marks such as being comprehensive, free from bias, and accurate. This creates a conception of a practical threshold to enable career development; if you gain sufficient insight from good enough career information you can then effectively manage your career.

Various adjustments have been made to this threshold model through the career literature. Grubb (2002) argues that there are significant challenges to a purely rational decision-making model, particularly that achieving complete information is not possible and that, even if it was, identifying how to integrate this into decision-making is not straightforward. Grubb proposes, by contrast, a social learning approach which is more educative (as opposed to therapeutic in nature) and uses LMI as an aid to stimulating learning about opportunities. Grubb appears to mainly offer a moderation to more traditional theories in

arguing that a clear match is not necessarily possible. However, this really represents a small adjustment and argues for a different level of possible certainty rather than arguing that the task is significantly different.

Two recent articles have made similar points to Grubb (2002) but have made specific additions by arguing for items which can offer further support in this matter. Bimrose (2021) makes similar points about the limits of a pure trait and factor approach and argues that career practitioners should move away from this, particularly its focus on the career practitioner as an expert, and instead consider how they can use LMI to aid development and adopt the role of facilitator. Bimrose goes on to argue that this is strongly supported by the professionalism of career practitioners and especially the ability to give information, use IT and understand the quality of LMI. Milosheva et al. (2021) focus on the place of information science and information literacy (CILIP, 2018) as a theoretical approach which describes how individuals can gain skills to better work with and understand information. This again takes a broader, more developmental approach. Moreover, Milosheva et al. argue for the need to move past merely discussing the amount of information provision and instead focus on information literacy as a concept which covers both the individual's decision-making and the practitioner's competencies.

So how do these pieces relate to logical positivism? As noted above, logical positivism is about reducing complex social situations to universal laws. This can be seen most strongly in our analysis that theorists, such as Mollerup (1995), Holland (1973) and Gati et al. (1996), use a practical threshold; that career decisions can be made when enough information is accessed of sufficient quality. Grubb (2002), Bimrose (2021) and Milosheva et al. (2021) soften this equation arguing there is more complexity to this picture and that more attention needs to be paid to the practical skills of the clients and the career practitioners making use of this information. But there is still ultimately a process in view here; an argument that inputs can be linked to outputs even if the process is more complicated than first considered. For example, Milosheva et al. state 'by focussing exclusively on information provision by service providers, there is a risk that some of the fundamental informational determinants of individuals'

career development learning and career decision-making would be overlooked' (p.17).

Here Milosheva et al. state that information is a determinant of an individual's decision-making, implying that better use of information literacy will lead to better decision-making. Importantly they are not arguing that information literacy improves outcomes directly but that there is still a process in view which can be improved upon and optimised. Similarly, Bimrose (2021) argues that it is hard to overlook LMI's 'pivotal importance to effective career practice' (p.293) and that through improving LMI practice we can continue to improve career provision for individuals. This maintains the same logical link: better use of LMI improves career practice which can in turn better support individuals in their futures.

This form of learning can appear common sense in defending the value of career practice but it is worth interrogating the logical links at play. This is still based on Parsons' (1909) original position that 'right knowledge' of opportunity is a vital ingredient in a successful career transition. Though we do not want to reject this wholesale we will explore in this article how a turn away from the logical positivism described here, and specifically towards a critical realist position, will show some of the weaknesses of what we will argue is a narrow understanding of the use of LMI and its relationship to career development.

The Content of LMI

An assumption is often made that LMI is obvious and common sense in its nature. Milosheva et al. (2021) discuss a general understanding of learning about the world of work and make reference to the DOTS model (Law and Watts, 1977) but these are very broad-brush strokes and omit what learning about the world of work actually entails. Bimrose (2021) notes that LMI covers a wide range of material which can come from multiple sources but Bimrose gives no specific commentary on what from these individuals need to know.

Elsewhere, Barnes and Bimrose (2010) have articulated specific content individuals should learn, including employment trends, labour market structure, labour

market function. These items appear to favour quantitative information and focus on labour market transitions. It is not always clear how these items help these transitions, nor is there much theoretical description of what perspectives or theories are being made use of to define LMI. The impression is given that LMI is common sense and obvious to understand.

Alexander et al. (2019) take a different approach to this, recognising the need to combine qualitative and quantitative sources of information (or 'hot' and 'cold' LMI) and to take a broader approach to LMI. These authors also take a purposively wide-ranging definition of LMI arguing that 'LMI is defined as information about any aspect of education and training for, entry into, progression through and experience of the working world.' (p. 23). Alexander et al. (2019) go on to describe a more encompassing approach to information covering everything from salary information, skills requirements, demographics or participants, workplace rites and other items besides. From Alexander et al.'s work what is not clear is why these items are included. It appears that they have attempted to amalgamate various different perspectives without a theoretical or empirical basis on what to include.

These approaches lack the theoretical justification which can set out what to include in LMI or allow us to judge between attempts - such as Barnes and Bimrose (2010) or Alexander et al. (2019) - to consider what should LMI contain. It is far from obvious what difference employment trends, skills gaps or equality and diversity data should make to individuals making decisions. To be clear, this does not mean that they are of no value but the lack of theoretical justification makes their value uncertain. The advantage of more traditional rationalistic approaches, such as Holland (1973), is that through a tighter focus on skills there is a clear logic to how LMI can be used as part of his RIASEC model. This is not to say that Holland is not without problems but it highlights the need for theoretical justification of what is included in LMI.

In the first two sections of this article, two critiques to the existing literature around LMI have surfaced; that it is tied to logical positivism and that there is a lack of theorisation about what to include in LMI. Moving

forward we are going to make use of a critical realist approach to reconsider how we approach LMI and define it.

Towards a critical realist view of LMI

As explained in the introduction, LMI claims to give a view of the world of work and in doing so is underpinned by ontological and epistemological claims. Critical realism (Archer, 1982; Bhaskar, 1975; Gorski, 2008) aims to sit between the positions of positivism and constructivism. Critical realists avoid arguing that the social world can be straightforwardly observed as positivists argue, nor that it can only be reduced to personal experience constitutive of nothing but itself, as constructivists and other post-structuralist thinkers would. Bhaskar (2011) argues that, firstly, our experiences are limited and we cannot see reality for itself, but that secondly, we can deduce the underlying causes and structures that form reality by making use of the philosophical tools which have been developed in the social science. On this basis, critical realists look to an ontology of the real social world but one that is formed of overlapping layers of social structures. What follows from this is an epistemology which means we can make observations about the real world but ones which are historically and socially contingent (Reed, 2005).

From a critical realist point of view, we cannot merely collect LMI and expect it to represent the reality of the world of work. As Bhaskar (2011) points out, it is through theoretical tools that we can deduce the underlying causes and meanings of the information that we have gathered. Alexander et al. (2019) draw attention to how this information may come from various sources, whether it be government surveys, job advertisements, sector information or the accounts of individuals experiencing the world of work. These in themselves do not represent the labour market so much as the perspectives of various groups because, as Reed (2005) argues, observations are historically and socially contingent. We need to be prepared to theorise these sources of LMI in a critical manner rather than accepting them on face value. This has the potential to open up the interrogation of LMI to more creative and detailed theoretical analysis (e.g. Staunton, 2021).

A post-neoliberal approach to LMI

To give one example, a theoretical approach based on post-neoliberal thought offers new avenues for exploring LMI. Post-neoliberalism as categorised by authors, such as Peck et al. (2010), makes various attempts to imagine possible futures beyond a neoliberal consensus. These alternatives could draw from resources both to the right and the left of the political spectrum. The work of Hooley et al. (2017) represents efforts to think through how to contest neoliberalism from the perspective of career guidance. A key part of this analysis is to claim that neoliberal markets are not a natural phenomenon but one which represents particular political and social arrangements. Therefore, when governments publish statistics or employers advertise vacancies they are doing so from a particular political position. This does not mean that they are wrong but merely that they represent a particular perspective.

As I have argued elsewhere (Staunton and Rogosic, 2021), using the work of Herman and Chomsky (1988) this information can represent a system supporting function. It encourages individuals to conform themselves to the requirements of the market and to assume that market trends are natural phenomena, so that disciplining yourself to the market through personal effort is as common sense as putting a coat on when it rains. This does not mean that information is inaccurate but that it represents a particular position. By its nature it also excludes, or makes null, particular information. For example, when you apply for a job you often do not hear why the previous incumbent left. Similarly, while job advertisements may tell you what salary to expect, they may not tell you if you could be represented by a union or how whistleblowing claims are handled by the organisation. There has been much work done on the decency of work (Blustein et al., 2016) yet LMI does not routinely make use of these sorts of conceptions to describe the world of work, nor do many governments aim to publish official figures on these concerns.

One could say that LMI as it is frequently presented in the literature is surprisingly uncritical and unengaged in the world of work. The term 'unengaged' is used

to mean that official statistics and job advertisement analysis often provide a surface level view removed from the actual working lives of individuals. This is not just saying we need more qualitative or 'soft' information about the world of work but that by focussing on reducing working lives to salaries and skills lists, employment trends and demographic statistics we are in danger of glossing over the hardship and difficulty that people experience in their jobs. This is in part a political decision because the desire from the state is often to motivate individuals to engage in work. LMI is an attempt to study the workplace and represent the complex reality of individuals' working lives so as to help other people develop strategies to approach the world of work. The logic that sits behind various forms of logical positivism is not just epistemic claims but political claims as well; if you conform yourself to the workplace it will go well for you. This can be a logic that carries itself through both career development thought and career guidance practice.

Signposts Towards New Theories

In order to move towards new theories of LMI we are going to use Hooley's five signposts towards social justice. Hooley (2015) argues that to engage with social justice career guidance we could:

- 1) explore ourselves and the world where we live, learn and work;
- 2) examine how our experience connects to broader historical, political and social systems;
- 3) (develop strategies that allow us individually to make the most of our current situation;
- 4) (develop strategies that allow us collectively to make the most of our current situations; and
- 5) consider how the current situation and structures should be changed.

(Hooley, 2015 p. 15)

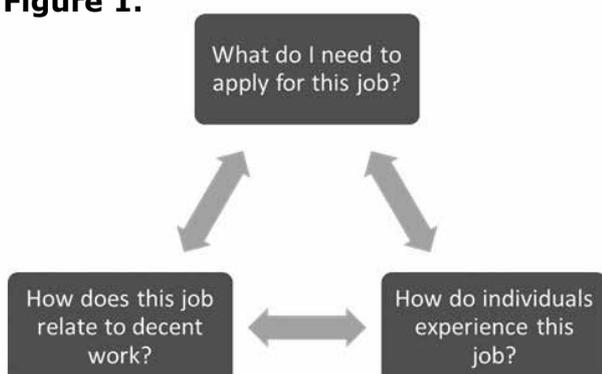
LMI can have a place in all of these signposts but it is particularly important in signposts (1), (2) and (3). The link to understanding decent work and other ways to critique the experiences of neoliberal workplaces can be clearly seen in points (1) and (2) but importantly this does not preclude developing strategies which allow

the individual to make the most of the current situation. This means that (a) considering information which allows individuals to calibrate themselves to the world of work and (b) to understand how various sectors operate and (c) what they would need to demonstrate in the recruitment process for a particular job, is helpful information as part of a 'making the most of the current situation' (Hooley, 2015). But this puts this information into a crucially different context. We are recognising that work has to be 'put up with' but the dealing with the reality as it is, does not consider it to be natural nor unopen to critique.

Hooley's second signpost encourages individuals to consider themselves in the context of their social position. This implies the importance of engaging with how individuals experience work differently on the basis of their social and cultural position. It is important to remember that work is a subjective experience on which people will have different perspectives. What is valuable about work is different between individuals and communities. This especially recognises the 'ethic of hospitality' which Sultana (2013) discusses. Work has differing social and cultural meanings. This means we should maintain a tension between articulating what decent work is and how individuals experience work differently on individual and collective levels. This tension will mean that we are slow to argue that what is decent for one person is true for everyone and we can simply universalise what makes work 'good' or decent', but as a counterpoint we must resist reducing all conversations about decent work to personal experience and personal preference. We should resist saying that wanting to be free from oppression and harassment at work is a matter of preference.

This creates three questions which LMI needs to be able to answer either as an individual source or in combination.

Figure 1.



This can be expanded upon as follows. Firstly, instrumental information aims to answer the question 'what do I need to apply for this job?' This will cover skills requirements, recruitment processes and other information needed to apply for jobs in a particular sector which can both underpin career decisions and enacting these decisions. Secondly, we should look at information that explores whether a job represents decent work and to what extent. This may not be formal information but career practice should aim to work hard to develop avenues to understand this whether that involves tapping into academic research or engaging with unions or other interest groups. Finally, we should be focussed on how individuals experience various jobs. This will help individuals reflect in turn on how they subjectively understand that role and what their own experiences of that role might be in the future. These three items are in turn related to each other, both offering different perspectives but also perspectives that rely on each other to fill out the full picture.

Conclusion

We have set out to argue that currently LMI makes claims about what the world of work is and how it is experienced. This requires us to consider its ontological and epistemological underpinning. We have found that currently discourse around LMI is often underpinned by a confidence that the world of work can be easily quantified and presented. In contrast, we have argued for a critical realist perspective that roots LMI in the context of the neoliberal workplace. This encourages career practice to make use of LMI, that helps individuals cope with the world as it is; that recognises the subjective understandings of how different communities approach work; and that explores the decency of work. This is not the only way that a critical realist approach could be used, various other attempts can be made to understand the world of work from different perspectives such as from a green perspective, a post-secular perspective or a post-colonial perspective. Crucially though, we need to keep theory and social context central to how we attempt to understand and relay the world through LMI.



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Towards a critical realist theory of labour market information

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