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Do we choose careers or do they choose us? Questions about career choices, transitions, and social inclusion.

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Introduction

Choice is at the heart of career guidance practice. We try not only to help clients make choices about their careers, but also to maximise the range of choices open to them, with regard for equality of opportunity.

Here in the UK, choice is also at the heart of government policies for education and training, as provision becomes marketised and ever more diverse. 'Better Choices' was one recent slogan for our former careers services (now absorbed into the *Connexions* youth support service), symbolising the logic that has underpinned career guidance policies across the world (see OECD, 2003):

- clients need excellent information about the provision on offer
- if they have this, they will be able to make well-informed choices
- well-informed choices will ensure smooth and successful career transitions
- such individual transitions will facilitate the functioning of the education and labour markets and ensure social inclusion.

Choice: what does it really mean?

Choice has therefore become a highly-charged concept. At one and the same time, it expresses guidance practitioners' duty to ensure that clients exercise the greatest possible freedom of individual action; it sets that freedom in the context of market mechanisms; and it acts as the guarantor of successful outcomes. It seems to convey a very benign and complementary set of meanings. But whenever a particular word or idea takes on such totemic status, it is always useful to do some 'archaeology': to dig down into its layers of meaning, and discover what lies beneath its surface. There are some important questions we need to ask:

- What assumptions lie beneath the visible meanings of 'choice'?
- How can we make those assumptions visible?
- And what becomes invisible when 'choice' is such a high-visibility idea?

Challenging idealised meanings of choice
There are a number of difficulties with the idealised scenario offered by the policy focus on choice. First of all, it assumes that career choice – and therefore careers education and guidance also – is a linear process, and it treats that process as a technically rational formula:

Perfect information + career management skills + sound choice = successful outcome

However, a number of in-depth case studies (see Ball *et al*, 2002; Bowman *et al*, 2003; Hodkinson *et al*, 1996; Okano, 1993; Reay *et al*, 2001) suggest that perhaps we need to take a reality check about how people *actually* make choices. Career decisions can usually be seen as rational, but in a pragmatic rather than a technical sense (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Personal contacts, local 'grey' economies, family situations, friends' experiences, encounters with prejudice and discrimination – these are just some of the many influences on the real-life choices people make.

Research based on large-scale surveys (e.g. Byrne, 1999; Roberts, 1995) also reveals that powerful social inequalities continue to shape most people's lives, including their career trajectories. Both types of research shows us that the reality of career choice is:

- messy rather than straightforward
- often influenced at least as much by chance as by planning
- both constrained and enable by clients' 'horizons for action' (the choices they believe possible for themselves)
- strongly influenced by social structures such as class, gender and 'race'.

Challenging the context of choice

A second set of assumptions that underpin the meaning of 'choice' are pervasive in career education and guidance. They are summed up in the dominant messages that herald a 'new world of work' in the 'knowledge economy'. Gone are the Fordist work practices into which we could settle, gone is the 'job for life', and gone is the kind of work that required only unskilled or semi-skilled labour – or so it is widely supposed. In the 21st century labour market, flexibility, commitment and lifelong learning are held to be the responsibilities we must shoulder in

order to earn the right to work. The choices on offer are presented as more glamorous than those of our predecessors… but the demands they make on us are all the greater too.

A major programme of national and international research on 'The Future of Work', funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council has recently presented its findings. The programme's Director (Nolan, 2003) argues that many contemporary commentaries on the 'new world of work' are misleading. Not only have economic and social disparities increased significantly in the advanced countries. But also, while a minority probably can enjoy more flexible and creative work that is well-balanced with their family and social lives, far more people are trapped working long hours in unglamorous manual and service sector jobs. Hairdressing and shelf-stacking are two of the fastest-growing occupations in the UK, putting a rather different face on the 'choices' on offer.

All too often, career education and guidance are expected to elide the difference between this rhetoric and lived experiences of the world of work by emphasising the importance of 'realistic' choices to clients (Colley, 2000). As Watts warned almost a decade ago, guidance can be used by political systems to:

> *'adjust the individual's subjective view of reality to make it consistent with the objective needs of society…[cultivate] realistic attitudes, ideals and expectations… [and bring] students to accept politically-constructed reality'*
> (Watts, 1996: 368-9).

We might even question if there is such a thing as 'the objective needs of society'. Perhaps different social classes in fact have different, and subjective, interests within a context of unequal power relations – where some groups' needs are far more fully met than others.
Young people's view of choice
Perhaps most importantly in the field of career guidance, we need to listen to young people's views, and try to understand how they experience career choice. A number of studies have shown that many school-leavers are not able to choose their destination freely.

Bates' (1994) study of young women training in elder care shows that most of them had aspired to be nursery nurses, but were rejected as not being able enough. In my own study of trainee nursery nurses (Colley, 2006), most had wanted to be teachers or nurses, but were similarly rejected from that career path. A number of engineering apprentices in a related study (James & Diment, 2002) had entered this route only after experiencing failure in higher education. This process of 'cooling out' and the *lowering* of aspirations, partly through the career guidance process, has been explored in many other contexts (e.g. Roberts, 1995; Wrench & Hassan, 1996; Wrench & Qureshi, 1996).

However, there is a further important finding in such case study research. Young people who are diverted into a

career path they did not initially desire tend eventually to reconstruct their experience as a positive choice. As one of the elder care trainees put it, she had found 'a job that is right for me'. Their career transition does not end upon entry to a two- or three-year course, but the whole of that course may be seen as a period of transition. Students not only reconstruct the occupation as 'one that is right for me', but they also have to reconstruct themselves as 'the right person for the job' (Colley *et al*, 2003).

Career choice therefore cannot simply be thought of as a search for person-environment fit (cf. Holland, 1997). Learning is itself a process of becoming a different person, of developing an identity that allows membership of the vocational community one has entered. As Lave and Wenger (1991) have noted, any such community tends to attract people with 'characteristic biographies/ trajectories', who have personal dispositions and social predispositions (structured by class and/or gender) that are necessary for them to adapt to the culture of that occupation. In this respect, we might reflect that careers 'choose' certain people as much as people choose careers.

On the nursery nursing course, for example, those who were most successful were young women from upper working class backgrounds and stable families, who displayed the appearance and demeanour of 'nice girls'. Those living in more disadvantaged circumstances tended to find themselves either excluded from the course, or were marginalized by their classmates who saw them as 'rough' and unsuitable.

Nevertheless, even well-integrated students had to work hard on their own identities, in order to become the 'right person for the job'. Their existing *habitus* may have been necessary, but it was not sufficient without mediation by the course. Both in college and in their regular work placements, they found they had to learn difficult emotional skills to bond with colleagues and parents, and to cope with the care of young children. By the end of their training, they described how they had learned to manage their own and others' feelings, developed stamina and patience for this work, and noticed these changes in their lives outside college and the workplace too. As a result they felt they had 'become a nursery nurse'.

Such findings suggest that we need to be cautious in interpreting young people's positive perceptions of choice once they have entered particular career pathways. It may sometimes be a psychological protection which they construct retrospectively, having experienced powerful structural constraints upon their choices at an earlier stage.

Choice, transitions and social inclusion

In terms of government policy in the UK, these young nursery nurses represented successful outcomes of the guidance, education and training processes. By all official definitions, they represent the logic of guidance policy:

a 'realistic' choice, followed by straightforward transitions into vocational education and then into employment in the related occupation. Since (in the UK at least) social inclusion is narrowly defined as participation in the labour market, this too should be guaranteed for them.

Yet the reality of their success also includes the experience of being rejected for professional career paths, having their career 'choice' effectively made for them by others, entering an occupation that is very low-status in the UK, and anticipating a future of long and stressful hours working (in many cases) for the minimum wage.   Their stories raise an important question about the outcomes of their choices and transitions:

> If these young women have developed cultural and social capital that can only be realised in a very limited and subordinate field of employment, are they not the victims of social inequality and injustice, even though they may be 'socially included'?

Perhaps we should borrow the phrase of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and talk about the 'choice of the necessary' that confronts so many of our young people, but which becomes invisible when we see only 'choice' alone. The concept of 'pure' choice is a dangerous one, smuggling in the assumption that each individual is a wholly free agent, whose actions are in no way determined:

> *'…choices are infused with class and ethnic meanings, and…choice-making plays a crucial role in the reproduction of divisions and hierarchies… [T]he very idea of choice assumes a kind of formal equality that obscures the 'effects of real inequality'*
> (Ball et al, 2002: 51).

We could, of course, add gender, disability and other inequalities to the list of meanings that infuse choice.

Conclusions

Such a critical archaeology of 'choice' has a number of implications for career guidance. We need to:

- provide guidance which responds to the pragmatically rational way that clients actually make career choices;
- recognise that not all choices are available to all young people, and that social inequalities still play a powerful role in career 'choice';
- raise our own awareness of the way that certain groups of young people are still 'allocated' to less desirable opportunities in stereotyped trajectories;
- learn more about the way that education and represent periods of transition and that vocational cultures actively *transform* identities;
- question the rhetoric of the 'new world of

work' and base our practice on research into its realities;
- ensure that issues of social inequality and social injustice *within* the labour market are not obscured by a limited agenda for social inclusion.

Notes

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